



**Academic Support Center
Writing Center**

The Process Analysis Essay

Resources: OWL at Purdue; 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 are not the same.

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.

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, you cannot discuss it fully in the space of a typical writing-course paper. On the other hand, if a topic is too simple, no instructions are required. An appropriate topic would meet all four of these criteria:

- 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.
- 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.

- 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.
- 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:

- What process are you trying to explain? Why is it important?
- Who are the readers? What knowledge do they need to understand this process?
- Offer clear descriptions of any tools or materials needed to carry out the process.
- Be sure to include all steps and arrange them in sequence.
- Explain why each step is necessary.
- Include warnings where appropriate.
- Define any terms that your readers may not be familiar with.
- If needed, tell what should not be done or why something should be done.
- Provide your readers with a way of determining if the process has been carried out successfully.