INFORMATION LITERACY PROGRAM  
 of Robert W. Sterling Memorial Library

**Four Basic Types of Essay**

People often use the term **essay** interchangeably with **research paper**, but the two are in fact different. Essays are shorter than research papers, often done as part of an exam or in-class assignment, and rely less on external sources than on your own thoughts and knowledge. In essence, an essay is based on what you have learned in class, while a research paper is based on what you can find out on your own. There are four basic types of essay:

**ARGUMENTATIVE (or PERSUASIVE) ESSAYS**: require you, the writer, to establish a position on a topic – not just to present your thoughts and findings, but to use those to prove a point. An argumentative essay should only discuss one general idea, but can consider different viewpoints on the idea.

Most research papers are essentially longer, more involved argumentative essays.

**DESCRIPTIVE ESSAYS:** ask you to describe something – an object, event, or experience – rather than trying to put forward an argument about it. In an assignment using this form of essay, **what** you’re describing isn’t always as important as **how** you describe it – the clarity of your language and the organization of your ideas to paint a coherent picture.

**EXPOSITORY ESSAYS:** instead of presenting evidence to prove a particular thesis, examine the evidence to arrive at a conclusion. In a way, you are presenting both sides of an argument instead of one or the other. These essays often take the form of “compare and contrast” or “cause and effect”, and more than one general idea is often discussed in the same paper.

**NARRATIVE ESSAYS:** are essentially short stories. The Purdue OWL describes them as “anecdotal, experiential, and personal” – basically, you are sharing your feelings about a topic, not necessarily just the facts as you recall them. Like descriptive essays, the clarity and organization of your writing is as important, if not more so, than what you’re writing about. This is the only essay format where regular use of first-person languageis encouraged.