ENG102: A Guide to Academic Research

Course Pack 1: Theories and Practical Rhetoric
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Chapter 1: Thinking Critically about Research

What is “Research” and Why Should You Use It?

Research always begins with the goal of answering a question. In your quest to answer basic research questions, you turn to a variety of different sources for evidence: reference resources, people, evaluative and opinionated articles, and other sources. All along the way, you continually evaluate and re-evaluate the credibility of your sources.

For example, if you wanted to find out where you could buy the best computer within your budget, your question might be “what kind of computer should I buy and where should I buy it?” To answer your questions about computers, the first research tool you might use the Internet, where you would look up “computer retailers” on Google or Yelp. You might also ask friends where they bought their computers and what they thought were the best (and worst) stores to go to. You would probably also talk to your friends about the kind of computer they bought: a Windows-based PC versus a Macintosh computer, or a desktop versus a laptop computer, for example. You could go to a computer store and ask the salespeople for their advice, though you would perhaps be more critical of what they tell you since they are biased. After all, salespeople are trying to sell you a computer that they sell in their stores, not necessarily the “best” computer for the amount of money you want to spend. To get the opinions of computer experts, you might do research in computer magazines or web sites, looking for reviews and ratings of different models of computers in your price range.

Other examples would include what type of cell phone or tablet you could buy. What process would you use to make this decision? Would you research as described in the previous scenario?
Of course, you could skip this research process entirely. You could simply go to a store and buy the first computer, tablet, or cell phone in your budget based on nothing more than a “gut feeling” or based on some criteria that has little to do with the quality of the device—the color, for example.

Who knows? By just guessing like this, you might actually end up with a device as good as you would have ended up with after your research. After all, researchers can never be certain that the evidence they find to answer their research questions is entirely correct, and the fact that there are different kinds of cell phones available suggests it is possible for people to look at the research and reach different conclusions about what is the “best.” Talk to loyal Apple owners and you will get a very different answer about “the best” kind of device than you will from loyal Android owners.

Nonetheless, the likelihood is quite high that the device you bought after careful research is a better choice than the one you would have bought after conducting no research at all. Most of us would agree that you have a better chance of being “right” about your choice (and just about anything else) if that choice is informed by research.

**Exercise 1.1**

Working alone or collaboratively in small groups, answer the following questions:

- What are some examples of some of the decisions you have made that were based on a research method similar to the one described here? What do you think would have been the result of your decision had you not done any research?
- Can you think of any decisions that you have made that were not based on research? Would these decisions have turned out more favorably had you conducted some basic research?
- What kinds of decisions do you think are potentially best made without research?

**What Is Different about Academic Research?**

The reasons academics and scholars conduct research are essentially the same as the reasons someone does research on the right computer or cell phone to buy: to find information and answers to questions with a method that has a greater chance of being accurate than a guess or a “gut feeling.” College professors in a history department, physicians at a medical school, graduate students studying physics, college juniors in a literature class, students in an introductory research writing class—all of these people are members of the academic community, and they all use research to find answers to their questions that have a greater chance of being “right” than making guesses or betting on feelings.

*Students in an introductory research writing course are “academics,” the same as college professors? Generally speaking, yes.* You might not think of yourself as being a part of the same group as college professors or graduate students, but when you enter a college classroom, you are joining the academic community in the sense that you are expected to use your research to support your ideas and you are agreeing to the conventions of research within your discipline. Another way of looking at it is first-year college students and college professors more or less follow the same “rules” when it comes to making points supported by research and evidence.
Many first-year college students think essays will be “just like in high school” and especially if they were in honors or AP classes. But research is most often required in college writing, and not the kind of research done in high school. “Looking things up on the Web” is not research at the college level. College writing implies scholarship, and scholarship asks students to enter the conversation among academics, experts in their fields of study.
Chapter 2: Rhetorical Theories and Structures

Aristotle and the Art of Persuasion

Aristotle was an ancient Greek philosopher with generations who studied under him, including the famous Plato. Men listened to him speak about many things, including the art of persuasion or rhetoric. In his writings, the philosopher lays out what is now considered classical argument structure, which is a philosophy, a set of rules and elements, and a format. Key elements include ethos, pathos and logos. The argument’s structure includes the speaker, the argument itself, and the audience. Aristotle believed that in presenting what is true...in a fair way...with solid evidence...and consideration of people’s emotions...was the most ethical way to bring an audience to one’s way of thinking.

