

Writing the Essay IV

The **BIG** Idea

- What are the most important things to remember when organizing and writing my essay?

AGENDA

Approx. 45 minutes

- I. Warm Up (5 minutes)
- II. Essay-Writing Tips (10 minutes)
- III. Write Your Draft (25 minutes)
- IV. Wrap Up (5 minutes)

MATERIALS

STUDENT HANDBOOK PAGES:

- Student Handbook page 29, Story Feedback (from previous lesson)
- Student Handbook pages 30-32, Sample Essays III
- Student Handbook page 33, Ten Tips for Well-Written Essays
- Student Handbook page 34, Essay Evaluation

Overhead and LCD projector

Notebook paper, pens, and pencils

OBJECTIVES

During this lesson, students will:

- Describe important elements of a well-organized, well-written essay.
- Review a rubric for assessing an essay.
- Write drafts of their essays.

OVERVIEW

This is the fourth week in the essay-writing unit. Students will begin by reading a few sample essays. Using these as examples, they'll review important tips for writing and organizing the essay. Students will review a rubric for evaluating essays, then spend the rest of the class working on their drafts.

PREPARATION

- List the day's **BIG IDEA** and activities on the board.
- The following handouts need to be made into overhead transparencies or copied onto chart paper:
 - **Student Handbook page 29, Story Feedback** (from previous lesson)
 - **Student Handbook pages 30-32, Sample Essays III**
 - **Student Handbook page 33, Ten Tips for Well-Written Essays**
 - **Student Handbook page 34, Essay Evaluation**

ACTIVITY STEPS

I. Warm Up (5 minutes)

1. [As students enter, assign them the number 1, 2, or 3. Explain they are to read this essay number in their **Student Handbook pages 30-32, Sample Essays III**. For the essay they've been assigned, they are asked to circle the main idea, or the claim that the writer is making about himself or herself. Then they should underline the evidence that supports this claim.]
2. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** You just read one of three very different essays. We'll talk about these in just a minute, and you'll see how their topics, structure, and tone vary greatly. But they do share some important elements of any good writing. In today's class, we're going to review these elements, along with a few other writing tips. Then we'll review a rubric, a chart to help guide and assess your writing. Finally, you'll spend the rest of the class writing your drafts.
3. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Before we begin, I want to stress the importance of a thoughtful, well-written essay. Remember, the college essay is your chance to show admissions officers who you are. Therefore, a college essay should reflect your maturity, your insight, and your ability to clearly express yourself.

II. Essay-Writing Tips (10 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Now let's look back at those essays you read when you came in. Like any good writing, they each had a clear topic or thesis. In this case, that topic was a particular claim that the writer was making about himself or herself, such as a strength or personal goal. They also supported this claim with strong evidence.
2. [For each of the three sample essays, have volunteers share the main topic and evidence they identified. As each essay is discussed, show a copy on an overhead projector.]
3. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** These are two elements of good writing you should remember when writing your own essay. Let's turn to your **Student Handbook page 33, Ten Tips for Well-Written Essays** to review a few others. [As you review this list, ask students to provide examples from the sample essays. For example, point out the strong starts, transitions, and conclusions in the sample essays. Note that not every essay states its main theme in the beginning; in our examples, the writers reveal their themes at the end.]

4. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Now please turn to your **Student Handbook page 34, Essay Evaluation**. [Show a copy on an overhead projector.] This will probably look familiar. This is based on a list we reviewed a few weeks ago about what makes a strong essay. Now that it's your turn to write a strong essay, I'd like you to look it over before you begin to write. Once you have a draft, you'll ask two adults to evaluate your essay using this chart.]

III. Write Your Draft (25 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Before you begin writing your drafts, turn to the description you wrote last week, along with your partner's feedback in the **Student Handbook page 29, Story Feedback**. Last week, your partner helped you identify strong words or phrases, as well as missing facts. I'd like you to consider your partner's feedback as you write your drafts.
2. [Give students the remaining time to draft their essay. Provide paper, pencils, and pens to those who need them. Circulate around the classroom, coaching students who are stuck, bolstering confidence, and providing a chance to be recognized.]

IV. Wrap Up (5 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Next week, you are going to exchange drafts with two other students and proofread each other's essays. For this stage, you'll want to share your very best work. So for homework, I'd like you to use the Essay Evaluation chart to honestly assess your own writing. If you can, make revisions to your essay before next week.

Sample Essays III

Read the essay you've been assigned. Then circle the main idea, or the claim that the writer is making about himself or herself. Next, underline the evidence that supports this claim. If you have time, read another essay.

