

## The Process Essay

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines a process as “the series of actions you take in order to achieve a result.” You have two options from which to choose if you write a process essay. You can write the process either as a *prescriptive* process or as a *descriptive* process. A *prescriptive* process essay explains *how to do something*, whereas a *descriptive* process essay describes *how something is done* or *how something works*.

| <i>Prescriptive</i>  | <i>Descriptive</i>   |
|--|--|
| Prominent and overt use of transition words  | Prominent and overt use of transition words  |
| Imperatives (verbs that issue commands) are used to state the steps in the process; present tense active verbs, to explain the steps.  | Present tense active verbs or present perfect tense verbs are used to describe the process.  |
| The pronoun <i>you</i> is often the subject of sentences. It may be stated or unstated.  | The subjects of sentences are nouns or third person pronouns, generally, the things which do the process or which are used in the process. |
| Sentences which state the steps in the process are short and direct. Sentences which explain the steps may be longer but are still concise.  | Sentences are concise and direct.  |
| The explanation of the process proceeds carefully step by step in order. The only digressions are to include warnings or point out the dangers of not following the steps as outlined. | Explanations may follow chronological order or may follow some logical order.  |
| A list of tools or materials may be given before the process is explained.   |  |
| Technical terms may need to be explained when they are introduced.   | Technical terms may need to be explained when they are introduced.   |

(Stifler, 1999)

Let’s say your assignment is to write about baking a cake. Regardless of whether you choose to write a *prescriptive* or *descriptive* process, this is a four-step procedure: preparing to bake the cake, assembling the ingredients, mixing the ingredients and baking the batter.

Here is an outline for the procedure:

1. Introduction
2. Preparing to bake the cake.
  - a. Preheat the oven to 175 degrees C (350 degrees F).
  - b. Grease and flour a 22.5 x 22.5 cm (9 x 9 inch) pan.
3. Assembling the ingredients.
  - a. 1 cup sugar
  - b. ½ cup butter
  - c. 2 eggs
  - d. 2 teaspoons vanilla extract

- e. 1½ cups all-purpose flour
  - f. 1¾ teaspoon baking powder
  - g. ½ cup milk
4. Mixing the ingredients.
    - a. Creaming together the sugar and butter.
    - b. Adding eggs, one at a time.
    - c. Stirring in the vanilla.
    - d. Combining the flour and baking powder.
    - e. Adding the dry ingredients to the creamed mixture and stirring well.
    - f. Stirring in the milk until the batter is smooth.
  5. Baking the mixture.
    - a. Pour the batter into a greased and floured pan.
    - b. Bake for 40 minutes.
  6. Conclusion

While the outline will be the same for both a *prescriptive* process essay and a *descriptive* essay, the finished essays will differ. To illustrate, let's look at essays for both.

**Prescriptive Process Essay**

Note the use of the *imperative mood*, starting with the thesis sentence and continuing throughout the essay.

Author Linda Grayson (n.d.) writes, "There is nothing better than a friend, unless it is a friend with chocolate." Historian Amanda Fiegl (2008) reports that this international sweet sensation has

a long history that can be traced back to the peoples of Mesoamerica. They originally drank it as a bitter beverage. It was not until the Spanish arrived on the scene in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that the word chocolate became synonymous with "sweet." After a group of Dominican friars took a gift of chocolate to Prince Philip of Spain, chocolate went on to become a European obsession for the upper classes. However, it was not until the Industrial Revolution that it was available to the general public. Since then, it has become one of the most favorite flavors for cakes. In fact, you can bake a chocolate cake in four easy steps.

First, prepare to bake the cake. Set oven at 175 degrees C (350 degrees F). Then, prepare the baking tins. Grease them with butter, followed by a dusting of general-purpose flour. Now, you are ready to proceed to the next step.

After the preparation step, assemble your ingredients . . . .

Next, mix the ingredients . . . .

Finally, bake the cake . . . .

In conclusion, baking a cake requires four steps . . . .

Now, let's compare the prescriptive essay to a descriptive essay for the same process.

**Descriptive Process Essay**

Note the use of the *indicative mood*, with stated nouns or third person pronouns as the subjects in the thesis sentence and continuing throughout the essay.

Author Linda Grayson (n.d.) writes, "There is nothing better than a friend, unless it is a friend with chocolate." Historian Amanda Fiegl (2008) reports that this international sweet sensation has a long history that can be traced back to the peoples of

Mesoamerica. They originally drank it as a bitter beverage. It was not until the Spanish arrived on the scene in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that the word chocolate became synonymous with “sweet.” After a group of Dominican friars took a gift of chocolate to Prince Philip of Spain, chocolate went on to become a European obsession for the upper classes. However, it was not until the Industrial Revolution that it was available to the general public. Since then, it has become one of the most favorite flavors for cakes. Baking this popular cake involves four easy steps.

First, the home cook prepares to bake the cake. He sets the oven at 175 degrees C (350 degrees F). Then, he prepares the baking tins by greasing them with butter. He, next, dusts the tins with general-purpose flour. Now, he is ready to proceed to the next step.

After the preparation step, the baker assembles the ingredients . . . .

Next, the cook mixes the ingredients . . . .

Finally, the cook bakes the cake . . . .

In conclusion, baking a cake requires four steps . . . .

We will be writing a descriptive process this semester.

## References

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