Aristotle’s Structure of Argument

The following has been adapted from instructor materials at community college Web pages:
Aristotelian Argument

One of the oldest organizing devices in rhetoric is the classical argument, which incorporates the five parts of a discourse that ancient teachers of rhetoric believed were necessary for persuasion, especially when the audience included a mixture of reactions from favorable to hostile. They often prescribed this order to students, not because it was absolutely ideal, but because using the scheme encouraged the writer to take account of some of the most important elements of composing:

- Beginning in an interesting way.
- Providing background or context that is relevant to their specific audience.
- Stating their claims and evidence clearly and emphatically.
- Taking account of opposing viewpoints and anticipating objections.
- And concluding in a satisfying and effective way.

The classical argument isn’t a cookie-cutter template: simply filling in the parts does not by itself make you successful. But if you use the structure as a way to make sure you cover all the needs of all parts of your audience, you will find it a very useful heuristic for developing effective arguments.

Format

Introduction

(includes one or more of the following)

- Exordium: The beginning or opening words, designed to win attention and good will by introducing the case in an interesting and favorable light.
- Exposition or Narration: An account of the history of the case (what gave rise to the present problem; how the issues developed).
- Direct statement of the case (the proposition to be proved or defended—thesis).
- Division of Proofs: An outline of how the writer will present the evidence.

The introduction has four jobs to do:

1. It must attract the interest of a specific audience and focus it on the subject of the argument.
2. It must provide enough background information to make sure that the audience is aware of both the general problem as well as the specific issue or issues the writer is addressing (for instance, not just the problem of pollution but the specific problem of groundwater pollution in Phoenix, AZ).
3. It must clearly signal the writer’s specific position on the issue and/or the direction of her/his argument. Usually a classical argument has a written thesis statement early in the paper—usually in the first paragraph or two.
4. It must establish the writer’s role or any special relationship the writer may have to the subject or the audience (for instance, you’re committed to the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure because your mother is a breast cancer survivor). It should also establish the image of the writer (the ethos) that he/she wants to project in the argument: caring, aggressive, passionate, etc.

Some Questions to Ask as You Develop Your Introduction

1. What is the situation that this argument responds to?
2. What elements of background or context need to be presented for this audience? Is this new information or am I just reminding them of matters they already have some familiarity with?
3. What are the principal issues involved in this argument?
4. Where do I stand on this issue?
5. What is the best way to capture and focus the audience’s attention?
6. What tone should I establish?
7. What image of myself should I project?

Body
(includes the following)

- Confirmation of case by presenting evidence in its favor (includes one or more of the following):
  - facts
  - reasons
  - statistics
  - testimony of experts
  - opinions supported by facts
  - reports
  - examples
  - logical reasoning (inductive or deductive)
  - analogy
- Acknowledge merit of opposing view
- Refutation of opposing views by demonstrating that they are:
  - untrue
  - illogical
  - self-contradictory
  - ambiguous (terms not clearly defined)
  - dishonest (a deliberate attempt to deceive)
  - absurd

Confirmation
There’s a strong temptation in argument to say “Why should you think so? Because!” and leave it at that. But a rational audience has strong expectations of the kinds of proof you will and will not provide to help it accept your point of view. Most of the arguments used in the confirmation tend to be of the inartistic kind, but artistic proofs can also be used to support this section.

Some Questions to Ask as You Develop Your Confirmation

1. What are the arguments that support my thesis that my audience is most likely to respond to?
2. What arguments that support my thesis is my audience least likely to respond to?
3. How can I demonstrate that these are valid arguments?
4. What kind of inartistic proofs does my audience respect and respond well to?
5. Where can I find the facts and testimony that will support my arguments?
6. What kinds of artistic proofs will help reinforce my position?

Concession/Refutation
You want to concede any points that you would agree on or that will make your audience more willing to listen to you (as long as they don’t fatally weaken your own side). For instance, you might argue that we
need stronger groundwater pollution laws, but concede that we shouldn’t hold cities and municipalities legally liable for cleaning up groundwater that was polluted before the law was passed, if you think that will help sell your case. Again, here is a place to use both pathos and ethos: by conceding those matters of feeling and values that you can agree on, while stressing the character issues, you can create the opportunity for listening and understanding.

