

The Basics of Academic Writing

The basics of academic writing spring from two simple questions: what do I want to accomplish in this particular piece of writing? Who are my readers, and how can I best communicate with them? These two questions will help you to determine your *purpose* and your *audience*. One of the keys to writing a successful essay is to consider your purpose and audience *before* you begin to write. With an internal reason for writing (beyond the grade) and an understanding of your ideal reader (beyond your instructor), you will be well prepared to move on to the next step: creating a meaningful thesis statement to guide your work.

The Thesis Statement

We know that the thesis statement is an important component of an academic essay. But what is a thesis statement, exactly? It is useful to think of the thesis statement as an expression of the essay's central focus. Most essays are trying to prove something about the topic that they examine. In your thesis statement, you will articulate this claim.

The thesis statement goes by many names. You may also hear it referred to as your *claim*, your *main point*, your *controlling idea* (because it controls the development of the essay), or your *so what* (because it explains the significance and importance of the essay topic). Whatever name is used, the thesis statement plays a double role in each essay. It is useful to the writer, who will develop and organize the essay around the ideas expressed in the thesis statement. It is equally useful to the reader, who will look to it for guidance so that he or she can anticipate and follow the writer's ideas. Without a thesis statement, the writer will not know what to write, and the reader will not fully understand what has been written.

In the process of writing, the thesis statement does not always come first. Many writers prefer to save the thesis statement for last, after they have explored their ideas in the first draft. Other writers start with a thesis statement, only to discover that it does not really express what they want to say. This is good. It lends credence to the idea that writing is a process of exploration and discovery.

Starting with a Question

One of the tried-and-true methods of arriving at a good working thesis statement is to start by asking a series of questions about your topic. (The term 'working thesis statement' alludes to the fact that the thesis statement is a work in progress; you may change it along the way if you wish.)

- Why were you initially interested in writing about the text (or texts) you have chosen?
- How is your text part of a larger system, conversation, or issue?
- How is your text similar or different to other texts you have read on similar subjects?
- Why are the ideas, concerns, and values addressed in the text important?
- How are patterns of words, images, or ideas revealed in the text? Why are they important?
- Why and how does the author use language to reflect his or her ideas, concerns, and values?
- How does this text interact with your own experiences, ideas, concerns, and values?

You may notice something interesting about the above questions: all of them begin with the words *how* and *why*. *How* and *why* questions are typically more useful than *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* questions; while the latter words will lead you to summarize your text (telling what happened to whom, and when and where it happened), *how* and *why* questions will lead you to analyze the text, creating original claims.

In *The Craft of Research*, authors Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph W. Williams suggest the following formula as a useful articulation of your questions:

I am studying __X__ because I want to find out how/why _____ in order to help my reader understand how/why/whether _____.

Asking these questions is the first step; answering them is the next one. To formulate a working thesis, choose the question that interests you most, and then work to develop the clearest, most complete, and most complex answer possible to that question. Your answer is your thesis statement, the central idea that you will explore and support in your essay.

Useful Words in a Thesis Statement

A thesis statement should make a claim that is not obvious to a reader who is reasonably well acquainted with the topic or text. A controversial or arguable thesis statement inspires the reader to continue reading, in order to see if the body of the essay proves the claim outlined in the thesis. ‘Controversial’ and ‘arguable’ do not mean that the thesis statement must shock or upset the reader; they simply mean that the reader should say, “Hmm... that’s interesting. I wonder if this is true. I’m going to read the rest of the essay to find out.”

As you begin to analyze literature, you may feel that you have nothing new or controversial to say about a text. However, certain words and phrases can help you to create logical relationships and add complexity to your thesis statement (adapted from E.B. Buchanan’s *The Writer’s Palette*):

Words of Addition: also, besides, equally important, furthermore, in addition, moreover

Words of Consequence: accordingly, as a result, because, consequently, therefore

Words of Concession: admittedly, certainly, granted, indeed, of course, to be sure

Words of Difference: although, despite, however, in contrast, nevertheless, nonetheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, whereas

Words of Result: accordingly, as a result, so, therefore, thus

Words of Similarity: by the same token, likewise, in comparison, similarly

An additional formula may be useful: *Although on the surface it appears that _____, when we look closer, it is actually true that _____.*

PIE Paragraph Structure

Strong paragraphs are essential to a strongly structured essay. Most essays have a three-part structure, with an introduction, body, and conclusion; likewise, individual paragraphs also display a three-part structure. Use the **PIE** technique to form strong paragraphs:

POINT Just as your essay has a thesis statement introducing the main point of your essay, each paragraph has a point (also known as a topic sentence) to tie it together.

