

Starting an Academic Essay

Putting words on a blank page often feels insurmountable. Instead of staring at the empty document, waiting for the right word to come to you, try these step-by-step instructions.

But first, why is starting an academic essay such a difficult, daunting first step?

- **Perfectionism.** A desire to make the most perfect essay is often what holds us back from just starting already! The key to spending less time anxiously staring at a blank page and more time writing is to throw that perfectionism out the window, which takes practice.
- **General fatigue.** It's hard to do anything when you're feeling tired, hungry, or just generally bored. Work is only possible once you are rested. To build up a genuine interest in your paper (which is a necessary ingredient to completing it), take care of yourself first!
- **Essay Avoidance.** Many of us recoil at the prospect of writing an academic paper, so we avoid it at all costs. Instead of looking at this paper as an assignment you have to do in a specific way, try coming at it from an angle you're more comfortable with. Find a way to create interest in the content of your essay, perhaps by freewriting a poem, drawing a picture, or talking to a friend. After this, try to transform what interested you into the format of the assignment.

Now, let's make starting your essay easier with this short exercise!

1. **Start with the text(s)!** Most essay assignments are about using or responding to a given set of texts. If you have no idea what to write about *or* no idea where to start, go back into the text. If you haven't read it yet, start there. If you have read it, go back to sections that interested you and/or are related to the prompt. Choose one to two quotes that get the gears in your head turning.
2. **Free write on the quotes.** Take the quotes you chose from the text, type them out, and cite them in a digital document. Start a timer and freewrite about these quotes. What interests you about them? What questions or concerns come up? Are there specific phrases or words that strike you? If you're ready, you can even begin

connecting this to the essay prompt. The key here is to write **freely**, without thinking too much about style or word choice.

3. **Revise your freewrite.** Congratulations! The document is no longer blank! Read back what you have written and begin cleaning up. Identify what interested you most about the quotes and focus your writing around that. Break up your main points and analyses into paragraphs. At this point, you should begin to see an argument forming.
4. **Write your conclusion.** So, what you've just done is write your body paragraphs. You might only have two to five paragraphs at this point, but you've completed the bulk of your textual analysis. Now that you have a sense of what your paper is about, write your conclusion by reviewing the topic and discussing the implications of your argument. For example, think about *why* you just wrote three paragraphs on Gloria Anzaldúa's use of one particular word or phrase. What could an understanding or misunderstanding of this word result in? Justify why you are identifying this part of the text and *why* it's important. And, of course, briefly summarize your paper in your concluding paragraph.
5. **Craft your thesis statement and introduction.** It may seem unorthodox to end with the thesis statement, but this is the ideal way to go if you want to write a semi-polished and strong thesis statement. Thesis statements are difficult to write unless you know what your paper is about, so why start with them? Read over your body paragraphs and conclusion. What are you arguing? Identify *what* your argument is, *how* you are making it, and *why* it's important. Then, fit this into a simple thesis template:

In this paper, I argue that _____ by using _____ in order to demonstrate that _____.

This template covers the *what*, *how*, and *why* of your argument (in that order). For example, you might write:

In this paper, I argue that **Anzaldúa's use of the term "borderlands" challenges** sociologists' understanding of space by **putting it in conversation with Gieryn's spatial theory**, in order to demonstrate that **space, place, and race are inextricably linked.**

I just made this one up, but feel free to experiment with different words, verbs, phrases, etc. After creating your thesis statement, contextualize it (and the paper) with an intro paragraph, and stick all of this at the beginning of your document with your thesis as the last sentence. **Now you have a nearly-complete draft!**