



# Cracking the Code on A+ Essays

## Part 1: A quick guide to writing academic essays that get high grades

Most students are familiar with the “hamburger” model of essay writing, but it’s hopelessly vague. To help my students, I developed the **HOT TREES TOPS** framework, which includes every element needed for a thoroughly developed essay. You will never go wrong if you follow this model, whether it’s for an elementary, high school, or university essay, or a 300-page book.

This guide focuses on “argument” essays, which are the archetypal essay format that EVERY professor has in mind when assigning a writing task. Conceptually, this is the most important model to understand.

Academic essays are the essence of both informative and persuasive writing. They are the most important form of writing that students need to master for academic AND career success. This guide will explain how to write essays that get high grades.

In our online classes, we start with argument essays, and then we apply our understanding of essay structure and content requirements to a wide variety of essay formats such as cause-effect, biography, problem-solution, literature critique, and reader response.

Note: This is the “Quick Start” version of the full guide. Throughout this document, you’ll find links to more in-depth explanations.

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# 1. What is an essay? How is it different from other forms of writing?

## The difference between an essay and a report: argument vs. description

An essay is not just a collection of facts. It must have an **argument** at its core. Without an argument, it's a report. This is an important distinction: reports are descriptive and factual, whereas essays are **persuasive** and aim to convince the reader of a particular viewpoint.

**Example:** In a report, you might describe an issue like traffic congestion in a city, but in an essay, you would need to include an argument. You could:

- argue about what the true causes of congestion are (inadequate public transport vs too many cars)
- propose a solution (e.g. increase public transportation or redesign cities to decrease the need for car use)
- argue that a proposed solution is too expensive (e.g. a new subway would be great but it's too expensive because it would require raising taxes or cutting spending in other areas)

## The difference between an argument and an opinion: every claim must be supported with evidence

In casual conversations, we often express opinions. However, in an essay, an argument must be backed up by facts, data, or logical reasoning. This is what distinguishes academic arguments from casual writing: every argument in an essay must be supported with **evidence**.

- **Example:** If you argue that school uniforms are beneficial because they help parents save money, you need to back this up with evidence. Find research on how much parents spend on clothing per year when their child goes to a school with a uniform policy vs. how much parents spend on clothing per year at schools without uniforms.

Read more about [the four most common essay topics: what can you argue about?](https://aemacademy.ca/the-four-most-common-essay-topics/) (<https://aemacademy.ca/the-four-most-common-essay-topics/> )

## 2. The best structure for an essay: **HOT TREES TOPS**

What is the best structure for an essay? The **HOT TREES TOPS** framework is a reader-friendly format that tells you exactly what to include in every part of an essay.

**Note 1:** Every part of HOT TREES TOPS can be more than one sentence.

**Note 2:** Not every body paragraph needs to follow TREES structure. However, a fully developed body paragraph includes all TREES elements.

You will never go wrong if you follow this structure 100%.

### **Form follows function**

This master structure can be used with all essay types for the rest of your life (elementary, high school, college, university, 300-page book):

#### **Title**

#### **Introduction**

- **H**ook
- **O**verview
- **T**hesis

#### **Body Paragraphs**

- **T**opic sentence
- **R**eason/reinforcement
- **E**vidence
- **E**xample
- **S**ummary/Significance

#### **Conclusion**

- **T**hesis
- **O**bservation
- **P**rediction
- **S**uggestion

## Title

Choose a clear title that reflects the essay's main point. The title is the most general description of what your writing is about. It is a more general version of your thesis/general topic sentence. Be reader-friendly: make it completely obvious:

### No good:

- School Uniforms
  - This doesn't tell the reader anything about the purpose of the essay.

### Better:

- The Disadvantages of School Uniforms
- The Advantages and Disadvantages of the President's Proposed Military Aid Package

See more about [punctuation and capitalization rules for titles.](#)

## Introduction

### Hook

A hook grabs the reader's attention. At school, the teacher has to read your writing, but in the real world, nobody will read your writing unless the hook draws them in to read the rest.

