What is an “Essay”?  

“A 500-word what?” Tracy couldn’t believe her ears. Not this weekend. She had plans with Mike. They were going out to a really nice restaurant, a movie, then — Her thoughts were interrupted by the instructor explaining how she wanted the essay structured. Tracy was never very good at writing – particularly essays. She was never really sure if what she had written was an essay or not. So preparing for what she considered to be another failure, she picked up her pencil, gave a reluctant sigh, and then copied down the instructions from the board.

Many students, like Tracy, have difficulty writing essays because they simply do not have a clear understanding of what an essay is. By understanding its definition and the expectations associated with that form of literature, students will be able to make more effective use of their time writing.

An Essay Defined
An essay is a fairly brief piece of non-fiction on a limited topic that presents the writer’s own unique and creative perspective, insights, and/or analysis (along with the supporting evidence) in an organized and professional manner.

To better explain this definition, I’ve broken it down into the following component parts:

- **Essays are fairly brief.** First of all, essays are not long, complicated pieces of writing. They are generally short pieces. For college exams, most essay responses range in size from one-to-three paragraphs, and for most college papers, they usually range in size from 500 to 2,000 words.

  Although there are some books that are called “essays,” they are not typical when it comes to length, particularly at the community college level.

- **Essays are pieces of non-fiction.** Essays are about people, events, issues, etc., that are real or true. The moment material is being fabricated, “made up,” or “fictionalized,” then the writer is engaging in “imaginative or creative writing,” rather than non-fiction.

  This does not mean that an essay may not contain “fictionalized material.” For example, an essay may use a hypothetical example to support one of its main points, or even cite material from a

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What’s a “Clause”?  

One of the basic concepts that students need to understand in order to edit well is the clause.

A clause is a grammatical term for a group of related words that contain a subject and a predicate. The subject is who or what the clause is about. For example, consider the following:

1. Geneva…
2. Frank and Bill…
3. We…

The predicate contains an assertion made about the subject. For example, consider the following:

1. …is my great aunt from Arkansas.
2. …went fishing at Lake Michigan this weekend.
3. …spent the evening walking along the beach.

So when the subject and the predicate are put together, they formulate a complete thought. This complete thought is called an “independent clause.”
In order for a group of words to be considered “a sentence,” it must contain at least one independent clause. However, in addition to the independent clause, other elements may also be added to the sentence. For example,

“Okay, so where did you go?” (word) (Indep. Clause)
In the morning, we’ll leave. (phrase) (Indep. Clause)

Regardless if a word, phrase, or even a clause is added to an independent clause, that group of grammatically-related words are still classified as “a sentence.”

One Sentence or Two?
When an independent clause is added to another independent clause, a new type of sentence is constructed, which is called a compound sentence. Many people have been taught that a compound sentence is comprised of two sentences; however, this is not true. A compound sentence is still only one sentence, but it's comprised of two independent clauses -- not two sentences.

For example, consider the following example:

Tom’s gone, but he’ll be back. (Ind. Clause) (Ind. Clause)

In this example, two independent clauses are joined together with a comma and a conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so). The comma, in this sentence, functions to distinguish or to separate the two independent clauses. And again, this new construction is called a “compound sentence.”

novel or short story. Although these “fictionalized” elements may be introduced in the essay, it is understood that they are being used to clarify, illuminate, and/or to further develop a point or topic that is real.

- **Essays focus on a limited topic.** Also, essays do not discuss everything there is to know about a particular issue or topic. You may have researched a particular issue and then tried to write everything there is to know about that issue. When you do that, you end up with either an extremely vague and generalized paper, or you end up writing a book. Also, in doing that, you leave out the most important element -- yourself! In writing college essays, you should seek to present your perspective on only an aspect or portion of the topic -- not the entire topic itself.

And the shorter the essay, the more restrictive and limited your perspective has to be. And this is perhaps one of the hardest things for students to learn -- to figure out how much to restrict a topic based on the assignment’s required length.

- **Essays present the writer's own unique and creative perspective, insights, and/or analysis.** For whatever reason, you may be like many students who wish to rely on the thoughts of others when you write, rather than to express your own thoughts, feelings, or beliefs. Sometimes, it seems when students do that they are trying to hide themselves from their readers because they’re afraid of being rejected.

