

The Seven Essential Steps

1. Gather the information

While you are reading, make marginal notes or note down page numbers and in a notebook, whichever comes more naturally to you.

Do not lose the notebook.

When you are ready to begin thinking about your essay, reread the entire text. If this is impractical, read over the passages you found most interesting, disturbing, annoying, or otherwise worth noticing. In reviewing these passages, try to answer the question: Why are these passages important to your understanding of this work? Look for details. Decide whether there is a pattern or logic to your choice of passages.

2. Develop a thesis and an argument

Remember that plot summary does not constitute a thesis. A thesis should have a “why” in it somewhere; it should try to tell us why what happens, happens. Once you have determined the importance of the passages you have chosen and you are fairly sure that they do relate to your thesis, sketch out the points you want to make with these passages.

Remember that these points are only a provisional set of goals. If you find that one or more of the points will be useless to you, or that you can’t honestly develop them without straining credibility, you need to reconsider either your choice of passages, or your argument itself. Throw out extraneous points, but don’t simply suppress a passage which appears to contradict or undermine your argument completely.

Be ruthless.

3. Arrange your Information

Write up a sketch of your essay, a brief draft, an outline, scribbles on the back of the phone bill, whatever works for you. This will give you a chance to look at the skeleton and see if it hangs together. It will also allow you the luxury of listing your examples without analyzing them.

Note: This is the only place where it is proper to include information without justifying its relevance to the other items in the essay.

4. Think your Argument Through

Examine your examples and the points you intend to draw from them. At this point, you must consider whether or not the connections between these observations are valid. Keep asking yourself “What is the point of this? What does it mean?”.

Ask yourself questions to establish whether this essay is really writable, whether your argument is convincing. For instance:

If I say “A”, does “B” arise as a consequence of “A”?

What is the nature of this relationship? Is it confrontational, that is, does “B” oppose or contradict “A”? Is it dependant? Does A depend on B, or vice-versa?

Is my premise so obvious that it is not worth arguing?

Exactly how does C provide an answer to the problems of tensions set up by A and B?

What can I do to extend the question I have discussed and show another way in which it is important to understanding this work?

What other issues are implicit in the author’s presentation?

During this process, write short exploratory sentences or paragraphs to see if your argument hangs together. If it doesn’t, try setting it aside for a while and working on something else, like you math assignment or your juggling skills.

5. Don’t Panic!

This is, of course, easier if you don’t leave writing your paper until the last moment.

6. Begin Writing Your Essay

7.

8. Revise

Revising is an essential part of the writing process. You will find it much easier to revise if you print your essay out and make corrections on hardcopy in some interesting color of ink. Try reading it aloud, to a friend or to yourself. Listing for repetition, incomplete sentences, awkward phrases, etc. Watch for spelling and grammar errors. Pay attention to the structure of the essay: do paragraphs lead into one another logically? Do some go on for pages or contain only a single sentence? Try to judge your argument objectively: does it make sense? Does it ignore evidence to the contrary? Is it interesting? Is the thesis controversial? Or is it so obvious that it is not worth arguing (i.e. Cain is an evil man)?

Things to avoid because they are incorrect, bad form, annoying or all of the above:

Excessive use of the passive voice (Mistakes were made)

Contractions (“Don’t” is fine in conversation; in formal writing use “do not”.)

Dangling participles

Comma splices (A comma cannot join two independent sentences; use a semicolon or a period, or perhaps a conjunction)

Lists (Do not simply list examples or quotations; analyze them)

Pretentious words (Do not use “utilize” instead of “use”, for instance. It sounds silly.)

Who/whom

Who/that

Split infinitives (Capt. Kirk was wrong (and so were Picard and Janeway). He should have said: “Boldly to go where no man has gone before.”)

If any of these no-nos are Greek to you, please ask!