Basic hooks are questions, especially rhetorical questions:

- Have you ever wondered why...?
- Did you know...?

### “If it bleeds, it leads.”

You can do better than a basic hook. What do TV news shows lead with? They lead with blood and guts because we're afraid of getting hurt. We want to know about dangers out there. That's why news about murder, violence, war, or disease always goes first.

For an essay, however, the best and easiest-to-find hooks are shocking or surprising facts and statistics. Use the most surprising fact you find during research. Don't bury your most surprising finding in a body paragraph. Editors call that “burying the lede” (or “lead”).

If you haven't found anything surprising during your research, then you definitely haven't done enough research!

- **Example:** “The most iconic American sports car, the Corvette, was designed by a Russian during the Cold War.”
- **Formula hook:** If you’re completely stuck, you can use the formula hook: “There is an ongoing debate about...” People are drawn to conflict, to arguments. This at least tells the reader that you’re talking about a controversial topic.

## Overview

The **overview** provides the basic background information necessary for the reader to understand the topic. This is essential for giving context before diving into your argument. Ideally, the overview should also convey the importance of the issue to make the reader care about the topic.

- **Example 1:** When writing about the pros/cons of automation, you could provide a brief overview of how the use of automation has grown in recent years and its impact on various industries.
- **Example 2:** In an English literature/movie critique essay, the overview will briefly summarize the plot.
- **Advanced:** Start by describing the OPPOSITE opinion: Some people believe... because...

Then transition to YOUR opinion in the thesis...

## Thesis

The thesis is the most important sentence in an essay. It states your opinion on a controversial topic and summarizes your main supporting reasons. It is a one-sentence summary/conclusion of your entire essay.

The thesis is always the last sentence of the introduction.

The thesis needs to present a clear argument. It can’t be merely descriptive.

Note: Reports are structured in the same way as an essay, but instead of a thesis statement, they have a general topic sentence.

## Don't include any detailed reasoning in the introduction

Details in the introduction overwhelm the reader. Save the details for the body paragraphs. Include only enough information in the introduction for readers to understand the larger context before diving into more focused points.

A solid thesis includes both your opinion and your supporting reasons.

- **Rule of 3:** One reason for an argument isn't compelling. With two reasons, you're on the right track, but three reasons tell the reader your point is well-supported (this is based on what a prosecutor needs to prove in a criminal case: means, motive, opportunity)
- **Example:** School uniforms are a good idea because they save students time, save parents money, and improve school spirit.

**See more about thesis statements** (<https://aemacademy.ca/thesis-statements/>):

- Nuanced thesis statements
- Avoid making strong claims without support

**See more about introduction techniques** (<https://aemacademy.ca/introduction-conclusion-techniques-mirroring-complementing-and-the-flip-technique/>):

- Mirrored introduction-conclusion
- Complementary introduction-conclusion
- The FLIP technique: irony and unintended consequences

## Body Paragraphs

Your thesis statement at the end of the introduction states your position on an issue and summarizes your supporting reasons. Each of those reasons is then developed in its own body paragraph. Body paragraphs are an explanation of how you arrived at your thesis. Each body paragraph explains one supporting reason in detail.

Each body paragraph in your essay focuses on a single idea or argument. Don't try to tackle multiple issues in one section. Keep the structure clear and logical by keeping each body paragraph focused on a single point. If you have many points, use more (shorter) paragraphs.

Body paragraphs have a SINGLE controlling idea, and this idea is developed from general to specific.

## Topic sentence

Each paragraph in the body of the essay focuses on a single reason that supports the thesis. Start with a clear **topic sentence** that introduces the point. Keep it short. Don't explain the reason in detail yet.

Think of the first sentence of a paragraph as a mini thesis statement.

