

Critical Essay Writing

Building skills and confidence with diverse essay types

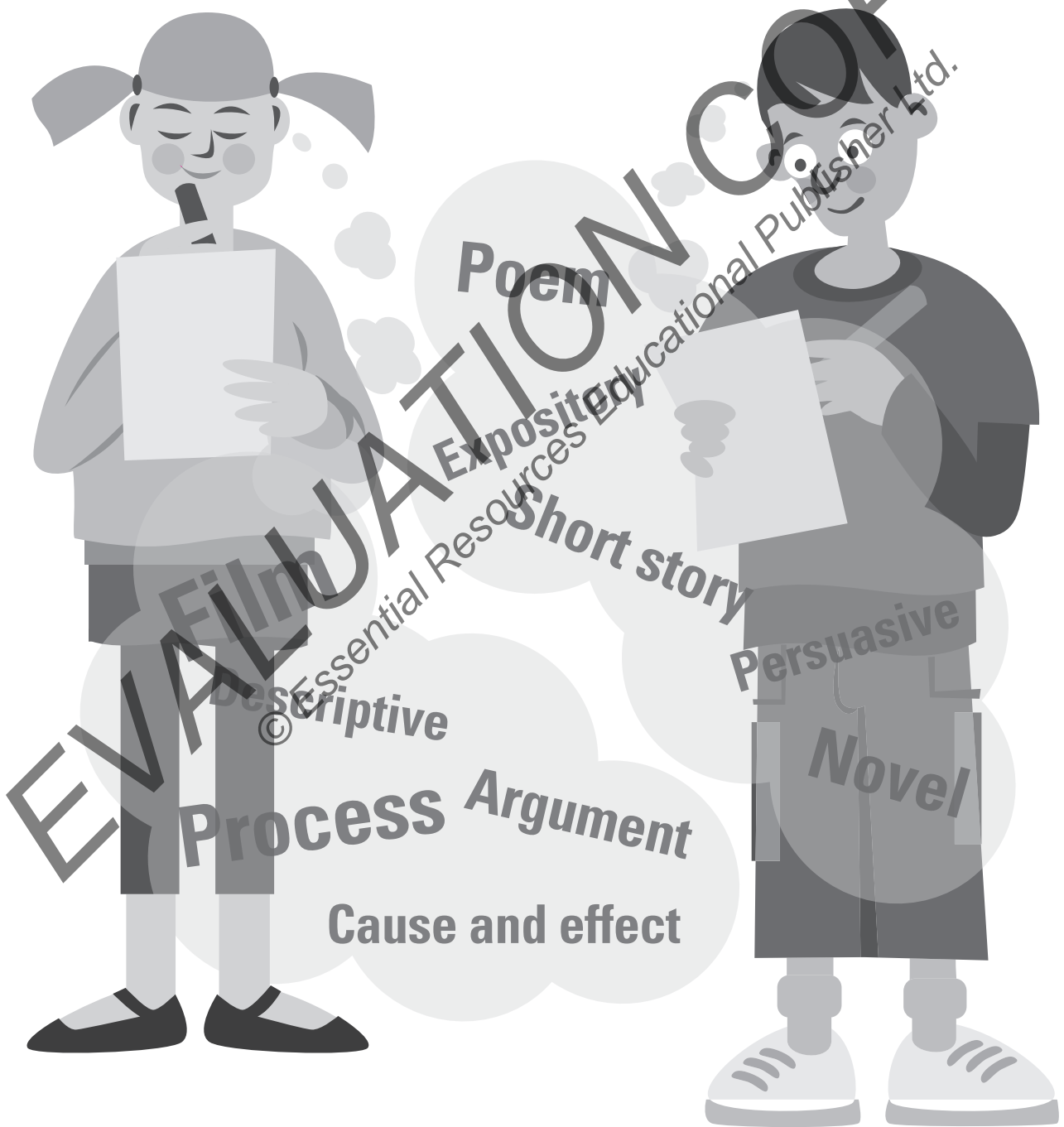


Maria Gill

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Introduction

Welcome to *Critical Essay Writing*. This learning resource is designed to help you teach essay writing skills to students aged 12–16 years by breaking each component down into manageable skills. At pre-secondary level, it offers a constructive way of supporting students to transition smoothly to secondary school, where a large part of the English curriculum involves writing formal essays. Likewise at secondary school, this resource offers a strong introduction to these basic skills for the whole class, learners with language backgrounds other than English and children with learning difficulties.

