The essay, like any style of writing, is an art form; a good essay is permeated with creative energy and imagination. Essays express thoughts, opinions, or arguments. They reflect on, challenge, or question any number of ideas and assumptions. When you begin writing an essay, you should ask the following questions: What type of essay will I write? What strategies and structures will be most effective for this type of essay? The following sections describe and offer suggestions for writing various types of essays.

**Reflective Essay:** describes or narrates a particular memorable experience or event and explores your feelings or thoughts about that experience. For this type of essay, it can be useful to discuss the transformative nature of the experience—how were your behaviors or attitudes altered because of the experience? Remember that both negative and positive feelings should be included. Also, consider how you might integrate any knowledge gained from this experience into your future actions, behaviors, or writing.

**Literary Analysis:** examines and analyzes a “text” (novel, short story, poem, film, painting, play, etc.) in terms of its literary devices (metaphor, symbolism, analogy, anaphora, personification, syntax, diction, perspective, voice, style, character development, irony, etc.). Discuss which devices the author uses, how such usages contribute or detract from the text’s ideas, and what effects these devices have on the audience.

**Rhetorical Analysis:** examines and analyzes a “text” in terms of what ideas it presents, how it presents those ideas, and how effective it is in that presentation. Discuss the rhetorical appeals of the text: How does the text address one’s sense of ethics (ethos)? How does it address one’s sense of feeling (pathos)? How does it address one’s sense of logic (logos)? Describe the effectiveness of these appeals.

**Cause/Effect:** analyzes why something happens. You could examine an event, a social issue, a political or economic situation, a hot topic, etc. You might consider the causes or discuss the effects of your subject. Your essay should identify and clearly articulate the causal links between situations or events. Many cause/effect essays also predict what will happen in the future based on the findings of the essay. When you are writing a cause/effect essay, be sure to ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I assumed a cause-and-effect relationship when there is none?
- Have I distinguished between the main cause and the contributory causes?
- Have I distinguished between primary and ancillary effects?

**Compare/Contrast:** introduces two subjects and draws similarities and differences between the two based on a set of points. You could compare and contrast two philosophies, ideas, “texts,” religions, practices, theories, influential people, etc. Your comparison should take you beyond the obvious similarities or differences. Try to focus on the most provocative or interesting elements. Explain why you feel these similarities and/or differences are significant. There are two traditional organizational structures for compare/contrast essays:

- In a subject-by-subject comparison, your essay will address each subject one at a time, first discussing all points in relation to subject #1, and then discussing those same points in relation to subject #2. This structure works better for shorter, straightforward essays.
In a point-by-point comparison, your essay will discuss both subjects in relation to your points, one point at a time. You will therefore be addressing each of your subjects in an alternating fashion, rather than in two separate sections. This structure works better for longer, more complicated essays.

**Complex Essay:** combines any of the previously mentioned forms to develop an essay. For example, you could reflect on the causes and effects of an experience that changed your worldview. Or you could compare and contrast the rhetorical strategies of two authors.

**NOTE:** For information on writing a persuasive argument essay, please consult the “Persuasive Argument” handout.

Sources:
