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Strategies for Essay Writing

How to Read an Assignment Assignments usually ask you to demonstrate that you have immersed yourself in the coursematerial and that you've done some thinking on your own; questions not treated at length in classoften serve as assignments. Fortunately, if you've put the time into getting to know the material, thenyou've almost certainly begun thinking independently. In responding to assignments, keep in mindthe following advice.

- **Beware of straying.** Especially in the draft stage, "discussion"and"analysis" can lead youfrom one intrinsically interesting problem to another, then another, and then ... You may windup following a garden of forking paths and lose your way. To prevent this, stop periodicallywhile drafting your essay and reread the assignment. Its purposes are likely to become clearer.
- **Consider the assignment in relation to previous and upcoming assignments.**Askyourself what is new about the task you're setting out to do. Instructors often designassignments to build in complexity. Knowing where an assignment falls in this progressioncan help you concentrate on the specific, fresh challenges at hand.

Understanding some key words commonly used in assignments also may simplify your task. Towardthis end, let's take a look at two seemingly impenetrable instructions: "discuss" and "analyze."

1. Discuss the role of gender in bringing about the French Revolution.

"Discuss" is easy to misunderstand because the word calls to mind the oral/spoken dimension ofcommunication. "Discuss" suggests conversation, which often is casual and undirected. In the contextof an assignment, however, discussion entails fulfilling a defined and organized task: to construct anargument that considers and responds to an ample range of materials. To "discuss," in assignmentlanguage, means to make a broad argument about a set of arguments you have studied. In the caseabove, you can do this by

- pointing to consistencies and inconsistencies in the evidence ofgendered causes of theRevolution;
- raising the implications of these consistencies and/orinconsistencies (perhaps they suggest alimited role for gender as catalyst);
- evaluating different claims aboutthe role of gender;
- andasking what is gained and what is lost by focusing on gendered symbols, icons and events.

A weak discussion essay in response to the question above might simply list a few aspects of theRevolution—the image of Liberty, the executions of the King and MarieAntoinette, the cry *"Liberte,Egalite, Fraternite!"*—and make separate comments about how each,being"gendered," is therefore apowerful political force. Such an essay would offer no original thesis, but instead restate the questionasked in the assignment (i.e., "The role of gender was very important in the French Revolution" or "Gender did not play a large role

in the French Revolution").

In a strong discussion essay, the thesis would go beyond a basic restatement of the assignmentquestion. You might test the similarities and differences of the revolutionary aspects being discussed.You might draw on fresh or unexpected evidence, perhaps using as a source an intriguing reading thatwas only briefly touched upon in lecture.

2. Analyze two of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, including one not discussed in class, asliterary works and in terms of sources/analogues.

The words "analyze" and "analysis" may seem to denote highly advanced, even arcane skills,possessed in virtual monopoly by mathematicians and scientists. Happily, the terms refer to mentalactivity we all perform regularly; the terms just need decoding. "Analyze" means two things in thisspecific assignment prompt.

- First, you need to divide the two tales into parts, elements, orfeatures.You might start with abasic approach: looking at the beginning, middle, and end. These structural features of literaryworks—and of historical events and many other subjects of academic study—may seem simpleor even simplistic, but they can yield surprising insights when examined closely.
- Alternatively, you might begin at a more complex level of analysis. For example, you mightsearch for and distinguish between kinds of humor in the two tales and their sources inBoccaccio or the Roman de la Rose: banter, wordplay, bawdy jokes, pranks, burlesque, satire, etc.
- Second, you need to consider the two tales critically to arrive atsomereward for havingobserved how the tales are made and where they came from (their sources/analogues). In thecourse of your essay, you might work your way to investigating Chaucer's broader attitudetoward his sources, which alternates between playful variation and strict adherence. Yourcomplex analysis of kinds of humor might reveal differing conceptions of masculine andfeminine between Chaucer and his literary sources, or some other important culturaldistinction.Analysis involves both a set of observations about the composition or workings of your subject and acritical approach that keeps you from noticing just anything—from excessive listing or summarizing—and instead leads you to construct an interpretation, using textual evidence to support your ideas.

Some Final Advice

If, having read the assignment carefully, you're still confused by it, don't hesitate to ask forclarification from your instructor. He or she may be able to elucidate the question or to furnish somesample responses to the assignment. Knowing the expectations of an assignment can help when you'refeeling puzzled. Conversely, knowing the boundaries can head off trouble if you're contemplating anunorthodox approach. In either case, before you go to your instructor, it's a good idea to list, underlineor circle the specific places in the assignment where the language makes you feel uncertain.

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Moving from Assignment to Topic At one point or other, the academic essay manages to intimidate most student writers.Sometimes, we may even experience what is commonly called writer's block—that awful experienceof staring at an assignment, reading it over and over, yet being unable to proceed, to find a way intoit. But the process of writing the academic essay involves a series of manageable steps. Keeping thisin mind can help you work through the anxiety you may at first feel. If you find yourself "clueless"about beginning an essay, it may be because you have skipped an important step. You may betrying to come up with a thesis before finding and narrowing your topic.

Entering the Conversation

Try to approach the writing of an academic essay as a genuine opportunity to connect with thematerial, to think in a concentrated and stimulating way about the texts you've chosen, to articulateyour own ideas. In short, think of the essay as a chance to challenge yourself and to contribute tothe on-going conversation among scholars about the subject under discussion. What's at stake isyour own intellectual development.

Writing is not playing someone else's game. Successful writing involvesthe creation and framing ofyour own questions about the sources you've chosen. You want to attend to the assignment at thesame time that you locate and articulate your own, particular interest in it.

Primary and Secondary Sources

If you were a lawyer and had to present a case for your client, the worst thing you could do wouldbe to face a jury and spout out random beliefs and opinions. ("Trust me. This guy's reallyhonorable. He'd never do what he's accused of.") Instead, you would want to look for evidence andclues about the situation, investigate suspects, maybe head for the library to check out books oninvestment fraud or lock-picking. Whatever the circumstance, you would need to do the appropriateresearch in order to avoid looking foolish in the courtroom. Even if you knew what you had toargue—that your client was not guilty—you still would need to figure out how you were going topersuade the jury of it. You would need various sources to bolster your case. Writing an academicessay is similar, because essays are arguments that make use of primary and secondary sources.

Primary academic sources are sources that have not yet been analyzed bysomeone else. These include but are not limited to novels, poems,autobiographies, transcripts of court cases, and data sources such as thecensus, diaries, and Congressional records.

Books or essays that analyze another text are secondary sources. They areuseful in supporting your argument and bringing up counter-argumentswhich, in an academic essay, it is your responsibility to acknowledge andrefute.

These are the basic rules that determine whether a source is primary orsecondary, but there is some ambiguity. For instance, an essay thatadvances an original argument may serve as your primary source if whatyoure doing is analyzing that essays argument. But if the essay citesstatistics that you decide to quote in support of your argument about adifferent text, then its function is as a secondary source. Therefore,always keep in mind that the academic essay advances an originalargument—your argument, not the argument of the author of your secondarysource. While secondary sources are helpful, you should

focus your essayon one or more primary sources.

Subjects to Topics

In the courtroom, the topic is never a huge abstraction like "jurisprudence" or "the legal system" oreven "capital punishment" or "guilt and innocence." All of those are subjects. A topic is particular:The Case of So-and-So v. So-and-So. Academic arguments, too, have topics. But if you tried towrite an essay using "The Case of So-and-So v. So-and-So" as a topic, you wouldn't know what toput in and what to leave out. You'd wind up reproducing the court's own record of the case.

Narrowing the Topic

The topic of an academic essay must be sufficiently focused and specific in order for a coherentargument to be made about it. For instance, "The Role of Such-and-Such in the Case of So-and-So v.So-and-So" is a topic that is somewhat narrowed. But if "Such-and-Such" is extremely general, ittoo will require further narrowing. "The Role of Societal Pressures in the Case of Jones v. Smith" isan example—it's too general. "Alleged Jury Tampering in the Case of Jones v. Smith" narrows thosesocietal pressures, and begins to suggest a persuasive argument. (Of course, even this topic could befurther narrowed.) Going through the following steps will help you focus your subject, find a topic, and narrow it.

- Carefully read your primary source(s) and then, with the assignment inmind, go throughthem again, searching for passages that relate directly to the assignment and to your owncuriosities and interests. *When you find a passage that interests you,write down the reasonfor its significance. If you don't, you might forget its importance later.*
- Annotate some of the most intriguing passages—write down your ideas,opinions and notesabout particular words, phrases, sentences. Don't censor your thoughts! Just write, even ifyou think that what you're writing doesn't add up to much. For now, get your impressionson paper; later, you'll begin to order and unify them.
- Group passages and ideas into categories. Try to eliminate ideas thatdon't fit anywhere.Ask yourself if any of the emerging categories relate to any others. Do any of the categoriesconnect, contradict, echo, prove, disprove, any others? The category with the mostconnections to others is probably your topic.
- Look at some relevant secondary sources—at what other scholars havesaid—in order to get asense of potential counter-arguments to your developing topic.**Remember:**While takingnotes, make sure to cite all information fully. This is a lot easier than having to go back laterand figure out where you got a particular quote, or, worse, being unable to find it.

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How to Do a Close Reading

The process of writing an essay usually begins with the close reading of a text. Of course,the writer's personal experience may occasionally come into the essay, and all

essays depend on thewriter's own observations and knowledge. But most essays, especially academic essays, begin witha close reading of some kind of text—a painting, a movie, an event—andusually with that of a *written* text. When you close read, you observe facts and details about the text. You may focus on aparticular passage, or on the text as a whole. Your aim may be to notice all striking features of thetext, including rhetorical features, structural elements, cultural references; or, your aim may be tonotice only *selected* features of the text—for instance,oppositions and correspondences, orparticular historical references. Either way, making these observations constitutes the first step inthe process of close reading. The second step is interpreting your observations. What we're basically talking about here isinductive reasoning: moving from the observation of particular facts and details to a conclusion, orinterpretation, based on those observations. And, as with inductive reasoning, close reading requirescareful gathering of data (your observations) and careful thinking about what these data add up to.

How to Begin:

1. *Read with a pencil in hand, and annotate the text.*

"Annotating" means underlining or highlighting key words and phrases—anything that strikes you assurprising or significant, or that raises questions—as well as making notes in the margins. When werespond to a text in this way, we not only force ourselves to pay close attention, but we also beginto think with the author about the evidence—the first step in moving from reader to writer.

Here's a sample passage by anthropologist and naturalist Loren Eiseley. It's from his essay called"The Hidden Teacher."

> . . . I once received an unexpected lesson from a spider. It happened far away on a rainy morning in the West. I had come up a long gulch looking forfossils, and there, just at eye level, lurked a huge yellow-and-black orb spider, whose web wasmoored to the tall spears of buffalo grass at the edge of the arroyo. It was her universe, and hersenses did not extend beyond the lines and spokes of the great wheel she inhabited. Her extendedclaws could feel every vibration throughout that delicate structure. She knew the tug of wind, thefall of a raindrop, the flutter of a trapped moth's wing. Down one spoke of the web ran a stoutribbon of gossamer on which she could hurry out to investigate her prey. Curious, I took a pencil from my pocket and touched a strand ofthe web. Immediately therewas a response. The web, plucked by its menacing occupant, began to vibrate until it was a blur.Anything that had brushed claw or wing against that amazing snare would be thoroughlyentrapped. As the vibrations slowed, I could see the owner fingering her guidelines for signs ofstruggle. A pencil point was an intrusion into this universe for which no precedent existed.Spider was circumscribed by spider ideas; its universe was spider universe. All outside wasirrational, extraneous, at best raw material for spider. As I proceeded on my way along the gully,like a vast impossible shadow, I realized that in the world of spider I did not exist.

