

Essays Say—  
This ...





Essays Say—This ...

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## Welcome to Essays Say—This . . .

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The information in this handbook will provide the reader—students and teachers—with an overview of the essay and many of the characteristics of essays. The material on the essay complements information presented in the *Canadian Writers Handbook* (2008). *Essays Say—This ...* provides summary statements explaining what an essay is, the forms an essay can take, the kinds and types of essays, a sample student essay, a rubric illustrating the qualities of an effective essay, an assessment model, and tips for writing the essay.

## What is an essay?

The word “essay” comes from the French “*essayer*,” to try. An essay is a short work of non-fiction prose. In an essay, you try to share what you know, think, or feel about a subject. You focus on one key idea, called a thesis. Your thesis may be expressed in a statement, a question, or a series of observations that suggest your purpose. To be effective, you must develop the ideas you present by discussing information that reflects and supports your point of view. You organize this discussion in a structure that has a recognizable beginning, middle, and end.

## What forms can an essay take?

Most forms of prose fall into one of four categories:

- **narration:** writing that tells a story
- **description:** writing that communicates strong sensory impressions
- **exposition:** writing that explains or informs
- **persuasion** (also called **argumentation**): writing that moves the audience to believe or to act

Essays may be narrative, descriptive, expository, persuasive, or any combination of these depending on their audience and purpose.

## How many kinds of essays are there?

“As many ... as there are human attitudes,” wrote famous essayist E. B. White. Yet we can divide essays into two broad groups based on how the writer approaches the subject.

- **Academic essays** focus on content. You carefully organize and present your ideas so that the audience fully understands the information being discussed. But that does not mean they need be dry or dull. The essayist Isaac Asimov is known for presenting challenging scientific concepts and information in interesting ways.
- **Artistic essays** focus on style. You express your ideas using many of the same techniques that fiction writers use, such as dialogue, characters in action, and interior monologue. Readers enjoy the writer’s unique approach to the subject just as much as they appreciate the information the essay contains. For example, the essays of Margaret Atwood, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Chief Dan George are elegantly written and enlightening.

## What are some common types of essays?

An essay is classified according to its purpose and the way it is developed and organized. Essay type is not always easy to define. The following chart identifies some of the most common types of essays and groups them according to their type of writing. But it is also possible to group some essays in other ways. For example, a travelogue is shown as a descriptive essay on the chart below. It may also be a persuasive essay if the author's intent is to encourage his or her audience to visit a particular location.

Type of Writing	Type of Essay	Purpose This type of essay ...	Writer's Focus The writer ...
Narration	Memoir	... gives a first-person account of an event or series of events that the writer has experienced.	... conveys not only the details of the experience but also its emotional impact.
	Profile	... provides a short biography of an interesting person.	... focusses on a single aspect of a person's background that will be of interest to the audience.
Description	Travelogue	... describes the highlights of a location that the audience may be interested in seeing.	... often interacts with what is being described instead of just viewing it from a detached perspective.
Exposition	Comparison/contrast	... expresses insights or opinions about multiple subjects.	... shows the similarities and/or differences between or among two or more subjects. When comparing subjects, the writer discusses both similarities and differences; when contrasting subjects, the writer discusses only differences.
	Literary analysis	... demonstrates an understanding of a literary work.	... analyses the work in terms of elements related specifically to literature.

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<b>Type of Writing</b>	<b>Type of Essay</b>	<b>Purpose</b> This type of essay ...	<b>Writer's Focus</b> The writer ...
<b>Exposition (continued)</b>	Literary comparison	... demonstrates an understanding of two or more literary works.	... identifies elements common to each work and then explains how they are similar or different.
	Cause and effect	... explores an event or situation and its background or results.	... asks, "What caused this to happen?" or "What were the effects of this happening?" In some cases, the writer may do both.
	Definition	... explains the precise meaning of a term or concept.	... identifies the term as belonging to a particular group and then discusses the specific characteristics that distinguish it from other members of that group.
	Division and classification	... conveys an understanding of a subject by examining its various parts.	... groups common aspects or elements of the subject into categories and discusses each in detail.
	Process analysis	... explains how a task is performed.	... may actually instruct the audience to make or to do something, or may simply help the audience to understand the process better.
	Research report	... helps the audience understand more about a particular subject by presenting or summarizing factual information.	... presents research findings from outside sources rather than from his or her personal knowledge or experience.