### Examples:

- The first reason why school uniforms are not a good idea is because they prevent students from expressing their uniqueness.
- The first reason why uniforms are a good idea is because they save students time.

Aim for predictable, reader-friendly writing. Tell the reader exactly what to expect in that paragraph.

If anything in the paragraph is not related to the topic sentence, it should NOT be in that paragraph.

## Reason/Rationale/Reinforcement

Include a **general explanation** of the reason. Reinforce the main idea.

This is where most people's writing stops. They have a topic sentence, a general explanation, and maybe a summary, but they're missing evidence (which is a requirement of academic writing) and an example, which brings the evidence to life for the reader. Can you prove to the reader that you know what you're talking about?

## Evidence

Present **evidence** to back up your reason, such as statistics, facts, or logical reasoning. Without evidence, all you have is an unsupported opinion.

**Example:** In an essay on school uniforms, a body paragraph could argue that uniforms save time. The topic sentence might be: "The first reason school uniforms are beneficial is that they save students valuable time each morning." The reasoning explains how students no longer have to decide what to wear. The evidence might cite a survey that shows students take less time getting ready when uniforms are mandatory. Finally, an example could describe a typical student who saves time every morning because of uniforms.

In academic essays, every claim needs evidence to back it up. The best kind of evidence is **data** from research studies, but you can also use expert opinions or historical examples. The key is that your argument must be well-supported.

**Example:** If you claim that school uniforms reduce bullying, you might provide evidence from a study showing that schools with uniforms report fewer bullying incidents. You could further enhance the argument by citing specific examples of schools that have seen a reduction in behaviour issues from implementing uniforms.

At higher levels, each body paragraph should include more than one piece of evidence to support the main point. This helps create a stronger, more persuasive argument. A single piece of evidence may not be enough to convince the reader.

**Example:** If discussing job losses due to automation, include data on various job sectors such as cashiers, retail workers, and administrative assistants, rather than focusing on only one group.

### Example

“1,000,000 dead Russian soldiers is a statistic. One dead soldier is a tragedy.”

- Attributed to Joseph Stalin

When Joseph Stalin’s generals were arguing about the best way to present horrendous World War 2 battle casualties to the public, Stalin told them that big numbers, like “a million dead,” are an abstraction that means nothing to the average person. He told them to focus on a single, relatable example.

Large numbers and statistics can be hard for readers to grasp. A well-chosen example helps readers visualize and understand the significance of your argument.

Note: Many students don’t understand what an example is. An example is something that the reader can visualize. It has to be a specific person or incident that can be PICTURED. General concepts cannot be pictured. Bring the evidence to life with a vivid example.

## Summary/Significance

People are easily confused and forget quickly. Remind readers of the main point of the paragraph they just read. The summary/significance statement should mirror the topic sentence of the paragraph. It should clarify how that paragraph supports the thesis.

Why was this paragraph important?

- In summary,
- For that reason,

### Read more about body paragraphs and evidence:

- Where does the 5-paragraph structure come from?
- Comparing Data Using Percentages
- “Dimensionalizing” Data
- Transitions for Clarity and Cohesion
- Percentage Point vs Percentage Change
- Advanced: Starting the body paragraphs with the opposite point of view

## Conclusion

The conclusion of an essay should wrap up the main points without introducing new ideas. It summarizes the key arguments and may include a final thought: an **observation**, **prediction**, or **suggestion**.

The structure is deliberately repetitive. Sage advice: “Say what you're going to say, say it in detail, and then say what you said.”

Your conclusion is the mirror of the introduction: it begins with your thesis statement.

### Thesis

The conclusion begins with a restated thesis: your thesis from the introduction but in different words. Summarize the reasons in the same order as they appear in the body paragraphs and in the thesis in the introduction.

## Observation, Prediction, Suggestion

The conclusion ends with a final thought, which could be an observation, prediction, or suggestion. Include one or more of these to wrap up the essay. This should logically follow from the content of the essay and should not be surprising or entirely new.