With formal essay writing skills, students can organise their thoughts and fully develop complex ideas. Writing essays requires critical thinking skills, and develops students' ability to define their terms and effectively communicate their thoughts and ideas. They will learn to sort out relevant from irrelevant details while researching and then to synthesise this information. They will need these skills in a diverse range of spheres in later life, including university, politics, the law and the commercial world. You can also emphasise the relevance of this work by explaining to your students that formal writing skills give them voice and power.

About this book

The three units in this book present lesson plans aligned with the New Zealand and Australian curricula.

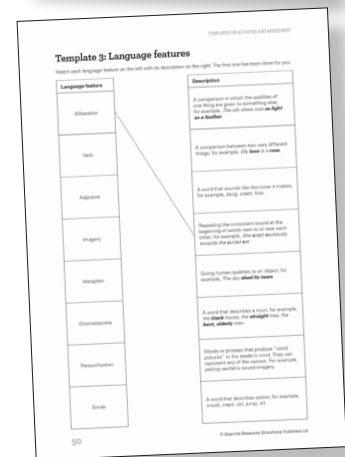
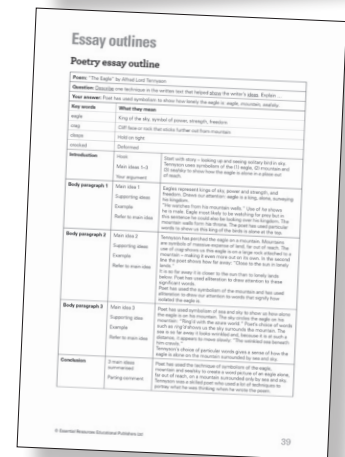
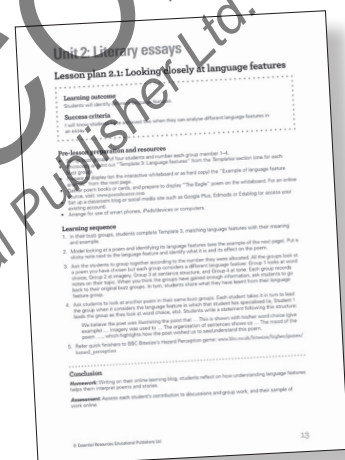
- Unit 1 is concerned with the key components of essay writing. Students apply the skills they learn in this unit to writing mini essays of one to five paragraphs in length. This unit develops the understanding students need to bring together the different components in writing longer essays.
- Unit 2 focuses on essays that students will need to write in the English curriculum when analysing a poem, short story, film or novel.
- Unit 3 introduces a wide range of other essays, such as persuasive, argument, and cause and effect essays. Given that the skills developed in these lessons are needed across the curriculum, these lessons are designed for use in both English and other curriculum areas.

Integral to the lesson plans are suggestions for how students can record and evaluate their work online. Keeping a learning blog will help them to learn to write for a wider audience and give purpose to their writing, as well as developing their skills in giving constructive feedback. Through this medium, you can also check online to see how your students are progressing and give feedback.

The mini workshops that follow the lesson plans focus on micro skills. Depending on the range of needs of your students, you can use them with the whole class to develop these skills generally or with one or more students for remedial help.

Also included are templates for activities that you can integrate into your lessons as needed, along with templates for self, peer and teacher assessment.

The final section lists further resources to help with the development of essay writing skills. Among them are suggestions for poems and stories that appeal to teenagers, as a starting point in your search for both current and traditional publications, and for stories and poems written by people in your own country. When you are choosing books, keep in mind that not all students are going to be academics, and that you want them to continue reading for pleasure as well as reading with an analytical eye.