The problem is that distancing yourself from a topic or an issue is probably one of the worst things you can do in writing. If the reader cannot sense that this topic is important to you, the writer, then why should he or she care what you have to say about it? You may ask, “What if it's a topic I don't care about?” Then find a way to make yourself care about it; that's part of your job as the writer.

Also, in any essay, the views and ideas of others should only back up and support your perspective, not replace it. Some of the questions your essay should answer are “What do you think about the topic? What insights do you have? What did you learn or uncover through your analysis and research of the topic?”

In addition, when writing your essay, you need to do more than simply regurgitate your thoughts and research onto a sheet of paper. You need to use your own experiences, observations, analysis, research, insights, perspective, etc., to “expose” or “uncover” some “unseen” or “hidden” element of the topic. For example, motivation, cultural or historical connections need to be brought out, or if it is a text, what is being implied or suggested by the writer. Remember, what is located in a text “between the lines” (what’s implied, suggested) is as important as what is written “on the lines.”

This means contrary to what some students have been
led to believe, they are not just to write down whatever comes to mind about a topic in any haphazard way. They need to spend some time effectively analyzing and/or interpreting the material before they even begin to write about it.

Writing a strong, assertive essay begins before students start to put words down on paper. If students do not take that necessary preparation time in analyzing their topic and sources, they'll either sit there unsure of what to write about, or their writing will be weak and ineffective. In either case, students will not produce the kind of writing that they will enjoy or that will provide them with a good grade at the college level.

It's important for students to remember that the point of an essay is not to report the facts of an issue (like a newspaper might) but to present the writer's own unique analysis and/or interpretation of the issue and the facts and/or evidence involved. Thus, an essay is, by definition, not an objective piece of writing, but it is subjective in nature, i.e., an opinion piece.

• **Essays also include the supporting evidence.** It is not enough to just write down your own views and ideas, you also have to demonstrate that they are, in fact, valid views and ideas.

This is the reason that the supporting evidence is included. For example, in a personal experience narrative essay, the supporting evidence may be the two or three experiences that you’ve had that support the point that you are trying to make within the paper. In other types of essays, you may want to include, along with your own personal experiences and observations; facts and examples; case studies; statistics; expert testimony; interviews; surveys and/or questionnaires; tables, graphs and charts.

Remember, the main reason for the inclusion of the various types of evidence is to back up and support your own perspective, insights, and analysis – not to replace it.

**Essays are to be presented in an organized and professional manner.** Papers are not to be "thrown together;" nor are they to be written in any haphazard way. Essays need to be written in an organized manner so that they are easy to follow and understand. It is not the job of the reader to try and figure out what you, the writer, are trying to say. It is your job to say it effectively and clearly. So if your readers end up having to re-read portions of your paper to figure out what you’re trying to say (or cannot even read your handwriting), then you have not done your job.

Also, you are to present your essays in a professional manner. This would include a couple of things:

1. **Essays are to be clearly labeled.** This means that brainstorm, outlines, rough drafts, revisions, and final drafts should be clearly identifiable.

2. **Essays are to be neatly presented.** This means that essays are not to be turned in crinkled, torn, mauled, chewed, folded multiple times, “thrown into the folder,” paper-clipped, or the top-left corner torn and folded over. If your paper is turned in to me in that condition, that tells me one or two things about you. Either you feel your writing is not worth being treated with respect (usually indicating you didn’t put much effort into it), or you weren’t prepared. In either case, you and your work are not viewed in the best possible light.

3. **Essays are to be written using Standard American English.** All professional college documents are written using Standard American English. This is also true for all materials written for this class. Nationally, the common expectation for papers written at the college level is 0-5 errors per page. This means if a paper is 3 pages long, it should contain only 0-15 errors within it. If a paper is 4 pages long, it should only contain 0-20 errors; and papers that are 5 pages long should only contain 0-25 errors within it.

With this definition and guidelines, you should have a much clearer view of what is an essay and some of the expectations and guidelines associated with it. It is my hope that you will use this information to help you develop the type of writing that will make you a successful student here at the college and in life.