



Pasadena City College
Learning Assistance Center

FOUR STEPS TO A GOOD ESSAY

Step 1 - Prewriting

Think about the topic: discuss it with others, read up on it if possible.

Brainstorm: write down any words, ideas, or details that come to mind.
Work quickly, and don't worry about the order they come in.

Gather and order your ideas: some people like to **circle** ideas that are similar, then put a **box** around the next category of similar information, then draw a **triangle** around the next group, until all ideas are ordered. Some people also like to use **arrows** to show cause and effect, or indicate a movement from general ideas to specific details or examples. Your next job is to decide what order these categories should be presented in.

Write a brief outline: be sure to include examples, details, and illustrations to support each point.

Write a topic sentence for each paragraph and a ***thesis statement*** for the entire essay.

Step 2 - Writing

Use lined, loose-leaf paper and **skip lines** to leave room for revision and instructor comments.

Follow your outline, but don't hesitate to make any changes you feel are necessary.

Step 3 - Rewriting

Read your first draft aloud to get a “feel” for what you have written.

Correct any errors (common errors include problems with misspelled words, fragments and run-on sentences, and subject-verb agreement). Also check sentence length, word order, word choice, and the order in which your ideas are presented. Make all necessary changes.

Remember that revising is a very positive act. The best writers are those who are willing to invest time and effort to make many improvements before submitting their work. For example, Ernest Hemingway is reported to have rewritten the last page of A Farewell to Arms a total of thirty-nine times. When asked what the problem was, he replied “getting the words right.” His work obviously paid off for him, and it will for you, too.

Step 4 - Final Copy

Pay attention to appearance; type your paper, leave adequate margins, skip lines, and only print on one side of the page. Use the spell check and grammar check functions, paying careful attention to punctuation, as you edit.

If you really want to improve your writing and follow each of these steps, you will have success. However, if you try shortcuts, the results will show--poor quality will result.

*One more thing: **let some time elapse between the steps.** Doing all four at one sitting simply doesn't work. The famous American writer Mark Twain said, “I always know when to stop writing: when my tank is empty.” Our “tanks” are our sources of energy, inspiration, ideas, and so on. Allowing some time to elapse between the four stages will result in a much better final product because we as writers will have some perspective on our own writing and therefore be better able to judge it.*

Careful attention to the process of writing will ultimately lead to a quality product.