

Student Success Guides: Writing a Better Essay

SAINT JOSEPH'S ONLINE



Use this Student Success Guide to write a better essay.

The ability to write clearly and to make yourself understood is as important when submitting written course assignments as it is when preparing a report for your boss.

The quality of your writing may make the difference between whether or not your instructor understands how well you know the course material. Here are nine tips to assist you.

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To write an effective essay, you must understand the question with precision in order to answer it. A precise question requires a precise answer. Read each question carefully so you understand exactly what the question is asking. As you can see from the listing that follows, words such as criticize, interpret, and describe have specific definitions. Therefore, if you have even the slightest uncertainty, don't hesitate to ask for clarification.

Although they may require specialized skills, essays are basically like any other type of question.; i.e. they require that you have mastered the material. If you have not provided the correct answer, it will be painfully obvious.

Well-supported essays will earn you superior scores. But at the very least, use the available time to make certain your essay gets to the point, is carefully organized, and is neat. Get to the point by leaving off an introduction and putting your answer at the beginning. Use a strong opening sentence that both repeats the question and provides the answer. The opening part of the first sentence restates the question while the second part supplies the answer. This focuses you on the main idea of your answer.

For example: "The principle cause of the American Revolution was the disconnect between the needs of the colonies and the demands of the British government." This then leads into further examples and instances that support your answer. This support comes through the use of strong evidence, which is factual. When you use opinions, support them with evidence. For example, to say that "The best player on the team is Joe" is an opinion, but to say "That because of his scoring average of 12.3 points per game, the best player on the team is Joe" is a supported opinion."

Nine Tips for Quality Writing

1. Pay close attention to grammar, sentence structure and other basics of good English composition. Careless, sloppy writing can be overcome with a bit of work.
2. If you feel that you need assistance with your writing, talk to either your instructor or academic advisor. Help is available.
3. Avoid the use of unexplained abbreviations and jargon. It is not in your best interest to make your instructor guess about what you mean.
4. When you finish an assignment, or a portion of one, put it aside and then read it over later to see if it makes sense to you and says what you want it to say. Adjust and improve the wording as necessary. If your assignment were a presentation to coworkers or other professionals, you would never be satisfied with the first draft.
5. If you are not sure whether the instructor will understand what you are saying, provide more detail. Your written assignment is all s/he has by which to evaluate you.
6. On the other hand, do not try to obscure your lack of understanding with a smoke screen of irrelevant dialogue. If you do not know the answer, go back and study it again. Do not simply quote a lot of material from the book in hope that some of it will be right.
7. Watch for multipart questions in the written assignments, and be sure to answer all parts and to answer what is asked.
8. Assignments should be submitted typed or word processed.
9. Take pride in your writing, and it will be reflected both in the quality of your assignments and in your grades.

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Essay Question Key Words

Key Word	Explanation
Apply a principle	Show how a principle works, through an example.
Comment	Discuss briefly.
Compare	Emphasize similarities, but also present differences.
Contrast	Give differences only.
Criticize	Give your judgment of good points and limitations, with evidence.
Define	Give meanings but no details.
Demonstrate	Show or prove an opinion, evaluation, or judgment.
Describe	State the particulars in detail.
Diagram	Show a drawing with labels.
Differentiate	Show how two things are different.
Discuss	Give reasons pro and con, with details.
Distinguish	Show main differences between two things.
Enumerate	List the points.
Evaluate	Discuss advantages and disadvantages with your opinion.
Explain	Give reasons for happenings or situations.
Give cause and effect	Describe the steps that lead to an event or a situation.
Give an example	Give a concrete example from the textbook or from your experience.
Identify	List and describe.
Illustrate	Give an example.
Interpret	State the meaning in simpler terms, using your judgment.
Justify	Prove or give reasons.
List	List without details.
Outline	Make a short summary with headings and subheadings.
Prove	Give evidence and reasons.
Relate	Show how things interconnect.
Review	Show main points or events in summary form.
Show	List your evidence in order of time, importance, logic.
Solve	Come up with a solution based on given facts or your knowledge.
State	List main points briefly without details.
Summarize	Organize and bring together the main points only.
Support	Back up a statement with facts and proof.
Trace	Give main points from beginning to end of an event.

Check out more tips in the GPS Student Orientation

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