2. *Look for patterns in the things you've noticed about thetext—repetitions, contradictions,similarities.*

What do we notice in the previous passage? First, Eiseley tells us that the orb spider taught him alesson, thus inviting us to consider what that lesson might be. But we'll let that larger question gofor now and focus on particulars—we're working inductively. In Eiseley's next sentence, we findthat this encounter "happened far away on a rainy morning in the West."

This opening locates us inanother time, another place, and has echoes of the traditional fairy tale opening: "Once upon a time . . .". What does this mean? Why would Eiseley want to remind us of tales and myth? We don'tknow yet, but it's curious. We make a note of it. Details of language convince us of our location "in the West"—*gulch,arroyo,* and *buffalo grass.*Beyond that, though, Eiseley calls the spider's web "her universe" and "the great wheel sheinhabited," as in the great wheel of the heavens, the galaxies. By metaphor, then, the web becomesthe universe, "spider universe." And the spider, "she," whose "senses did not extend beyond" heruniverse, knows "the flutter of a trapped moth's wing" and hurries "to investigate her prey."Eiseley says he could see her "fingering her guidelines for signs of struggle." These details oflanguage, and others, characterize the "owner" of the web as thinking, feeling, striving—a creaturemuch like ourselves. But so what?

3. *Ask questions about the patterns you've noticed—especially how andwhy.*

To answer some of our own questions, we have to look back at the text and see what else is goingon. For instance, when Eiseley touches the web with his pencil point—an event "for which noprecedent existed"—the spider, naturally, can make no sense of the pencil phenomenon: "Spider wascircumscribed by spider ideas." Of course, spiders don't have ideas, but we do. And if we startseeing this passage in human terms, seeing the spider's situation in "her universe" as analogous toour situation in our universe (which we think of as *the* universe),then we may decide that Eiseley issuggesting that our universe (*the*universe) is also finite, that*our* ideas are circumscribed, and thatbeyond the limits of our universe there might be phenomena as fully beyond our ken as Eiseleyhimself—that "vast impossible shadow"—was beyond the understanding of the spider.

But why vast and impossible, why a shadow? Does Eiseley mean God, extra-terrestrials? Orsomething else, something we cannot name or even imagine? Is this the lesson? Now we see that thesense of tale telling or myth at the start of the passage, plus this reference to something vast andunseen, weighs against a simple E.T. sort of interpretation. And though the spider can't explain, oreven apprehend, Eiseley's pencil point, that pencil point *is*explainable—rational after all. So maybenot God. We need more evidence, so we go back to the text—the whole essay now, not just this onepassage—and look for additional clues. And as we proceed in this way, paying close attention to theevidence, asking questions, formulating interpretations, we engage in a process that is central toessay writing and to the whole academic enterprise: in other words, we reason toward our ownideas.

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Overview of the Academic Essay A clear sense of argument is essential to all forms of academic writing, for writing is thoughtmade visible. Insights and ideas that occur to us when we encounter the raw material of the world—natural phenomena like the behavior of genes, or cultural phenomena, like texts, photographs andartifacts—must be ordered in some way so others can receive them and respond in turn. This giveand take is at the heart of the scholarly enterprise, and makes possible that vast conversation knownas civilization. Like all human ventures, the conventions of the academic essay are

both logical andplayful. They may vary in expression from discipline to discipline, but any good essay shouldshow us a mind developing a thesis, supporting that thesis with evidence, deftly anticipatingobjections or counter-arguments, and maintaining the momentum of discovery.

Motive and Idea

An essay has to have a purpose or motive; the mere existence of an assignment or deadline is notsufficient. When you write an essay or research paper, you are never simply transferringinformation from one place to another, or showing that you have mastered a certain amount ofmaterial. That would be incredibly boring—and besides, it would be adding to the glut of pointlessutterance. Instead, you should be trying to make the best possible case for an original idea you havearrived at after a period of research. Depending upon the field, your research may involve readingand rereading a text, performing an experiment, or carefully observing an object or behavior.

By immersing yourself in the material, you begin to discover patterns and generate insights, guidedby a series of unfolding questions. From a number of possibilities, one idea emerges as the mostpromising. You try to make sure it is original and of some importance; there is no point arguing forsomething already known, trivial, or widely accepted.

Thesis and Development

The essay's thesis is the main point you are trying to make, using the best evidence you canmarshall. Your thesis will evolve during the course of writing drafts, but everything that happens inyour essay is directed toward establishing its validity. A given assignment may not tell you thatyou need to come up with a thesis and defend it, but these are the unspoken requirements of anyscholarly paper.

Deciding upon a thesis can generate considerable anxiety. Students may think, "How can I have anew idea about a subject scholars have spent their whole lives exploring? I just read a few books inthe last few days, and now I'm supposed to be an expert?" But you can be original on differentscales. We can't possibly know everything that has been, or is being, thought or written byeveryone in the world—even given the vastness and speed of the Internet. What is required is arigorous, good faith effort to establish originality, given the demands of the assignment and thediscipline. It is a good exercise throughout the writing process to stop periodically and reformulateyour thesis as succinctly as possible so someone in another field could understand its meaning aswell as its importance. A thesis can be relatively complex, but you should be able to distill itsessence. This does not mean you have to give the game away right from the start. Guided by a clear understanding of the point you wish to argue, you can spark your reader's curiosity by first askingquestions—the very questions that may have guided you in your research—and carefully building acase for the validity of your idea. Or you can start with a provocative observation, inviting youraudience to follow your own path of discovery.

The Tension of Argument

Argument implies tension but not combative fireworks. This tension comes from the fundamentalasymmetry between the one who wishes to persuade and those who must be persuaded. Thecommon ground they share is reason. Your objective is to make a case so that any reasonable personwould be convinced of the reasonableness of your thesis. The first task, even before you start towrite, is gathering and ordering evidence, classifying it

by kind and strength. You might decide tomove from the smallest piece of evidence to the most impressive. Or you might start with the mostconvincing, then mention other supporting details afterward. You could hold back a surprising pieceof evidence until the very end.

In any case, it is important to review evidence that could be used against your idea and generateresponses to anticipated objections. This is the crucial concept of counter-argument. If nothing canbe said against an idea, it is probably obvious or vacuous. (And if too much can be said against it,it's time for another thesis.) By not indicating an awareness of possible objections, you might seemto be hiding something, and your argument will be weaker as a consequence. You should alsobecome familiar with the various fallacies that can undermine an argument—the "straw man" fallacy,fallacies of causation and of analogy, etc.—and strive to avoid them.

The Structure of Argument

The heart of the academic essay is persuasion, and the structure of your argument plays a vital rolein this. To persuade, you must set the stage, provide a context, and decide how to reveal yourevidence. Of course, if you are addressing a community of specialists, some aspects of a sharedcontext can be taken for granted. But clarity is always a virtue. The essay's objective should bedescribed swiftly, by posing a question that will lead to your thesis, or making a thesis statement.There is considerable flexibility about when and where this happens, but within the first page ortwo, we should know where we are going, even if some welcome suspense is preserved. In the bodyof the paper, merely listing evidence without any discernible logic of presentation is a commonmistake. What might suffice in conversation is too informal for an essay. If the point being made islost in a welter of specifics, the argument falters.

The most common argumentative structure in English prose is deductive: starting off with ageneralization or assertion, and then providing support for it. This pattern can be used to order aparagraph as well as an entire essay. Another possible structure is inductive: facts, instances orobservations can be reviewed, and the conclusion to be drawn from them follows. There is noblueprint for a successful essay; the best ones show us a focused mind making sense of somemanageable aspect of the world, a mind where insightfulness, reason, and clarity are joined.

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5. Essay Structure

Writing an academic essay meansfashioning a coherent set of ideas into an argument. Because essays areessentially linear—they offer one idea at a time—they must present their ideasin the order that makes most sense to a reader. Successfully structuring anessay means attending to a reader's logic.

The focus of such an essay predictsits structure. It dictates the information readers need to know and the orderin which they need to receive it. Thus your essay's structure is necessarilyunique to the main claim you're making. Although there are guidelines forconstructing certain classic essay types (e.g., comparative analysis), thereare no set formulas.

AnsweringQuestions: The Parts of an Essay

Atypical essay contains many different kinds of information, often located inspecialized parts or sections. Even short essays perform several differentoperations: introducing the argument, analyzing data, raisingcounter-arguments, concluding. Introductions and conclusions have fixed places,but other parts don't. Counter-argument, for example, may appear within aparagraph, as a free-standing section, as part of the beginning, or before theending. Background material (historical context or biographical information, asummary of relevant theory or criticism, the definition of a key term) oftenappears at the beginning of the essay, between the introduction and the firstanalytical section, but might also appear near the beginning of the specificsection to which it's relevant.

It'shelpful to think of the different essay sections as answering a series ofquestions your reader might ask when encountering your thesis. (Readers shouldhave questions. If they don't, your thesis is most likely simply an observationof fact, not an arguable claim.)

"What?" The first question to anticipate from areader is "what": What evidence shows that the phenomenon describedby your thesis is true? To answer the question you must examine your evidence,thus demonstrating the truth of your claim. This "what" or"demonstration" section comes early in the essay, often directlyafter the introduction. Since you're essentially reporting what you've observed,this is the part you might have most to say about when you first start writing.But be forewarned: it shouldn't take up much more than a third (often muchless) of your finished essay. If itdoes, the essay will lack balance and may read as mere summary or description.

"How?" A reader will also want to know whether theclaims of the thesis are true in all cases. The corresponding question is"how": How does the thesis stand up to the challenge of acounter-argument? How does the introduction of new material—a new way oflooking at the evidence, another set of sources—affect the claims you'remaking? Typically, an essay will include at least one "how" section.(Call it "complication" since you're responding to a reader'scomplicating questions.) This section usually comes after the "what,"but keep in mind that an essay may complicate its argument several timesdepending on its length, and that counter-argument alone may appear just aboutanywhere in an essay.

"Why?" Your reader will also want to know what's atstake in your claim: Why does your interpretation of a phenomenon matter toanyone beside you? This question addresses the larger implications of yourthesis. It allows your readers to understand your essay within a largercontext. In answering "why", your essay explains its ownsignificance. Alhough you might gesture at this question in your introduction,the fullest answer to it properly belongs at your essay's end. If you leave itout, your readers will experience your essay as unfinished—or, worse, aspointless or insular.

Mappingan Essay

Structuringyour essay according to a reader's logic means examining your thesis andanticipating what a reader needs to know, and in what sequence, in order tograsp and be convinced by your argument as it unfolds. The easiest way to dothis is to map the essay's ideas via a written narrative. Such an account willgive you a preliminary record of your ideas, and will allow you to remindyourself at every turn of the reader's needs in understanding your idea.

