

WRITING AN ESSAY FOR THE WPA

A strategy for writing your essay:

WPA questions require that you do two things:

- 1) Show your understanding of an author's position;
- 2) Construct a logical and well-developed argument in response to that position.

Your essay should consist of a focused introduction, followed by body paragraphs which provide the rationale and support for your position. In the body of your essay, you will display your critical reading and critical thinking skills by presenting your response to the text and question. Be sure to use logical reasoning and details/specifics to support your response. You're encouraged to use your own observation and experience and to use first person ("I"), but remember to maintain an academic voice. Though it's wise to end your essay by reminding the reader of how the individual portions of your argument contribute to the whole, you will probably have neither the time nor the need to construct an elaborate conclusion.

A strategy for writing your introduction:

One key to properly structuring an essay for the WPA is getting off to a good start that guides what you do and don't do in the rest of the essay. An effective introduction contains the following elements:

- Evidence that you understand the issue presented in the text
- Clear and concise movement toward an answer to the question asked
- A cogent thesis statement that responds to the question
- A brief suggestion or sketch of the main points to come in the body of your essay

Although you may pride yourself on your ability to write creative introductions that "hook" the reader, keep in mind that your WPA introduction doesn't need—and really shouldn't include—a lengthy story or hypothetical scenario. You should simply show the reader that you understand the text and the question at hand, and present a thesis that expresses your position on the issue you've been asked to address. An attentive reader will make a prediction about the direction an essay will take by the time he/she has finished reading its introduction. Therefore, make sure you know where you are headed before you write the introduction so that the rest of the essay follows from it. Once you have decided on your central claim and turned it into a thesis statement, stick to defending it in the body of your essay even if you change your mind as you write. You can only write one essay in the allotted time and it is best to make it coherent and focused.

A strategy for writing the body of your essay:

Many students are accustomed to using a five-point (or five-paragraph) structure for their papers, but this structure is not always the most effective one. Deciding upon an arbitrary number of paragraphs, or points, before you begin may limit the extent to which you can explore your ideas and may force you to pay more attention to structure than to content. Also, remember that a point and a paragraph are not necessarily the same thing. Sometimes you may need more than one paragraph to fully develop a point, especially if you're aware of the need for detailed support and examples. As you're planning your essay, decide how many main points you want to make and how many paragraphs you need to make each point. This will help you create a logical organization, especially if you remember to use transitions to help your reader move from one point to the next.

Sample questions and introductions: (thesis statements are italicized)

Question: In his essay "Dehumanizing People and Euphemizing War," Haig Bosmajian argues that the use of dehumanizing language in political speech is dangerous. Do you find Bosmajian's argument convincing? Explain why or why not.

Answer (Introduction): Throughout history, groups of seemingly logical and peaceful people have managed to do unthinkable things to each other. Although almost all people find the thought of killing another human being wrong, it is amazing what people have done to each other when they are coerced to believe what they normally would not. This idea is addressed in the essay "Dehumanizing People and Euphemizing War" by Haig Bosmajian. Bosmajian argues that ugly and inaccurate language is used to dehumanize people and justify the causes for war. He makes his argument primarily by comparing the Nazis' treatment of the Jews in WWII with Reagan's treatment of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. *These examples make it clear that language can be used as a tool for destruction, but I do not find Bosmajian's argument entirely convincing because he fails to put the blame where it belongs, on the listener.*

Question: Milovan Djilas argues in "Ideas Against Torture" that those with "faith in an idea" and knowledge of several key "weak points" can withstand torture. Does Djilas persuade you that you would be able to maintain your "faith in an idea" under state-sponsored torture? Why or why not?

Answer (Introduction): In Milovan Djilas's essay "Ideas Against Torture," he issues advice to those who would find themselves under the threat of state-sponsored torture. His advice is practical and logical, and his essay causes one to pause and consider how one would behave in such a situation. As the purpose of torture is to break a man—or more specifically, his mind—so that he might be controlled, the proposals made in Djilas's essay, while seemingly simple and straightforward, would be difficult to implement when the time for practical application is at hand. Only those with iron-fast dedication and absolute "faith in an idea" would be able to withstand torture with this faith intact. *Because I value some of my ideas as much as I value my own life, I would like to believe that I would be able to maintain my faith during torture, but I do not think that the average person would be able to implement the advice that Djilas puts forth.*