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Type of Writing	Type of Essay	Purpose This type of essay ...	Writer's Focus The writer ...
Persuasion	Review	... evaluates the worth of a work or performance.	... uses analysis and opinion to convince the audience of the validity of his or her view of the work or performance.
	Problem-solution	... informs the audience of issues surrounding a problem and then attempts to persuade the audience to follow a course of action.	... usually follows a particular pattern of organization, beginning with the identification of a problem and then presenting one or more solutions.
	Argument	... attempts to convince the audience to adopt the writer's position or to follow a particular course of action.	... usually combines factual evidence and emotional appeals to persuade the audience.

### What are the qualities of an effective essay?

Most writing has seven distinct traits: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. You can judge the effectiveness of an essay by considering each trait in turn and evaluating the results. The rubric on the following pages describes the qualities of each trait from four levels—inadequate (1) to excellent (4).

<b>Trait</b>	<b>1</b> The essay ...	<b>2</b> The essay ...	<b>3</b> The essay ...	<b>4</b> The essay ...
<b>Ideas</b>	... demonstrates no clear sense of purpose. The information included does not enhance understanding of the topic.	... demonstrates a focus but provides only a general discussion of the topic. The audience has many questions that remain unanswered.	... demonstrates a focus and includes information that supports the writer's purpose. However, some elements of the discussion require further development to have credibility.	... demonstrates a clear focus and includes details and examples that explore the topic thoroughly and credibly. The writer's purpose is obvious throughout, and every detail contributes to that purpose.
<b>Organization</b>	... has no clear beginning, middle, and end. The writer has not used transitional devices to connect ideas, or has used them inappropriately. There is no title, or the title does not introduce the essay's focus in an engaging way.	... has a beginning, middle, and end, but these elements are undeveloped. Some attempt has been made to organize ideas in a meaningful way, but this organization does not always suit the writer's purpose. The writer has attempted to use transitional devices, but not all are successful. The writer includes a title that introduces the essay's focus but in a superficial manner.	... has a clear beginning, middle, and end, but these elements may seem formulaic. The writer has arranged ideas and information in a logical order and has used some transitional devices to show how ideas relate to each other. The writer includes a title that introduces the essay's focus and attempts to engage the audience.	... has an engaging lead that clearly identifies the thesis, presents ideas and information in a way that the audience can follow easily, and has a smooth, satisfying conclusion. The writer frequently uses transitional devices that clearly show how ideas connect, and these ideas are arranged in an order that supports the purpose of the essay. The writer includes a title that introduces the essay's focus in an engaging way.

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<b>Trait</b>	<b>1</b> The essay ...	<b>2</b> The essay ...	<b>3</b> The essay ...	<b>4</b> The essay ...
<b>Voice</b>	... does not convey a sense of the person behind the words. The writer demonstrates little or no concern for the topic and does not attempt to engage the audience in the discussion of it.	... attempts to convey a sense of the writer's personality. The writer seems sincere and attempts to engage the audience in the discussion of the topic.	... conveys some sense of the writer's personality and a tone that is appropriate for the writer's purpose and audience. The writer cares about the topic and often engages the audience in the discussion of it.	... conveys a strong sense of both the writer's personality and a tone that is appropriate for the writer's purpose. The writer has a strong sense of audience, clearly cares about the topic, and engages the audience throughout the discussion of it.
<b>Word Choice</b>	... includes limited vocabulary. Some words may be used incorrectly. The writer makes no attempt to use figurative language.	... includes predictable or imprecise words, or vocabulary that is inappropriate for the essay's purpose and audience. The writer makes little use of figurative language to add interest.	... includes words that are appropriate for the essay's purpose and audience but may lack freshness. The writer attempts to use figurative language when appropriate, although some may be ineffective or clichéd.	... includes specific, accurate words that avoid repetition and convey vivid impressions of the content. The writer uses figurative language when appropriate to achieve desired effects.
<b>Sentence Fluency</b>	... includes similar sentence lengths and structures throughout, so the writing seems repetitive. Some sentences may be unclear.	... includes a few sentences of varying length and structure, but the writing seems mechanical or awkward.	... includes a variety of sentence lengths and structures, but some passages reveal a lack of stylistic control.	... includes a wide variety of sentence lengths and structures that flow smoothly, emphasize key ideas, and add interest to the writing.