Essaymaps ask you to predict where your reader will expect background information,counter-argument, close analysis of a primary source, or a turn to secondarysource material. Essay maps are not concerned with paragraphs so much as withsections of an essay.

They anticipate the major argumentative moves you expectyour essay to make. Try making your map like this:

* State your thesis in a sentence or two, thenwrite another sentence saying why it's important to make that claim. Indicate,in other words, what a reader might learn by exploring the claim with you. Hereyou're anticipating your answer to the "why" question that you'lleventually flesh out in your conclusion.
* Begin your next sentence like this:"To be convinced by my claim, the first thing a reader needs to know is .. ." Then say why that's the first thing a reader needs to know, and nameone or two items of evidence you think will make the case. This will start youoff on answering the "what" question. (Alternately, you may find thatthe first thing your reader needs to know is some background information.)
* Begin each of the following sentences likethis: "The next thing my reader needs to know is . . ." Once again, say why, and name some evidence.Continue until you've mapped out your essay.

Yourmap should naturally take you through some preliminary answers to the basicquestions of what, how, and why. It is not a contract, though—the order inwhich the ideas appear is not a rigid one. Essay maps are flexible; they evolvewith your ideas.

Signsof Trouble

Acommon structural flaw in college essays is the "walk-through" (alsolabeled "summary" or "description"). Walk-through essaysfollow the structure of their sources rather than establishing their own. Suchessays generally have a descriptive thesis rather than an argumentative one. Bewary of paragraph openers that lead off with "time" words("first," "next," "after," "then") or"listing" words ("also," "another," "inaddition"). Alhough they don't always signal trouble, these paragraph openersoften indicate that an essay's thesis and structure need work: they suggestthat the essay simply reproduces the chronology of the source text (in the caseof time words: first this happens, then that, and afterwards another thing . ..) or simply lists example after example ("In addition, the use of colorindicates another way that the painting differentiates between good andevil").

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Developing A Thesis Think of yourself as a member of a jury, listening to a lawyer who is presenting an openingargument. You'll want to know very soon whether the lawyer believes the accused to be guilty ornot guilty, and how the lawyer plans to convince you. Readers of academic essays are like jurymembers: before they have read too far, they want to know what the essay argues as well as howthe writer plans to make the argument. After reading your thesis statement, the reader should think,"This essay is going to try to convince me of something. I'm not convinced yet, but I'm interestedto see how I might be."

An effective thesis cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." A thesis is not a topic;nor is it a fact; nor is it an opinion. "Reasons for the fall of communism" is a topic. "Communismcollapsed in Eastern Europe" is a fact known by educated people. "The fall of communism is thebest thing that ever happened in Europe" is an opinion. (Superlatives like "the best" almost alwayslead to trouble. It's impossible to weigh every "thing" that ever

happened in Europe. And whatabout the fall of Hitler? Couldn't that be "the best thing"?)

A good thesis has two parts. It should tell what you plan to argue, and it should "telegraph"how you plan to argue—that is, what particular support for your claim is going where in your essay.

Steps in Constructing a Thesis

First, analyze your primary sources. Look for tension, interest,ambiguity, controversy, and/orcomplication. Does the author contradict himself or herself? Is a point made and later reversed?What are the deeper implications of the author's argument? Figuring out the why to one or more ofthese questions, or to related questions, will put you on the path to developing a working thesis.(Without the why, you probably have only come up with an observation—that there are, forinstance, many different metaphors in such-and-such a poem—which is not a thesis.)

Once you have a working thesis, write it down. There is nothing asfrustrating as hitting on agreat idea for a thesis, then forgetting it when you lose concentration. And by writing down yourthesis you will be forced to think of it clearly, logically, and concisely. You probably will not beable to write out a final-draft version of your thesis the first time you try, but you'll get yourself onthe right track by writing down what you have.

Keep your thesis prominent in your introduction. A good, standardplace for your thesisstatement is at the end of an introductory paragraph, especially in shorter (5-15 page) essays.Readers are used to finding theses there, so they automatically pay more attention when they readthe last sentence of your introduction. Although this is not required in all academic essays, it is agood rule of thumb.

Anticipate the counter-arguments. Once you have a working thesis,you should think about whatmight be said against it. This will help you to refine your thesis, and it will also make you think of thearguments that you'll need to refute later on in your essay. (Every argument has a counter-argument.If yours doesn't, then it's not an argument—it may be a fact, or an opinion, but it is not an argument.)

Michael Dukakis lost the 1988 presidential election because he failed to campaign vigorously after the Democratic National Convention.

This statement is on its way to being a thesis. However, it is too easy to imagine possible counter-arguments. For example, a political observer might believe that Dukakis lost because he suffered froma "soft-on-crime" image. If you complicate your thesis by anticipating the counter-argument, you'llstrengthen your argument, as shown in the sentence below.

While Dukakis' "soft-on-crime" image hurt his chances in the 1988 election, his failure to campaign vigorously after the Democratic National Convention bore a greater responsibility for his defeat.

Some Caveats and Some Examples

A thesis is never a question. Readers of academic essays expect tohave questions

discussed,explored, or even answered. A question ("Why did communism collapse in Eastern Europe?") is notan argument, and without an argument, a thesis is dead in the water.

A thesis is never a list. "For political, economic, social andcultural reasons, communism collapsedin Eastern Europe" does a good job of "telegraphing" the reader what to expect in the essay—a sectionabout political reasons, a section about economic reasons, a section about social reasons, and a sectionabout cultural reasons. However, political, economic, social and cultural reasons are pretty much theonly possible reasons why communism could collapse. This sentence lacks tension and doesn'tadvance an argument. Everyone knows that politics, economics, and culture are important.

A thesis should never be vague, combative or confrontational. Anineffective thesis would be,"Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe because communism is evil." This is hard to argue (evilfrom whose perspective? what does evil mean?) and it is likely to mark you as moralistic andjudgmental rather than rational and thorough. It also may spark a defensive reaction from readerssympathetic to communism. If readers strongly disagree with you right off the bat, they may stopreading.

An effective thesis has a definable, arguable claim. "While culturalforces contributed to thecollapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of economies played the key role indriving its decline" is an effective thesis sentence that "telegraphs," so that the reader expects theessay to have a section about cultural forces and another about the disintegration of economies. Thisthesis makes a definite, arguable claim: that the disintegration of economies played a more importantrole than cultural forces in defeating communism in Eastern Europe. The reader would react to thisstatement by thinking, "Perhaps what the author says is true, but I am not convinced. I want to readfurther to see how the author argues this claim."

A thesis should be as clear and specific as possible. Avoid overused,general terms andabstractions. For example, "Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe because of the ruling elite'sinability to address the economic concerns of the people" is more powerful than "Communismcollapsed due to societal discontent."

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Beginning the Academic Essay The writer of the academic essay aims to persuade readers of an idea based on evidence. Thebeginning of the essay is a crucial first step in this process. In order to engage readers and establishyour authority, the beginning of your essay has to accomplish certain business. Your beginningshould introduce the essay, focus it, and orient readers.

Introduce the Essay. The beginning lets your readers know what theessay is about, the *topic*. Theessay's topic does not exist in a vacuum, however; part of letting readers know what your essay isabout means establishing the essay's *context*, the frame withinwhich you will approach your topic.For instance, in an essay about the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech, the contextmay be a particular legal theory about the speech right; it may be historical information concerningthe writing of the

amendment; it may be a contemporary dispute over flag burning; or it may be aquestion raised by the text itself. The point here is that, in establishing the essay's context, you arealso limiting your topic. That is, you are framing an approach to your topic that necessarilyeliminates other approaches. Thus, when you determine your context, you simultaneously narrowyour topic and take a big step toward focusing your essay. Here's an example.

When Kate Chopin's novel The Awakening was published in 1899,critics condemned the book asimmoral. One typical critic, writing in the Providence Journal,feared that the novel might "fall intothe hands of youth, leading them to dwell on things that only matured persons can understand, andpromoting unholy imaginations and unclean desires" (150). A reviewer inthe St. Louis Post-Dispatch wrote that "there is much that is very improper in it, not tosay positively unseemly."

The paragraph goes on. But as you can see, Chopin's novel (the topic) is introduced in the contextof the critical and moral controversy its publication engendered.

Focus the Essay. Beyond introducing your topic, your beginning mustalso let readers know whatthe central issue is. What question or problem will you be thinking about? You can pose a questionthat will lead to your idea (in which case, your idea will be the answer to your question), or you canmake a thesis statement. Or you can do both: you can ask a question and immediately suggest theanswer that your essay will argue. Here's an example from an essay about Memorial Hall.

Further analysis of Memorial Hall, and of the archival sources that describe the processof building it, suggests that the past may not be the central subject of the hall but only amedium. What message, then, does the building convey, and why are the fallen soldiersof such importance to the alumni who built it? Part of the answer, it seems, is thatMemorial Hall is an educational tool, an attempt by the Harvard community of the1870s to influence the future by shaping our memory of their times. Thecommemoration of those students and graduates who died for the Union during the CivilWar is one aspect of this alumni message to the future, but it may not be the centralidea.

The fullness of your idea will not emerge until your conclusion, but your beginning must clearlyindicate the direction your idea will take, must set your essay on that road. And whether you focusyour essay by posing a question, stating a thesis, or combining these approaches, by the end ofyour beginning, readers should know what you're writing about, and *why*—and why they mightwant to read on.

Orient Readers. Orienting readers, locating them in your discussion,means providing informationand explanations wherever necessary for your readers' understanding. Orienting is importantthroughout your essay, but it is crucial in the beginning. Readers who don't have the informationthey need to follow your discussion will get lost and quit reading. (Your teachers, of course, will trudge on.) Supplying the necessary information to orient your readers may be as simple asanswering the journalist's questions of who, what, where, when, how, and why. It may meanproviding a brief overview of events or a

summary of the text you'll be analyzing. If the source textis brief, such as the First Amendment, you might just quote it. If the text is well known, yoursummary, for most audiences, won't need to be more than an identifying phrase or two:

In Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare's tragedy of `star-crossed lovers'destroyed by theblood feud between their two families, the minor characters . . .

Often, however, you will want to summarize your source more fully so that readers can follow youranalysis of it.

Questions of Length and Order. How long should the beginning be? Thelength should beproportionate to the length and complexity of the whole essay. For instance, if you're writing afive-page essay analyzing a single text, your beginning should be brief, no more than one or twoparagraphs. On the other hand, it may take a couple of pages to set up a ten-page essay.

Does the business of the beginning have to be addressed in a particular order? No, but the ordershould be logical. Usually, for instance, the question or statement that focuses the essay comes atthe end of the beginning, where it serves as the jumping-off point for the middle, or main body, ofthe essay. Topic and context are often intertwined, but the context may be established before theparticular topic is introduced. In other words, the order in which you accomplish the business of thebeginning is flexible and should be determined by your purpose.

