

The 500-word Essay: Some Thoughts

Gordon Thompson

The 500-word length is consistent with many other kinds of professional writing, from blogs to book reviews. Moreover, if you want to capture and hold your audience's attention, the three-section statement maximizes your opportunity. The statements below provide ideas on how you might successfully write.

The short essays for this seminar have several goals.

1. They provide you with an opportunity to explore a topic we have covered in our discussions and readings and to formulate an opinion about some aspect of those ideas.
2. These essays also provide me with a sense of your engagement and understanding of the material we cover, as well as your ability to explain your position.
3. Each essay offers you a focused opportunity to improve your writing skills. Grammar, punctuation, spelling, and citation all figure in the act of scholarly writing. A short essay allows me to work with you on these details.
4. The 500-word essay represents a miniature paper that includes all of the same features of a longer paper. Indeed, the longer papers you will write as Skidmore students will often consist of subsections consistent with the goals of these shorter essays. That is, you can form a large paper by organizing your ideas into short subsections that address the different issues comprising your topic.

Finally, you should have writing clearly as your unambiguous goal. Consult the [The Skidmore Guide to Writing](#) for examples of how to cite, to punctuate, and to improve your ability to communicate in writing. For my seminars and classes, I ask that students use the MLA style of in-text citations with a "References Cited" section at the end.

The Essay

A good essay has an arch with a beginning, middle, and end. Just like a half-hour (20-minute) television show, you need to grab your audience's attention with your opening sentence, let them know your topic, and project a thesis about what you plan to prove. A good title can also grab their attention. If you look at a newspaper, the front page will have several articles on it, each one hoping to capture your attention. The authors intend their titles and their first sentences to pull you into their articles. The title of your essay and your first sentence should identify your topic and make your reader want to continue. Often, the last sentence of the first paragraph presents your position.

The middle of your essay should explore the data that you hope will prove your thesis, just as in a mystery the detective compiles the evidence through observation, interviews, and analysis. You only have a few hundred words with which to accomplish this so choose your topic selectively and, just as you might find red herrings in a detective story

(i.e., clues that lead nowhere), choose your sources carefully. Citing your sources represents a particularly important feature of an academic essay. A reader should be able to trace the sources of your information back to the specific page/s of a publication. (As indicated above, for this seminar, use the MLA form of citation and bibliography.)

The more focused you can make your essay the better you will be able to provide relevant supporting documentation. At the end, you need to drive home your argument. Did your evidence support your thesis? Have you made us think differently about your subject? Leave your reader thinking that they have just had a revelation, just as a detective explains how s/he has solved a crime. Good conclusions allow us new insights into what we have just read.

Style

Two different systems compete in academic writing: the British and the American. Given that we use American spellings, we should also use American punctuation. For example, when quoting a source or highlighting a word, use double quotation marks and place punctuation such as periods and commas inside those marks. When placing a quote inside a quote, set the second quote in single quotation marks. (The British do the reverse.)

In Microsoft Word, you can change your grammar settings to mark this and other aspects of style. Under "Tools" or "Spelling and Grammar" (depending on which version of Word you are using), click on "Options." Be sure that the "Hide grammatical errors box remains unchecked. Select "Spelling and Grammar" and then "Settings." Choose two spaces at the ends of sentences, commas before the last item, and punctuation inside of quotations. You should check every box of the options.

The following potential stylistic issues often arise in student writing.

Passive Voice. British academics also prefer the passive voice; Americans more often use the active voice. The passive voice obscures the subject of a sentence, either because you cannot identify the subject or because you want to obscure the subject. Henry Kissinger's comment about Watergate ("Mistakes were made") provides an example of the latter. More commonly, eliminating passive voice simply helps make the meaning of your sentence clearer. A simple example follows.

The koto was played by a woman wearing a red-and-pink kimono.

A clearer and shorter version of this sentence would be...

*A woman wearing a red-and-pink kimono played the koto.*¹

When you place the subject first (and not the object), you help the reader to understand what you want to describe. Moreover, the more complex the sentence, the more important the active voice in keeping your meaning intact. Ultimately, you want to be concise and clear in your writing. Avoid long and convoluted sentences or grammatical structures that obfuscate your story.

Contractions. Do not use contractions in formal writing. While we use contractions in casual and colloquial speech, the written word functions differently. If you are writing dialogue, then contractions may rule; but, in formal discourse, you can raise the intellectual level of your writing simply by stating your verbs clearly.

First person. Use of the first person fits personal reflections and statements, which are by their nature usually informal. Personal opinion, while important, will seldom be the focus of your essays. The positions you can argue with the support of reliable and firm evidence should dominate your essays.

Prepositions. The word “pre-position” indicates that these words come before the word they help to modify. Do not end clauses and sentences with prepositions. In a few rare instances, they may be unavoidable (see the [alleged attribution to Churchill](#)), but these seem unlikely to arise in your writing. Besides, a dangling preposition simply sounds awkward.

¹ In the above sentence, if you have set Word’s grammar to identify passive voice, it may have recommended the replacement sentence.