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Trait	1 The essay ...	2 The essay ...	3 The essay ...	4 The essay ...
<b>Conventions</b>	... contains many errors in grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage, and paragraphing that distract the audience and interfere with meaning.	... contains errors in grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage, and paragraphing that sometimes interfere with meaning.	... contains some errors in grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage, and paragraphing, but most do not interfere with meaning.	... contains very few errors in grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage and paragraphing. If errors appear, they do not interfere with meaning.
<b>Presentation</b>	... reveals no attempt to present ideas neatly or to use appropriate presentation format. If presented using a computer, the essay's text spacing, font size, and margin width do not assist the audience in understanding the essay's purpose and content.	... reveals an attempt to present ideas effectively, but requires greater attention to neatness of handwriting and appropriateness of presentation format. If presented using a computer, the essay's text spacing, font size, and margin width do not always support the audience's understanding of the essay's purpose and content.	... reveals attention to neatness of handwriting and appropriateness of presentation format. If presented using a computer, the essay's text spacing, font size, and margin width assist the audience in understanding its purpose and content.	... reveals keen attention to neatness of handwriting and appropriate presentation format. If presented using a computer, the essay's text spacing, font size, and margin width clearly enhance the audience's understanding of its purpose and content.

### How can we apply these traits?

On the following page is a persuasive essay written by a grade 9 student. Read it at least twice and evaluate the writer's success by assessing the essay according to each trait. Then read the assessment of the essay that is provided for you.

**Rural Schools: Don't Take Them for Granted!**

Earlier this year my family moved to Eagle Bay, a place that you'd be hard pressed to find on a map. We came from Windsor, Ontario, a place with over 200 000 people living in it. Talk about a culture shock! This year I have attended the local high school, a complete change from what I'm used to, and I noticed something. Many people who have been in a small school for a long time forget about its advantages and those people who have always been in a big school have never had a chance to enjoy the experience. Lucky for me I have, and I think rural schools have more to offer.

A major advantage to rural schools is its much more relaxed environment. There's less of the hustle and bustle that you would find in a big city. You always have time to get to your next class and it's way easier to find your way around the school. Sometimes in a big school you can get completely lost and confused, but that never happens in a rural school. Even the people here are laid back. They tackle each week one day at a time and seem to have more time to just relax. The teachers are a lot more easy going too, and no one is ever in to much of a hurry.

As soon as you walk into a little school everyone knows you're there, and it doesn't take long for them to know your name. Some people think it's a bad thing for it to be so personal, but I would consider it to be part of the rural school charm. The teachers have a lot more time to give you one on one teaching and extra help, which you will rarely find in a big city school. Also, in a little school it seems like everyone wants to be your friend, whereas in a big school people tend to stick to their own groups. The people in a rural area are a lot more trusting too, though many people don't think so. In a larger school it is easier to blend in and cause trouble without anyone noticing, but in a rural area it is much harder and not as many people feel they need to cause trouble to get attention. As a result of this there is less vandalism, theft, bullying and fighting overall.

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If you come from a big school than you will know what it takes to be on a school team, you really have to be the best. You might also understand the feeling of being rejected because you weren't good enough. In a little school though the people are a lot more concerned with whether or not they will have a team in the first place instead of worrying about having the best possible team. Thanks to that, if you have an interest in playing sports then you are pretty much guaranteed a spot. Nobody ever gets rejected. As a result of this, no matter what your skill level is everyone is given an opportunity to play.

I think that people who have lived in a small school their whole lives are too quick to say that they want what they don't have. Even though most of them have never actually experienced what it's like in a big school, and they often forget how special a smaller school can be.

– grade 9 student

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### Assessment of the Sample Essay

Trait	Score	Discussion of the Trait
Ideas	3	<p><b>Areas of strength:</b> The writer has chosen a clear focus—to persuade his audience that rural schools offer advantages that larger urban schools cannot—and he offers three benefits of rural schools to support his claim: a more relaxed learning environment, the advantage of knowing everyone in a small school, and the increased likelihood of athletes playing on sports teams. Rather than just listing these benefits, the writer attempts to explain each in terms that the audience will understand.</p> <p><b>Areas of need:</b> The writer often makes generalizations without providing concrete details or examples as proof of his claims. (For example, he states that people in a rural school are “laid back” and “tackle each week one day at a time,” and he claims that “teachers are a lot more easy going,” yet he provides no proof of these statements—which, in fact, may be untrue of many people in rural schools. Since the writer has no data to support these generalizations, he could have provided personal examples of interactions with people in both his urban and rural schools to illustrate his claim.) Because the writer relies on generalizations throughout his essay, his discussion of the benefits of rural schools lacks credibility.</p>

