



State Bar of New Mexico

Essay Contest Tutorial

You are writing a legal essay. Legal essays are “persuasive” in nature; therefore, your job is to present the facts clearly and persuade the reader of your point of view.

STEP 1

Read all the information

The first step is to read the information you’ve been given from beginning to end to get a general idea of:

1. What happened? What are the facts?
2. What does the law say (*legal authority*: the rules, regulations, and case law that govern this issue)?
3. How does the law apply to the facts?

STEP 2

Brainstorm/Outline

The generally accepted form of a legal argument is an outline. For now, start by brainstorming. Write down everything that seems important for each section below. Use no particular format; just write down ideas and get something on paper.

1. **Introduction**—In your own words, summarize the facts. You will later develop this section into an introductory paragraph. Think about it this way. If you were going to relay this information verbally to someone, what information is necessary to get your point across? On average, this section should be a page or less. Note: Don’t just repeat the “facts” of the question. Put it in your own words. (This is one of the things the judges keep an eye out for.)
2. **Essay Question 1**—Read essay question 1 (more than once, if necessary). Write down your thoughts regarding law, events, fairness and responsibility based on what you’ve read in Step 1. A list or “bullet points” is an acceptable format.
3. **Essay Question 2**—Read essay question 2 (more than once, if necessary). Write down your thoughts regarding law, events, fairness and responsibility based on what you’ve read in Step 1.
4. **Essay Question 3**—Read essay question 3 (more than once, if necessary). Write down your thoughts regarding law, events, fairness and responsibility based on what you’ve read in Step 1.
5. **Conclusion**— Write down the facts and law that convinced YOU of your opinion. This is where you will be as persuasive as possible. Although currently you are still brainstorming, this will eventually become the conclusion to your whole essay, the section where you get to “wrap it up.”

HINT:

You have two sets of information: (1) the particular facts and circumstances of the situation and (2) the law which you apply to determine how to answer the questions in this situation.

You may not be able to write anything in this section yet and that’s ok. As you become convinced of the position you plan to take, you can write down your thoughts, including the facts and law that convinced you of your opinion.

STEP 3

Apply the Law to the Facts

You are still in the brainstorming phase. This is the part that makes this essay unique. This is not just an essay; it's a **persuasive** essay. What better way to get your point across than provide the **law** as backup for your position.

Read the section entitled "Legal and Other Authority." This section includes the law and school policy relevant to the matter. You will use this information to show which laws and/or policies support your opinion about the facts.

1. Create a quick chart (as follows) and indicate which laws/policies support the student and which laws/policies support the school district.

HINT:

Re-read the essay questions, the facts, and the legal authority. If you missed something, add it to the appropriate section. If you misunderstood something, make adjustments.

HINT:

This contest does not prohibit additional constitutional, statutory or case research. You might even consider the policy behind certain rules and regulations.

Supports Student

1.

2.

and so forth...

Supports School District

1.

2.

and so forth...

2. Add this information to your brainstorming notes.

Remember: Use the law and policies to help you formulate and support your argument.

Be aware of contest rules!

Rule 3 states that entries must be 1000-1500 words (word count does NOT include information on a title page). Follow all contest rules!

STEP 4

Structure Your Essay

It's time to start typing. In this step, you will use the information you've already written down on paper to begin writing your rough draft.

Below is a format you may use to structure your essay. Note: this format is NOT required; it is simply an example of an acceptable legal writing format. Feel free to modify this format or to use your own version of a legal writing format.

In the example that follows, Part I should be your introduction, Parts II–IV are the “heart” of your essay (where you answer the three essay questions), and Part V is your conclusion.

HINT:

Use case law to support your argument (i.e., your point of view).

If the case supports your argument, make comparisons that show how your facts are similar to the facts provided in the case law. If your facts are blatantly different, then make arguments stating why the differences are unimportant and thus the case should still apply to your facts.

If the case law hurts your argument, show the contrasts between the facts of your case and those in the case law.

Emphasize how your facts are different from the facts in the case law or minimize the similarities between your facts and those in the precedent case.

HINT:

This is a good time to view some of our past winning essays posted on our website (www.nmbar.org). Here you will see some variations on format.

I. Introduction

Your introduction (about ½–1 page) should be a brief summary of the facts, in your own words, that introduces the reader to the event in question. Remember, keep the re-statement of the facts to a minimum; don't just copy the whole “Topic” section.

II. Heading. You can simply re-state question 1.

- In your first sentence of this paragraph (your topic sentence), state your answer to the question in one complete sentence. This represents the argument you will now need to support/prove.
- Present a statement of the applicable legal rule(s)/policies.
- Support your argument by applying the given facts to the legal rule(s)/policies. (See the “Hint” at the left.)
- Write a clincher sentence for this paragraph which summarizes the key points in the paragraph.

III. Heading (Question 2)

- Follow above steps

IV. Heading (Question 3)

- Follow above steps

V. Conclusion

State your general conclusion. Use the information you wrote down in the brainstorming section to write your conclusion. This is your “final word” on the subject, so to speak.

Because this is YOUR final word on the subject, the information you choose to put here is up to you. Past successful entrants have included one or more of the following approaches:

- state your actual position with rationale, or
- state what you anticipate to be the result (what do you think would happen if this “case” went to court?), or
- state your own opinion, or
- state a point of view as to fairness.
- Use a combination of the above.

STEP 5

Edit Your Paper

1. Is your paper well organized and well focused?
2. Does your paper begin and end effectively?
3. Do your thoughts and arguments have strong development?
4. Do your writing style and structure reinforce tone and content?
5. Is your paper authoritative, using proper vocabulary and tone?
6. Is your paper free of grammatical and structural errors. Spell-check your document; but remember, spell-checking doesn't catch all errors.
7. Have you had someone review your essay, and have you made corrections as necessary?

HINT:

Ask your teacher or a parent to review your paper and give you their opinion. More than one opinion is even better. Pay attention to the questions they ask you, especially if they are looking for clarification on something.

HINT:

Proofread your work carefully. Avoid jargon and slang. Use active voice. Proofread again.

Find out what the judges look for by checking out the scoring rubric at www.nmbar.org.

STEP 6

Submit Your Paper

Review the essay contest rules for deadlines, submission guidelines and requirements.

Submit your essay via e-mail to the address listed at the bottom of the entry form.

A signed entry form is required for each submission.



All documents can be found on the State Bar website at www.nmbar.org.
Go to the "Public/Education Programs/Essay Contests."