

For many people, beginning an essay is very difficult. Many people just pick a topic, grab their writing utensil and start to write down the first thoughts that come to mind. While writing this way may generate a satisfactory result, there is a better, more structured way of starting an essay that could produce a better piece of writing: planning. Planning your essay, whether it is a classification, persuasion, compare/contrast or cause and effect essay, should be where you start. There are a few steps that can be used to assist any writer in the planning process:

STEP 1: Choose a topic

STEP 2: Brainstorm

STEP 3: Categorize

STEP 4: Build a thesis

STEP 5: Organize an outline

Once these steps are completed, you may proceed to write your essay.

Note: These steps are not set in stone; they are not law. They are just a recommended process. You may alter these steps in any way to suit your style or your essay. Different types of essays will have some differences, but nothing major. The focus of this handout is planning a classification essay.

Step 1:

Choose a Topic

Choosing a topic is very important, and considerable time should be spent on choosing the best one; however, a lot of people simply take their outstretched index finger, hover it over a page with a list of topics, cover their eyes and proceed to drop that finger onto the page expecting their finger to make the best choice. A topic should reflect the writer's interests and knowledge. Once your topic has been selected, you should test its strength by brainstorming ideas.

Note: Don't be afraid to narrow your selected topic; it's actually encouraged. Instead of writing about "three characteristics of a good hockey," you can narrow it down to "three characteristics of the Stanley Cup winning Montreal Canadiens." Just remember to stay on topic. The original topic was about a general hockey team; therefore, the narrowed topic is still about a hockey team, but a very specific one.

Example: Billy was about to start an essay that was assigned to him by his teacher. His teacher gave him a list of topics to choose from, but Billy didn't know which one to choose. Billy is a Humber student who is currently enrolled in the Accounting Program. He really likes hockey and video games. Which topic is best for him?

Topics

1. Three characteristics of a good hockey team.
2. Three features of a good marketing plan.
3. Three qualities of a good book.

Before looking at his options, Billy randomly selected a topic. He selected choice number 3, but he doesn't read very much and wouldn't know the first thing about a good book. He vigorously checked the Internet and looked up "Three qualities of a good book," but he found nothing. Billy was stuck, so he went back to his list of choices.

"Hey! There's a topic on hockey! I love hockey!"

Because Billy is so eager to write about hockey, he picks up a pen and paper and starts to write. Whoa, Billy, it's not time to write just yet. It is time to start the brainstorming process.

Step 2:

Brainstorm

Brainstorming means to think and to generate ideas. Brainstorming can be done in many different styles. All you need to do is write down every idea about your topic that comes to mind on a piece of paper. It doesn't matter whether you put these ideas down as a list or scattered around a page. Make sure that this process is done in point form; there should be no sentences or paragraphs.

Note: You will not need to worry about grammar when you write down your brainstormed ideas. You should, however, make sure that **YOU** understand exactly what you have written.

Example: Billy starts to brainstorm his ideas on his newly chosen topic: three characteristics of a good hockey team. He must have ignored my advice because he starts to write paragraph after paragraph! Wait, Billy, this should be in point form! You don't need to write sentences; a few words are sufficient. Billy, after following my advice, revised his brainstorming page in point form.

A GOOD HOCKEY TEAM

- | | | |
|------------------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| -High scoring | -Good defence | -Excellent goaltending |
| -Smart coach/staff | -Brave GM | -Fair owner |
| -Young players
leadership | -Plan for future | -Veteran |

If you are finding difficulty brainstorming ideas, it might be wise to start the process again by choosing another topic

Step 3:

Categorize

Now that you have a page that is filled with ideas, it is time to organize them. You will take your ideas and group them together. Don't just put any ideas together; the ideas will need to be similar or relate to one another. Once the ideas are categorized, you should label each category. When this is done, you will have all the elements needed to make a thesis statement.

Note: Each category should be distinct. You don't want them to overlap similar ideas. For example, three categories that would overlap would be "kind, caring and compassionate." These categories are too similar.

