

A Guide to AXES Paragraph Construction

While a strong overall thesis is essential to writing a successful academic paper, developing paragraphs with clear arguments and focused use of evidence is just as crucial. Staying on topic, linking your claims, and choosing the right evidence can be challenging without a plan for carefully structuring the content of each paragraph. The AXES method of paragraph construction comprises four elements that should be present for each claim you seek to make in a paper: your **A**ssertion, **eX**ample, **E**xplanation, and **S**ignificance.

	A ssertion	eX ample	E xplanation	S ignificance
What is it / what does it do?	Thesis statement/claim of the paragraph	Quote, data, or other evidence that supports your assertion	Shows how the example supports/proves the assertion	Reveals how or why the paragraph supports the paper's overall thesis
Why do I need it?	It links a paper's arguments to each other and to the overall thesis	It is necessary to prove the basis of an assertion	It explains how an example proves an assertion (evidence doesn't speak for itself)	It answers the "So What?" question of your paper
How does it improve my paper?	A statement that contains a confident and concrete argument or position is most effective	More specific examples = more precise analysis	Helps prevent your evidence from being a mere list of facts or quotes	If you can't explain the significance of your assertion and example, they don't belong in the paper
Questions to consider:	Is my assertion a specific arguable point? Does it make a claim that must be proven or explained? Does it support my overall thesis?	Does my evidence clearly support my assertion? Have I chosen the most relevant quotes or data for this paragraph?	Have I analyzed my evidence? Do I clearly show how it connects to my assertion? Does it connect back to my topic sentence?	Why is my assertion important to my overall argument? How does my use of evidence relate to my paper as a whole? Do my examples prove or challenge my own thesis? What do I want the reader to take away from this paragraph?

Remember that while AXES is a helpful acronym for remembering each step, these elements may not always appear in the same way. Some of your sentences may not neatly fit into one of these categories (i.e. context preceding an example) or may follow a different pattern of construction (i.e. AEXEXS, AEEXS, AXEXE). Especially for longer research papers, theses, and dissertations, your assertion may require several paragraphs of *examples* and *explanation* before you fully examine its *significance* (but this should be done before introducing a new *assertion*).

Adapted from handouts produced by Thurgood Marshall College, USC's Annenberg School, and Cal State Fullerton.

Examples of AXES in Academic Paragraphs

A helpful way to identify AXES construction in your own papers is to identify your Assertion, eXamples, Explanation, and Significance in each paragraph. This will give you a visual accounting of whether you are integrating each element into your work. If too many of your sentences consist of the same element, it may be time to revise and reshape your content and construction.

A = Assertion

X = eXample

E = Explanation

S = Significance

Example #1: SETs have also come to occupy a place of considerable institutional importance for their role in personnel considerations, informing important decisions like hiring, firing, tenure, and promotion. **(A)** Seldin (1993, as cited in Pounder, 2007) finds that 86% of higher educational institutions use SETs as important factors in personnel decisions. A 1991 survey of department chairs found 97% of used student evaluations to assess teaching performance (US Department of Education). **(X)** Since the mid-late 1990s, a general trend towards comprehensive methods of teacher evaluation that include multiple forms of assessment has been observed (Berk, 2005). However, recent research suggests the usage of SETs in personnel decisions is still overwhelmingly common, though hard percentages are hard to come by. **(E)** In certain contexts, student evaluations can also have ramifications beyond the level of individual instructors. Particularly as public schools have experienced pressure in recent decades to adopt neoliberal, market-based approaches to self-assessment and adopt a student-as-consumer mindset (Darwin, 2012; Marginson, 2009), information from evaluations can even feature in department- or school-wide funding decisions. **(S)** *(Text of Example #1 adapted from the OWL Purdue Online Writing Lab, APA Sample Paper)*

Example #2: How history was taught and to what ends was by no means an homogenous enterprise in Victorian education. **(A)** The great variety of history textbooks employed by myriad educational institutions in 19th-century England has been illuminated in some detail by Valerie E. Chancellor, who has argued that “of all school subjects, history is perhaps the most obviously a vehicle for the opinions of the teacher... [giving] scope for the expression of a wide variety of

political, moral and religious ideas, and since these are embedded in a traditional and often emotive story, they are arguably more open to acceptance and less liable to detection by the pupil” (Chancellor 8). **(X)** This type of individualistic approach to history, as well as many other academic subjects, was a hallmark of liberal British educational policy, which, when compared to that of continental Europe, was almost entirely devoid of state intervention. It also encompassed a moral tradition of history that was a key component of the literary historical tradition prevalent in the 18th-century, and one which persisted well into the Victorian period. **(E)** Social reformer Octavia Hill wrote in 1883 that “the teachings of history show us the reason of our hope” (Hill 591). **(X)** This sense of optimism and progress based in the obligation of personal and communal improvement, and fostered by British liberalism and emphasized in religious and non-conformist instruction, was a key element to be gained through the study of the past. **(E)** It also related to a larger nationalistic project of establishing Britain’s primacy in the world, both past and present, as the vast majority of history education outside of the classics focused on British (and specifically English) history and the story of its upward progress as a nation. **(S)**

(Text of Example #2 adapted from CGU History Department Dissertation, 2020)