Opening Strategies. There is still the further question of how tostart. What makes a goodopening? You can start with specific facts and information, a keynote quotation, a question, ananecdote, or an image. But whatever sort of opening you choose, it should be directly related toyour focus. A snappy quotation that doesn't help establish the context for your essay or that laterplays no part in your thinking will only mislead readers and blur your focus. Be as direct andspecific as you can be. This means you should avoid two types of openings:

- The history-of-the-world (or long-distance) opening, which aims to establish a context for theessay by getting a long running start: "Ever since the dawn of civilized life, societies have struggled to reconcile the need for change with the need for order." What are we talking about here, political revolution or a new brand of soft drink? Get to it.
- The funnel opening (a variation on the same theme), which starts withsomething broad andgeneral and "funnels" its way down to a specific topic. If your essay is an argument about state-mandated prayer in public schools, don't start by generalizing about religion; start with the specific topic at hand.

Remember. After working your way through the whole draft, testingyour thinking against theevidence, perhaps changing direction or modifying the idea you started with, go back to yourbeginning and make sure it still provides a clear focus for the essay. Then clarify and sharpen yourfocus as needed. Clear, direct beginnings rarely present themselves ready-made; they must be written,and rewritten, into the sort of sharp-eyed clarity that engages readers and establishes your authority.

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8. Outlining

Trying to devise a structure foryour essay can be one of the most difficult parts of the writing process.Making a detailed outline before you begin writing is a good way to make sureyour ideas come across in a clear and logical order. A good outline will alsosave you time in the revision process, reducing the possibility that your ideaswill need to be rearranged once you've written them.

TheFirst Steps

Beforeyou can begin outlining, you need to have a sense of what you will argue in theessay. From your analysis and close readings of primary and/or secondarysources you should have notes, ideas, and possible quotes to cite as evidence.Let's say you are writing about the 1999 Republican Primary and you want toprove that each candidate's financial resources were the most important elementin the race. At this point, your notes probably lack much coherent order. Mostlikely, your ideas are still in the order in which they occurred to you; yournotes and possible quotes probably still adhere to the chronology of thesources you've examined. Your goal is to rearrange your ideas, notes, andquotes—the raw material of your essay—into an order that best supports yourargument, not the arguments you've read in other people's works. To do this,you have to group your notes into categories and then arrange these categoriesin a logical order.

Generalizing

Thefirst step is to look over each individual piece of information that you'vewritten and assign it to a general category. Ask yourself, "If I were to filethis in a database, what would I file it under?" If, using the example ofthe Republican Primary, you wrote down an observation about John McCain's viewson health care, you might list it under the general category of "Health care policy." As you go throughyour notes, try to reuse categories whenever possible. Your goal is to reduceyour notes to no more than a page of category listings.

Nowexamine your category headings. Do any seem repetitive? Do any go together?"McCain's expenditure on ads" and "Bush's expenditure onads," while not exactly repetitive, could easily combine into a moregeneral category like "Candidates' expenditures on ads." Also, keepan eye out for categories that no longer seem to relate to your argument. Individualpieces of information that at first seemed important can begin to appearirrelevant when grouped into a general category.

Nowit's time to generalize again. Examine all your categories and look for commonthemes. Go through each category and ask yourself, "If I were to placethis piece of information in a file cabinet, what would I label thatcabinet?" Again, try to reuse labels as often as possible: "HealthCare," "Foreign Policy," and "Immigration" can all becontained under "Policy Initiatives." Make these larger categories asgeneral as possible so that there are no more than three or four for a 7-10page paper.

Ordering

Withyour notes grouped into generalized categories, the process of ordering themshould be easier. To begin, look at your most general categories. With yourthesis in mind, try to find a way that the labels might be arranged in asentence or two that supports your argument. Let's say your thesis is thatfinancial resources played the most important role in the 1999 RepublicanPrimary. Your four most general categories are "Policy Initiatives,""Financial Resources," "Voters' Concerns,"

and"Voters' Loyalty." You might come up with the following sentence:ÒAlthough McCain's policy initiatives were closest to the voters' concerns,Bush's financial resources won the voters' loyalty.Ó This sentence shouldreveal the order of your most general categories. You will begin with anexamination of McCain's and Bush's views on important issues and compare themto the voters' top concerns. Then you'll look at both candidates' financialresources and show how Bush could win voters' loyalty through effective use ofhis resources, despite his less popular policy ideas.

Withyour most general categories in order, you now must order the smallercategories. To do so, arrange each smaller category into a sentence or two thatwill support the more general sentence you've just devised. Under the categoryof "Financial Resources," for instance, you might have the smallercategories of "Ad Expenditure," "Campaign Contributions"and "Fundraising." A sentence that supports your general argumentmight read: "Bush's early emphasis on fundraising led to greater campaigncontributions, allowing him to have a greater ad expenditure than McCain." Thefinal step of the outlining process is to repeat this procedure on the smallestlevel, with the original notes that you took for your essay. To order whatprobably was an unwieldy and disorganized set of information at the beginningof this process, you need now only think of a sentence or two to support yourgeneral argument. Under the category "Fundraising," for example, youmight have quotes about each candidate's estimation of its importance,statistics about the amount of time each candidate spent fundraising, and an ideaabout how the importance of fundraising never can be overestimated. Sentencesto support your general argument might read: "No candidate has ever raisedtoo much money [your idea]. While both McCain and Bush acknowledged theimportance of fundraising [your quotes], the numbers clearly point to Bush asthe superior fundraiser [your statistics]." The arrangement of your ideas,quotes, and statistics now should come naturally.

PuttingIt All Together

Withthese sentences, you have essentially constructed an outline for your essay.The most general ideas, which you organized in your first sentence, constitutethe essay's sections. They follow the order in which you placed them in yoursentence. The order of the smaller categories within each larger category(determined by your secondary sentences) indicates the order of the paragraphswithin each section. Finally, your last set of sentences about your specificnotes should show the order of the sentences within each paragraph. An outlinefor the essay about the 1999 Republican Primary (showing only the sectionsworked out here) would look something like this:

I. POLICY INITIATIVES
II. VOTERS' CONCERNS
III. FINANCIAL RESOURCES
    A. Fundraising
        a. Original Idea
        b. McCain Quote/Bush Quote
        c. McCain Statistics/Bush Statistics
    B. Campaign Contributions
    C. Ad Expenditure
IV. VOTERS' LOYALTY

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C ounter-Argument

When you write an academic essay, you make an argument: you propose a thesis and offersome reasoning, using evidence, that suggests why the thesis is true. When you counter-argue, youconsider a possible argument *against* your thesis or some aspect ofyour reasoning. This is a goodway to test your ideas when drafting, while you still have time to revise them. And in the finishedessay, it can be a persuasive and (in both senses of the word) disarming tactic. It allows you toanticipate doubts and pre-empt objections that a skeptical reader might have; it presents you asthe kind of person who weighs alternatives before arguing for one, who confronts difficultiesinstead of sweeping them under the rug, who is more interested in discovering the truth thanwinning a point.

Not every objection is worth entertaining, of course, and youshouldn't include one just toinclude one. But some imagining of other views, or of resistance to one's own, occurs in most goodessays. And instructors are glad to encounter counter-argument in student papers, even if theyhaven't specifically asked for it.

The Turn Against

Counter-argument in an essay has two stages: you turn against your argument to challenge it andthen you turn back to re-affirm it. You first imagine a skeptical reader, or cite an actual source,who might resist your argument by pointing out

- a problem with your demonstration, e.g. that a different conclusion could be drawn fromthe same facts, a key assumption is unwarranted, a key term is used unfairly, certainevidence is ignored or played down;
- one or more disadvantages or practical drawbacks to what you propose;
- an alternative explanation or proposal that makes more sense.

You introduce this turn against with a phrase like *One might objecthere that...* or *It might seemthat...* or *It's true that...* or*Admittedly,...* or*Ofcourse,...* or with an anticipated challenging question:*But how...?* or *But why...?* or *But isn't this just...?*or*But if this is so, what about...?* Then you statethe case against yourself as briefly but as clearly and forcefully as you can, pointing to evidencewhere possible. (An obviously feeble or perfunctory counter-argument does more harm thangood.)

The Turn Back

Your return to your own argument—which you announce with a *but, yet,however, nevertheless orstill*—must likewise involve careful reasoning, not a flippant (ornervous) dismissal. In reasoningabout the proposed counter-argument, you may

- refute it, showing why it is mistaken—an apparent but not realproblem;

- acknowledge its validity or plausibility, but suggest why on balanceit's relatively lessimportant or less likely than what you propose, and thus doesn't overturn it;
- concede its force and complicate your idea accordingly—restate yourthesis in a more exact,qualified, or nuanced way that takes account of the objection, or start a new section inwhich you consider your topic in light of it. This will work if the counter-argumentconcerns only an aspect of your argument; if it undermines your whole case, you need anew thesis.

Where to Put a Counter-Argument

Counter-argument can appear anywhere in the essay, but it most commonly appears

- as part of your introduction—before you propose your thesis—wherethe existence of adifferent view is the motive for your essay, the reason it needs writing;
- as a section or paragraph just after your introduction, in which youlay out the expectedreaction or standard position before turning away to develop your own;
- as a quick move within a paragraph, where you imagine acounter-argument not to yourmain idea but to the sub-idea that the paragraph is arguing or is about to argue;
- as a section or paragraph just before the conclusion of your essay, inwhich you imaginewhat someone might object to what you have argued.

But watch that you don't overdo it. A turn into counter-argument here and there will sharpen andenergize your essay, but too many such turns will have the reverse effect by obscuring your mainidea or suggesting that you're ambivalent.

Counter-Argument in Pre-Writing and Revising

Good thinking constantly questions itself, as Socrates observed long ago. But at some point in theprocess of composing an essay, you need to switch off the questioning in your head and make acase. Having such an inner conversation during the drafting stage, however, can help you settle ona case worth making. As you consider possible theses and begin to work on your draft, askyourself how an intelligent person might plausibly disagree with you or see matters differently.When you can imagine an intelligent disagreement, you have an arguable idea.

And, of course, the disagreeing reader doesn't need to be in your head: if, as you're starting workon an essay, you ask a few people around you what *they* think oftopic X (or of your idea about X)and keep alert for uncongenial remarks in class discussion and in assigned readings, you'llencounter a useful disagreement somewhere. Awareness of this disagreement, however you use itin your essay, will force you to sharpen your own thinking as you compose. If you come to findthe counter-argument truer than your thesis, consider making *it* your thesis and turning youroriginal thesis into a counter-argument. If you manage to draft an essay *without* imagining acounter-argument, make yourself imagine one before you revise and see if you can integrate it.

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10. Summary

Summary is indispensable inpreparing for and writing an argumentative essay. When you summarize a text (ordescribe visual material), you distill the ideas of another source for use inyour own essay. Summarizing primary sources allows you to keep track of yourobservations. It helps make your analysis of these sources convincing, becauseit is based on careful observation of fact rather than on hazy or inaccuraterecollection. Summarizing critical sources is particularly useful during theresearch and note-taking stages of writing. It gives you a record of whatyou've read and helps you distinguish your ideas from those of yoursources.

Summaries you write to prepare foran essay will generally be longer and more detailed than those you include inthe essay itself. (Only when you've established your thesis will you know theelements most important to retain.) It is crucial to remember, though, that thepurpose of an analytical essay is only partly to demonstrate that you know andcan summarize the work of others. Thegreater task is to showcase your ideas, your analysis of the source material.Thus all forms of summary (there are several) should be tools in your essayrather than its entirety.

