Elements of an Essay

Most of your writing at Brown will take the form of essays about a text or group of texts, whether your instructor calls them "essays" or not. By essay we in this [handout] will mean a written argument, readable in one sitting, in which some idea is developed and supported. The following are some terms for the elements of this process that you may use; or you may choose your own synonyms for them.

1. **IDEA**: the general proposition or thesis that your essay argues about its **TOPIC**, whether it's spelled out fully at the start or revealed gradually. It should be (1) true, but (2) arguable—not obviously true, and (3) limited enough in scope to be argued in a short composition and with available evidence. (In the early stages, you might think of your idea as a **HYPOTHESIS**, to help keep it open to change as you test it in drafting.)

2. **MOTIVE**: a reason for writing, suggested at the start of the essay and echoed throughout, establishing why you thought the topic needed taking up and why the reader should care (the "so what" factor). Perhaps
   - the truth isn't what one would expect, or what it might appear to be on first reading
   - there's an interesting wrinkle in the matter, a complexity
   - the standard opinion of this work (as great, or as -dull or minor) needs challenging
   - there's a contradiction, or paradox, or tension here that needs some sorting out
   - there's an ambiguity here, something unclear, that could mean two or more things
   - there's a mystery or puzzle here, a question that presents itself
   - we can learn something interesting about a larger phenomenon by studying this smaller one
   - there's a published view of this that's mistaken, or needs qualifying
   - he published views conflict
   - this seemingly tangential or insignificant matter is actually interesting, or important
   - and so on.

3. **STRUCTURE**: the shape your idea takes, the sequence of sub-topics and sections through which it is unfolded and developed. This happens by the complementary activities of **CONVINCING** your reader and **EXPLORING** your topic.
   - Convincing requires you to push forward insistently, marshalling evidence for your idea, in a firm, logical structure of clear sections--each section proving further the truth of the idea.
   - Exploring requires you to slow down and contemplate the various aspects of your topic--its complications, difficulties, alternatives to your view, assumptions, backgrounds, asides, nuances and implications.
   - The challenge is to make your essay's structure firm and clear while still allowing for complication--without making it feel mechanical or like a laundry list. (Just as you might think of your idea, at the draft stage, as a hypothesis, you might think of your structure, when it's a provisional outline of sections, as merely a plan.)

4. **EVIDENCE**: the facts or details, summarized or quoted, that you use to support, demonstrate, and prove your main idea and sub-ideas. Evidence needs to be
   - ample and concrete--enough quotation and vivid summary so readers can experience the texture of the work, its sound and feel, so they feel able to judge your analysis
   - explicitly connected to the idea--so it's always clear exactly what inference is being made from the evidence, exactly how the details support the idea or sub-idea.
5. **EXPLANATION**: bits of background information, summary, context to orient the reader who isn't familiar with the text you're discussing. This includes
   - essential plot information
   - precise locating of scene or comment (e.g. "in the opening scene/ the climactic scene/ the opening volley, where the protagonist/ where the author/ where the critic wonders, considers, proposes....., we find....")
   - setting up a quotation, telling who's speaking it, in what context, and what the reader should be listening for in it.

6. **COHERENCE**: smooth flow of argument created by
   - transition sentences that show how the next paragraph or section follows from the preceding one, thus sustaining momentum
   - echoing key words or resonant phrases quoted or stated earlier.

7. **IMPLICATION**: places where you speculate on the general significance of your particular analysis of a particular text; you suggest what issues your argument raises about the author's work generally, or about works of its kind (e.g. all short stories), or about the way fiction or criticism works, etc.

8. **PRESENCE**: the sensation of life in the writing, of a mind invested in and focused on a subject, freely directing and developing the essay--not surrendering control (out of laziness or fear) to easy ideas, sentiments, or stock phrases.