Elements of the Academic Essay
(from G.H. The Academic Essay)

1. **Thesis**: your main insight or idea about a text or topic and the main proposition (though it may have several parts) that your essay argues—your *argument* being your thesis plus the reasoning that supports it. Your thesis should be true but arguable (not obviously or patently true, but one alternative among several) and limited enough in scope to be argued in a short composition and with available evidence. It should get to the heart of the text or topic being analyzed (not be peripheral). It should be given early (not just be implied—though its fullest and sharpest statement may come later), and it should govern the whole essay (not disappear in places).

2. **Motive**: the reason you give at the start of your essay why someone might want to read an essay on this topic, why your thesis isn’t just obvious but requires explanation: why it isn’t what one might have expected to be the case, differs from what others have thought, speaks to a puzzle or conflict that others might have, has a larger implication that they might not see. The others you mention or imagine shouldn’t be dummies; you need to make clear that their misapprehension or rival claim can be argued for (that there’s a plausible counter-*argument*, not just a counter-claim) or that their puzzlement or uncertainty is understandable—that your idea is one that intelligent readers might really overlook. Your motive thus won’t necessarily be the reason you got interested in the topic, or the personal motivation behind your engagement with it: this could be private and idiosyncratic, whereas your motive is what you say to show that your argument isn’t idiosyncratic, is of interest to any serious student of your topic. Defining motive should be the main business of your introductory paragraphs, where it’s usually introduced by some form of the complicating word "But."

3. **Evidence**: the data—facts, examples, details—that you refer to, quote, or summarize to support your thesis. There should be *enough* evidence to be persuasive; it needs to be the right *kind* of evidence to support the thesis (with no obvious pieces of evidence overlooked); it needs to be sufficiently *concrete* for the reader to trust it (e.g. in analyzing a text, finding key or representative passages to quote and focus on); and if summarized, it needs to be summarized *accurately* and fairly (not suppress data that doesn’t fit your thesis and might be counter-evidence).

4. **Analysis**: the work of breaking down, interpreting, and commenting upon particular data, claims, or concepts, showing how details or parts contribute to a whole or how causes contribute to a general effect or quality. What can be inferred from the data such that it supports or doesn’t support a thesis (is or isn’t *evidence* for a claim)? What all is entailed in a certain claim or concept that may not be apparent to a superficial view? Analysis is what makes the writer feel present, as a distinct and active mind; so your essay contain more of it than it does summarizing or quoting.
5. **Keyterms**: the recurring terms or basic conceptual oppositions that your argument and analysis rest upon, usually literal but sometimes metaphors. An essay's keyterms should be clear in meaning (defined if necessary) and appear throughout (not be abandoned half-way); they should be appropriate for the subject at hand (not unfair or too simple, e.g. implying a false or constraining opposition); and they should not be inert clichés or abstractions (e.g. “the evils of society”).

6. **Structure**: the sequence of your essay’s main sections, and the turning points between them. Your sections should have a clearly apprehensible order: both the shifts between your main topics (see "stitching") and your logic in putting one topic or point after another should be apparent. But that order should also be flexible: it should allow both brief **pauses** to reflect on what you’re doing and major **turns** in your analysis. You might pause to define your terms or acknowledge assumptions (what do I mean by this word? or, what am I assuming here?); or to consider a counter-argument—a possible alternative position, or objection or problem, that a skeptical or resistant reader might raise; or offer a qualification or limitation to the case you have made (what you’re not saying). You might turn to address an emergent topic, to incorporate a complication that arises, to consider a possible explanation for the phenomenon you have demonstrated (why might it be so? what might cause or have caused it?), to draw out an implication (so what? what might it mean if I’m right? what does my argument about an aspect suggest about the whole, or about some larger phenomenon involved?).

7. **Stitching**: words that tie together the parts of your argument, most commonly by (a) signaling transitions or acting as signposts to indicate how a new idea—section, paragraph, sentence—follows from the one previous; but also by (b) recollecting or repeating an idea or word or phrase used or quoted earlier. Repeating keyterms helps especially at points of transition from one section to another, to show how the new section fits in (the repetition need not be mechanical or heavy-handed).

8. **Sources**: persons or documents—referred to, summarized, or quoted—that help you demonstrate the truth of your argument. They are typically sources of factual information or data, opinions or interpretations of your topic, comparable versions of the thing you are discussing, or applicable general concepts. Whether you’re affirming or challenging or qualifying your sources, they need to be accurately presented, efficiently integrated, and fairly acknowledged by citation—see Writing with Sources.

9. **Reflecting**: when you pause in your demonstration to reflect on it, to raise or answer a question about it—as when you (1) consider a counter-argument—a possible objection, alternative, or problem that a skeptical or resistant reader might raise; (2) define your terms and assumptions (what do I mean by this term? or, what am I assuming here?); (3) handle a newly emergent concern (but if this is so, then how can X be?); (4) draw out and implication (so what? what might be the wider significance of the argument I have made? what might it lead to if I’m right? or, what does my argument about a single aspect of this suggest about the whole thing? or about the way people
live and think?), and (5) consider a possible explanation for the phenomenon that has been demonstrated (why might this be so? what might cause or have caused it?); (6) off a qualification or limitation to the case you have made (what you're not saying). The first of these reflections can come anywhere in the essay; the second usually comes early; the last four often come late (they're common moves of conclusion).

10. **Orienting**: bits of information, explanation, and summary that you give to orient the reader who isn't expert in your subject, enabling such a reader to follow your argument easily. The orienting question is, what does my reader need, and when? And the answer can take many forms: necessary factual information about the text, author, or event (e.g. given in your introduction); a summary of a text or passage about to be analyzed; pieces of information given along the way about passages, people, or events mentioned (including announcing or set-up phrases for quotations and sources—see *Writing with Sources*). The challenge is to orient briefly and gracefully.

11. **Stance**: the implied relationship of you, as writer, to your readers and your subject; how you implicitly position or characterize yourself as analyst and characterize your readers. Stance is defined by such features as style and tone (e.g. familiar or formal); presence or absence of specialized language and knowledge; willingness or unwillingness to orient a general, non-expert reader; use or avoidance of scholarly conventions of form and style. You should establish your stance within the first few paragraphs of your essay and keep it consistent.

12. **Style**: the choices you make of words and sentence structures. Your style should be exact (find the right word, don't settle for approximations) and clear (emphasize the main idea or action of each sentence, don't bury it), and generally plain without being flat (i.e. graceful and a little interesting, so animated by your own presence, not stuffy).

13. **Title**: it should both interest and inform. To inform—i.e. inform a general reader who might be browsing in an essay collection or bibliography—your title should give the subject and focus of the essay. To interest, your title might include a linguistic twist, paradox, sound pattern, or striking phrase taken from one of your sources (the aptness of the phrase the reader comes gradually to see). You can combine the interesting and informing functions in a single title or split them into title and subtitle. The interesting element shouldn't be too cute; the informing element shouldn't go so far as to state a thesis. Don't underline your own title, except where it contains the title of another text.