TrueSummary

Truesummary always concisely recaps the main point and key supporting points of ananalytical source, the overall arc and most important turns of a narrative, orthe main subject and key features of a visual source. True summary neitherquotes nor judges the source, concentrating instead on giving a fair picture ofit. True summary may also outline past work done in a field; it sums up thehistory of that work as a narrative. Consider including true summary—often justa few sentences, rarely more than a paragraph—in your essay when you introducea new source. That way, you inform your readers of an author's argument beforeyou analyze it.

Immediatelyafter his introduction to an essay on Whittaker Chambers, a key player in thestart of the Cold War, Bradley Nash included four sentences summarizing theforeword to his main source, Chambers's autobiography. Nash characterizes thegenre and tone of the foreword in the first two sentences before swiftlydescribing, in the next two, the movement of its ideas:

The foreword to Chambers's autobiography is writtenin the form of "A Letter to My Children." In this introduction,Chambers establishes the spiritual tone that dominates the body of his book. Heinitially characterizes the Cold War in a more or less standard fashion,invoking the language of politics and describing the conflict as one between"Communism and Freedom." But as the foreword progresses, Chambersintroduces a religious element that serves to cast the struggle betweencommunism and capitalism as a kind of holy war.

Everyessay also requires snippets of true summary along the way to"orient" readers—to introduce them to characters or critics theyhaven't yet met, to remind them of items they need to recall to understand yourpoint. (The underlined phrase in the paragraph introducing Nash's summary is anexample of orienting information.) True summary is also necessary to establisha context for your claims, the frame of reference you create in yourintroduction. An essay examining the "usable past" created by theVietnam Veterans Memorial, for example, might begin by briefly summarizing thehistory of the idea of a usable past, or by summarizing the view of a leadingtheorist on the topic.

InterpretiveSummary

Sometimesyour essays will call for interpretive summary—summary or description thatsimultaneously informs your reader of the content of your source and makes apoint about it. Interpretive summarydiffers from true summary by putting a "spin" on the materials,giving the reader hints about your assessment of the source. It is thus bestsuited to descriptions of primary sources that you plan to analyze. (If you putan interpretive spin on a critical source when you initially address it, yourisk distorting it in the eyes of your reader: a form of academic dishonesty.)

Theinterpretive summary below comes from an essay examining a Civil War photographin light of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The essayist, Dara Horn, knew sheneeded to describe the photo but that simply "walking through" itsdetails would bewilder and bore her readers. So she revealed the point of herdescription in a pair of topic sentences (solid underline), summarized thedetails of the photo (double underline), and gave the description someinterpretive "spin" (throughout).

Asskeptical moderns, we often have trouble accepting drawings or paintings ashistorical records, but we tend to believe in photographs the way that webelieve in mirrors; we simply accept them as the truth. Alexander Gardner'sphotograph *Trossel's House, Battle-Field of Gettysburg, July, 1863* might therefore be viewed as evidence ratherthan commentary. Unlike some of Gardner's other "sketches," this pictureincludes no perfectly positioned rifles, no artistically angled river, nowell-posed men in uniform—indeed, no people at all. The photograph'scomposition could barely be more prosaic; the horizon slashes the picture inhalf, and the subject, a white colonial-style house, sits smack in the center.Yet this straightforward, almost innocent perspective sets the viewer up forthe photograph's stealthy horror. At first glance, the photograph appearsto be a portrait of a house, perhaps even a poor portrait of a house; ina Òsketch bookÓ of war, one might flip right by it to the gory pictures beforeand after. But the terror in this photograph lies in its delayed shock, thegut-wrenching surprise when the light on the house leads the eye to thelight on the fence and the viewer notices that the backyard fence isbroken, and then that the backyard is a mess, littered with—whatare those?—horses, dead horses, twelve dead horses. What must havehappened to topple twelve nine-hundred-pound horses, and where are the peoplewho rode them? Crushed underneath? The viewer doesn't know, because Gardner'spicture doesn't tell us. All we see is a house, a broken fence, twelve deadhorses, and an empty sky.

SomeCautions

Rememberthat an essay that argues (rather than simply describes) uses summary onlysparingly, to remind readers periodically of crucial points. Summary shouldalways help build your argument. When teachers write "too muchsummary—more analysis needed" in the margin, generally they mean that theessay reports what you've studied rather than argues something about it. Twolinked problems give rise to this situation. The first is a thesis that isn'treally a thesis but rather a statement of something obvious about yoursubject—a description. (The obvious cannot be argued.) A statement of theobvious tends to force further description, which leads to the second problem,a structure that either follows the chronology of the source text frombeginning to end or simply lists examples from the source. Neither approachbuilds an argument.

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11. Topic Sentencesand Signposting

Topic sentences and signposts makean essay's claims clear to a reader. Good essays contain both.*Topicsentences* reveal the main point ofa paragraph. They show the relationship of each paragraph to the essay'sthesis, telegraph the point of a paragraph, and tell your reader what to expectin the paragraph that follows. Topic sentences also establish their relevanceright away, making clear why the points they're making are important to theessay's main ideas. They argue rather than report. *Signposts*, as theirname suggests, prepare the reader for a change in the argument's direction.They show how far the essay's argument has progressed vis-ˆ-vis the claims ofthe thesis.

Topic sentences and signposts occupya middle ground in the writing process. They are neither the first thing awriter needs to address (thesis and the broad strokes of an essay's structureare); nor are they the last (that's when you attend to sentence-level editingand polishing). Topic sentences and signposts deliver an essay's structure andmeaning to a reader, so they are useful diagnostic tools to the writer—they letyou know if your thesis is arguable—and essential guides to the reader.

Formsof Topic Sentences

Sometimestopic sentences are actually two or even three sentences long. If the firstmakes a claim, the second might reflect on that claim, explaining it further.Think of these sentences as asking and answering two critical questions: Howdoes the phenomenon you're discussing operate? Why does it operate as it does?

There'sno set formula for writing a topic sentence. Rather, you should work to varythe form your topic sentences take. Repeated too often, any method growswearisome. Here are a few approaches.

Complexsentences. Topic sentencesat the beginning of a paragraph frequently combine with a transition from theprevious paragraph. This might be done by writing a sentence that contains bothsubordinate and independent clauses, as in the example below.

> Although *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*depicts an unknown, middle-class woman at an ordinary task, the image is morethan "realistic"; the painter [Vermeer] has imposed his own orderupon it to strengthen it.

Thissentence employs a useful principle of transitions: always move from old to newinformation. The subordinate clause(from "although" to "task") recaps information fromprevious paragraphs; the independent clauses (starting with "theimage" and "the painter") introduce the new information—a claimabout how the image works ("more than Ôrealistic'") and why it worksas it does (Vermeer "strengthens" the image by "imposingorder").

Questions. Questions, sometimes in pairs, also makegood topic sentences (and signposts). Consider the following: "Does the promise of stability justify thisunchanging hierarchy?" We may fairly assume that the paragraph or sectionthat follows will answer the question. Questions are by definition a form ofinquiry, and thus demand an answer. Good essays strive for this forwardmomentum.

Bridgesentences. Like questions, "bridge sentences"(the term is John Trimble's) make an excellent substitute for more formal topicsentences. Bridge sentences indicate both what came before and what comes next(they "bridge" paragraphs) without the formal trappings of multipleclauses: "But there is a clue to this puzzle."

Pivots. Topic sentences don't always appear at thebeginning of a paragraph. When they come in the middle, they indicate that theparagraph will change direction, or "pivot." This strategy isparticularly useful for dealing with counter-evidence: a paragraph starts outconceding a point or stating a fact ("Psychologist Sharon Hymer uses theterm Ônarcissistic friendship' to describe the early stage of a friendship likethe one between Celie and Shug"); after following up on this initialstatement with evidence, it then reverses direction and establishes a claim("Yet ... this narcissistic stage of Celie and Shug's relationship ismerely a transitory one. Hymer herself concedes . . . "). The pivot alwaysneeds a signal, a word like "but," "yet," or"however," or a longer phrase or sentence that indicates anabout-face. It often needs more than one sentence to make its point.

Signposts

Signpostsoperate as topic sentences for whole sections in an essay. (In longer essays,sections often contain more than a single paragraph.) They inform a reader thatthe essay is taking a turn in its argument: delving into a related topic suchas a counter-argument, stepping up its claims with a complication, or pausingto give essential historical or scholarly background. Because they reveal thearchitecture of the essay itself, signposts remind readers of what the essay'sstakes are: what it's about, and why it's being written.

Signpostingcan be accomplished in a sentence or two at the beginning of a paragraph or inwhole paragraphs that serve as transitions between one part of the argument andthe next. The following example comes from an essay examining how a painting byMonet, *The Gare Saint-Lazare: Arrival of a Train,* challenges Zola'sdeclarations about Impressionist art. The student writer wonders whetherMonet's Impressionism is really as devoted to avoiding "ideas" infavor of direct sense impressions as Zola's claims would seem to suggest. Thisis the start of the essay's third section:

> It is evident in this painting that Monetfound his Gare Saint-Lazare motif fascinating at the most fundamental level ofthe play of light as well as the loftiest level of social relevance. *Arrivalof a Train* explores both extremes of expression. At the fundamentalextreme, Monet satisfies the Impressionist objective of capturing thefull-spectrum effects of light on a scene.

Thewriter signposts this section in the first sentence, reminding readers of thestakes of the essay itself with the simultaneous references to sense impression("play of light") and intellectual content ("socialrelevance"). The second sentence follows up on this idea, while the thirdserves as a topic sentence for the paragraph. The paragraph after that startsoff with a topic sentence about the "cultural message" of thepainting, something that the signposting sentence predicts by not onlyreminding readers of the essay's stakes but also, and quite clearly, indicatingwhat the section itself will contain.

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Transitioning: Beware of Velcro As the writer of an essay, imagine yourself crossing a river, guiding a troop of avid readers. Youbring an armful of stones to lay down and step on as you go; each stone is a sentence or paragraph thatspeaks to and develops the essay's thesis, or central question. If you find yourself in the middle of theriver with another mile to shore but only a few more stones, you can't finesse such a situation. Youcan't ask your readers to follow you and jump too broad a span.

In such a case, stop. Ask yourself if you need more stones—more sentences or paragraphs—or ifperhaps you have already used ones that more properly belong ahead. On a second look, you maydecide that the distance between stones is not that great, after all; perhaps your reader only needs ahand of assistance to get from one stone, or paragraph, to the next. In an essay, such assistance can beoffered in the form of a "furthermore" or "in addition to" or "therefore." These are called transitional*words and phrases.*

Transitional words or phrases sometimes will be precisely what you need to underscore foryour readers the intellectual relationship between sentences or paragraphs—to help them navigate youressay. Very often, such transitions

- address an essential similarity or dissimilarity (*likewise, in thesame way, on the other hand,despite, in contrast*);
- suggest a meaningful ordering, often temporal (*first, second, atthesame time, later, finally*) orcausal (*thus, therefore, accordingly, because*);
- in a longer paper, remind the reader of what has earlier been argued(*in short, as has been said,on the whole*).

