

Adding Stylistic Devices To Essays

Every essay presents its "body information" in different ways. The most common way of presenting information is to provide **examples** (sometimes called **illustrations**). As you read further, you will see that pertinent and well-developed examples are essential elements of most essays, especially expository and persuasive papers. Thus, if you argue that bicycling is better for the environment than driving a car, discussing (1) the effects on air pollution and (2) the benefits of exercise, would be two examples that illustrate your argument. However, just like a poem may use a variety of stylistic techniques (like similes, metaphors, rhyming and metre), essays may also contain a variety of other devices to enhance the experience and understanding of the reader.

Below is a selection of common essay techniques that you may encounter when reading well-written essays.

1. Analogy: An analogy is a comparison of one situation (x) in terms of another (y). If (y) is easy to understand, then using it to describe something more complex (x) will make (x) easier to understand. Consider it a non-fiction form of metaphor or simile. For example, the Greek philosopher Plato explains the process of intellectual enlightenment in terms of a person emerging from a cave. The cave is full of shadows and darkness (i.e. ignorance), and the enlightened person emerges into the sunlight of understanding. The cave is an analogy that explains the difficult concept of intellectual development and philosophical idealism. To the extent that people have accepted the comparison, Plato's cave analogy is one of the most famous instances of this device in Western literature.

2. Anecdote: An anecdote is a very short story, usually found within the confines of an essay, that helps illustrate or prove a point. It's usually a true story that is personal and humorous.

3. Statistics: Measurable and quantifiable (i.e. numerical) information can often be a very effective tool, as long as the statistics are relevant to the topic under discussion, and the measurements are made by a credible source in a careful, unbiased manner. Statistics from a credible source, like Statistics Canada or a published document, enhances the effectiveness of any essay because it is difficult to refute or minimize such information. Make sure you always have a bibliographic entry if you use outside statistical sources.

4. Expert Testimony: Like statistics, a direct quote from an expert (i.e. in quotation marks) can also lend credence to an essay's argument or discussion. To be truly legitimate, the expert giving the testimony must have recognized expertise in the area under discussion, and he or

she must have something relevant to offer to the particular essay topic. Make sure you always have a bibliographic entry if you use an expert's testimony.

5. Emotional Appeal: Appealing to a reader's emotions (which we also call *pathos*) is a common technique in essays, but it is considered a less credible technique than rational examples or statistics (or *logos*). In fact, emotional appeals are often labeled as illogical and fallacious by teachers of rhetoric like Aristotle. However, if they are sincere, eloquent and connected to some form of demonstrative, tangible evidence, then emotional appeals do form a legitimate part of an essayist's repertoire. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is a classic example of both *logos* and *pathos*.

6. Cause and Effect: This is a common device that's usually found in expository essays, but you can find it in persuasive papers, too. In such essays, the writer will attempt to explain why something has happened. This device usually means that the process under discussion is examined in a chronological manner, with causes coming before effects. A good writer will take time to explain why other potential causes are not actually part of the "chain of causation".

7. Compare and Contrast: This approach asks you to analyze the differences and similarities between two objects, texts or ideas. It's found in both expository and persuasive writing. You can organize your paper based on similarities and differences, or you can structure it according to categories. [For example, two pieces of literature could be compared using literary categories like character, theme and diction.] Sometimes the essayist will simply contrast two opposing ideas or events; this intentional contrast (or juxtaposition) can be quite refreshing.

8. Rhetorical Question: Asking questions is always risky because some students forget to answer them, but rhetorical questions are so obvious that the answer is already implied. Nevertheless, most experts advise you to avoid asking rhetorical questions; they make you appear lazy. Just remember: Most questions are *not* rhetorical.

9. Definitions: Definitions are always useful if the term is intrinsic to the thesis. Most writers believe that you should present your definitions in the introductory paragraph or the first body paragraph. [I prefer the latter.] If you use a mainstream dictionary and refer to it by name, a separate citation is usually not necessary.

10. Poetic Language: Though poetry and non-fiction essays might be viewed as opposites, the techniques of poetry *can* be used to liven up dry explanations or challenging arguments. Figurative language like metaphors, similes, and personification, and sound techniques like alliteration, parallelism and repetition, are all legitimate tools for the essayist. As with most things, however, use them in moderation and with a sense of context.