By convention, we do not include new ideas in the conclusion. The reader is not expecting them there. If it's something important, it belongs in a body paragraph.

**Example prediction:** “In conclusion, while automation may lead to significant job losses, it remains to be seen whether it will open up new fields of employment.”

**Example suggestion:** If you've written an essay about the benefits of school uniforms, a suggestion for more schools to adopt uniform policies flows naturally from your content.

## Repetition for Clarity

In academic writing, **repetition** is important to help the reader stay on track. The introduction tells the reader what the essay will cover, you elaborate on these points in the body paragraphs, and finally, you restate the main points in the conclusion. This repetition reinforces the argument and helps ensure the reader understands the structure and logic of the essay.

“Say what you're going to say, say it in detail, and then say what you said”:

- The **thesis statement** in the introduction previews the essay's argument and reasoning.
- The **topic sentences** at the beginning of each body paragraph remind the reader of the paragraph's focus in relation to the thesis.
- The **final sentence** of each body paragraph summarizes the paragraph's point in relation to the thesis.
- The **thesis** is restated in **the conclusion**.

### 3. Updates and Additional Resources

This resource is periodically updated, and I often share lessons, exercises, and quizzes. Be sure to sign up for email updates here: <https://aemacademy.ca/how-to-write-an-effective-academic-essay-extras/>

### 4. Conclusion & Writing Program Information

The HOT TREES TOPS system tells students exactly what to write in every part of an essay. It's easy to understand, but it takes practice to learn how to use it.

The AEM Academy Academic Writing Program is a specialized online course where we apply the HOT TREES TOPS system to a wide variety of essay types typically required for school assignments: argument, biography, cause-effect, comparison, problem-solution, and reaction essays. Students have extensive opportunities to practice writing with detailed feedback from the teacher on content, cohesion (logical flow of ideas, use of transitions), vocabulary, and grammar. After receiving feedback, students have unlimited revision opportunities to fix issues and receive additional feedback, suggestions, and corrections. Teacher support is provided seven days per week.

If you want to make sure your child can write well, I encourage you to sign up for a complimentary writing assessment.

1. Have your child write a short response to one of the prompts on the next page. They are listed from easy to challenging. This will show me what your child can produce without teacher help.
2. Send the writing sample to [janw@aemacademy.ca](mailto:janw@aemacademy.ca).
3. Use this meeting link to choose your timeslot:  
<https://calendly.com/aemacademy/aem-academy-writing-assessment>
4. We'll meet for a 30-minute Zoom call to go over your child's writing in detail and discuss what's working and what isn't. I'll provide suggestions and share resources to help you help your child right away. You'll also see exactly how the program works so you can decide whether it would meet your child's needs. There is no obligation to purchase anything.

## Writing Prompts

Please choose ONE of the following prompts for a four-paragraph response. You should include:

1. a title
2. an introduction
3. two body paragraphs
4. a conclusion

1) Describe a trip you recently took. What were the two most interesting places, events, things, or people you saw on the trip? What made them so interesting?

2) Describe a person you admire. This could be a family member, friend, leader, or artist. What two qualities make this person admirable? Why?

3) Summarize a story you recently read or a movie you recently saw. What were your two favourite parts? Why?

4) Some people believe technology helps young students with learning, while others disagree. What is your opinion? Support your ideas with reasons and examples.

5) Some people believe that competition helps students achieve better results in both academics and athletics, while others disagree. What is your opinion? Support your ideas with reasons and examples.

6) Many jobs are being replaced by automation. Is this a positive or negative development? Support your ideas with reasons and examples.

- Please send your typed writing sample to [janw@aemacademy.ca](mailto:janw@aemacademy.ca) no later than the night before the meeting.
- Book your meeting here: <https://calendly.com/aemacademy/aem-academy-writing-assessment>. Appointments are available throughout the week.