Keep in mind that although transitional words and phrases can be useful, even gracious, theynever should be applied to force a vagrant paragraph into a place where it does not, structurally,belong. No reader will be fooled by such shoddy craft, which is designed to help the writer finesse theessay's flaws, rather than to illuminate for the reader the connections among the essay's ideas andtextual evidence. A strip of Velcro on a cracked wall will not fool us into thinking we are standingsomewhere safe; neither will a Velcro transition persuade an essay's readers that they are in the handsof a serious writer with something serious to say. In the absence of genuine intellectual connection,such efforts at transition all sound manufactured. The human voice has been drained off, and what'sleft is hollow language. Velcro transitions insult and bore the reader by pointing out the obvious, generally in a cannedand pompous way. Here are some examples:

It is also important to note that ... Thus, it can be said that ... Another important aspect to realize is that ... Also, this shows that ...

This is not to say that such phrases never can be used in an essay. Of course they can, mostlyfor summary. Just don't use them indiscriminately. Be careful, and be honest. Don't talk down to the reader. If you tell a reader that something "is important to note," make sure there's a very good chance the reader would not have realized this if you hadn't pointed it out. And neveroverdo such phrases; after all*, *everything* in your essayought to be important to note. **In otherwords, be aware that, in a well-crafted essay, *every sentence is atransitional sentence.***

This shouldn't be as intimidating as it might at first sound.Rather, this is another

way ofsaying that transitions are important not simply between paragraphs.Instead, the necessity totransition occurs among the sentences within a paragraph, and from paragraph to paragraph. Aparagraph ought to follow logically from the one preceding, and move the argument towards theparagraph that follows. Again, this is no cause for alarm on thepart of the writer. It's simply anotherway of saying that, just as the sentence itself has internal logic and coherence, so does the paragraph;and so does the essay as a whole.

Tips for Transitioning

Quite often, if you are having a terrible time figuring out how toget from one paragraph to the next, itmay be because you**shouldn't** be getting from one paragraph to thenext quite yet, or even ever; theremay be something crucial missing between this paragraph and its neighbors—most likely an idea or apiece of evidence or both. Maybe the paragraph is misplaced, and logically belongs elsewhere. Thereason you can't come up with a gracious connective sentence is that there's simply too large anintellectual span to cross, or that you've gone off in the wrong direction.

Before you can go on, some causality needs first to be explicated, some other piece of evidence offered.You have to guide the reader safely to the next idea by making certain that everything that should havebeen discussed by this point has in fact been thoroughly discussed.While it is true that an essay is aconversation between a writer and a reader, in which the reader's questions and concerns areinternalized and addressed by the writer at the appropriate times, itis also true that even the mostcommitted reader cannot read your mind. You have to guide your reader.

As has been discussed above, it is also useful to note that**transitions between paragraphs that reallydo belong where they are in the essay can be strengthened by the repetition or paraphrasing of oneparagraph's key words into the next. Such repetition or paraphrasing ofkey words, however, can belittle more than Velcro** if the writer really has nothing more to say, as is now the case.

* Underlined words and phrases function as transitions. Try reading without them; you'll see that the ideasremain in logical order. Such words and phrases, however, make life easierfor the reader. *They neversubstitute for intellectual coherence.*

** Ick! Velcro—beware!

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How to Write a Comparative Analysis Throughout your academic career, you'll be asked to write papers in which you compare andcontrast two things: two texts, two theories, two historical figures, two scientific processes, and so on."Classic" compare-and-contrast papers, in which you weight A and B equally, may be about twosimilar things that have crucial differences (two pesticides with different effects on the environment) ortwo similar things that have crucial differences, yet turn out to have surprising commonalities (twopoliticians with vastly different world views who voice unexpectedly similar perspectives on sexualharassment).

In the "lens" (or "keyhole") comparison, in which you weight A less heavily than B, you use Aas a lens through which to view B. Just as looking through a pair of glasses changes the way you see anobject, using A as a framework for understanding B changes the way you see B. Lens comparisons areuseful for illuminating, critiquing, or challenging the stability of a thing that, before the analysis, seemedperfectly understood. Often, lens comparisons take time into account: earlier texts, events, or historicalfigures may illuminate later ones, and vice versa.

Faced with a daunting list of seemingly unrelated similarities and differences, you may feelconfused about how to construct a paper that isn't just a mechanical exercise in which you first stateall the features that A and B have in common, and then state all the ways in which A and B aredifferent. Predictably, the thesis of such a paper is usually an assertion that A and B are very similaryet not so similar after all. To write a good compare-and-contrast paper, you must take your raw data—the similarities and differences you've observed—and make them cohere into a meaningfulargument. Here are the five elements required.

Frame of Reference. This is the context within which you place thetwo things you plan to compareand contrast; it is the umbrella under which you have grouped them. The frame of reference mayconsist of an idea, theme, question, problem, or theory; a group of similar things from which youextract two for special attention; biographical or historical information. The best frames of reference areconstructed from specific sources rather than your own thoughts or observations. Thus, in a papercomparing how two writers redefine social norms of masculinity, you would be better off quoting asociologist on the topic of masculinity than spinning out potentially banal-sounding theories of yourown. Most assignments tell you exactly what the frame of reference should be, and most coursessupply sources for constructing it. *If you encounter an assignment thatfails to provide a frame ofreference, you must come up with one on your own.* A paper without sucha context would have noangle on the material, no focus or frame for the writer to propose a meaningful argument.

Grounds for Comparison. Let's say you're writing a paper on globalfood distribution, and you'vechosen to compare apples and oranges. Why these particular fruits? Why not pears and bananas? Therationale behind your choice, the*grounds for comparison*, lets yourreader know why your choice isdeliberate and meaningful, not random. For instance, in a paper asking how the "discourse ofdomesticity" has been used in the abortion debate, the grounds for comparison are obvious; the issue hastwo conflicting sides, pro-choice and pro-life. In a paper comparing the effects of acid rain on two forestsites, your choice of sites is less obvious. A paper focusing on similarly aged forest stands in Maine andthe Catskills will be set up differently from one comparing a new forest stand in the White Mountainswith an old forest in the same region. You need to indicate the reasoning behind your choice.

Thesis. The grounds for comparison anticipates the comparative nature of your thesis. As in anyargumentative paper, your thesis statement will convey the gist of your argument, which necessarilyfollows from your frame of reference. But in a compare-and-contrast, the thesis depends on how the twothings you've chosen to compare actually relate to one another. Do they extend, corroborate, complicate,contradict, correct, or debate one

another? In the most common compare-and-contrast paper—onefocusing on differences—you can indicate the precise relationship between A and B by using the word"whereas" in your thesis:

> **Whereas** Camus perceives ideology as secondary to the need toaddress a specific historical moment of colonialism, Fanon perceives a revolutionary ideology as the impetus to reshape Algeria's history in a direction toward independence.

Whether your paper focuses primarily on difference or similarity, you need to make the relationshipbetween A and B clear in your thesis. This relationship is at the heart of any compare-and-contrast paper.

Organizational Scheme. Your introduction will include your frame of reference, grounds forcomparison, and thesis. There are two basic ways to organize the body of your paper.

- In *text-by-text*, you discuss all of A, then all of B.
- In *point-by-point*, you alternate points about A with comparablepointsabout B.

If you think that B extends A, you'll probably use a text-by-text scheme; if you see A and B engaged indebate, a point-by-point scheme will draw attention to the conflict. Be aware, however, that the point-by-point scheme can come off as a ping-pong game. You can avoid this effect by grouping more than onepoint together, thereby cutting down on the number of times you alternate from A to B. But no matterwhich organizational scheme you choose, you need not give equal time to similarities and differences. Infact, your paper will be more interesting if you get to the heart of your argument as quickly as possible.Thus, a paper on two evolutionary theorists' different interpretations of specific archaeological findingsmight have as few as two or three sentences in the introduction on similarities and at most a paragraph ortwo to set up the contrast between the theorists' positions. The rest of the paper, whether organized text-by-text or point-by-point, will treat the two theorists' differences.

You can organize a classic compare-and-contrast paper either text-by-text or point-by-point. But in a"lens" comparison, in which you spend significantly less time on A (the lens) than on B (the focal text),you almost always organize text-by-text. That's because A and B are not strictly comparable: A is merelya tool for helping you discover whether or not B's nature is actually what expectations have led you tobelieve it is.

Linking of A and B. All argumentative papers require you to link eachpoint in the argument back to thethesis. Without such links, your reader will be unable to see how new sections logically and systematicallyadvance your argument. In a compare-and contrast, you also need to make links between A and B in thebody of your essay if you want your paper to hold together. To make these links, use transitionalexpressions of comparison and contrast (*similarly, moreover, likewise,on the contrary, conversely, on theother hand*) and contrastive vocabulary (in the example below,*Southerner/Northerner*).

As a girl raised in the faded glory of the Old South, amid mystical tales of magnolias and moonlight, the mother remains part of a dying generation. Surrounded by hard times, racial conflict, and limited opportunities, Julian, *on the other hand*, feels repelled bythe provincial nature of home, and represents a new Southerner, one who sees his native land through a condescending Northerner's eyes.

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Ending the Essay: Conclusions

So much is at stake in writing a conclusion. This is, after all, your last chance to persuadeyour readers to your point of view, to impress yourself upon them as a writer and thinker.And the impression you create in your conclusion will shape the impression that stays withyour readers after they've finished the essay.

The end of an essay should therefore convey a sense of completeness and closure as wellas a sense of the lingering possibilities of the topic, its larger meaning, its implications: thefinal paragraph should close the discussion without closing it off.

To establish a sense of closure, you might do one or more of the following:

- Conclude by linking the last paragraph to the first, perhaps byreiterating a word orphrase you used at the beginning.
- Conclude with a sentence composed mainly of one-syllable words. Simplelanguage canhelp create an effect of understated drama.
- Conclude with a sentence that's compound or parallel in structure;such sentences canestablish a sense of balance or order that may feel just right at the end of a complexdiscussion.

To close the discussion without closing it off, you might do one or more of thefollowing:

- Conclude with a quotation from or reference to a primary or secondarysource, one thatamplifies your main point or puts it in a different perspective. A quotation from, say, thenovel or poem you're writing about can add texture and specificity to your discussion; acritic or scholar can help confirm or complicate your final point. For example, you might conclude an essay on the idea of home in JamesJoyce's shortstory collection, *Dubliners*, with information about Joyce's owncomplex feelingstowards Dublin, his home. Or you might end with a biographer's statement aboutJoyce's attitude toward Dublin, which could illuminate his characters' responses to thecity. Just be cautious, especially about using secondary material: make sure that you getthe last word.

- Conclude by setting your discussion into a different, perhaps larger,context. For example, you might end an essay on nineteenth-century muckraking journalism bylinking it to a current newsmagazine program like *60 Minutes*.
- Conclude by redefining one of the key terms of your argument. For example, an essay on Marx's treatment of the conflict between wage labor and capitalmight begin with Marx's claim that the "capitalist economy is . . . a gigantic enterprise of*dehumanization*"; the essay might end by suggesting that Marxistanalysis is itselfdehumanizing because it construes everything in economic_rather than moral orethical_terms.

- Conclude by considering the implications of your argument (or analysisor discussion).What does your argument imply, or involve, or suggest? For example, an essay on the novel *Ambiguous Adventure*, by theSenegalese writerCheikh Hamidou Kane, might open with the idea that the protagonist's developmentsuggests Kane's belief in the need to integrate Western materialism and Sufi spirituality inmodern Senegal. The conclusion might make the new but related point that the novel onthe whole suggests that such an integration is (or isn't) possible.

