



Academic Support Center  
Writing Center

## The Process Analysis Essay

**Resources:** OWL at Purdue; <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/process.html>; freewebs.com; wiredprof.com

### What a process analysis essay is:

A process paper either tells the reader how to do something (a “how-to” essay) or describes how something is done.

When you analyze a process, you break it down into separate steps and present those steps to your reader in one of two ways. You can either instruct the reader on how to do something (for example, how to change the oil in a car) or explain how something happens (how coins are minted). Both types of process analysis will present steps chronologically, but otherwise, the resulting papers will be quite different because the purposes of the papers differentiate fundamentally.

The purpose of instructions is to enable the readers to repeat the process successfully; having read the paper on changing the oil in a car, readers should be able to change the oil in their cars correctly.

The purpose of an explanation is to inform readers about the process; having read the paper on the minting of coins, readers should understand the basic procedure, but they would certainly not be capable of minting their own money.

### What to consider when developing a process-analysis essay:

To give you practice in process analysis, college composition instructors may ask you to write about a process you know well. In such a case, select and limit your topic carefully. If a topic is too complex (such as rewiring an old house), you cannot discuss it fully in the space of a typical writing-course paper. On the other hand, if a topic is too simple (making a sandwich), no instructions are required. An appropriate topic would meet all four of these criteria:

1. The process should be one you do well and often, such as a procedure that you do daily in school, on the job, or at home.
2. The process should be suitable for its intended audience. For example, instructions on tying shoelaces would be inappropriate for children too young to follow written instructions.
3. The process should be one whose instructions are not easily found elsewhere. For example, instructions on making Jell-O or baking a cake mix would be useless because readers could follow the instructions on the box more easily than they could read a paper on the process.

4. The process should be one that can be discussed fully in the required length of the paper.

### **What to consider when writing a process-analysis essay:**

When developing a paragraph or essay through process analysis, you should keep the following points in mind:

1. What process are you trying to explain? Why is it important?
2. Who are the readers? What knowledge do they need to understand this process?
3. What skills/equipment are needed for this? Offer clear descriptions of any tools or materials needed to carry out the process.
4. How many steps are there in the process? Be sure to include all steps and arrange them in sequence.
5. Why is each step important? Explain why each step is necessary.
6. Do any cautions need to be given? Include warnings where appropriate.
7. Does the process have definitions that need to be clarified? Define any terms that your readers may not be familiar with.
8. If needed, tell what should not be done or why something should be done.
9. Provide your readers with a way of determining whether or not the process has been carried out successfully.
10. Process papers can be written in the second person (you), but use the professor's instructions. If writing in second-person is not allowed, avoid its use.

Your responses to these questions and statements should enable you to write an effective process essay. In addition, you shouldn't find it difficult to follow these guidelines if you've chosen a topic that you know quite well.

### **Guidelines to follow when writing instructions:**

1. Use the second person (you). Since you are speaking directly to the readers through telling them what to do, use the imperative verb form (e.g., prepare the surface by sanding it lightly; mix the ingredients thoroughly) and the pronoun *you* (e.g., you should allow at least two hours for the paint to dry).
2. Divide the process into separate actions. Almost any undertaking, even a relatively complex one, can be followed if the instructions separate the process into clear steps that the reader can follow one at a time.
3. Make the sequence clear. Use plenty of transitions (see list below) to indicate the chronological sequence of steps: Every step should have expressions like "first," "second," "next," "at the same time," or "fifteen minutes later." The readers should never have to guess when, or in what order, the steps should be followed.

4. Give complete instructions. Remember that your readers do not know how to perform the task; that's why they are reading the instructions. Include all steps, no matter how obvious they seem to you, and include necessary background information. Also consider the error readers might make, and add any appropriate cautions or warnings.

5. Be specific. For example, telling the readers to "remove the old oil filter" is inadequate; they might not know where to locate the oil filter or how to remove it. To be specific, you may want to go through the process (or better yet, convince a friend to go through it), taking notes on exactly what you do and when you do it.

6. Avoid the telegraphic style. To ensure that readers will be able to understand the instructions, do not omit words like "the" and "a," and do not rely on abbreviations. For example, instead of writing, "Add 1 lb flour to dough," write, "Add one pound of flour to the dough."

**Structure that could be used for writing instructions:**

**Generic Process Outline**

INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH

- Stage A
  - step 1
  - step 2
  - step 3
- Stage B
  - step 1
  - step 2
  - step 3
  - step 4
  - step 5
  - step 6
  - step 7
- Stage C
  - step 1
  - step 2
  - step 3
  - step 4
- Stage D
  - step 1
  - step 2
- Stage E
  - step 1
  - step 2
  - step 3

CONCLUSION PARAGRAPH

**Outline for Doing Laundry**

INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH

- Stage A: Sorting the laundry
  - step 1
  - step 2
  - step 3
- Stage B: Pre-washing
  - step 1
  - step 2
  - step 3
- Stage C: Washing
  - step 1
  - step 2
  - step 3
  - step 4
- Stage D: Drying
  - step 1
  - step 2
- Stage E: Folding
- Stage F: Ironing
- Stage G: Storing

CONCLUSION PARAGRAPH

**Suggested transition words to lead readers through your essay:**

Process essays are generally organized according to time: that is, they begin with the first step in the process and proceed in time until the last step in the process. It's natural, then, that transition words indicate that one step has been completed and a new one will begin. Some common transitional words used in process essays are listed below:

One time	Transition		Another time
	<b>TIME</b>		
	<i>After a few hours,</i>	<i>Immediately following,</i>	
	<i>Afterwards,</i>	<i>Initially,</i>	
	<i>At last</i>	<i>In the end,</i>	
	<i>At the same time,</i>	<i>In the future,</i>	
	<i>Before</i>	<i>In the meantime,</i>	
	<i>Before this,</i>	<i>In the meanwhile,</i>	
	<i>Currently,</i>	<i>Last, Last but not least, Lastly,</i>	
	<i>During</i>	<i>Later,</i>	
	<i>Eventually,</i>	<i>Meanwhile,</i>	
	<i>Finally,</i>	<i>Next, Soon after,</i>	
	<i>First, Second, Third, etc.</i>	<i>Previously,</i>	
	<i>First of all,</i>	<i>Simultaneously,</i>	
	<i>Formerly</i>	<i>Subsequently,</i>	
	<i>Immediately before,</i>	<i>Then,</i>	

