

## Essay Writing In French Versus English

Students who are used to writing essays in French should be aware that writing an essay in English differs considerably in style and structure.

### Introductory paragraph

- The introduction of an English essay should begin with general statements that provide context for a given topic. Each subsequent sentence narrows the focus of the essay, culminating in the **thesis statement** that clearly states the writer's position to be defended throughout the rest of the essay. Asking questions in the introduction is not recommended.
- In contrast, expressing an opinion in the introduction of a French essay is discouraged because the French convention is to leave opinions for the concluding sentence(s) of the whole essay. Students writing an essay in French identify *la problématique* in the introduction, which often involves a series of complicated, interlinked questions culminating in an interpretive problem that the essay sets out to address or to solve. Such an endeavour is inspired by French ethnologist and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who stated that « *le savant n'est pas celui qui donne les bonnes réponses mais celui qui pose les bonnes questions* » (1964).

### Body paragraphs and conclusion

- The first sentence of a body paragraph in a French essay is typically not as direct as the topic sentence in English. In an English essay, a clear topic sentence presents an argument in favour of the position taken in the thesis statement.
- Unlike essays in English, essays in French commonly contain a body paragraph that concedes a counterargument to the point of view presented in the preceding paragraph. Exploring a counterargument in English is possible, but only if it is ultimately refuted to further support the thesis statement. Otherwise, the writer risks appearing undecided and unsure of their position.
- Essays in French often use the concluding paragraph to summarize the pros and cons of different viewpoints before striving to overcome the initial contradiction, possibly by bringing in additional information. Such a structure is known as the *thèse-antithèse-synthèse*. An English essay, on the other hand, recaps the main arguments presented in the body and how they have served to support the thesis statement made in the introduction.
- Finally, French essays may also include *une ouverture* that encourages the reader to reflect on a new topic of discussion that merits its own argumentative essay. In contrast, a conclusion in an English essay remains closer to the topic at hand by offering a prediction, suggestion, warning, or broader societal implication of the thesis.

Elements of a French essay	Equivalent in an English essay
<i>Le sujet amené</i>	→ General statements that provide context
<i>La problématique [le sujet posé]</i>	→ Thesis statement (clear position taken on a particular topic); avoid direct or indirect questions
<i>L'annonce du plan [le sujet divisé]</i>	→ Can be integrated into the thesis statement or appear on its own before thesis statement → Shorter essays (under 1,000 words) do not require a detailed roadmap that reveals the main points of your essay
<i>Thèse-antithèse-synthèse</i>	→ Thesis statement at the end of introductory paragraph → Body paragraphs that support thesis statement; counterarguments are optional but must not weaken overall position → Conclusion that summarizes main arguments and reiterates thesis statement; no new information added

## Writing style

- Writing in French favours certain turns of phrases and long sentences that are discouraged in English essays. What English considers to be run-on sentences are perfectly acceptable in French writing, especially when punctuated by several commas. Note that in English, comma splices are a sentence structure error. (See the BU Writing Centre *Comma Splices* handout.)
- English essays usually avoid the first person (“I” and “we”) in academic essays, whereas French commonly uses *nous* and *on*. Instead, English essay writing employs commands (“consider the following scenario...”) or the third person (“some may argue that...”).

French essay wording	English essay wording
<i>Nous débuterons cette argumentation par...</i>	The first reason why...
<i>Nous appuierons l'idée que...</i>	To support this idea, consider...
<i>Enfin, nous nous pencherons sur...</i>	Finally, an analysis of _____ reveals that...

### References:

<http://documentationcinema.umontreal.ca/elements-du-discours-argumentatif-lintroduction/>

[https://www.learnfrenchathome.com/c1\\_pe\\_essai.pdf](https://www.learnfrenchathome.com/c1_pe_essai.pdf)

<https://www.fluentu.com/blog/french/how-to-write-an-essay-in-french/>

Lévis-Strauss, C. (1964). *Le cru et le cuit: mythologiques*. Plon.

