

The basics, in a “nutshell”

With luck, your essay title will have been given to you in the form of a *question* (e.g. “How does McEwan create a sense of tension and excitement in the opening chapter of *Atonement*?”); or, at least, it’ll be in a form that you’ll easily be able to mentally “convert” it into a question, (e.g. “In the opening chapter of *Atonement*, McEwan relies on several key narrative techniques to create a sense of tension and excitement. Discuss.”).

- ▶ *It’s usually possible to “restate” any essay title as a kind of “question”. Try to do this mentally with your own. Stating an essay title in the form of a question will truly help with the planning and structure of your essay.*
- ▶ *This is because your essay needs to be, in essence, nothing more than **your attempt to argue your point of view** on what **you believe** the “answer” to this “essay question” is.*
- ▶ *Of course – whilst there **are** wrong answers, there is **NEVER A SINGLE CORRECT ANSWER to any English essay** – only **a well-supported point of view!***
- ▶ *If you state your view clearly at the beginning and support what you say convincingly in the essay itself, **you will do well!***
- ▶ *This means that you’ll need to create an essay that is, at heart, a **clearly stated and well-supported argument.***
- ▶ *Thus, try hard to make your opening paragraph become an ultra-succinct “answer” to the essay “question”, then use the rest of the essay to show why your stated “answer” (really just **an informed opinion...**) is **a good one!***

CREATING AN ARGUMENT – THE “THESIS STATEMENT”

To create an effective essay, therefore, you will need to form an “in-a-nutshell style answer” to the essay question – one that gives, in just a sentence or so, your “overall conclusion”, “take” or “view” of the question. It’s called, technically, your “**thesis statement**”. It’s not so very different from saying to Mum on Friday, “I think it would be really fun to go to Emma’s for a sleepover...” – then making an “essay” *that supports your thoughts on why going to Emma’s is such a good idea!*

In the above essay example on McEwan’s novel *Atonement*, you might write, “The creation of tension is a key narrative device that is much used by McEwan. In the first chapter of *Atonement*, this is frequently evident, for example when... ...”. Now you add in a **very brief comment** to explain in a generalised skeleton form **how you are going to answer the essay question**. Thus:

- ▶ *Your essay becomes nothing more than a series of paragraphs in which you try to persuade your teacher or the examiner **why your interpretation is a fair one to hold.***
 - ▶ *Each paragraph is used to explain and explore a **new persuasive point – one that supports your opening “in a nutshell” super-condensed “answer”.***
 - ▶ *Each paragraph will need to be built around **evidence from the text**, usually a quotation (but in a drama, it might be a description of stage directions, costume, etc.).*
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In more detail:

The Opening Paragraph

- Find a way of making your opening sentence **short, interesting and memorable**.
 - *Avoid the mind-numbing boredom of starting with “In my essay I am going to be looking at the...” (Yawn...). Instead start with something like “Tension and excitement abound in the opening lines of McEwan’s Atonement and with good reason: he wants his reader to read on...”*
 - *So be brave, be bold! Be different! Above all, write in a **lively and interesting** style by **being yourself**. Don’t join the ranks of students who irritate examiners and lose marks by trying to emulate the overly-formal style of an imagined stuffy professor.*
 - **TOP TIP!** *Create a knowledgeable and authoritative tone by **incorporating a word or phrase from the text directly into your own opening sentence** (see below for more on the key technique of “**embedded quotations**”).*
- Next, immediately show **you have a good grasp of the essay title or question**. English Lit essay questions allow a good deal of leeway so you’ll need to make it clear exactly **what your take on the question is**.
 - *In some types of literature essays (check this with your teacher), you’ll need to show awareness of **other ways of interpreting the text** than your own. If this is a part of the mark scheme you’ll be told. In this case, in your opening paragraph, write something like this opening of an essay on the play “A Streetcar Named Desire”:
“Many readers might take a different view of Blanche Dubois and consider Williams’ play anything but a tragedy, but I believe that the events of the play suggest fairly clearly that... ..”*
 - *Keep in mind at all times that your essay is always nothing more than an attempt to **support** your originally stated view: it is **a persuasively made argument for what you believe**. Here is an example of a thesis statement: “Some commentators suggest that the poet Philip Larkin is all-but a miserable pessimist, but I feel that there is much evidence to the contrary, that he is, in fact, an unusually clear-sighted realist. Through an analysis of two of his poems, “High Windows” and “The Explosion”, I shall argue why I believe this to be the case.”*
 - *In other kinds of essay, the mark scheme insists that you show **a close awareness of context**. But... always and always, do try to remember that **this is not a History essay**: it is an essay for **English Literature**.*
 - *What this means is that your marks only ever come from **your interpretation and analysis of the text**; they **will never come from mere explanations of context**. So... **DON’T** write long explanations of the author’s historical or literary context but, **DO** try to find quotations that allow you **to derive relevant aspects of both historical and literary context, i.e. deriving context from the text itself**.*
 - *Thus, as well as the need to discuss the linguistic or literary merits of a quotation, in an essay where context is important, also **extend your comment to cover an important contextual point as revealed by the quotation**.*

