

Wilcox Writing Method for Beginning your Humanities Essay

This document introduces a method for choosing an academic essay topic and formulating a research question and thesis, which are the first steps to beginning an academic essay.

Are the instructions to choose the topic of the essay yourself? Go to [section 1](#).

Are the essay prompts already given to you? Go to [section 2](#).

TLDR (Too Long Didn't Read, or a concise summary)

- a. Read the instructions carefully
- b. Write down the instructions in your own words
- c. Read the prompt carefully
- d. Answer the prompt
- e. Gather your reasons and evidence
- f. Create your thesis: Link the reasons and answer
- g. Structure your essay

1. Quescussion Method for Choosing Course Paper Topics

So, you're faced with having to choose a topic for an essay. The instructions might say something like "find a topic relevant to the course that engages with at least one course reading." Now begins the journey to figuring out exactly what you want to write about.

First, think about what aspect of the course was most interesting to you. Ask yourself:

"Were there any aspects of the course I wish we could have spent more time on?"

"Were there any weeks I was particularly engaged with or paid more attention?"

"Are there any questions that remain unanswered for me?"

These questions can guide you to a particular topic, module, or week of interest.

From there, you will want to home in on a more specific topic. For instance, if you were particularly interested and paying attention in week five, which was about the sociology of religion, then you might begin by thinking about the sociology of religion as a topic. Next, you will have to get much more specific, since an essay about the sociology of religion is much too broad for a course essay.



For instance, you might think about a time and place for the scope of your essay, such as the sociology of religion in the 1800s or the sociology of religion in South America. Then, you would set your topic as the sociology of religion in South America during the 1800s. That is much more manageable. You might get even more specific about the topic by focusing on a specific aspect of the sociology of religion. For instance, the use of religious rituals, or even more specifically, baptism.

The reason to focus so specifically is that you can get clearer and more focused with your ideas and treat a small topic very well. This is usually the expected outcome in academia: deep, focused engagement on a topic. It also weeds out being overwhelmed with exactly what to say, which points to talk about, and filters out an overwhelming number of sources you'd have to sift through. A simple search on "sociology of religion" may yield a whopping 750,000 results! It would be impossible to check all those. You'll want to home in on your topic until you get maybe a few hundred to less than a hundred hits on an academic library or scholarly search. In comparison, a search for "sociology of baptism" might yield 10,000 results, which is much more manageable. Most specifically, a search for "sociology of baptism in South America" might yield a hundred results. That's about the specificity you want to be at. Just be wary of being too specific, since it might be hard to find any sources.

How you might arrive at this topic is after answering the first set of questions, continue to pose questions with no answers. You can even use a friend or family member to have a fun back-and-forth. For instance, if you identified a particular week on the sociology of religion, you could find the question that will function as your own prompt of sorts and can be used in section 2. It may also become your research question. Perhaps the line of questioning goes like this

Is the sociology of religion useful to think about in modern society?

What aspect of the sociology of religion is useful in modern society?

Is there an era that was particularly academically focused on this aspect?

Is the 1800s an era that was heavily focused on this aspect?

What part of the world focused most on this aspect in the 1800s?

Is South America the country that focused most on this aspect?

What can we learn from the sociology of religion in South America in the 1800s?

What religious practices were part of society in South America in the 1800s?

Keep asking questions until you feel satisfied that you've reached a sufficiently specific topic. As you can see, this last question can make for a sufficiently focused research



question. This question is what you aim to answer with your research. We'll use this as our prompt, and we will look at how to answer it in section 2.

2. Engaging with Essay Prompts

So, you have an essay due, and the professor has provided you with a prompt to follow. How do you approach and begin the essay? It's not as difficult as you may think, so let's walk through how to approach an essay assignment with a provided prompt.

What's the first thing to do when getting any academic assignment? I'll give you three guesses, and the first two are not "start writing" or "start reading the text or my notes." We first read the instructions carefully.

Read the instructions carefully

The first thing to always do with any assignment is read the assignment instructions. In fact, read through them twice. The main reason why students fail to get full marks on exams is a failure to properly read the instructions. I've seen this myself as a university exam grader. Some students just completely ignore some parts of the question. When I get academic assignments, I usually read the instructions when I first get them. Even a quick glance over is helpful, so I can gauge the scope and size of the project and get a sense of the expectations and work required. I note deadlines in my calendar.