But you will also have to refute (that is, counter or out-argue) the points your opposition will make. You can do this in four ways:

1. Show by the use of facts, reasons, and testimony that the opposing point is totally wrong. You must show that the opposing argument is based on incorrect evidence, questionable assumptions, bad reasoning, prejudice, superstition, or ill will.
2. Show that the opposition has some merit but is flawed in some way. For instance, the opposing viewpoint may be true only in some circumstances or within a limited sphere of application, or it may only apply to certain people, groups, or conditions. When you point out the exceptions to the opposition rule, you show that its position is not as valid as its proponents claim it is.
3. Show that the opposition has merits but is outweighed by other considerations. You are claiming, in essence, that truth is relative: when a difficult choice has to be made, we must put first things first. For instance, you may say that it’s undesirable for young girls to have abortions, but when girls as young as ten become pregnant, they’re too young to take on the burdens of motherhood and must not be forced to carry the pregnancy to term. Or you may say that yes, it’s true that my proposal is expensive, but consider the costs if we do not undertake it, or how much the price will go up if we wait to undertake it, etc.
4. Show that the reasoning used by the opposition is flawed: in other words, that it contains logical fallacies. For instance, the opposition may claim that anyone who does not support a retaliatory bombing of Afghanistan to punish Osama bin Laden and the regime that supports him is not a patriotic American; you can show that this is an example of the “either/or” fallacy by showing that there are other patriotic responses than nuking a Stone Age country further back into the Stone Age—for instance arresting bin Laden and the Taliban leaders and turning them over to the World Court, bringing them to trial in the US justice system, and the like.

In general, strategies 2 and 3 are easier to pull off than strategy 1. Showing that a position is sometimes valid gives the opposition a face-saving “out” and preserves some sense of common ground.

Some Questions to Ask as You Develop Your Concession/Refutation

1. What are the most important opposing arguments? What concessions can I make and still support my thesis adequately?
2. How can I refute opposing arguments or minimize their significance?
3. What are the possible objections to my own position?
4. What are the possible ways someone can misunderstand my own position?
5. How can I best deal with these objections and misunderstandings?

Conclusion

(includes one or more of the following)

- Recapitulation and summary of argument: to repeat is to reinforce and make certain readers have not misunderstood.
Peroration: A final, heightened appeal for support.
Propose a solution.

Conclusions are hard and there’s a temptation to simply repeat your thesis and topic sentences and pray for a miracle. However, if you try to step back in your conclusion, you can often find a way to give a satisfying sense of closure. Instead of simply restating, you might refer back to the background: why has this remained a problem and why is it so important to solve it, your way, now?

Or you might refer back to the common ground you have with your audience: why does accepting your argument reinforce your shared beliefs and values? You might include a quote from a subject matter expert (not just from quotes.com), include a call to action, and reference an element of your introduction (if you wrote a good one). Too many times classical arguments don’t close—they just stop, as if the last page is missing. And this sense of incompleteness leaves readers dissatisfied and sometimes less likely to accept your argument. So spending a little extra time to round the conclusion out is almost always worthwhile in making the argument more successful.

Some Questions to Ask as You Develop Your Conclusion

1. How can I best leave a strong impression of the rightness and importance of my view?
2. How can I best summarize or exemplify the most important elements of my argument?
3. What is the larger significance of the argument? What long-range implications will have the most resonance with my readers?
4. How can I bring the argument “full circle” and leave my readers satisfied with the ending of my argument?

References


The Toulmin Method

From the Writing@CSU Guide

When learning written argument, it is always helpful to observe how others argue effectively or ineffectively. The Toulmin method, based on the work of philosopher Stephen Toulmin, is one way of analyzing a text that we read, with an eye toward responding to that particular argument (as in a writing assignment that asks us to respond) and, ultimately, toward analyzing and improving the arguments we ourselves make.

Definition of the Toulmin Method

Thorough analysis requires us to go beyond the kinds of "gut-level" responses we undergo when reading. To respond analytically to an argument is to do much more than state a basic agreement or disagreement with it; it is to determine the basis of our agreement or disagreement. In other words, analysis is a process of discovering how the argumentative strategies an author employs (the how and why levels of an argument) lead us to respond to the content (the what level) of that argument in the way that we do. Sometimes, too, such analysis can cause us to change our minds about our judgment of how effective or ineffective an argument is.

The Toulmin method, in short, is an effective way of getting to the how and why levels of the arguments we read. It is a type of textual "dissection" that allows us to break an argument into its different parts (such as claim, reasons, and evidence) so that we can make judgments on how well the different parts work together.

Why Use the Toulmin Method?

The Toulmin Method is a way of doing very detailed analysis, in which we break an argument into its various parts and decide how effectively those parts participate in the overall whole. When we use this method, we identify the argument's claim, reasons, and evidence, and evaluate the effectiveness of each.

However, it can be said that Toulmin works somewhat like a formula to be applied to arguments, and that as such it exhibits some limitations. It is often not very well applied, for example, to arguments that are not themselves organized in a linear way and written in the tradition of Western rhetoric. And, as Timothy
Crusius and Carolyn E. Channell point out in *The Aims of Argument*, this method is limited to logical analysis, and therefore excludes other types of evaluation/analysis which are equally important (such as the Critical Reading strategies mentioned elsewhere in the Writing Center.) But Toulmin proves for many to be a good starting point.

**Parts of an Argument**

Using the Toulmin method requires that we take an argument apart and examine its various elements. This "dissection" allows us to understand the argument more fully, summarize it more accurately, and discuss its effectiveness or ineffectiveness more intelligently than we would have otherwise.

It might be helpful to envision writing the parts of an argument like building a house of cards, in which you work backwards, beginning with the uppermost level (the claim). Each level is balanced precariously on the level beneath it. And in order for an argument to hold up under careful scrutiny, each level must be strong enough to support what is placed on top of it.

**The Claim**

Think of the claim in an argument as the most general statement in that argument. It may not be a particularly general statement all by itself, and some for arguments are very narrow indeed. But the claim is like the umbrella statement that all other parts of an argument have to fall under. It is the uppermost level of our "house of cards."

After you have identified an argument's claim, it is important to determine how far the author intends to carry that claim. The next step in this process, in other words, is the identification of any qualifiers or exceptions the author makes to the argument's claim.

**Identifying Qualifiers**

Qualifiers are words like *some, most, many, in general, usually, typically* and so on—little words whose value to an argument is immeasurable.

Example of a qualified claim:

*Many books by Charles Dickens are fun to read.*

Example of an unqualified claim:

*Books by Charles Dickens are fun to read.*

Without qualifying words like *some* or *many*, a claim like this can be interpreted (by the careful analytical eye) as

*All books by Charles Dickens are always fun for everyone to read.*

Although unqualified claims like these are not necessarily a bad argumentation strategy, they do allow ample room for challenges to be made to an argument. An appropriately qualified claim is much easier to defend.

**Identifying Exceptions**

Oftentimes, an author will specifically exclude from an argument certain cases or situations. Such exceptions serve to restrict a claim, so that it is understood to apply in some situations but not in others.
A claim like

*Most books by Charles Dickens are fun to read,*

might be limited by the following exception:

*Having labored over David Copperfield in high school, I would not rank that book among them.*

Exceptions like this one are important, because without them, readers who would like to challenge a claim may begin to concoct exceptions of their own.

**Distinguishing between Qualifiers and Exceptions**

Qualifiers and exceptions are similar in that they both put limits on how far a claim may be carried. A qualifier, however, is merely a word (like *some* or *usually*) which serves to limit a claim, while an exception is an example of a case or situation in which the claim does not apply.

An example of a qualifier would be the word *most* in the following claim:

*Most books by Charles Dickens are fun to read.*

An exception would be an example, usually appearing after the claim, of a situation in which that claim would not apply:

*Having labored over David Copperfield in high school, I would not rank that book among them.*

**The Reasons**

Why does a writer believe the claim she/he makes? The reasons a writer gives are the first line of development of any argument. To use our "house of cards" image again, reasons comprise the second level of an argument, without which the uppermost level (the claim) cannot remain balanced (or, in the language of argument, "effective").

How can we tell if reasons are strong? In other words, how can we determine whether or not they are sturdy enough to support the claim? Using the Toulmin method, we ask two main questions: *Is the reason relevant to the claim it supports?* and *Is the reason effective?*

**Determining the Relevance of the Reasons**

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of reasons used in an argument, we must first determine whether or not they are relevant to the claim they mean to support.

**Determining the Effectiveness of the Reasons**

If a reason is effective (or "good"), it invokes a *value* we can believe in and agree with. Value judgments, because they are by necessity somewhat subjective, are often the most difficult to make in arguments. It is, therefore, always a good idea to restate the value being invoked as clearly as possible in your own terms. Then you'll be able to evaluate whether or not the value is good in itself or worth pursuing.

If an argument's claim is the reason,

*Argumentation is an important skill to learn,*

the reason,

*No other type of writing requires a great deal of thought,*

is arguably not very effective, since many people would not agree with or value this idea. (Notice, too, how qualification might help this reason.) On the other hand, a reason like
If you look at writing assignments given in various disciplines of the university, you will find that many of them include elements that are related in some way to argument, would be likely to give the impression of being effective (and supportable).

The Evidence

We would all probably like to believe that the people we argue with will accept our claims and reasons as perfect and complete by themselves, but most readers are unlikely to do that. They want evidence of some sort—facts, examples, statistics, expert testimony, among others—to back up our reasons. If this level of the house of cards is either unstable or absent, neither of the two levels it supports (the reasons and claim) can be effective.

To be believable and convincing, evidence should satisfy three conditions. It should be sufficient, credible, and accurate.

Determining the Sufficiency of Evidence

As you look at the evidence supporting a reason, ask yourself if the author makes use of enough evidence to convince a reasonable reader.

If one reason given in an argument is

If you look at the writing assignments given in various disciplines of the university, you will find that many of them include elements that are related in some way to argument,

an example from one engineering assignment would most likely be insufficient, where several such examples would provide a more varied range of situations in which the stated reason holds true.
Determining the Credibility of Evidence

It is important to decide how credible (believable and authoritative) a piece of evidence is within an argument. As you look at the evidence supporting a reason, ask yourself whether or not this evidence matches with readers' experience of the world. If it doesn't, does the evidence come from a source that readers would accept as more knowledgeable or authoritative than they are?

Consider the following quote:

On the university level, argument is valued by professors of various disciplines who say that they would like for their students to be able to take a strong position and support it with ample reasons and evidence; statistics taken from The National Inquirer and given in support of this reason will typically be much less credible than ones taken from The Journal of Higher Education.

Determining the Accuracy of Evidence

As you look at the evidence supporting a reason, ask yourself if this evidence "tells the truth." Are statistics gathered in verifiable ways from good sources? Are the quotations complete and fair (not out of context)? Are the facts verifiable from other sources?

Sometimes it is difficult to determine accuracy without having the writer's sources in front of you, but there are oftentimes cases in which you will be suspicious of a piece of evidence for one reason or another.

If, in support of a reason like

College students are very enthusiastic about learning argumentation skills,

a writer uses this piece of evidence:

In a survey conducted in my residence hall, 92% of the respondents asserted that they enjoyed writing arguments more than any other activity listed on the questionnaire,

you might be led to ask questions like "Who conducted this survey?" "Who were these respondents?" or "What were the other activities listed on the questionnaire?"

Anticipated Objections and Rebuttal

When we analyze an argument using the Toulmin method, we look for potential objections to the argument's reasons, objections which the writer expects his or her opponents to make. Usually, these are included in arguments as opportunities for the writer to present her or his own reasons as refutations/rebuttals.

Example of an Anticipated Objection

If one reason in an argument is

On the university level, argument is valued by professors of various disciplines who say that they would like for their students to be able to take a strong position and support it with ample reasons and evidence,

the writer might hold up the following objection:

Many students argue that fields like engineering and math have no use for argumentation skills.

Once a writer identifies counter-arguments opponents might make, it would be self-defeating to announce those counter-arguments and not argue against them. Therefore, after stating the objections of opponents,
most writers will refute or rebut the objections. Good rebuttal usually requires evidence, so don't forget to look for support for the rebuttal position in that part of an argument. Like all evidence, rebuttal evidence should be sufficient, accurate, and credible.