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Trait	Score	Discussion of the Trait
Organization	3	<p><b>Areas of strength:</b> The title immediately introduces the essay’s focus using a command that engages the audience. The essay has a clear beginning, middle, and end. The writer discusses different ideas in separate paragraphs and uses transitional devices such as “but”, “also”, “whereas”, and “as a result” to help the audience move smoothly from one idea to the next.</p> <p><b>Areas of need:</b> The writer seems “locked into” a traditional five-paragraph essay structure, which prevents him from exploring his ideas more fully. Also, effective persuasive essays discuss the most important idea last. However, the final idea presented in this essay describes how rural schools benefit only a portion of the student population (athletes) while the first and second ideas discuss how rural schools benefit all students. Therefore, the writer needs to reconsider the order of his ideas.</p>
Voice	3	<p><b>Areas of strength:</b> The writer clearly cares about his topic, immediately demonstrating this in the exclamation in his title, and he uses some personal experience—“We came from Windsor, Ontario, a place with over 200 000 people”—to frame his argument. His casual style—“Talk about a culture shock!”—conveys a strong sense of his personality and is appropriate for his purpose (to persuade) and his audience (students who may not recognize the value of the rural schools they attend). The writer sometimes speaks directly to his audience, making comments such as “You might also understand the feeling of being rejected because you weren’t good enough” that appeal to emotion and engage the audience.</p> <p><b>Areas of need:</b> The writer could personalize his argument even further, making continued connections to his own experience that would strengthen the voice of his essay. For example, when discussing the benefit of rural schools for athletes, he might have explained how he would never have made the basketball (or soccer or volleyball) team at his urban school but was able to do so at Eagle Bay.</p>
Word Choice	3	<p><b>Areas of strength:</b> The writer has used words that are appropriate for his purpose and audience, and he sometimes uses figurative language, particularly in his choice of verbs (“stick to their own groups,” “blend in,” “tackle each week”).</p> <p><b>Areas of need:</b> The writer’s words sometimes lack freshness. He resorts to clichéd expressions like “hustle and bustle” rather than seeking original ways to present his ideas.</p>

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Trait	Score	Discussion of the Trait
Sentence Fluency	3	<p><b>Areas of strength:</b> The writer uses a variety of sentence structures and sentence lengths to add interest and effect. For example, short, simple sentences like “Even the people here are laid back” and “Nobody ever gets rejected” emphasize key ideas discussed in longer, more complex sentences.</p> <p><b>Areas of need:</b> The writer does not vary his sentence lengths and structures throughout the entire essay. For example, his third—and longest—paragraph contains several sentences that are similar in length and structure.</p>
Conventions	3	<p><b>Areas of strength:</b> At approximately 580 words, the essay contains relatively few errors, and most do not interfere with meaning.</p> <p><b>Areas of need:</b> Among the essay’s errors are usage problems (its versus it’s, then versus than, to versus too, way versus far), a misspelling (fell rather than feel), a comma splice, an unintentional sentence fragment, a pronoun antecedent agreement problem, a vague pronoun reference, a split infinitive (“to just relax”), and omission of commas. The final sentence, which sums up the writer’s argument, poses the greatest problem in terms of meaning.</p>
Presentation	4	<p>The writer’s attention to neatness and his choice of a standard font type, font size, and line spacing ensure that no physical elements interfere with the audience’s understanding of the essay. The audience is able to focus entirely on purpose and meaning.</p>

### What is the overall score of the essay?

This writer demonstrated a level 3 proficiency in each of the first six traits. The essay deserves an overall score of 3. This means that the writer is meeting the expectations of essay writing for the grade level. The writer achieved a higher score on presentation, the physical appearance of the essay. However, presentation does not reflect the quality of the writing, so should not be considered when scoring the essay. If the writer achieves a variety of scores for ideas, organization, voice, sentence fluency, word choice, and conventions, identify the score that the writer achieved most often for these six traits. Award the essay that score as an overall grade, not a mean, or average, of the various scores.



# Tips for Writing Essays

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1. Read effective essays to see how various writers craft them. Notice how they establish their purpose, organize and develop their main ideas, conclude their essays, and convey a strong sense of voice throughout.
2. Choose a topic that truly interests you. (If you don't have a choice, spend some time exploring an assigned topic to make sure you understand it. Find an angle that interests you.)
3. Make sure your topic is “narrow” enough to discuss fully in a single piece of writing. If not, narrow it further.
4. Focus on your purpose. What do you want your essay to achieve? Try to write your purpose in a single sentence and keep this in mind at all times as you plan your essay.
5. Give yourself plenty of time to write your essay. If your deadline permits, think about your essay's purpose for a few days and keep a notebook handy to jot down ideas and details that you might be able to include.
6. Identify what you already know about your topic, what you need to find out, and where you might go to get this additional information.
7. Immerse yourself in your topic. Read and view materials related to it, making notes and recording the sources of your information. If you have the opportunity, talk to others about your essay's purpose and your ideas, making notes of new ideas or different approaches that may arise from your conversations.
8. When you feel you have a strong understanding of the topic, review your purpose and identify the main ideas you will include in your essay to achieve that purpose.
9. Consider how you will arrange your ideas. Does one order support your purpose better than another? Try outlining your essay to find the best way to present your information.
10. When writing your essay, use the active voice rather than the passive voice. The active voice emphasizes the doer of the action (Smoking kills hundreds of Nova Scotians every year.) while the passive voice emphasizes the receiver of the action (Hundreds of Nova Scotians are killed by smoking every year.)