Planning resources – curriculum links

<p>Key concept: Critical essay writing</p>	
<p>English curriculum</p> <p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • navigate and read texts for specific purposes, applying appropriate text-processing strategies • plan, draft and publish informative and persuasive texts (selecting aspects of subject matter and particular language to convey information and ideas), choosing text structures and language features appropriate to purpose and audience • re-read and edit their own and others' work using agreed criteria for text structures and language features • use a range of strategies and references to access general and subject-specific vocabulary • evaluate text structure, language features and grammatical techniques used to influence an audience, including persuasive techniques and the language of argument • analyse and compare different perspectives in texts through close analysis of language • determine the nature and extent of information needed and selectively source specific information using evaluative and online research skills; and collect evidence from a variety of sources including libraries, websites, databases and search engines • evaluate how well the purpose of the text is met as well as the accuracy of content, citing information from the text to support point of view • make inferences, including by inferring meaning using evidence from interrelated parts of the text • draw conclusions about main ideas, concepts and arguments • interpret and analyse texts critically, including by identifying how aspects of subject matter and particular language choices contribute to the representation of characters, places and events • make appropriate selections of subject matter from various sources, synthesising and organising these in a logical sequence. 	<p>Assessments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observations • Sample of work • Completed projects • Motivation <p>Focus skills and strategies</p> <p>Students can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understand text and language features • use a plan to structure writing • give and receive constructive feedback • understand inferences and synthesising • use critical reading strategies • reflect on skills learnt • undertake research and take notes.

Source: Adapted from the *Australian Curriculum* at: www.australiancurriculum.edu.au

A note on the online resources

Please note that the website addresses (URLs) in this resource are correct at the time of publication. However, website addresses can change, and some websites may adopt advertising that is inappropriate for the classroom. It is therefore advisable to check each website you plan to use in the classroom before visiting it with your students or providing printed copies. Essential Resources and the author take no responsibility for the content of any website included in this book.

Unit 1: Components of essay writing

Lesson plan 1.1: Analysing essay questions

Learning outcome

Students will identify the components of an essay question.

Success criteria

I will know students have achieved this when they can break the question into its parts and have successfully understood what the question wants them to do.

Pre-lesson preparation and resources

- Set up buzz groups of two to four students.
- Photocopy or print out "Template 1: Descriptors and descriptions" from the *Templates* section and cut out the cards separately (one set of cards for each pair of students).
- Set up a classroom blog or social media site such as on Google Plus, Edmodo, Kidblog or Edublog (or access your existing account).

Learning sequence

1. As a class, discuss what usually lets students down in multichoice questions, essays and other tests. Is the problem that they haven't understood or answered the question?
2. In pairs, students brainstorm the verbs they find in multichoice questions: *describe, explain, compare, analyse, argue, support, identify* etc then match the descriptor with the description using Template 1.
3. Still in their pairs, students take turns to give instructions about a familiar topic such as sport, choosing an appropriate verb to make the instructions clear. For example, *describe* netball or *explain* netball, or *compare* netball with basketball, or *analyse* a World Cup netball game, or *support* your explanation about netball with some facts or quotes, or *identify* the aim of netball.
4. Write a question on the board. Discuss its components, and underline, circle or highlight the key words. For example:

Present a written argument that explores one of the following topics. You may argue for or against the topic. Imagine that your writing will be published in a book that will explain young people's view to an adult audience. The ideas you include should be explained, and supported by examples.

- (a) Students are not given enough homework.
 - (b) Ice cream is better than sorbet.
 - (c) Sport stars make good role models.
5. In small groups, students discuss what the question requires them to do. For example, do they need to give both sides of an issue; choose from the subjects listed; give facts to someone their own age; define, describe or make clear; support their claims by examples – facts, quotes etc?
 6. In pairs, students pick one of the topics supplied in the question and brainstorm what they might include in an essay about it. Pairs share their ideas with the rest of the class.

Conclusion

Homework: Writing on their online learning blog, students reflect on how understanding the question helps them to fully answer it.

Assessment: Assess each student's contribution to discussions and pair and group work, and their online reflection.

Lesson plan 1.2: Formal vs informal writing

Learning outcome

Students will identify the difference between formal and informal writing.

Success criteria

I will know students have achieved this when they can use the appropriate language for formal writing.