**Example of a Rebuttal**

To the anticipated objection

> Many students argue that fields like engineering and math have no use for argumentation skills,

a writer might offer the following rebuttal evidence:

> However, a recent study appearing in journal, Language and Learning Across the Disciplines indicates that...(fill in the blank)

**Drawing Conclusions from a Toulmin Analysis**

Once you have completed a Toulmin analysis of an argument, your task is to collect your "results" into an overall, coherent statement about the effectiveness of that argument. In other words, if you are attempting to respond to that argument—whether in a formal response essay or in an arguing essay where you are using the argument as evidence or as opposing evidence—you will need to shape your Toulmin results into a coherent, defensible, narrow *claim* of your own. To see an example of how you would do this, you might go to the relevant part of the Toulmin demonstration.
Argument Basics

The Purpose of Academic Argument

Scholarly conversation makes an argument for a given point of view.

Nearly all scholarly writing makes an argument. That’s because its purpose is to create new knowledge so it can be debated in order to confirm, dis-confirm, or improve it. That arguing takes place mostly in journals and scholarly books and at conferences. It’s called the scholarly conversation, and it’s that conversation that moves forward what we humans know.

Your scholarly writing for classes should do the same — make an argument — just like your professors’ journal article, scholarly book, and conference presentation writing does. (You may not have realized that the writing you’re required to do mirrors what scholars all over the university, country, and world must do to create new knowledge and debate it. Of course, you may be a beginner at constructing arguments in writing, while most professors have been at it for some time. And your audience (for now) also may be more limited than your professor’s. But the process is much the same. As you complete your research assignments, you, too, are entering the scholarly conversation.

Making an argument means trying to convince others that you are correct as you describe a thing, situation, or phenomenon and/or persuade them to take a particular action. Important not just in college, that skill will be necessary for nearly every professional job you hold after college. So learning how to make an argument is good job preparation, even if you do not choose a scholarly career.
Realizing that your research paper, essay, blog post, or poster is to make an argument gives you a big head start because right off you know the sources you’re going to need are those that will let you write the components of an argument for your reader.

Happily (and not coincidentally), most of those components coincide with the information needs we’ve been talking about. Filling an information need by using sources will enable you to write the corresponding argument component in your final product.

**Components of an Argument**

Making an argument in an essay, research paper, or other college writing task is like laying out a case in court. Just as there are conventions that attorneys must adhere to as they make their arguments in court, there are conventions in arguments made in college assignments. Among those conventions is to use the components of an argument.

**NOTE**

This section on making an argument was developed with the help of “Making Good Arguments” in *The Craft of Research*, by Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, and Joseph Williams, University of Chicago Press, 2003.

The arguments you’re used to hearing or participating in with friends about something that is uncertain or needs to be decided contain the same components as the ones you’ll need to use in essays and research papers. Arguments contain those components because those are the ones that work—used together, they stand the best chance of persuading others that you are correct.

For instance, the question gets things started off. The claim, or thesis, tells people what you consider a true way of describing a thing, situation, or phenomenon or what action you think should be taken. The reservations, alternatives, and objections that someone else brings up in your sources or that you imagine your readers logically might have allow you to demonstrate how your reasons and evidence (maybe) overcome that kind of thinking—and (you hope) your claim/thesis comes out stronger for having withstood that test.

**Example: Argument as a Dialog**

Here’s a dialog of an argument, with the most important components labeled.

**Jerald:** Where should we have my parents take us for dinner when they’re here on Sunday? *[He asks the question about something that’s unsettled.]*

**Cathy:** We should go to The Cascades! *[She makes her main claim to answer the questions.]* It’s the nicest place around. *[Another claim, which functions as a reason for the main claim.]*
Jerald: How so? [He asks for a reason to believe her claims.]

Cathy: White table cloths. [She gives a reason.]

Jerald: What's that have to do with how good the food is? [He doesn't see how her reason is relevant to the claim.]

Cathy: Table cloths make a restaurant seem upscale. [She relates her reason for the claims.] And I've read a survey in Columbus Metro that says The Cascades is one of the most popular restaurants in town. [She offers evidence.]

Jerald: I never read the Metro. And Dino's has table cloths. [He offers a point that contradicts her reason.]

Cathy: I know, but those are checkered! I'm talking about heavy white ones. [She acknowledges his point and responds to it.]

Jerald: My dad loves Italian food. I guess he's kind of a checkered-table-cloth kind of guy? [He raises another reservation or objection.]

Cathy: Yeah, but? Well, I know The Cascades has some Italian things on the menu. I mean, it's not known for its Italian food but you can order it there. Given how nice the place is, it will probably be gourmet Italian food. [She acknowledges his point and responds to it. There's another claim in there.]

