

WRITING TYPES AND TOOLS

Writing an Informative Essay

Did you ever pick up a magazine or newspaper and after reading the article say, “Hmm! I didn’t know that!” That article is an informative essay.

Informative essays, also called expository essays, seek to inform or educate the audience on a given topic. The goal is not to persuade the reader but to give the reader more information, to provide the reader with insight, and to support the writer’s interpretations with factual information. The essay should make the reader say “Aha! I didn’t know that.”

Informative essays do not express the writer’s opinion. Views, pro and con, can be included but they must be presented in an unbiased fashion, pointing out comparisons and contrasts of viewpoints. One way to do this is to imagine that the audience holds a common view of the topic; the writer’s purpose is to give the audience a surprising new view based on research.

To do this you can:

- Enlighten your audience with new facts and/or statistics.
- Give them usable material that they can apply.
- Present sufficient information to explain the new findings about the topic.
- Make clear from the beginning of your paper its purpose.

Here is an example of an informative essay topic: a student wrote about technology invading churches in the form of ATM machines. He called it “Technology goes to Church.” His purpose was to inform readers that because of the decrease in weekly donations some churches are now installing ATM machines in the hopes of raising their revenue.

The writing of an informative essay (expository essay) incorporates a variety of modes or strategies of writing. Using a variety of these modes to inform and educate the audience will result in the audience having a clearer view of the topic.

This can be accomplished through **illustration**. By giving examples through narratives, comparing, contrasting, explaining the causes and/or effects, describing with details, explaining how something came to be or how something works, defining what you mean, or sorting the topic into smaller components will make the writing more effective and more clearly understood by the audience. You, as the writer, are exposing the reader to new information.

Just what are these modes and how do you incorporate them?

Narration is telling a short nonfiction story – an anecdote (personal experience, observation, or reflection based on past experiences). It is a direct short story that will add spark to your writing while introducing the topic or illustrating a main point.

Description – Your reader cannot see what you see, so using word pictures called concrete sensory images (the senses – see, hear, smell, taste, and touch) is like making a multisensory film. You want the readers to vividly sense the subject. You as the writer want to select details that will create a dominant impression of the subject – to sense it as a whole.

Comparison and/or contrast – Often explaining how things are alike or different, or how they were and how they have changed, will present new information. This strategy can be useful in showing relationships; by showing the comparisons and or contrasts we provide clarity and insight and, therefore, we understand each one more clearly.

Definition – This strategy is necessary to define key terms, vague terms, or ambiguous terms. Your reader needs to know exactly what you mean so that he or she can understand your points.

Process analysis – Sometimes explaining how something is done, made, or works or how it came to be will clarify a topic for a reader. Writing of this type analyzes the process, breaks it into steps, and shows how the process works.

Cause and Effect – By explaining or analyzing the causes, effects, or both of something, and the whys and what happened, or will happen, your readers will be able to understand and sometimes cope with the new ideas.

Classification – Writers often use this “sorting out” tactic to clarify a complicated or complex topic. The writer looks at the topic and breaks it into the components or subgroups that can be more easily understood. Each component is described and explained in relationship to the others. The individual components as well as the relationship between them can be more easily understood by the reader.

As you prepare to write an informative essay, you will need to think about how you can utilize different strategies to enlighten your readers with the new information you have discovered through your research.

WALK THROUGH WRITING AN INFORMATIVE ESSAY

This reading will walk you through the process of writing an informative essay by letting you look over the shoulder of one writer, Maggie Durham. The best writing is the result of a process:

- Step One: Selecting a Topic and Conducting Research
- Step Two: Brainstorming for Key Points
- Step Three: Writing an Outline
- Step Four: Writing the Essay

Step One: Selecting a Topic and Conducting Research

Selecting a topic is the first step in writing any essay. Maggie Durham, the writer who you will be observing, has chosen as her topic parental conduct at their children’s sporting events.

Once the topic is chosen, it is time to hit the library and do some research. Maggie read four articles for her initial research: “Fixing Kids’ Sports,” “When Cheers Turn Into Jeers (and Tears),” “Mom! It’s only a Game,” and “Inside the Crazy Culture of Kids Sports.”

Step Two: Brainstorming for Key Points

Once Maggie has selected her topic and conducted some basic research, the next step is to narrow her focus. Maggie used a variety of brainstorming strategies to focus on her key points. The first thing Maggie did was to free-write. Free-writing is simply writing nonstop on a topic for a specified period of time (usually 5 to 15 minutes). Errors are not corrected, and revision is not allowed; the writer's goal is just to set down whatever comes into his or her mind.

Here is Maggie's free-writing:

A few weeks ago I was taking a walk and passed the local playing field, it was about 6 in the evening. There were dozens of boys and girls in teams practicing baseball. There were just as many parents along the sidelines screaming and yelling at the children. As I stood there one father went up to the coach and started yelling at him. The team of about 8 year olds just stood and watched this father verbally abuse the coach because his son was not playing. What are parents doing? To my mind this isn't setting a good example. In talking to a friend whose child plays on the soccer team, she said this same thing happens at her daughter's practice sessions and it's even worse during games. What has happened to sportsmanship and praising children?