Finally, some advice on how not to end an essay:

- Don't simply summarize your essay. A brief summary of your argumentmay be useful,especially if your essay is long_more than ten pages or so. But shorter essays tend notto require a restatement of your main ideas.
- Avoid phrases like "in conclusion," "to conclude," "in summary,"and"to sum up."These phrases can be useful_even welcome_in oral presentations. But readers can see,by the tell-tale compression of the pages, when an essay is about to end. You'll irritateyour audience if you belabor the obvious.
- Resist the urge to apologize. If you've immersed yourself in yoursubject, you now knowa good deal more about it than you can possibly include in a five- or ten- or 20-pageessay. As a result, by the time you've finished writing, you may be having some doubtsabout what you've produced. (And if you haven't immersed yourself in your subject,you may be feeling even more doubtful about your essay as you approach theconclusion.) Repress those doubts. Don't undercut your authority by saying things like,"this is just one approach to the subject; there may be other, better approaches. . ."

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Revising the Draft Having drafted your essay, you have gained the perspective of hindsight.Was the subject matter more complex than you anticipated? Did your preconceivedideas prove less interesting than discoveries you made while writing?Would you like to revise, but feel uncertain about how to do so?

[size=+1]How to revise:

- Put your draft aside. Time away from your essay will allow for more objectiveself-evaluation.
- Get feedback. Since you already know what you're trying to say, you aren'talways the best judge of where the draft is clear or unclear. Let anotherreader tell you. Then discuss aloud what you were trying to achieve. Inarticulating for someone else what you meant to argue, you will clarifyideas for yourself.
- Construct a backward-outline of your essay. Identify the main idea(s) ineach paragraph. Rank their importance in advancing your thesis. Considerconnections between and among ideas.
- Rethink your thesis. Based on what you did in the previous step, restructureyour argument: reorder your points, cut irrelevancies or redundancies,add complications and implications. You may want to return to the textfor additional evidence.
- Now that you know what you'rereally arguing, work on the introduction and conclusion. Make sure to beginyour paragraphs with topic sentences, linking idea(s) in each paragraphto those proposed in the thesis.
- Proofread. Aim for precision and economy in language. Read aloud so youcan hear stylistic infelicities. (Your ear will pick up what your eye hasmissed.)

[size=+1]An example of revision:In 1969, E. B. White wrote a one-paragraph comment on the first moonwalk. Eventually, White took the comment through six drafts. On the nextpage of this hand-out, you can see his third and sixth drafts. White'smain points are underlined. In Draft 6, White gets right to the point.He states the problem he's addressing—"the moon is a poor place for flags"—inhis third sentence. In Draft 3, he does not suggest this until the sentencethat begins "Yet," and never directly; it is the sum of the large amountof underlined material. Revision enabled White to be clearer by articulatingconcisely and directly an idea that was earlier implied; correspondingly,revision let him move an idea that was clear by the middle or end of anearly draft to the beginning. He also cut his introductory device, thebeach trip. The amount of space he devotes to it in draft 3 suggests thatWhite was attached to this example. But it prevents him from getting tothe point. So he substitutes the bouncy dance, which preserves the playfulnessof the trip to the beach but is more economical.

Draft 3: Planning a trip to the moon differs in no essential respect fromplanning a trip to the beach. You have to decide what to take along, whatto leave behind. Should the thermos jug go? The child's rubber horse? Thedill pickles? These are the sometimes fateful decisions on which the successor failure of the whole outing turns. Something goes along that spoilseverything because it is always in the way; something gets	**Draft 6: The moon, it turns out, is a great pla men. One-sixthgravity must be a lot of fun, a Armstrong and Aldrin went into theirbouncy dance, like two happy children, it was a mon onlyof triumph but of gaiety. The moon, on t hand, is a poor placefor flags. Ours looked st awkward, trying to float on the breezethat d blow. (There must be a lesson here somewhe traditional,of course, for explorers to plant t**

left behindthat is desperately needed for comfort or for safety. The men who drewup the moon list for the astronauts planned long and hard and well. (Shouldthe vacuum cleaner go, to suck up moondust?) Among the items they sentalong, of course, was the little jointed flagpoles and the flag thatcould be stiffened to the breeze that did not blow. (It is traditionalamong explorers to plant the flag.) Yet the two men who steppedout on the surface of the moon were in a class by themselves and shouldhave been equipped accordingly: they were of the new breed of men,those who had seen the earth whole. When, following instructions, theycolored the moon red, white, and blue, they were fumbling with the past—orso it seemed to us, who watched, trembling with awe and admiration andpride. This moon plant was the last scene in the long book of nationalism,one that could have well been omitted. The moon still holds the keyto madness, which isuniversal, still controls the tides that lapon shores everywhere, still guards lovers that kiss in every land underno banner but the sky. What a pity we couldn't have forsworn our littleIwo Jima scene and planted instead a banner acceptable to all—a simplewhite handkerchief, perhaps, symbol of the common cold, which, like themoon, affects us all!	**but it struck us, as we watchedwith awe and admiration and pride, that our two fellows w universalmen, not national men, and should been equipped accordingly.Likeevery great r every great sea,the moon belongs to none andbelongs to all. It still holds the key to ma still controls thetides that lap on shores ever still guards the lovers that kissin every land banner but the sky. What a pity that in our m triumph we did not forswear the familiar Iw scene and plant insteada device acceptable limp white handkerchief, perhaps, symbolof common cold, which, like the moon, affect u all, unites us all!**

[size=+1]As you revise your own work, keep the followingprinciples in mind:

- *Revision entails rethinking your thesis.* Because clarity of visionis the result of experience, it is unreasonable to expect to come up withthe best thesis possible—one that clearly accounts for the complexitiesof the issue at hand—before beginning a draft, or even during a firstdraft. The best theses evolve; they are the products of the kind of precisethinking that is only possible to achieve by writing. Successful revisioninvolves bringing your thesis into focus—or, changing it altogether.
- *Revision entails making structural changes.* Drafting is usuallya process of discovering an idea or argument. Your argument will not becomeclearer if you only tinker with individual sentences. Successful revisioninvolves bringing the strongest ideas to the front of the essay, reorderingthe main points, cutting irrelevant

sections, adding implications. It alsoinvolves making the argument'sstructure visible by strengthening topic sentences and transitions.

- *Revision takes time.* Avoid shortcuts: the reward for sustained effortis a clearer, more persuasive, more sophisticated essay than a first draftcan be.

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Editing the Essay, Part One

Anyone who has gone through the ecstasies and agonies of writing an essay knows thesatisfaction (and sometimes the sadness) of finishing. Once you've done all the work of figuring outwhat you want to say, arriving at an arguable and interesting thesis, analyzing your evidence,organizing your ideas, and contending with counter-arguments, you may feel that you've got nothingleft to do but run spell-check, print it out and await your professor's response. But what spell-check can't discern is what real readers might think or feel when they read your essay: where theymight become confused, or annoyed, or bored, or distracted. Anticipating those responses is the jobof an editor—the job you take on as you edit your own work.

As you proceed, remember that sometimes what may seem like a smallproblem can mask (bea symptom of) a larger one. A poorly-worded phrase—one that seems, say, unclear or vague—mayjust need some tweaking to fix; but it *may*indicate that yourthinking hasn't developed fully yet, thatyou're not quite sure what you want to say. Your language may be vague or confusing because theidea itself is. So learning, as Yeats says, to "cast a cold eye" on your prose isn't just a matter ofarranging the finishing touches on your essay. It's about making your essay better from the inside(clarifying and deepening your ideas and insights) and from the outside (expressing those ideas inpowerful, lucid, graceful prose). These five guidelines can help.

1. Read your essay aloud. When we labor over sentences, we cansometimes lose sight of the largerpicture, of how all the sentences sound when they're read quickly one after the other, as your readerswill read them. When you read aloud, your ear will pick up some of the problems your eye might miss.

As you read your essay, remember the "The Princess and the Pea," the story of a princess so sensitiveshe was bothered by a single pea buried beneath the pile of mattresses she lay upon. As an editor, youwant to be like the princess—highly alert to anything that seems slightly odd or "off" in your prose. So if something strikes you as problematic, don't gloss over it. Investigate to uncover the nature of theproblem. Chances are, if something bothers you a little, it will bother your readers a lot.

2. Make sure all of your words are doing important work in making yourargument. Are all ofyour words and phrases necessary? Or are they just taking up space? Are your sentences tight andsharp, or are they loose and dull? Don't say in three sentences what you can say in one, and don't use14 words where five will do. You want every word in your sentence to add as much meaning andinflection as possible. When you see phrases like "My own personal opinion," ask yourself what"own personal" adds. Isn't that what "my" means?

Even small, apparently unimportant words like "says" are worth your attention. Instead of "says,"could you use a word like argues, acknowledges, contends, believes, reveals,

suggests, or claims? Wordslike these not only make your sentences more lively and interesting, they provide useful information: ifyou tell your readers that someone "acknowledges" something, that deepens their understanding ofhow or why he or she said that thing; "said" merely reports.

3. Keep in mind the concept of *le mot juste*. Always try tofind the perfect words, the most preciseand specific language, to say what you mean. Without using concrete, clear language, you can't convey to your readers exactly what you think about a subject; you can only speak in generalities, and everyone has already heard those: "The evils of society are a drain on our resources." Sentences likethis could mean so many things that they end up meaning nothing at all to your readers—or meaningsomething very different from what you intended. Be specific: What evils? Which societies? Whatresources? Your readers are reading your words to see what *you* think, what *you* have to say.

If you're having trouble putting your finger on just the right word, consult a thesaurus, but only toremind yourself of your options. Never choose words whose connotations or usual contexts you don'treally understand. Using language you're unfamiliar with can lead to more imprecision—and that canlead your reader to question your authority.

4. Beware of inappropriately elevated language—words and phrases thatare stilted, pompous,or jargony. Sometimes, in an effort to sound more reliable orauthoritative, or more sophisticated, wepuff up our prose with this sort of language. Usually we only end up sounding like we're trying tosound smart—which is a sure sign to our readers that we're not. If you find yourself inserting words orphrases because you think they'll sound impressive, reconsider. If your ideas are good, you don't needto strain for impressive language; if they're not, that language won't help anyway.

Inappropriately elevated language can result from nouns being used as verbs. Most parts of speechfunction better—more elegantly—when they play the roles they were meant to play; nouns work well asnouns and verbs as verbs. Read the following sentences aloud, and listen to how pompous they sound.

He exited the room. It is important that proponents and opponents of this bill dialogue about its contents before voting on it.

Exits and dialogues work better as nouns and there are plenty of ways of expressing those ideas withoutturning nouns into verbs.

He left the room. People should debate the pros and cons of this bill before voting.

Every now and then, though, this is a rule worth breaking, as in "He muscled his way to the front of theline." "Muscled" gives us a lot of information that might otherwise take several words or even sentencesto express. And because it's not awkward to read, but lively and descriptive, readers won't mind thetemporary shift in roles as "muscle" becomes a verb.