11. Draft three different leads for your essay and choose the best one.
12. Draft the body of your essay, giving equal attention to your main ideas. Use concrete details and examples to show—rather than tell—what you mean.
13. Draft an ending that brings your essay to a smooth, satisfying conclusion. An effective ending always grows out of what has come before it. If an image is introduced in your lead, can you return to it naturally in your conclusion?
14. Give credit when offering other people’s ideas. Cite sources appropriately.
15. Read your first draft aloud. Do your sentences flow smoothly? Does the writing “sound” like you? Have you chosen words that are appropriate for your audience and purpose?
16. If possible, leave the essay for a few days before revising it. When you are ready to revise, review the purpose of your essay and then read your draft with this purpose in mind. Does everything in your essay work to achieve that purpose? Are there parts where more information is required?
17. If possible, have others read and respond to your essay. Are there parts of your essay that they find confusing? Does your essay leave your audience with unanswered questions?
18. Once you are satisfied with the content of your essay, edit carefully for errors in grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage, and paragraphing. If possible, have someone else edit your work.
19. Write a polished draft of your essay, paying close attention to the physical appearance of your piece. Nothing in its presentation should distract your audience from its purpose and meaning.
20. Proofread carefully for errors.

Which of the above tips do you follow whenever you write an essay? Choose five others that you will focus on the next time you write an essay.

# What curriculum outcomes are addressed by essay writing?

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The following are outcomes addressed in *Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum: Grades 7–9* for students in grade 9.

## **General Curriculum Outcome 5:**

**Students will be expected to interpret, select, and combine information using a variety of strategies, resources, and technologies.**

### Specific Curriculum Outcomes:

*Students will be expected to*

- 5.1 independently access and select specific information to meet personal and learning needs
  - select from a wide range, sources appropriate to their purposes
  - use the electronic network
  - develop approaches and strategies to conduct their research

## **General Curriculum Outcome 8:**

**Students will be expected to use writing and other ways of representing to explore, clarify, and reflect on their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and learnings; and to use their imagination.**

### Specific Curriculum Outcomes:

*Students will be expected to*

- 8.1 use a range of strategies in writing and other forms of representing to
  - extend ideas and experiences
  - explore and reflect on their feelings, values, and attitudes
  - consider others' perspectives
  - reflect on problems and responses to problems
  - describe and evaluate their learning processes and strategies
  - reflect on their growth as language learners and language users
- 8.2 use note-making to reconstruct knowledge and select effective strategies appropriate to the task
- 8.3 make informed choices of language to create a range of interesting effects in imaginative writing and other ways of representing

### **General Curriculum Outcome 9:**

**Students will be expected to create texts collaboratively and independently, using a variety of forms for a range of audiences and purposes.**

#### **Specific Curriculum Outcomes:**

*Students will be expected to*

- 9.1 demonstrate facility in using a variety of forms of writing to create texts for specific purposes and audiences, and represent their ideas in other forms (including visual arts, music, and drama) to achieve their purposes
- 9.2 demonstrate an awareness of the effect of context on writing and other ways of representing
  - make appropriate choices of form, style, and content for specific audiences and purposes
- 9.3 analyse and assess responses to their writing and media productions

### **General Curriculum Outcome 10:**

**Students will be expected to use a range of strategies to develop effective writing and other ways of representing and to enhance their clarity, precision, and effectiveness.**

#### **Specific Curriculum Outcomes:**

*Students will be expected to*

- 10.1 demonstrate an awareness of what prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, proofreading, and presentation strategies work for them with various writing and other representations
- 10.2 consistently use the conventions of written language in final products
- 10.3 experiment with the use of technology in communicating for a range of purposes with a variety of audiences
- 10.4 demonstrate a commitment to crafting pieces of writing and other representations
- 10.5 integrate information from several sources to construct and communicate meaning







