

## Lecture Notes on Basic Academic Essay Components

Academic essay writing is a specific type of writing that has its own rules and expectations. No matter what kind of writing you've done in the past or you do currently, you must adapt to these rules and expectations to get the best grade possible. These are not my own rules, but what I perceive as the general overall basics that you can take to most other college classes, and even to many professional and personal situations, and be able to turn in something that will pass.

1. **Standard academic English in a fairly high diction.** If you cannot communicate proficiently in English, grammar and mechanics, then no matter how good your argument is, your reader will find the mistakes distracting and perhaps not be able to understand what you're saying. Your Troyka/Hesse handbook, as well as a variety of resources on the Internet, can help you correct the errors I point out in your writing in these areas.
2. **Structure:** academic essays can be rigid in structure: intro, body, conclusion, thesis statements and topic sentences. When we read professional essays, many of the ones in our textbook, we won't always see a strict adherence to structure. We won't always be able to identify a sentence that is the thesis, etc. However, after finishing the essay we will very rarely have a doubt about what the thesis is, where the intro and conclusions are, and what specific points the author made to support his/her position. In academic essays, though, teachers expect to be able to clearly see your thesis and other specific parts of the essay.
3. **Audience:** the teacher is rarely your audience in college classrooms. We are your evaluators, but not the group that you are writing to necessarily. You must identify and target a specific audience - know enough about them to make important decisions concerning vocabulary, background information provided, types of examples to use, sources to stay away from, and which rhetorical appeal to use (see below for more about this last one).
  - **Vocabulary:** what is my audience's education level? What words will appeal to them or turn them off? For example, if I have a conservative audience and I label something liberal, I will probably distance that audience. Instead, I need to find another way to describe it that won't get a knee-jerk reaction.
  - **Background info to provide:** what does my audience already know about this issue? What do they NEED to know to be able to understand the argument I'm making? Be sure you provide only necessary relevant info - don't stuff your introduction, or your essay, with trivial facts or biographical information that do nothing to further your argument.
  - **Types of Examples:** what will appeal to my reader - anecdotal evidence? Statistics? Hypothetical examples? Examples come in 3 types: 1) specific: you are giving the reader an example of a real person or real event. 2) Typical: you are painting a picture that is a composite of what usually occurs, but not citing specific people or places. 3) Hypothetical: you are playing the "what if" game to show people what might happen or may have happened because there is no specific evidence available. This last one is used when speculating about the effects that something might have, or when trying to figure out what may have occurred. No one type is better than the other because it all depends on the situation and the audience. You do need to use specific evidence in academic essays at some point, but you have some wriggle room.

- **Sources:** again, what will turn off your reader? If I cite Hitler, then automatically, no matter how valid the info that I'm using from him, I will get a negative reaction from my reader, unless I'm using his own words to show what a horrible person he is. If I'm writing to a liberal audience, you can bet that anything Dick Cheney has said will not go down well for them. It doesn't matter how accurate or correct he is, it's about perception. Your reader will put up a wall that you must knock down. Plus, they may begin questioning your credibility if you use lots of sources that they distrust.
- **Rhetorical appeals:** Aristotle called these "pisteis." The 3 major ways we appeal to our audience are through logos, pathos, and ethos. Logos is reason: common sense, facts, figures, and objective data. Pathos is emotion: I'm using information that I know will invoke an emotional response in my reader, and it is their pity, fear, anger, patriotism, etc, that will get them to agree with me. Ethos is credibility and trustworthiness. How do I get my reader to trust me? I do this by the tone I invoke in my writing, by using credible sources, and by not lying to my reader. For more on classical rhetoric, check out the following web pages:
  - [http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/resource\\_rhet.html](http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/resource_rhet.html)
  - [http://www.molloy.edu/sophia/aristotle/rhetoric/rhetoric1a\\_nts.htm](http://www.molloy.edu/sophia/aristotle/rhetoric/rhetoric1a_nts.htm)
  - <http://www.rpi.edu/dept/llc/webclass/web/project1/group4/index.html#logos>
  - <http://www.rhetorica.net/textbook/>

4. **Context:** what is the situation that I'm creating to argue my point in? You will notice on the handout that I mention SSC tuition hikes and show you several ways to develop ideas. I could have easily said Oklahoma Tuition Hikes or National Tuition Hikes. Each difference in geography is a different context that will demand I change my argument. And the more narrower I get, the more limited my options are. This can be a great help to a writer. I only have to consider SSC, so I don't have to do as much research. However, if it's too narrow, I might find that there isn't that much information that would be usable in an academic essay, so I'm stuck. Context can also be time - since 9/11, after the first world war, in my lifetime, etc. You can also find context in audience: say I want to use the Holy Bible as part of my reasoning for supporting legislation. Well, in America, with religious freedom, it would be impossible to justify that legally to a wide audience. However, if I limit the context to Southern Baptists as my audience, I can reasonably expect them all to agree that the Bible is a text that provides guidance in laws to support. Context will be different for every essay.

***Please ask or email me questions you have concerning any of this - no matter what point in the semester. The crazy thing about writing is that different assignments will challenge us in different ways. We may be great on context in one assignment, but the next one gives us fits. So please do not hesitate to ask me for advice or help at any point.***