Essay #1

I grew up watching my mother struggle to raise a family alone, providing for three children with one income. My mom was always working, so she didn't have a lot of time to concentrate on my progress at school. Sometimes I would get angry at her when she was too exhausted to attend parent teacher conferences. I blamed her for my grades, too. After all, nobody punished me for bringing home a bad report card, so I didn't put effort into my classes or to push myself to do better. I was just the student that showed up to class but didn't bother to participate or hand in homework. I would always go home not expecting anyone to bother with me and just watch TV all night.

Then at the beginning of junior year, I started to feel ashamed of myself. I noticed that most of my friends were honor students, happy to see 90s and 80s on their report card. I was the outcast of the group, because I had the easy classes and was barely passing them. I knew I needed to change my outlook on school, because not caring wouldn't get me anywhere. Watching "Family Guy" instead of doing homework wouldn't help me pass any classes.

I wanted to change my ways, but I didn't at first. Then one day I found my mother crying because she didn't have enough money to pay bills. She whispered to me, "Be smart about the decisions you make in life." I giggled, but inside I wanted to lie down and cry with her. I realized that a change had to come from within me. I couldn't just sit there waiting for a better report card to arrive. I had to take responsibility for my actions. If I didn't, one day I could just end up like my mother, working very hard and just barely getting by.

I have learned from her mistakes. She was pregnant at the age of nineteen and couldn't attend college because she had to take care of us. I want the opportunity to attend college and make a path for myself so I can be successful in the future. Since it took me so long to get myself together I had to catch up fast. I started attending Saturday school and I grabbed any opportunities that would help me improve. For once, I started to see my grades improve.

Now, looking at my grades I see 80s and above and it makes me proud. I know I am finally living up to my potential. I know I can be successful at anything I strive for as long as I put my mind to it.

Essay #2

“Olé! Planta Tacon! Ría Ría Pita!” This is what the Spanish say when they saw Flamenco dancers dancing in the streets of southern Spain, clapping these beautiful little castanets in the air and stomping until tomorrow, in big red polka dot dresses, gold lined capes and red velvet vests. I just made up the “Ria, Ria, Pita,” but it’s how my flamenco teachers would describe what castanets sound like.

In 2002, I moved to New York City with my aunt, Veronica, who has been like my mom. Veronica is a professional dancer. She wanted me to do something after school, so she enrolled me in dance class at the Ballet Hispanico School of Dance, where she began her training long ago. Destroying the floor with three-inch heeled boots with nails on the bottom doesn’t really sound like a little kid’s ultimate dream until he or she actually tries it.

When my aunt told me I was to take dance classes, at first I completely refused. But since I lived with her, I really had no choice. As if it couldn’t get any worse, my aunt was my flamenco teacher. Of course, I was the only boy and I didn’t feel comfortable at all. Imagine a sixth grader with a white T-shirt, black sweat pants, and a pair of ugly hand-me-down boots my aunt had found in the basement. I will never forget those smelly boots made of ugly creased leather. The heels were two inches high and didn’t even have nails. Where’s the fun in that?

I really wasn’t happy in my class until we started working on our dance for the recital. My aunt told us the name of our dance, “El Paso Doble!” What a powerful name. When I heard the music, I instantly connected to its beat. The posture of the dance was upright, strong, and prideful. I felt the pride and power in my body and that’s the way I danced it. As the recital neared, I was becoming more anxious. I had never felt so excited to do anything in my life, I just wanted to scream for no apparent reason because I had so much “stuff” I wanted to let out. I didn’t know what that “stuff” was. All I knew was that on the day of the recital, I would let something out that would flip my world upside down.

When I woke up the morning of the recital, I thought, “It’s finally here!” I got up early on Saturday and walked downtown to the high school where the recital was held. The only thing I could think of was, “This is real, this is me. I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be now.” The recital began and our class was the third to last. As the other groups danced, I rehearsed my steps: walk, walk, planta, tacon, right, left, and repeat.

The time arrived. My heart was beating so hard and my stomach felt empty, but the show had to go on. As we walked on stage, I started to feel this unknown feeling: flight, freedom. It was a roller coaster ride, twisting and turning. I wanted to scream again. At that point I knew what that “stuff” was — it was contentment, joy, glee. It was a feeling I wanted to carry with me for the rest of my life. When we finished, the crowd cheered and applauded and those feelings elevated to the tenth power. The crowd’s reaction made me feel comfortable and happy. It was bliss.

What I found in flamenco was a relief, an escape from my issues, my life, and the problems I face in the world. It gave me power, something as a sixth grader I had never felt before. It gave me a way to express myself as a person and taught me to use my energy and tension and put it into something powerful and passionate. It showed me how to use my excess energy to make myself and others happy. Flamenco gave me something to look forward to every week. Now, seven years into flamenco, I’ve been to Spain to study the amazing culture and art behind this art form. Dancing flamenco is one of my passions and I will never stop.