Example: Billy has nine ideas on his brainstorming page; however, the topic asked for three. He feels all his ideas are strong, so he wisely decides to group them together into three categories

THREE CHARACTERISTICS

Highly Skilled Players

- High scoring
- Good defence
- Excellent goaltending

Strong Organization

- Brave GM
- Fair owner
- Smart coaching Staff

Team Fundamentals

- Young players
- Veteran leadership
- Future plans

Billy has the three characteristics that he needed. Believe it or not, he is almost finished with the planning process. He has all the elements to make a thesis statement, which will be his next step.

Note: Some people would switch steps 2 and 3 around. They would think about three general categories and proceed to brainstorm the points for each. Use a process that you are most comfortable with.

Step 4: **Build a Thesis**

A thesis is like a window. When the readers look through it, they see what they are about to read. It tells the readers what you are trying to prove. It should contain the topic and the contents of your writing. At this point, you have everything needed to make a thesis statement. Once the thesis has been built, an outline can be prepared.

Note: Many people like to split the thesis statement into a few sentences or keep it in a single sentence. Both ways are acceptable, so choose whichever process you feel most comfortable with.

Example: Billy has his thesis right in front of him. He knows that a thesis should contain the topic. Billy looks at his topic, which is “Three characteristics of a good hockey team.” He has the first part, now he needs the contents of his essay. He checks his category page, which has highly skilled players, strong organization and team fundamentals. He’s got both parts, so he begins to write his thesis statement.

Thesis Statement: There are three characteristics that make a good hockey team. My favourite hockey team, the Montreal Canadiens, possesses all of these traits. They are such a great team. I remember my first hockey game.

You are getting off topic, Billy! A thesis statement should contain the topic and contents. You should use those other parts for your hook. Billy can see that his thesis statement can use some work.

Thesis Statement: Three characteristics that make a good hockey team are having highly skilled players, having a strong organization and having team fundamentals.

That’s much better, Billy. As you can see, a thesis can be really short. This is quite an effective thesis because it gets right to the point.

Billy has his thesis statement, but he can’t start to write just yet. His next step is to develop an outline. Don’t worry, the writing process is about to start!

Step 5:

Organize an Outline

The outline is very important; it will make the writing process much easier because it will guide you through the structure of your essay. It is your essay; it just hasn't been put into paragraphs yet.

An essay contains a hook, a thesis statement, body paragraphs and a conclusion, but not all of the sections have to be included in an outline. The most important parts for an outline would be the thesis and body paragraphs. Each body paragraph should be separated, and every point in that paragraph should be listed. It is also a good idea to show a description and example of each point on the outline.

Note: Different types of essay can have different styled outlines. For example, a compare and contrast outline may be divided in two. The purpose of the division is that two things will be compared to point out similarities or differences.

Example: Let's take a look at Billy's outline. He has been working on it for quite some time. He has already finished his first body paragraph plan.

OUTLINE

Thesis: Three characteristics that make a good hockey team are having **highly skilled players**, having a **strong organization** and having **team fundamentals**.

Body 1: Highly Skilled Players

High scoring players

- Many players scoring 20 or more goals or having 40 or more points
- E.g. Detroit Red Wings - 5 players with 20 or more goals – first place in the western division

Good defence

- Defensive unit plays well together – players with a strong +/- -- +/- = goals scored when the player is on the ice versus goals scored against
- E.g. New Jersey Devils – defensive pairs play well together and have a high positive +/-

Excellent goaltending

- Goalie is experienced with strong goals against average and high save percentage
- E.g. Martin Brodeur – Playoff experience – strong goals against – high save percentage – Stanley cup winner and gold medalist

Billy would do the same with his other two body paragraphs.

Note: Make sure your points are strong. For example, the first body paragraph in Billy’s outline has three points. The rule of thumb is to have three points for each paragraph, but two is sufficient if they are really strong. If you feel that your body paragraph is a little weak even with three points, try adding a fourth or even fifth point.

Note: Make sure to consider the order of your points. For example, you can have your points in chronological order or have them in order from weakest to strongest. The order will depend on what kind of essay you are doing.

After all this planning for your essay, you can finally start to write your essay. You have your ideas planned out in a structured way that you can follow. Now it is time to worry about grammar.

“Grammar! Oh no!”

Don’t worry, Billy. The Writing Centre can help you improve your grammar skills! Good luck!