The point...

...is typically the first sentence of the paragraph.

...introduces the main idea you will discuss in that paragraph.

...shows how this paragraph relates to your thesis statement and to the rest of your essay.

Each point belongs in its own separate paragraph; don't combine more than one point in a single paragraph.

ILLUSTRATION Your illustration is composed of the concrete details, facts, quotes, and textual examples that support your point and make it credible.

Consider...

How many details or pieces of evidence do you need to illustrate your point thoroughly?

Will direct quotations, paraphrases, or summaries from the text best illustrate your point?

How much material is too much for one paragraph? (*Paragraphs with too many illustrations are repetitive and unwieldy.*)

EXPLANATION Your paragraph won't be complete without a thorough explanation. Here, you analyze the connection between your point and your illustration(s). Your goal is to give your readers a clear understanding of the text, based on your own understanding. Focus on *how* and *why*, and remember to reiterate the connection between this paragraph, your thesis statement, and your essay as a whole.

Ask yourself...

Have I explained my illustration(s) thoroughly in relation to my point?

Have I explained how this paragraph relates to my thesis?

When I read the paragraph, do I myself understand the point that I am making?

Once your explanation is complete, start a new paragraph. If you feel that you are beginning to repeat yourself, this is another good indication that it is time to start a new paragraph.

The wonderful thing about **PIE** is that, when consistently followed, the method can be a 'cure-all' for some of the most common problems of logic and organization:

- **Paragraphs too long**
- **Paragraphs too short**
- **Disorganized paragraphs**
- **Not enough textual examples**
- **Too many textual examples**
- **Unclear points**
- **Unexplained logical leaps**
- **Body paragraphs unrelated to thesis statement**
- **Too much summary, not enough analysis**

Summary versus Analysis

Speaking of ‘too much summary, not enough analysis,’ First-Year Composition instructors often write this comment on their students’ drafts. What does it mean, and what can be done about it? In an analytical essay, too much summary will frustrate your readers; they will ask, “What can you tell me about the text that I couldn’t figure out by reading it myself?”

Here is a summary paragraph about the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*, taken from James DiGiovanna’s June 3 movie review in the *Tucson Weekly*. This paragraph is a summary because it focuses on *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*; it retells the facts as it describes several scenes from the movie:

Summary

In one of the most visually stunning moments in this visually stunning film, the skies above New York fill with birds fleeing an approaching storm... There’s also some amazing footage of giant tornadoes destroying Los Angeles, a wall of water shooting down Fifth Avenue, a fortress-like cloud engulfing England, and so many more weather scenes that you can barely count them.

To transform this paragraph into an analysis, we need to use **PIE**. The key is in the point. Summary paragraphs begin with summary points – points which describe what happens, not how or why it happens. However, if we begin the paragraph with an analytical point, looking at the *how* and *why* of the scenes, we can easily follow up with analytical illustrations and explanations. (Refer back to the questions in “Starting with a Question” for guidance.)

Let’s try answering these questions: “Why did the director, Roland Emmerich, include these scenes in the movie? How did he hope to affect his viewers?”

Analysis

As you analyze more texts in your First-Year Composition classes, your balance of summary and analysis will naturally shift. You will feel more comfortable structuring your essay around *how* and *why* questions. Practice makes perfect, after all. In the meantime, ask your instructor if he or she has any expectations regarding the amount of summary that belongs in your essay. If he or she does not, ask yourself, “What must be retold in order for my reader to understand my thesis statement and my points?” These are the elements of summary that belong in your essay.