Another good way to settle on some specific key points is to use questioning. This is just what it sounds like: write out as many questions as you can think of. Maggie used this technique, too.

Questioning:

Why are parents behaving badly?
Why aren't coaches teaching the love of the game and sportsmanship?
What happened to praise?
Why has winning become so important?
Why are there a larger number of players on the youngest teams?

Many of us are more visual, and for us the best technique may be to use graphic organizers. These are simply tools that help us “see” the topic. Maggie has identified several groups she sees as being affected by parental conduct: the parents, the coaches, the officials, and the athletes. She also wants to think more about the ethical considerations, like sportsmanship. Note how she sets up a table to help organize her thoughts:

Graphic Organizer:

Parents	Coaches	Officials	Athletes	Ethics
Yelling at athletes, coaches, and officials	Yelling at athletes	Abused by parents and coaches	No role models	Sportsmanship
Using bad language	Verbally abusing young athletes	Laws to protect	Not learning game	Winning a priority
Physically violent – smacking or pushing children	Physically violent	Sometimes subjected to physical violence	Discouraged by lack of praise	Fair play
No praise, only criticism	Winning is goal no matter how			Teaching skills of game not apparent
Verbally berating coaches and officials	What training do they have?			

In your own research, when you take notes it's good to jot down some of your thoughts about what the author emphasized and what the author neglected, as well as what parts of the article you found most and least convincing.

Maggie Durham, our writer in this reading, had several immediate reactions that she jotted down when she read "Fixing Kids' Sports" and "When Cheers Turn Into Jeers (and Tears)":

- The authors of "Fixing Kids' Sports" and "When Cheers Turn Into Jeers (and Tears)" both stressed that by the age of 12 most kids are dropping out of youth sports. Why? Are they bored? What is causing this? My sons both played sports.
 - Lancaster, the author of "Fixing Kids' Sports," says it's because of the bad conduct of the coaches and the parents. What are they doing? He says they are verbally and physically abusing the young athletes. I think this is true; parents on the sidelines are screaming at their children. I've seen the coaches treat the children as if they were training for the World Series or Super Bowl.
 - Lord, the author of "When Cheers Turn Into Jeers (and Tears)," gives examples of some of the violent acts of parents and coaches – she calls them "spoilsports" and "hoodlums." What has turned these coaches and parents into poor role models?
 - It seems like both authors think the cure to making sports fun again is to have less focus on winning and more emphasis on learning sportsmanship and the correct way to play the game.
 - Both authors blame the poor coaching behavior on "lack of experience teaching the game." I think this might be true – I coached little league baseball for one of my son's teams until they got a "real" coach and I had no idea what I was doing. I need to find out what training these coaches have.
 - Another thing both authors emphasize is parental conduct – Lord talks about places that require parents to attend an ethics class and sign a code of conduct before their kids play sports. I think some parents are reliving their activity in sports through their children. Could it be they want their child or children to be the heroes of the game? Is this hero worship and "win every game" mentality what is turning kids off to sports?

Step Three: Writing an Outline

Were some of your brainstormed reactions in step two similar to Maggie's? Every informative essay is going to be different because every reader is going to have new information to share with the reader. We will now follow Maggie as she turns this brainstorming into an outline.

Outlining before writing an essay will help you identify your main points, organize them well, and catch important elements you may have missed. Your outline should include your thesis statement and a minimum of three main points you plan to make. It is a good idea to have each point supported by evidence. The more complete your outline, the easier it will be to write your informative essay. Here is a sample outline format below:

- I. Introduction
 - A. Background information
 - B. Thesis statement
- II. Key point
 - A. Supporting details
 - B. Supporting details
- III. Key point
 - A. Supporting details
 - B. Supporting details
- IV. Key point
 - A. Supporting details
 - B. Supporting details
- V. Conclusion
 - A. Restatement of thesis
 - B. Concluding statement

If you are writing your outline for yourself, it does not have to be a formal, Roman-numbered outline, but if you are turning it in for a grade, it probably should be (check

the assignment instructions). Microsoft Word has a built-in outlining feature that will do much of the numbering work for you, but if you wish to change it go to "Format," then "Bullets and Numbering," then "Outline Numbered."

Also, aim to put your key points in full sentences. As noted above, the more complete your outline, the easier it will be to write your informative essay.

Remember to include complete APA-style citations for all outside sources you used, both in the text and at the end of your paper. For a model of what a complete outline should look like, review Maggie Durham's informative essay outline by clicking here [Sample Informative Essay Outline](#)

If you want further help understanding how Maggie wrote this outline, read on. Otherwise, you can jump ahead to how she wrote her essay.