Pre-lesson preparation and resources

- Set up buzz groups of two to four students.
- Set up a classroom blog or social media site such as Google Plus, Kidblog, Edmodo or Edublog (or access your existing account).
- Arrange for use of smart phones, iPads/devices or computers.
- Preview EzineArticles' YouTube video, *Formal vs informal writing*, on www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdDBY2-Wmis and prepare to show it on a projector, interactive whiteboard, computer etc.
- Access Per Lysvag and Karen Dwyer Loken's chart on the characteristics of four styles on the spectrum of informal–formal writing from <http://ndla.no/en/node/14807?meny=1707> so that you can display it on the interactive whiteboard.

Learning sequence

1. As a class, watch EzineArticles' YouTube video.
2. Encourage the class to discuss the different contexts when you would write formally or informally. Record their responses on the whiteboard.

Examples

Informal – text message, letter to friend, email to sports coach, comment on Facebook, Twitter message, blog post.

Formal – letter for a job application, email to principal/headteacher, essay, report on science/social science subject.

3. In their buzz groups, students do two role plays of one of the following scenes. In the first role play, they talk informally; in the second they talk formally in the same scene.

Scenes: Asking permission to leave the school grounds; suggesting to friends they go to a film; going for a job interview; joining a new sport club; asking parent if you can go out tonight.

4. On their online blog, students write a paragraph about something they did in school today. They write three versions: the first formal, second neutral and third informal.
5. They get peer feedback and then revise.

Conclusion

Homework: Writing on their online learning blog, students reflect on the differences between formal and informal writing and where they would use each style.

Assessment: Assess each student's contribution to discussions and buzz groups, and an example of work.

Lesson plan 1.3: Writing an introduction

Learning outcome

Students will identify the components of an introduction.

Success criteria

I will know students have achieved this when they can write an introduction that includes a hook, a thesis statement and the main ideas to be covered in an essay.

Pre-lesson preparation and resources

- Set up a classroom blog or social media site such as Google Plus, Edmodo or Edublog (or access your existing account).
- Arrange for use of smart phones, iPads/devices or computers.

Learning sequence

1. Read an introduction from a fiction book and an introduction from a formal essay. Ask the students, "How are they different?" Record their responses on a chart.

Examples

Fiction book – starts with a hook, introduces characters, setting and sometimes a problem.

Formal essay – starts with a hook, briefly summarises the topic or big idea, and outlines the main ideas you are going to cover.

2. Take the students through the process of preparing to write an introduction by first underlining the key words in the essay question and then brainstorming how you will answer the question.

Example: Describe an important event that happens in the story and why it is important.

Explain, "To answer this question, I'll brainstorm the events that are in the story, and then highlight the one I think is the most important. I'll then think about why it was important. I'll ask myself questions like: Did it have consequences that influenced what happened later? Did it reveal something about the protagonist or the antagonist? I'll be looking for three reasons."

Example: In John Marsden's *The Ellie Chronicles*, Ellie's parents are murdered by terrorists from the other side of the border. Consequences? The event had to happen in the story because it set up Ellie to make her own decisions from then on in the story; there are no parents saying she cannot do things. It also makes her very vulnerable – she is on that farm now with no adults to protect her from further attacks or from greedy adults. Like in the *Tomorrow* series, she has to make all her own decisions and stand up for herself, but it also gives her autonomy, which she wouldn't have if her parents were still alive. What does it reveal about the antagonists? It shows how far the terrorists will go to get rid of their past enemies.

3. Explain that you then use this brainstorm to write the introduction. Ask the class to help you write it.

Example: In John Marsden's novel *The Ellie Chronicles*, terrorists from the

other side of the border shoot the parents of the main character, Ellie. At the time of the murders, the wars have finished and the invaders are living on the other side of the border. Ellie has climbed the spur with two friends when she hears gun shots. She runs down the spur only to find her

parents dead. This key event in the first chapter influences what happens

to Ellie; it leaves her vulnerable but also gives her autonomy to make her own decisions so that she can do what she feels must be done.

Introduces author and book

Summarises what happens

States why it is an important event

continued ...