

## *Writing an Essay*

Spring Branch Academy

We read not only to know, but also *to think*; therefore, writing should regularly follow reading. To encourage this habit, you will write some essays upon topics generated from your reading in this course. An essay is literally a mental test of the strength of your own mind, expressed in an exploratory style. “In the essay style,” writes Stanley Fish, “successive clauses and sentences are not produced by an overarching logic, but by association; the impression the prose gives is that it can go anywhere in a manner wholly unpredictable” (*How to Write a Sentence*, 62).

The topics for your essay must be generated by something in the assigned reading. The best essays come from a trail of thought that was triggered by some detail or insight gained through reading. To develop this trail, you are encouraged to “pick your posies” from the text (quotations or insights that you want to pocket) and “press them” in your notes, citing the page number. This practice will help both your recall and citation.

The essay is composed of two paragraphs:

The first paragraph introduces your topic in a way that will entice your reader to read more. In this paragraph, you must include the specific quotation or information in the book you read that piqued your interest and generated your own thoughts. Also include a problem generated by the topic, that is, because of what you found in the reading, a person could react in this direction or in that direction.

The second paragraph gives your own views on the topic. You must give at least three points that support your perspective. These points can (and probably will) include other details from the book you read or from other books, such as the Bible. At the end of the essay, conclude by stating your main point again, and by showing why it is important for the reader to know your main point.

The format of the essay is:

Typed, 10-point font, one-inch margins, and double-spaced

400-word minimum, one-page maximum length (including the bibliography)

Title: Centered and bold, with your name on the next line (not in bold) with no line spacing in between

For biblical quotations, add the biblical book, chapter, and verse in parentheses:

“Wisdom is better than strength” (Ecclesiastes 9:16).

For other quotations, cite the author, a short form of the title, and the page number in parentheses:

“The lives of men are transformed by a piece of news” (Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism*, 48).

Repeated citations from the same work use “*ibid*” in italics, followed by a period:

“Christian fellowship exists only between those to whom the message has become the very basis of all life” (*ibid.*, 52).

At the bottom of the page, include a bibliography of any non-biblical sources cited in the essay:

**Source:** Machen, J. Gresham. *Christianity and Liberalism*. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009 [1923].

Grading will be based on both the content and the form of the essay. In content, you should demonstrate the three levels of intelligence—*knowledge* (the facts given in interesting and salient details), *understanding* (discerning the difference between two similar items of the same class), and *wisdom* (the ability to apply creatively what you have learned to real-life situations). In form, you should demonstrate both *eloquence* (the force of argument, based a lot upon the arrangement of ideas) and *elegance* (the beauty of your prose).

**Please note:** *Your essay will not be graded on whether your teacher agrees with your position or not, but on how well you interact with an idea from the reading material. This is a conversation, in which I will grade you based on performance, and then answer you personally based on my own thoughts and beliefs.*

If you have any questions, please let me know. In the end, you should appreciate having a written record of your journey through the material of this course.

## *A Standard Style for a Book Review*

Spring Branch Academy

Much of education consists of reading books. Even God Himself communicated His mind through a book, the Bible (which literally means “book”). The mere reading of books, however, is not sufficient in itself for knowledge. Many people read books and then forget what they read. Others retain a lot of what they read, but they do not talk about it, either with God in prayer or with fellow human beings. In the end, whether through forgetfulness or isolation, much of the benefit from reading is lost.

Writing a good book review provides a way for you to remember more and to interact more with others. The following guide offers a simple outline for writing such a review. The book review consists of four paragraphs, which are described under the four underlined headings. When finished, the review and its bibliography should be more than 800 words in length, but less than two typed pages (10-point font, double-spaced, with one-inch margins). It should also have several appropriate quotes from the book (with the page number of the quote in parentheses).

### The Author’s Story

- The first sentence gives both the *genre* of the book and its *subject*:  
“*Big Book* by Joe Author is a *novel* about *life during the Civil War*.”
- The next sentence gives the main character and starts describing the plot:  
“The story focuses on the experiences of Billy Smith, a boy living on a southern plantation.”
- The rest of the paragraph develops the plot in a general way, without spoiling the book for the reader.

### The Author’s Point

- The first sentence gives the *thesis* of the book:  
“In *Big Book*, Joe Author argues that *adversity brings real prosperity*.”
- The rest of the paragraph gives the author’s argument for his thesis.  
“The author attempts to prove his point in three ways. First,…”

### Your Analysis

- The first sentence tells your overall opinion of the book’s argument:  
“Joe Author makes a good apology for adversity, but misses out on two details.”
- The rest of the paragraph offers your detailed analysis of the book’s argument.  
Your analysis should include where you agree and where you disagree, giving reasons for both.  
(As the recipient of another’s work, it is honorable to begin with the merits of a book, not its faults.)

### Your Suggestions

- The first sentence should indicate where you think the conversation should go from here:  
“*Big Book* opens the door to several areas of exploration.”
- The paragraph may offer suggestions on how the book could be used for someone else:  
“*Big Book* will really help those in a personal crisis.”
- The paragraph may also offer suggestions for further research, perhaps even your own research:  
“Hopefully this will not be the last word on this topic. In particular, the insights into suffering offer strands for another author to weave.”

At the end of your review, include a bibliography of the book reviewed and of any other non-biblical sources cited:

### **Bibliography**

Author, Joe. *Big Book: Life out of Death in the Civil War*. New York: Scribbles, 2011.

**Please note:** Your book review will not be graded on whether your teacher agrees with your personal position or not, but on how well you understand and interact with the argument of the book, both in assessing its truth and in making notes for further scholarship. This is a conversation, in which I will grade you based on performance, and then answer you personally based on my own thoughts and beliefs.