5. Be tough on your most dazzling sentences. As you revise, you mayfind that sentences youneeded in earlier drafts no longer belong—and these may be the sentences you're most fond of. We're allguilty of trying to sneak in our favorite sentences where they don't belong, because we can't bear to cutthem. But great writers are ruthless and will throw out brilliant lines if they're no longer relevant ornecessary. They know that readers will be less struck by the brilliance than by the inappropriateness ofthose sentences and they let them go.

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Editing the Essay, Part Two

When you read writing you like, ask yourself: How did the writer do that? How did the writermake me see this image, feel this feeling? Try to figure out how the writer achieves those effects, andthen try some of those moves on your own. Don't feel guilty about this; all great writers are greatreaders. In finding a new way to say something, we're always building on what came before, addingour voices to an ongoing conversation. Here are more ways to help you add yours.

1. Try to avoid repetitive sentence structure. Try to vary the rhythmin your sentences. Try toavoid starting all your sentences the same way. Try to write sentences of differing lengths. (Thestructure and the length of the preceding sentences make this choppy and dull to read, and readers getso distracted by the monotony of the *sound*, that they lose focus onthe *sense* of what you'resaying.)

2. *A word to the wise*: watch out for cliches. Phrases thatwe hear all the time have lost their impactand vividness, and you want your readers to feel that they're hearing a fresh voice when they readyour essay. Of course, avoiding cliches altogether is *easier said thandone.* Sometimes a cliche is justwhat you need to make a point, and trying to avoid them at all costs can make your prose seemstrained and unnatural. You don't want your prose to be so demanding thatyour readers*can't see theforest for the trees.* So get in the habit of questioning phrases thatcome to you especially easily todetermine whether they might be stale, whether there might be more powerful ways of expressingyour idea. When you use a cliche, do it intentionally, and don't do it toooften. *This is just the tip ofthe iceberg* on this subject, but let's not *push the envelope.*

3. Be sparing in your use of rhetorical or stylistic flourishes—cutesytouches like alliteration,double entendres, or extended metaphors. A well-placed sentencefragment or a sentence beginningwith "And" or "But" or "Or" can emphasize a point well. But too much of this sort of thing andyou'll sound shrill. Or dull. It's okay to wink at your reader every now and then, if that'sappropriate to your essay's tone, but try to avoid spending so much time winking that you neverseem to have your eyes open. (See, that's a little cutesy, but at least it's not an example of #4.)

4. Beware of mixed metaphors. While metaphors can help make abstractideas more vivid andconcrete for your readers, piling them one on top of the other can be confusing. Consider: "The fabricof society vibrates to the fluctuations of the stock market." There are too many metaphors herecompeting for your readers' attention. Does it really make sense, anyway, to say that fabric vibrates?It's usually better to pick one image and stick with it. So if you want to use a metaphor like "fabricof society," choose language that's appropriate

for talking about fabric: "The fabric of society is moredelicate than it sometimes seems."

5. Don't use "crutches" to support weak, imprecise language. Phraseslike "It is almostimpossible to extricate...." or "The writer's almost magical ability to transform...." use "almost" as acrutch. Either it's "impossible" or it's not, "magical" or not. If it *is* impossible, or if you're claimingit's so, be bold and say it! Take responsibility for your claim by being direct about it; don't hidebehind an "almost." If it's *not* impossible, be clear about what it*is*. Tough? Very difficult?

6. Don't call something a fact that isn't one, even if it may be true."The fact that Shakespeareis a great writer ..." That's not a fact, even though most people agree that he's pretty good. "The factthat water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit ..." That's a fact. Similarly, don't call something unprecedented if you just mean to say it's rare or surprising. Unprecedented means somethingspecific and literal. (Of course, all words have literal meanings, but not all of them need to be usedequally literally. Many can be bent, and stretched, and played around with. But be careful whenyou're using words, like "fact," whose very natures require attention to accuracy.)

7. "But"—only use it if you really mean it; that is, if you're introducing a counter-argumentor contradiction. Otherwise, your readers will wonder what you're"but-ing" against. You losecredibility if you seem to be trying to create high drama or conflict or suggesting counter-argumentwhere there really isn't any. Needless to say, this also goes for "however." (And why is "Needless tosay" necessary? If it really is needless to say what you're saying, why are you saying it?)

8. Try not to overuse forms of the verb "to be." Replace some of those"are"s and "were"s withwords that add more energy to your sentences. Instead of saying "Jones's theory is a directcontradiction of Smith's" say "Jones's theory contradicts Smith's." Instead of "This historian isoutspoken about revisionist theories," try "This historian speaks out against ...."

9. Avoid sexist language. A sure way to lose your readers is to makethem feel that you're notspeaking to them, that your essay hasn't been written with them in mind. Using sexist language, even ifyou don't mean to offend, is certain to alienate people. Wherever you use phrases like "Throughouthistory, man has ..." figure out how to make it gender-neutral, or how to include women in your world-view. Here, for instance, you could say: "humans" or "we" or "people" or "men and women."

When you refer to someone who has no specific gender ("The last line confuses the reader ..."), howshould you follow that up? If you say "he," referring to "the reader," you're excluding the possibilitythat the reader is female. There's no perfect solution to this problem, as our language is still evolving toaccommodate issues like these, but there are things you can do. Occasionally, you can use "he or she."Don't repeat that too many times, though. It gets irritating quickly. You can switch from "he" to "she"a few times throughout your essay, but don't do it within one specific example, or your reader willbecome confused. Whenever possible, use plurals to avoid the problem: "Readers may be confusedwhen they get to the last line" is a neat way of side-stepping the issue. And don't let your attempts toavoid sexist language lead you into ungrammatical phrasing: "One should always edit their essay." Youneed to be mindful of sexist language *and* the elegance of yourprose, not one or the other.

10. Make sure you're not over-quoting. Try to quote only the mostessential, illustrative, orvividly-phrased material. Too much quoting obscures your own thinking, while highlighting that ofyour source. It suggests to your reader that you're leaning heavily on your source because you don'thave much to say for yourself, or that you couldn't be bothered, or didn't take the time, to summarize.Remember that your readers are trying to figure out what *you* think.If they only wanted to hear yoursources' positions, they'd go read *them*.

Remember, too, that unless you're reasonably sure your sources are known to most readers (Plato orJoan of Arc or Freud, for example), you need to introduce them in some way. Even a brief mention of asource's field or area of expertise can help orient your reader: "as philosopher Robert Nozick says, ..."

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Tips on Grammar, Punctuation and StyleCommas and semi-colons. If the rules you learned about commas andsemi-colons don't mean muchto you, forget them and try this: Read one of your sentences aloud and see where you wouldnaturally pause, where you would draw a breath. If it's a short pause, like that just was, youprobably need a comma. If it's a longer pause, but not quite a full stop (for which you'd need aperiod), you probably need a semi-colon; remember that whatever follows a semi-colon must be ableto stand on its own, as a full sentence, like this one.

If you don't want your reader to pause, there shouldn't be a comma, there, because as, thisdemonstrates it's very difficult to figure, out, what you're saying when your punctuation, makes thesentence unreadable.

Your sentences shouldn't leave your reader hyperventilating from the constant shallow breaths thatover-punctuation requires. Nor should they be gasping for breath at the end of a long, unpunctuatedsentence. (Consider yourself responsible for your readers' cardiovascular health.)

Check your dashes and hyphens. When you're setting off a clause—thisone is a good example—usethe longer dash, called an m-dash. (You can indicate this dash with two hyphens—like this—if youdon't have an m-dash function on your computer.) Be sure that the parts of the sentence that precedeand follow the dashes would make sense even if you removed the dashes and the words they bracket.(In the example above, the sentence is readable with or without the clause inside the dashes.)

You can also use the m-dash in place of a colon if you want to emphasize more dramatically the wordsthat follow: "The mantlepiece was lined with photographs of people she loved—her mother, hergrandmother, a favorite aunt." Or you can use it to add a surprising element into a sentence: "Herfamily's photographs were displayed on the mantlepiece; there were pictures of parents, grandparents,and siblings—and of Muffin, a Yorkshire terrier." Whereas the m-dash is used to set off parts of asentence, hyphens are used to join words together: broken-hearted, two-thirds, sister-in-law.

Always identify abbreviations before you use them, unless you feel reasonably confident thatthe average intelligent reader would be able to identify theacronym—like when the acronym ismore commonly used than the words it stands for. (It would be odd to write out all the words for ESP,NATO, CEO, or AIDS.) Keep in mind the

audience for the particular essay you're writing, though;readers who are specialists in a particular discipline may not want or need to have terms spelled out forthem.

Try to avoid split infinitives. This is no longer a hard and fastrule, and occasionally keeping aninfinitive together in a sentence can introduce more awkwardness than the split, but usually the split isungraceful. (Imagine: To be or to not be.)

Make sure all your referents are clear. When you say "This theory" or"that point" or, simply,"it," is it clear which theory or point you're referring to? When you use "he" or "she" or "thesecritics," will your reader have to pause to figure out who all these people are?

There's more to say about *this*. We often throw in a "this" whenwe're not entirely sure exactlywhat we want to draw our readers' attention to, especially when we're making a complex argumentwith many different elements. Sometimes vagueness in our language can be a symptom of muddledthinking. So ask yourself, what does this "this" refer to? What words would I replace it with? If you'renot easily able to answer, you need to go back and work out your ideas in that section. (Readers willnever understand what you mean when you don't know yourself. When you notice vague referents, orother apparently minor problems, take the opportunity to ask yourself if there might be any largerproblem lurking beneath your surface error.)

Never use "that" when you're referring to a person: "The first manthatwalked on the moon.""The author that she was referring to." These are people, not objects—it's insulting to call them "that."Use who or whom: "The first man who walked on the moon." "The author to whom she wasreferring." Are you using "that" because you're shaky on the who/whom thing? See below. (And whileyou're at it, consider whether you're twisting your sentences around to avoid any other grammaticalpoints you're uncertain of. If so, take control! Liberate yourself! Learn the rules once and for all soyou can write freely, instead of skulking around trying not to break the rules—or breaking them withoutrealizing it. Try starting a text file in which you list the rules you tend to forget, and keep it open whenyou write. You can look rules up in any style manual, or come to the Writing Center.)

***Who* is what doing what to *whom*?** That's the question youneed to ask yourself if you're uncertainwhich word to use. The one that does the action (the subject) is*who*. The one that gets something doneto it (the object) is *whom.*

Avoid passive voice. It tends to sap energy and power from your prose.It's usually better to say"Einstein's theory" than "the theory that was formulated by Einstein."

Italics and underlines. You can use one or the other but neverboth. They mean the same thing—underlining used to be a copy-editing mark to tell printers to set certain words in italic type.Underlining italics meant the editor wanted the words taken out of italics. So underlining your already-italicized phrase is, in effect, like using a double negative.

Be sure all of your sentences have parallel construction. Thissentence doesn't have it: "Re-reading my first draft, I notice it's trite, repetitive, and with no thesis." This sentence does: "Re-reading my first draft, I notice that it's trite and repetitive, and that it has no thesis." Or you could say:"Re-reading my first draft, I notice it's trite, repetitive, and lacking in a thesis." In the two exampleswith parallel construction, you could take out any of the words in the list and still have the sentencemake sense.

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