

Chapter 12: The Illustration Essay



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Why Write an Illustration Essay?

Illustration is often used as a mode of writing when the writer needs to clarify general statements or observations about perceived truths about society, nature, experiences, and behavior. Illustration is used to clarify abstract concepts by providing a demonstration of a concept with supporting examples which show, in a concrete way, the point the writer is trying to establish. For example, a review of a beach resort would likely include main points and supporting examples regarding the hotel amenities, the restaurants available, beach access and related beach activities, and perhaps, price. All of these points would be assembled in an organized written composition—a personal journal entry, a travel brochure, a newspaper review, or a letter of complaint or praise to resort management.

Understanding Illustration

The point of any illustration assignment is for the writer to assert an overall observation and back up that assertion with evidence-based examples. Like other rhetorical modes, it can be simply informative—providing a neutral presentation of information for readers to use to draw their own conclusions, or it can be argumentative—providing a stance of favoritism or superiority on the topic. The key to organizing the overall essay is to decide on categories of main ideas that are needed to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic.

The Thesis Statement

The thesis statement for an illustration essay should convey the main point for why clarification or development of a deeper understanding of the topic is necessary or important.

Examples

- The over-reliance on social media and texting has created an environment where people feel comfortable sharing critical feelings they would have previously kept to themselves.
- Many of today's popular movies rely on excessive gore and violence to entertain audiences which could explain why book adaptations are more violent than the original text.
- If money is not object, then a vacation to the Kanaapali Shores Beach Resort will satisfy a tourist's paradise dream.

Basic Structure

The organization of the essay depends on the purpose of the essay and requires a clear rationale for why the examples apply as an illustration of a concept.

As a single supporting paragraph, a writer uses a topic sentence to designate the main idea followed by primary and secondary support structure. Primary supports are the main ideas to support a topic sentence, and secondary supports are the examples and details to provide the concrete information to complete the writer's point.

Purpose of Illustration: To demonstrate how a vacation at the Kanaapali Shores Beach Club Resort is enjoyable and affordable.

Primary support 1: The hotel amenities

- Secondary supporting details: the room, the bed, the bathroom, the kitchenette, the view, the concierge services

Primary support 2: The restaurants

- Secondary supporting details: the variety of food, the quality of food, the service, the ambiance

Primary support 3: The beach and activities

- Secondary supporting details: the beauty of the sand, sky, and water; sunbathing, snorkeling, windsurfing

Primary support 4: The cost

- Secondary supporting details: the price of the room per night, the prices of meals, the price of activities/entertainment

In an illustration essay, each of the supporting body paragraphs will follow the same basic structure. Writers should use flexibility with that structure, though. The design is not meant to be a single sentence of primary support followed by a single sentence for secondary support. Often, a writer may have several concrete secondary examples or details to use to fully develop the primary point. However, only use as many examples as necessary without being redundant or becoming tedious for the audience.

For example, if you want to illustrate the qualities of an effective professor, then you must first establish what attributes would be shared among many quality professors. Your illustration could then be based on instructional delivery methods, grading, interpersonal communication, availability outside of class. Each of these traits would be the main ideas supporting the thesis, and the examples

of each trait could include descriptions of each trait or examples of known individuals who demonstrate it. Using this strategy helps the writer focus on illustrating how all professors could be amazing rather than just making the essay present like a tribute to one amazing teacher.

What if you are trying to illustrate the bad habits associated with social media use? You have choices for how you organize the essay. You could handle the examples as associated by device, or you could handle the development of the essay according to each different “bad” habit or behavior and discuss each device in the context of that behavior. For example, you could talk about all of the annoying habits a person might display when on their cell phone and then all of the annoying habits people show when on Facebook. Alternately, you could talk about “rudeness” as your distinguishing category and then use the examples of rude behavior associated with all of the devices or social media applications.

These are some of the options for outlining/organizing the paragraphs of an illustration essay:

1. One long example using multiple paragraphs
 - a. Could be narrative using an anecdotal story
 - b. Spatially arranged by location or setting
 - c. Order of importance
2. Series of short examples where each example is a paragraph
 - a. Weakest to most important
 - b. Chronological
3. Large series of categorized examples where each category is a paragraph with embedded examples usually arranged from least to most important within each category.
4. Sometimes no special order is needed or process because the examples are of equal importance.

Introduction

Narrative and descriptive devices are often used to engage the reader with a general overview of the presented topic.

Conclusion

Summarize the purpose and bring the essay full circle to the introductory device. If an essay started with an anecdote of a situation, bring closure to that situation. Be sure to reiterate the purpose for illustrating the ideas related to the topic.

Questions for Discussion and Analysis

Answer the following questions regarding the essay. Be complete in your explanations, and cite examples or quotes in support of your answer. Use complete sentences with proper grammar, spelling and punctuation.

1. Who is the intended audience?
2. Explain with examples how the language and style help the writer connect with the audience.
3. What is the main point or focus of this illustration? How is that point illustrated for the reader?
4. This article is from 1998. Are you surprised the problem of binge drinking among college students has existed for this long? How common do you think the problem is today? Do you think statistics have changed?

No sample student essays are available for this rhetorical strategy.

Tips for Writing the Illustration Essay

Illustration essays use well-developed examples to illuminate a topic in a way that an audience may not have previously considered. The examples should be detailed and real, based on observation or research, so that they are relatable to the audience who could use the information to make informed decisions or validate opinions.

Topic Ideas

- An effective or ineffective teacher/professor
- An outstanding nurse/doctor
- Symptoms of stress on the body
- The perfect vacation destination
- A horrible job
- A review of any business establishment

Chapter Questions for Comprehension

1. What practical, non-academic purpose indicates an illustrative writing approach?
2. What role do adjectives serve in the development of an illustrative paragraph or essay?
3. Why is secondary support critical in the development of an illustrative assignment?