

**A STRONG ESSAY /
A WEAK ESSAY**

THESIS – *a central idea, the engine of your analysis*

- focused: central question of the essay is defined sharply
- adrift: issue addressed by essay is defined vaguely, if at all

- engaging: ideas form an argument, essay has a purpose
- aimless: ideas fit together indifferently, almost at random

- creative: ideas spring from independent thinking
- unimaginative: ideas are a rehash of class discussion

- sophisticated: controlling idea is marked by nuance, alert to subtleties
- simplistic: main idea is obvious, predictable, unadventurous

DEVELOPMENT – *the unfolding of your idea from paragraph to paragraph*

- dynamic: essay grows to fit idea, goes where it needs to go
- static: essay structure is formulaic, prefabricated (e.g., the 5-paragraph theme)

- purposeful: thesis controls organization, shapes a smooth train of paragraphs
- plot-driven: plot summary hijacks essay, dictates the succession of paragraphs

- responsive: central idea progresses, each paragraph builds upon the previous one
- repetitious: main idea gets stuck, becomes repetitive

- flowing: topic sentences show how each paragraph connects with previous one
- disorientating: topic sentences fail to show relationship between ideas

SUPPORT – *the clarity of your evidence at each step of the way*

- insightful: firm grasp of ideas, comprehension of text
- confused: shaky discussion of concepts, misreading of text

- thorough: evidence to back claims is fully explored, reasoning well laid out
- spotty: claims are unsubstantiated, explanations are lacking

- coherent: paragraphs address specific issues one at a time, make clear points
- diffuse: paragraphs wander about, fail to take shape around a single idea

- proportionate: paragraph length is well suited to delivering each idea powerfully
- skimpy or bloated: paragraphs are either too brief or too drawn out to have an impact

- contextual: examples, quotations, points are properly framed by judicious summary
- fragmentary: textual details seem to crop up from nowhere, don't fit together

(over)

STYLE – *the manner in which you express your thoughts*

precise: diction is always on target, exactly the right word is chosen
errant: usage errors crop up frequently, wrong words keep appearing

accomplished: phrases come together idiomatically, just as the language requires
awkward: phrases are cobbled together without knowledge of the proper idioms

cohesive: sentences are tied together nicely from one to the next
rambling: sentences are plopped down without much reference to order

concise: no matter how long or short the sentence, no words are wasted
wordy: an excessive number of words are used to accomplish your point

MECHANICS – *a presentation free of distractions*

grammar

correct: conventions of proper grammar are fully under control
faulty: error-prone sentences, displaying little mastery of grammar

punctuation

sure: accurate use of all punctuation marks
erratic: prose is punctuated as if by guesswork

sentences

polished: sentences of all varieties and lengths are handled skillfully
halting: sentences stumble into fragments, run-ons, or comma splices

quotations

adept: quotations handled well, fit in smoothly with your sentences
clumsy: quoted material creates problems with syntax, or is just dumped in

Saint Mary's College Writing Proficiency Program