Write down the instructions in your own words

Take some time and write down what you must do in your own words. Point form is fine. The main thing is you want to make sure you understand those instructions. I like to make a checklist, so I can be sure I've checked all important things off before submitting. Write down the purpose; the formatting standards like font size, spacing, and word count; and anything else the professor requires.

Yes, it can be tedious or feel useless to have to rewrite instructions that you already have, but this method assures that you understand those instructions and can break them down into their parts. At least making a point-form checklist of what is expected acts as a check, so you can feel confident that you've tackled everything required.

If there are no specific formatting instructions, feel free to ask the professor or adhere to the standard formatting for your discipline, like font, spacing, style guide, etc.

Read the prompt carefully

Now that you understand what you must do, make sure to read the prompt carefully. Note the following things



- a. What is the main question asked, if any?
- b. Are there multiple parts to the answer?
- c. What topic is it on?
- d. What is asking me to do, exactly?

If there is no question asked, instructions like “note two ideas we discussed in the course and relate them together in a short exegetical essay in 500 words,” you can reframe that as a question. “What are two ideas in this course and how do they relate?” The rest is simply formatting. The main thing is to formulate the instructions as a question that can be answered with a sentence (and not just “yes” or “no”). We note that it’s a short and exegetical essay that should be around 500 words.

If the prompt is given as a question, detach the question from the instructions and set the question aside.

e.g., “How does [*author*] discuss the topic [*topic*] and how does it fit into the course as a whole? Explain in a 600-word essay.”

Now that you have the question, the next thing to do is simple. Answer the question directly.

Answer the prompt directly

We have a question that needs an answer, and you will provide that answer, right now. Yes, right now. Don’t worry about it being wrong. The beauty of answers is that we can change them until we submit the assignment.

Let’s take our question from the previous section.

“What are two ideas in this course and how do they relate?”

Here is an answer: Two ideas in this course are [*idea 1*] and [*idea 2*] and they relate by being both [*relation*].

That’s it. This answer could be inaccurate or just plain wrong, but that is something we can narrow down and correct as we work through the essay and research or read more about it. For now, this is our answer.

This will be the foundation for your *working thesis* or *tentative thesis*. All academic essays need a thesis. A thesis is the conclusion of the thrust of the essay. However, most times it will be helpful to add reasons to your thesis to refine it and make it pop.

Gather your reasons and evidence

Now, you need to find support for this answer. Academic essays and theses need support, which are your reasons and evidence. Pretend the answer you just gave is



something you tell a friend, and they ask you, “Why do you think that?” What would you tell them in response?

Your response are the reasons why you answered as you did, and those reasons work as your essay’s evidence. For instance, you might state that

Two ideas in this course are [*idea 1*] and [*idea 2*] and they relate by being both [*relation*], because ...

- a. [*Idea 1*] and [*idea 2*] are both about [*what they are about*].
- b. They are both a response to problem [*problem*].

‘a’ and ‘b’ are your reasons. Evidence can be distinct from reasons too. Perhaps your evidence comes from the texts or course notes.

- c. [*Idea 1*] is in chapter [*chapter*] of text [*text*].
- d. [*Idea 2*] is in chapter [*chapter*] of text [*text*].
- e. The course notes discuss both as under the heading [*heading*].

So now you have reasons and evidence, the supporting structure of the academic essay. Now you just need to incorporate those reasons together with the answer to the prompt and formulate your essay’s thesis.

Create your thesis: Link the reasons and answer

This next step is simple, like addition. Add together your answer and reasons into a complete, grammatical sentence.

Two ideas in this course are [*idea 1*] and [*idea 2*] and they relate by being both [*relation*]

- a. [*Idea 1*] and [*idea 2*] are both about [*what they are about*].
- b. They are both a response to problem [*problem*].
- c. [*Idea 1*] is in chapter [*chapter x*] of text [*text 1*].
- d. [*Idea 2*] is in chapter [*chapter y*] of text [*text 2*].
- e. The course notes discuss both as under the heading [*heading*].

You must consider how to phrase them together without being too clunky or wordy. It may take a few tries here, but I think something like this is respectable:

Two ideas in this course are [*idea 1*] and [*idea 2*] and they relate by being both [*relation*], because [*idea 1*] and [*idea 2*] are both about [*what they are about*], they are both a response to [*problem*], and they are discussed in [*chapter x*] of [*text 1*] and [*chapter y*] of [*text 2*], along with the course notes that suggest they both situate under [*heading*].



