

Writing Essays For Credit

ESSAY REQUIREMENTS

Learning experiences for which students request credit are conveyed to faculty evaluators by the writing of essays about those experiences.

Credit cannot be awarded for experience alone, nor can evaluators assume that what a student knows is based on a given experience. The evaluators can evaluate only the knowledge that is presented in the essay. If a student can't explain his or her knowledge on paper, that knowledge cannot be evaluated. Evaluators cannot read what is in a student's mind, nor can they evaluate intuitive knowledge.

Documentation can generally verify only the experience from which knowledge was acquired or the products of knowledge. Documentation alone cannot explain knowledge.

Products a student has created—such as poetry, painting, photographs, technical manuals, and the like cannot be evaluated for credit by themselves. They must be accompanied by an essay presenting knowledge and experience related to the subject. In other words, the subject must be presented in the same manner and meet the same criteria as any other course for which college credit is earned. Samples of products discussed in an essay, however, must accompany the essay as documentation.

General Requirements

There are several things evaluators look for in an essay which are not directly related to a given field of knowledge, but which are an important part of conveying knowledge. These might be called “generic” or “universal” factors that are looked for and, in fact, required in all essays, regardless of the particular subject being discussed.

In addition to the discussion of the subject knowledge itself, each essay must include:

1. A description of an experience;
2. An explanation of how knowledge was acquired from that experience;
3. A description of how that knowledge was applied and used;
4. A description of learning outcomes;
5. Evidence of the student's processing of the knowledge; and
6. Evidence of the student's generalization and conceptualization from the knowledge.

Because evaluators will be examining essays for these factors, it is important for the student to understand them so that he or she can be sure to include each of them when writing essays.

Knowledge and Experience

The evaluator will examine the essay to see that it contains both knowledge and experience. The experience provides a frame of reference for the knowledge. The essay cannot be only a story of the student's experience, nor can it be a term paper which presents only ideas and principles but never mentions *the student*. Furthermore, there must be an obvious relationship in the essay between the knowledge discussed and the experience. For example, it is not acceptable to write about one's experience as a supervisor followed by a term paper on theories of supervision. There might not be an obvious connection between this particular experience as a supervisor and those theories. The student needs to tell how he or she acquired that knowledge *from* that experience. If the experience included reading, then the evaluators will want to know not only what was read, but also why the student was interested in reading it and how the student used the knowledge gained.

The student should blend experience with the thoughts, reflections, and concepts learned from the experience. Use examples from the experience to illustrate the learning outcomes. One way in which a connection is made between knowledge and experience is in the discussion of how the knowledge has been used.

Evidence of Comprehension and Mental Processing

Evaluators look for evidence of comprehension and processing of the learning experience being discussed. It is not sufficient, for example, just to present a fact or principle. An evaluator might respond by saying, "So what? Does the student understand what this means or implies? Can the student explain it? Is there evidence that the student has thought about this knowledge or what can be done with it?" In other words, the evaluator is looking for evidence that the student has interacted with the knowledge and, in doing so, gained an understanding of it. This interaction, or evidence of mental processing, may take the form of the ability to explain the subject, break it down, critique it, rearrange it, or combine it with other knowledge on the subject. These intellectual skills and abilities reflect thinking processes and must be evident in the essay, in addition to knowledge itself. Remember, in the essay one wants to *demonstrate* one's knowledge of the subject under discussion.

Generalization and Conceptualization

Another thing evaluators look for is the student's ability to generalize: that is, to derive or formulate a general concept or principle from a particular situation. The evaluator cannot award credit for knowledge that was limited to a given experience (for example, knowing *one's own* company's policies and procedures for disciplining employees). The evaluator will look for the ability to generalize from the situation the element or elements which would apply or hold true in other settings.

College Equivalent Knowledge

The evaluator is looking for college equivalent knowledge that includes generalizations and concepts as well as the specific experiences from which it was gained and the specific applications of that knowledge.

Concordia University recognizes that there are many useful and valuable types of knowledge that are not taught within the college system, such as certain industrial or commercial processes that are taught only within industry, or highly personal learning, related to life experience. The purpose of evaluation is not so grandiose as to attempt to credit *all* learning, but only the learning in the fields normally studied within a college or university setting.

Appropriate Documentation

The final thing evaluators look for is appropriate documentation of knowledge resulting from learning experiences. *All essays for which credit is requested must have documentation.* Documentation is the verification of specific learning experiences. The following guidelines give suggestions for this documentation.

1. **Documenting Professional Experience.** Employment records, awards, letters of commendation, letters of corroboration from supervisors, peers, and clients, congratulations on high performance, promotion evaluations, evidence of promotion, evidence of suggestions adopted, samples of work produced, membership in professional or trade organizations, scores on licensing exams, bills of sale, rating forms, and work samples may all be acceptable forms of documentation.

Items that are not acceptable as documentation, but that might be useful for clarification, include explanations of rankings, ratings, or a company's classification system, performance standards, membership requirements, and job descriptions.

2. **Documenting Community Service Activities.** Consider using commendations, awards, newspaper and magazine clippings, and letters of corroboration from co-volunteers, clients served, or supervisors.
3. **Documenting Special Accomplishments.** This may be done by presenting books published, pictures painted, music written, patents obtained, mementos from countries lived in and traveled to, machines designed, exhibits (such as shells, plants, *et cetera*), speeches given, programs from performances, writing samples, auditorium presentations, and proposals written. Works of art should be submitted in an appropriate visual form.
4. **Lists.** Useful for further insight into the learning process are lists of books read and of consultations with experts.
5. **Letters.** Letters may be used for verifying many learning outcomes. When students ask someone to write a letter of verification, the person from whom the letter is requested should be given explicit instructions as to what the letter should contain.

Students should use the following guidelines in seeking letters of verification.

- a. The individual writing the letter must know the student and have firsthand knowledge of the experiential activity that the student has cited in the essay.
- b. The author of the letter should state clearly the nature of his or her relationship to the student.
- c. The letter should be written on the official letterhead stationery of the organization with which the author is associated.
- d. The content of the letter should focus on the duties, responsibilities, tasks, or activities which were inherent in the experience under consideration. In addition, the letter should explain the context of the experience-the who, what, when, where, why, and how long of it.
- e. A special accomplishment resulting in a product requires documentation in the form of one or more letters of verification authored by persons who observed the student while he or she was developing the product.
- f. The student should make it clear to the author that the letter to be written is one of verification, not recommendation.