Maggie first fills in some background information on her topic, in slot I.A. This will set up her thesis nicely. The next slot to fill in is Maggie's thesis, the main point of the essay. She looks back at her other prewriting (the questioning, the free-writing, and the graphic organizer) and brainstorms to get a working thesis:

Maggie's brainstorming for a thesis:

Parents and coaches are causing many young athletes to drop out of organized sports.

Many young athletes no longer want to play organized sports because of parents and coaches.

Too many young athletes are becoming discouraged and dropping out of organized sports.

The conduct of parents and coaches discourages many young athletes from participating or continuing with organized sports after the age of 12.

Young athletes (6 to 12 year olds) are becoming discouraged and dropping out of organized sports, not because of their own physical limitations or lack of knowledge, but because of the violent parental conduct, verbal and physical abuse of the coaches, and the lack of civility and sportsmanship.

By using her prewriting brainstorming, she comes up with a good working thesis: *Young athletes (6 to 12 year olds) are becoming discouraged and dropping out of organized sports, not because of their own physical limitations or lack of knowledge, but because of the violent parental conduct, verbal and physical abuse of the coaches, and the lack of civility and sportsmanship.* It is a "working" thesis because it may very well change and develop as she continues this process. This goes in slot number I.B.

Turning back to the prewriting brainstorming, we can see that Maggie had already come up with three key points she wished to make: children are dropping out because of (1) violent parental conduct, (2) verbal and physical abuse of the coaches, and (3) the lack of civility and sportsmanship. The next step is to go into the original articles and find specific sections that state the original authors' point and examples so Maggie can incorporate them as supporting details.

The first key point Maggie had was: *the author states that because of the bad conduct of the parents they are driving the young athletes away from participating. What are the parents doing?* Looking at the article "When Cheers Turn Into Jeers (and Tears)," find a section where the author did stress this and cites specific examples. In the article "Fixing Kids' Sports," Maggie finds more examples of parental misconduct.

Maggie chooses the excerpts from both articles to educate the readers about parental and coach conduct. These goes into A and B as supporting details. Now Maggie needs evidence to support these statements. There are two options: research and logic. Collecting research from outside sources to support your point is the best way to proceed most of the time, but in this case, a logical argument might work well.

Here is how Maggie's outline looks so far:

- I. Introduction
 - A. Parents and coaches are destroying kids' sports by fighting on the sidelines, screaming abusively, encouraging physical violence among players, and in general modeling unsportsmanlike behavior.
 - B. *Young athletes (6 to 12 year olds) are becoming discouraged and dropping out of organized sports, not because of their own physical limitations or lack of knowledge, but because of the violent parental conduct, verbal and physical abuse of the coaches, and the lack of civility and sportsmanship.*
- II. The inappropriate conduct of parents who are losing their perspective and putting too much pressure on young players is a contributing factor to young athletes dropping out of sports.
 - A. Parents want the best for their children and when it comes to sports they want the young player to be the star; this appears to be causing them to treat youth sports as training for the World Series or the Super Bowl.
 - B. Parents can be seen exhibiting "ferocious temper tantrums" and physically abusing coaches, as well as hitting, kicking, slapping, insulting, and verbally abusing their children (Lord, 2000).

She continues this process with her two remaining points:

1. *The coaches of many youth teams vary from former players with some background to volunteer dads to "wannabe" championship coaches, some with little or no experience.*
2. *The quality of sportsmanship, civility, and ethics is being replaced by a "win at all costs" attitude.*

For these two points, Maggie needs more than logic to back up her argument. She returns to her notes from the Lord and Lancaster articles and finds more information that will help support her points.

What appears in her outline now may not be what appears in her final informative essay. She may stumble across evidence that is better. She may reorganize her points or rework them. All writing develops and changes as it goes through this process and yours will, too.

Here is Maggie's final outline. Note her title page and references page are in APA format (as yours should be as well):

Click here [Sample Informative Essay Outline](#) to see the outline.

Step Four: Writing the Essay

Maggie turned in her outline and received some great feedback from her instructor. The instructor pointed out that Maggie's thesis, *Young athletes (6 to 12 year olds) are becoming discouraged and dropping out of organized sports, not because of their own physical limitations or lack of knowledge, but because of the violent parental conduct, verbal and physical abuse of the coaches, and the lack of civility and sportsmanship*, indicated the reasons but perhaps instead of “lack of knowledge” she should use “lack of skills and understanding of the game.” After a few revisions, Maggie settled on *Young athletes are becoming discouraged and dropping out of organized sports, not because of their own physical limitations and skills or understanding of the game, but because of the conduct of both parents and coaches and the lack of sportsmanship*.

Working from her outline, Maggie started to write her paper. What you see below was not her first draft. She wrote it, revised it, and gave it a final polishing proofreading. You will notice new evidence to support her points, an introduction that starts with a startling statistic to grab readers' attention, and a conclusion that drives the points home. Pay careful attention to the citation of outside sources throughout, both direct quotations and paraphrases. Note how each supporting detail is cited. You must do this to avoid plagiarism.

Click [Sample Informative Essay](#) to see the informative essay.