You could also make this less wordy by breaking it up into two sentences and distinguishing the reasons and the evidence. Theses should usually be 1 – 3 sentences.

Two ideas in this course are [*idea 1*] and [*idea 2*], and they relate by being both [*relation*], because [*idea 1*] and [*idea 2*] are both about [*what they are about*], they are both a response to [*problem*]. Both are discussed in [*chapter x*] of [*text 1*] and [*chapter y*] of [*text 2*], along with the course notes that suggest they both situate under [*heading*].

That's it! Now you have a thesis to work with, even if it may be inaccurate at this point or needs refining later. The thesis may be wrong or partially wrong at this point, but you can narrow that down once you do your analysis, focusing on the evidence you picked out. This thesis indicates so much in this little sentence or two: An answer to the prompt, your reasoning, and the evidence you will call upon and where it can be found.

The thing about the thesis is that it can be revised as you do your research and write the essay. I rarely, if ever, end with the same thesis that I started with. In section 3, we will see, now with all this info at hand, how to structure the essay even before writing it.

3. Structuring the Essay

An academic essay has three main parts: introduction, body, and conclusion. The thesis goes in your introduction, almost always at the end. Your reasons can be written down as the topic sentences (first sentences) of a body paragraph. Each reason or evidence can be written down as one body paragraph. This creates your outline.

- i. Introduction
 - a. Thesis
- ii. [*Idea 1*] and [*idea 2*] are both about [*what they are about*].
 - a. Sub points
- iii. They are both a response to problem [*problem*].
 - a. Sub points
- iv. [*Idea 1*] is in chapter [*chapter x*] of text [*text 1*].
 - a. Sub points
- v. [*Idea 2*] is in chapter [*chapter y*] of text [*text 2*].
 - a. Sub points
- vi. The course notes discuss both as under the heading [*heading*].
 - a. Sub points
- vii. Conclusion

From this framework, we have a strong guide to how to format the essay. More must be added to fill in the introduction and conclusion, but for now this is enough to get started.



Body paragraphs can be removed, merged, or switched around during the writing and revising processes. Don't also be afraid to cut. One common and major essay problem is going over the word count or not removing less or non-relevant material, because you put in the work, those words are your darlings, and you've grown attached to them. Make sure everything ties back strongly to and supports the thesis. If you change the thesis, then you also might want to look at your body paragraphs again and vice versa.

You can now begin writing further. See the documents "Academic Essays: Writing the Body Paragraphs" for how to add some meat to those body paragraphs; "Academic Essays: Writing the Introduction" for how to fill in that introduction; and "Academic Essays: Writing the Conclusion" for how to fill in the conclusion.

4. Conclusion

One reason why students don't get full marks on assignments is that students fail to adhere to the assignment instructions. Academic assignments expect students to follow the stated instructions exactly. This is part of being attentive and able to mentally manage nuances, since university is a place to develop your mental capacities. Imagine yourself at a job. If you do finish a project that misses a specific instruction from your boss or stakeholders, they will be unhappy, since you've wasted time and resources. Knowing how to engage assignments and what they are asking, along with their prompts, is the foundation to creating strong academic writing pieces.

By breaking down assignments into bite-sized chunks instead of diving in and writing whatever comes to mind, we have a recipe to create an excellent academic essay. Would you prefer a cook that follows a proper recipe or one that throws everything together and adjusts by taste? Unless that cook is a master chef, you'd probably prefer the cook that has a tried-and-true recipe. Anyone consulting this instructional document is probably not yet a master chef. To cook up a good essay, we first need a recipe.

It might seem intuitive or easy to just jump in and start writing what comes to mind. That's fine. Anyone can write an essay. However, if you want to write an excellent essay and aim for that 'A' grade, the time and effort spent on proper planning is essential. One of my favorite sayings goes "one hour of planning can save days of headache." A good plan makes the rest of the process easier and minimizes snags and slowdowns.

Don't be afraid that if you think your answer to the essay prompt is wrong, then give a different answer to your research question, or go back to the beginning and start the process over again. In academia, you don't want to give false information. The point of academia is to give academically rigorous and factually backed information. That is what research is. There are many ways to go about it, and this is one way of beginning that research journey.