- *This will often be possible because there are usually contextual aspects lurking – maybe a little buried – within the quotation itself somewhere if you look and think hard enough (and choose quotations appropriately). But... if you find this difficult – and it can be – ask your teacher for more help. It's a real mark winner!*
- *Some essay questions are based on a statement made by an eminent person such as a literary critic. If this is the case, **do not feel that you are obliged to agree with it** – as above, there is rarely just one interpretation of an author's work.*
- In *all* cases, it's important to open your essay by giving your **overall point of view** concerning the essay question. This will be your "take" on the question, your "overall conclusion": a kind of super-condensed "answer". This statement is often the *key* to a successful essay – a key that unlocks the door to the highest marks and gives you, the essay writer, the greatest satisfaction. See the Englishbiz guide to "better essays" for more on this important technique: <http://www.englishbiz.co.uk/mainguides/analysis.htm>.
- **TOP TIP!** For exam writing, it's important to remember that **you only have this one chance to make a favourable first impression**. Your aim, therefore, needs to be **to impress the examiner with a show of clarity, confidence and precision**. One especially effective way to do this is to use an "**embedded quotation**" in your introduction – a word or phrase from the text (always still in quotation marks) that *fits directly into your own sentence*. This suggests a deep knowledge of the text itself, creates an authoritative tone and a confident approach. Here is an example: "Blanche Dubois might claim she wants "magic" rather than "realism" but in his play "A Streetcar Named Desire" Williams provides his audience with an extra large helping of reality".

The 'Body' Paragraphs

- Do you worry about just how many main points you need to make to support your argument? Well, if you explore each point *thoroughly* and *in depth* using the "**Point → Quotation → Comment**" strategy, you will only have space for half a dozen or so. Remember also that given the time pressure in an exam, you need to be sure to **avoid waffle!**
- For each and every point you make, be sure it helps to **answer the essay question** and thus relate to your initially stated point of view (i.e. "thesis statement"). Ask yourself, "Am I **exploring** and **interpreting** the *subtle* layers and shades of meaning of the text?"
 - *Make it a habit NEVER to open a paragraph with any sentence that does not CLEARLY DEVELOP your overall argument and so help "answer" the essay question or title.*
- Plan your answer – a rough sketch of the main points you intend to make. This will help you to make your points flow logically from one to the next (try to use "discourse markers" to help: *consequently...*, *therefore...*, *as a result...*, *it follows from this that...*, *in conclusion...*, and so on). The development of your argument should be clear and understandable at all times. This is a real mark winner.
- Always **support each point of your argument with examples** – usually **a brief quotation** – from your text(s). If you have the text in the exam this is easier; if you don't you should be prepared with a small bank of learned quotations (just lines or phrases rather than whole chunks are needed). Avoid using an excessive number of (or excessively long...)

quotations. Use **apt** and **brief** quotations that *clearly* work to *support their point*.

- *This point will be one that **supports, explains, develops** or **explores** your “thesis”. Remember what that is? It’s the single sentence that explained your **super-condensed-overall-point-of-view** concerning the essay question that you wrote at the beginning of your essay!*
- *If a quotation is just a few words in length, set it off inside quotation marks, but **keep it in the same line**. If the quotation is longer, set it off, **again inside quotation marks**, but now on a new line – like a new paragraph, **indented from the margin by about 2cm**.*
- It’s not often a good technique to open a paragraph with a quotation. Of course, every rule is made to be broken but unless you are a skilled essay writer, it’s always better to begin *each* new body paragraph with a sentence that contains a **new point** - one that helps answer your essay question. This **prevents waffle** and **keeps the structure of your essay intact**.
- **TOP TIP!! Avoid “retelling the story”**, i.e. giving lengthy descriptions about WHAT HAPPENS in the text; instead, **INTERPRET** the text in ways that help answer the essay question. Retelling is *a waste of time* and **LOSES MARKS!!**
- If the essay requires you to allude to there being other ways of interpreting the text, try to show this *as you write*. There is no need to labour it – just show your awareness that others might see things differently.
- **ALWAYS SQUEEZE YOUR QUOTATIONS TILL THEY SQUEAL!** Wring every drop of interpretation and comment out of them for this is where the marks lie. Look super-hard at each quotation and ask yourself:
 - *What effective uses of **language** or **literary devices** does it contain?*
 - *How does it help **structurally**?*
 - *How does it contribute to the text **when and where it occurs**? Does it develop character, plot or mood, for example?*
 - *How does it, however subtly, contribute **to an overall aspect of the text, perhaps to a theme**?*
- **NEVER but NEVER** miss the opportunity to use your quotations to discuss **how the writer has used language, literary/poetic/dramatic devices** or **structure** in *effective* ways. This is a golden opportunity to gain extra marks!

The Essay’s Conclusion

- This is the last thing your teacher or examiner will read - **it will hover in their mind as your mark is being decided**. So... make it good!
- Use your conclusion as a **summing up** of your argument (you did write the essay as an argument didn’t you!?)
 - *Restate the major points of your argument – trying to express them succinctly and a little differently.*
 - *Show how the issues raised by your essay apply more generally – most texts have widely applying themes and now is the chance to show how this is the case.*
 - *Give a personal view on the text.*
- **As with the first sentence of your essay, make the last one interesting and memorable!**