

Writing College Essays and Formulating Research Questions

Decide on a topic or an issue that is important to you.

React to the topic you have chosen. Brainstorm in whatever ways work best for you. Do you like to free write? Cluster? Or do you simply list reactions or details?

What is it that you think or know about the topic? What interests you?

After brainstorming, develop a thesis statement or question.

Use the topic you chose to define whether your thesis is a “why,” “how,” or “what” focus.

Create a plan or outline for your essay.

State your thesis and list the key supporting ideas that will best explain your thesis. Be sure your supporting ideas are consistent in their focus. Do they all answer the question why, how, or what?

Are your supporting ideas all “causes” or “effects” or “solutions?” Assess whether or not you can develop each of your supporting ideas into a full paragraph.

Consider your outline a “rough game plan” for your essay.

Your outline (essentially your thesis and supporting ideas) will be the skeleton for your paper, but remember it is only a plan.

As you draft the paper, your main point may change or your supporting ideas may need adjusting. It’s okay- we don’t often know what we want to say until we actually put it into words and develop our ideas fully.

Model for an Academic Essay

Introductory paragraph:

- Warm up: an engaging opener invites the reader into your essay.
- Thesis: this sentence (or two) conveys the question, point, or opinion you are defending or defining. The rest of the essay exists to support and explain this point. The thesis is the heart of the essay!

Supporting paragraphs:

- Topic sentences convey paragraph ideas and link paragraphs to the thesis.
- Each supporting paragraph develops on paragraph idea with lots of specific details (examples or further explanation of your points). These details give credence, conviction, and soul to your thesis!

Concluding paragraph:

- Here the thesis is restated or emphasized once more, but perhaps in a new way. Supporting ideas can be emphasized as well, but try to vary their presentation to avoid repetition.
- A closing commentary should end the essay gracefully and provide a sense of finale. Advice to the reader, a look into the future, or an insightful look backward is often effective in closing the essay.

Develop a Research Question and Search Strategy

Explore your topic through questioning

- Ask open ended questions like how? and why?
- Ask yourself why your topic is important- Why does it matter to you, and why should it matter to others?
- Reflect and identify the questions you feel are worth exploring through research.

Determine and evaluate your research question

Research questions should be specific enough to be well covered in the space available. Questions shouldn't have simple yes or no answers, and should require research and analysis.

- Take your topic from general to specific.
- Ask yourself if your question is clear and focused.
- Does your research question have enough complexity to fill the pages required by the assignment?

Hypothesize your Research Strategy

Research is rarely linear. Consider the directions your research will take you.

- Who is an authority on your topic, and how can you find that information?
- If making an argument, what evidence will you need to support your claims?
 - Why is your argument important?
 - How might others challenge your argument?
- What types of sources will you need to support the claims that you are making?

Sample Research Questions:

Your research question should focus in on a specific angle of an over-arching topic; it should be clear to yourself and the reader which question you are trying to answer; it should be complex enough to invoke thought and interest.

Is your question <u>clear</u> ?	Is your question <u>complex</u> ?	Is your question <u>focused</u> ?
Unclear: Why are social networking sites harmful?	Too Simple: How are doctors addressing diabetes in the U.S.?	Unfocused: What is the effect on the environment from global warming?
Clear: How are online users experiencing or addressing privacy issues on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter?	Appropriately Complex: What are the common traits of those suffering from diabetes in America, and how can these commonalities be used to aid the medical community in the prevention of the disease?	Focused: How is glacial melting affecting the penguins in Antarctica?

**Adapted from Indiana University Libraries*