Essay #3

“Life is what you make it.” I must have heard my parents say this a million times. But somewhere along the way, I realized the true meaning and power of these words. In my rural community with limited opportunities and resources, it means sometimes you have to make something out of nothing to succeed. It means having the determination to succeed no matter what obstacles are thrown your way.

This determination is what drives my family’s business. In our small town, local businesses open, close, and change hands frequently. But my family has owned and operated the White Horse Restaurant and Lounge since 1928. Growing up, I’ve seen firsthand the hard work and commitment this takes. And it is truly a family effort. For as long as I can remember, I have been a part of the business, helping my older cousins sort silverware on Saturday nights, cleaning in the mornings, organizing shelves, and eventually helping tend bar, hostess, prepare, cook, waitress, and help with the paperwork. My parents and grandparents have inspired me, working 16-hour days for little to no pay, just to keep the business running and to support us.

I’ve taken this same determination onto the athletic field. Just shy of 5’2” with the coordination of a young giraffe, sports never came easy. During little league softball I was sentenced to the outfield. But I loved the game and stuck with it. Finally, after nine years of playing, I was named the Most Improved Player on our varsity team last spring. Despite my height, I’ve also played volleyball since seventh grade. I’ve worked hard, year round, playing during regular season, on a club team, and in summer leagues. Last year, as a junior, I was honored as a first team all-star and am currently considered the top setter in the Lackawanna League.

To me, determination means learning a business from the ground up. It means sticking with a sport despite an apparent lack of athletic talent. It means knowing that hard work will eventually pay off. As my parents say, “Life is what you make it.”

Ten Tips for Well-Written Essays

A well-written essay...

- Starts strong: Grabs the reader at the beginning of the essay.
- States its purpose: Clearly states the main topic or claim early in the essay.
- Backs up its claim: Provides strong, specific evidence to support the claim in the body of the essay.
- Keeps to the point: Focuses on the main topic without extraneous or irrelevant information.
- Flows: Makes clear transitions between each paragraph.
- Ends strong: Ties it all together in the conclusion by summarizing the main point and showing its relevance — how the experience connects to your personal strengths, goals, or selected major.

More writing tips:

- Keep the tone conversational, but be respectful of your reader. Use slang sparingly and carefully — and never use foul language.
- Show your sense of humor, but don't be wacky or silly. Remember, you want to come across as thoughtful and mature.
- Avoid clichés (“live one day at a time”), overused phrases (“I want to give back to my community”), or weak words (“really,” “special”)
- Don't plagiarize, or try to pass off someone's words as your own. If you use a quotation, name the speaker. For example, you wouldn't say, “I realized that day that to err is human, to forgive divine,” without crediting the source (Alexander Pope).

Essay Evaluation

Thank you for taking the time to read my essay. As you read through it, please consider the criteria in the left-hand column. Next to each, circle the score that best describes the essay. If you have specific comments, write them in the last column, or use the back of this page.

CRITERIA A good essay is:	QUALITY: How well did this essay do this?			COMMENTS
	4 Very well	3 Fairly well	2 Somewhat	
Focused	Describes a single event or experience. Clearly answers the essay question.	Focuses mostly on single event, strays some; needs clearer link to question.	Focus isn't clear; needs better link to question.	Covers too much information and/or does not answer question.
Convincing	Supports claims with specific, strong details.	Some evidence provided, but not very specific.	Little evidence provided; evidence is weak or vague.	Claims not supported by any evidence.
Descriptive	Provides several vivid details; readers feel like they're there.	Some good details are provided.	Few details provided; may be vague or unclear.	No details provided.
Organized	Opening grabs reader, purpose is clear; transitions are logical; ends with strong conclusion.	Opening does not grab reader; needs better transitions; ending not clear.	Purpose is unclear; weak transitions; ending does not provide a logical conclusion.	Purpose is unclear; no transitions between thoughts; ends without clear, logical conclusion.
Personal	Shows clear, insightful thoughts and feelings; reflects personal strengths.	Shows some personal perspective and strengths, but not very revealing.	Shows minor or trivial personal reaction; little or weak reference to personal strengths.	No personal insight; perspective is vague or a cliché; does not reflect personal strengths.
Easy to read	Language is conversational, easy to read aloud; writing is clear.	Language could be clearer; a few phrases are too formal or informal.	Much of the language is unclear, too formal or informal.	Most language is too formal or inappropriate use of slang; several phrases unclear.
Grammatically correct	Does not contain grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors.	Few errors of spelling, grammar, or punctuation	Several distracting errors.	Many errors, making it difficult to read.

