Types of Essays

In an essay, a writer’s goal is to communicate a message to the reader. This can be done in a variety of ways and lengths. Although essays do have an organizational structure, the writer decides—based on the prompt—how much support he/she needs to best convey his/her message. Therefore, there is no formulaic, rigid structure unless your instructor has told you otherwise. Look at the various essay types below and take note that each essay type has a different purpose.

Comparison/Contrast:
These essays require written development exploring the similarities and differences, usually between two concepts. The thesis highlights the main points that will be explored. In the body paragraphs, it is helpful to introduce both concepts briefly before writing about the similarities and differences.

- For example, in an assignment comparing/contrasting two spaces, Disneyland and Universal Studios, I could organize my essay using one of two different format styles. One format is organized subject by subject, and the other is organized point by point. In a subject by subject format, you would make all your points about Disneyland then follow that with your points about Universal Studios; those points do not necessarily belong in one paragraph. However, this format style could read as a list, which is not a style that is encouraged in college writing. The point by point format would instead be organized around concepts related to the two spaces. I could organize my paper with a section about location, a section about cost, a section about entertainment value, etc.

Literary Analysis:
This type of essay analyzes a work of literature to make a thesis statement, usually an interpretation that focuses on one or two aspects of the work (plot, character, point of view, theme, and setting). Textual evidence (quotes and examples) are used in the body paragraphs to support the interpretation outlined in the thesis. Remember to keep the tense present when referencing works of literature. When summarizing or paraphrasing the work, the writer must explain both the meaning of the summary and its relevance to thesis. The conclusion summarizes the relation between the different examples and points, while also making a larger statement relating the work of literature to something outside it.

- For example, if I were assigned an essay answering the question, “Is Hamlet mad or merely acting to avenge his father’s death?” I would answer the question in my thesis and then use examples from the play to prove that. You should have clear main points to support your interpretation of the work. You cannot make a literary interpretation if the actual book or poem cannot support that interpretation. You want to seem reliable to your reader and making assumptions threatens your credibility as a writer. Therefore, it is sometimes helpful to find the quotes from the work that would support your interpretation before you start writing. That way, you can avoid reaching a dead-end and realizing that you do not have enough information in the text to support your thesis. If the writer is arguing that Hamlet is mad, he/she must have several main points that clearly explain why that is the case and also present quotes from the work that support those main points.
**Cause and Effect:**
This type of paper requires an exploration of the causes of an issue and the effects that are created. The thesis can be exploratory and discuss possible effects. The conclusion for this type of essay can be a reflection in addition to a summary of the effects.

- **For example,** if a professor asked for an essay about the causes and effects of global warming, you might begin your essay explaining what global warming is, and then describe the causes of global warming. Following that, you might explain the effects of global warming. The descriptions of causes and effects are not limited to two paragraphs; the number of paragraphs and the length of those are based on the information you choose to include in your essay.

**Argumentative:**
In this type of essay, the writer asserts a point which is then supported by details developed in the body paragraphs. In an argumentative essay, a writer should choose a clear side and not waver back and forth between the opposing views. To support the argument, the writer should present facts such as examples, statistics, and evidence from various sources. Reliable sources are government publications, books, and peer reviewed journals. Many argumentative papers require a counterargument that acknowledges the opposing viewpoint, but the writer must also show the flaws or weaknesses in the opposing argument. The counterargument is then refuted with evidence in favor of their argument. Finally, the writer’s conclusion should provide a sense of urgency to the reader that shows the strength of their argument.

- **For example,** if I answered an essay question regarding whether or not college athletes should be paid, I would begin my essay exploring both sides of this issue and conclude my introduction with a thesis asserting my argument. The thesis would either agree or disagree that college athletes should be paid. The body paragraphs would support the thesis with examples. If one argues that college athletes should be paid, then the body paragraphs would provide several main points explaining why it is necessary to pay these students. I would conclude my essay by summarizing the various examples and relating them to the thesis, with a brief reminder of the counterargument to show my readers that I am aware of other viewpoints.