Jerald: Ha! My dad, the gourmet? Hey, maybe this place is too expensive. [He raises another reservation.]

Cathy: More than someplace like Dino's. [She concedes his point.]
### Argument and Information Needs

Each component of an argument relates back to your information needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need</th>
<th>Component of Your Argument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To get background information and develop a research question (if your professor hasn’t given you a specific question)</td>
<td>Your <strong>research question</strong>, which probably will not appear in your term paper or essay but which drives the entire research process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| To answer your research question | Your **thesis** (may also be called your **claim**)
| To convince your audience your answer is correct or at least reasonable | **Reasons** for your thesis and **evidence** for your reasons
**Acknowledgement** that others may have reservations or objections to your argument or alternative solutions
**Reasons** why others’ opinions are incorrect or not important |
| To describe the situation around your research question and why it’s important | This is not an argument component but is usually an important part of research papers and essays. It is usually done in the introduction in order to help readers understand and to encourage them to continue reading. |
| To report what others have said that’s relevant | **Reasons** for your thesis and **evidence** for your reasons
**Acknowledgement** that others may have reservations or objections to your argument or alternative solutions
**Reasons** why others’ opinions are incorrect or not important |

### Order of the Components

The order in which the components should appear in your argument essays, papers, and posters may depend on which discipline your course is in. So always adhere to the advice provided by your professor and what you learn in class.
One common arrangement for argument essays and research papers is to begin with an introduction that explains why the situation is important—why the reader should care about it. Your research question will probably not appear, but your answer to it (your thesis, or claim) usually appears as the last sentence or two of the introduction.

The body of your essay or paper follows and consists of the following:

- Your reasons the thesis is correct or at least reasonable.
- The evidence that supports each reason, often occurring right after the reason it supports.
- An acknowledgement that some people have/could have objections, reservations, counterarguments, or alternative solutions to your argument and a statement of each. (Posters often don’t have room for this component.)
- A response to each acknowledgement that explains why that criticism is incorrect or not very important. Sometimes you might have to concede a point you think is unimportant if you can’t really refute it. (Again, posters often don’t have much room for this component.)

After the body, the paper or essay ends with a conclusion which states your thesis in a slightly different way than occurred in the introduction.

A Blueprint for Argument

It’s no accident that people are said to make arguments—they’re all constructed, and these components are the building blocks. The components are important because of what they contribute. The components generally, though not always, appear in a certain order because they build on or respond to one another.

For example, the thesis or claim is derived from the initial question. The reasons are bolstered by evidence to support the claim. Objections are raised, acknowledged and subsequently responded to.

The components of argument build on each other.
Where You Get the Components

This section will help you figure that out which components may come from your professor, which you just have to think about, which you have to write, and which you have to find in your sources.

Here, again, are the components we’ll cover:

- The question you (or your professor) want answered.
- Your claim or thesis.
- One or more reasons for your thesis.
- Evidence for each reason.
- Others’ objections, counterarguments, or alternative solutions.
- Your acknowledgment of others’ objections, counterarguments, or alternative solutions.
- Response to others’ objections, counterarguments, or alternative solutions.

The Question You Want Answered

Sometimes your professor will give you the research question, but probably more often he or she will expect you to develop your own from an assigned topic. You learned how to develop research questions in another section. Though vitally important, they are often not stated in essays or research papers but are usually stated in reports of original studies, such as theses, dissertations, and journal articles.

EXAMPLES: Research Questions for Hypothetical Essays or Research Papers

- Is the recent occurrence of stronger hurricanes related to global warming?
- Did the death of his beloved daughter have any effect on the writings of Mark Twain?

Your Claim or Thesis

You write the claim or thesis—it doesn’t come directly from a resource. Instead, it is the conclusion you come to in answer to your question after you’ve read/listened to/looked at some sources. So it is a statement, not a question or hypothesis, that you plan to prove or disprove with your research.

After you’ve done more research, you may need to change your thesis. That happens all the time—not because you did anything wrong but because you learned more.

EXAMPLES: Claims (or Theses) for Hypothetical Essays or Research Papers

- The strength of hurricanes has not been affected appreciably by global warming.
- Mark Twain wrote more urgently and with less humor during the four years immediately after the death of his daughter.

One or More Reasons

Write what you believe makes your thesis (the answer to your research question) true. That’s your reason or reasons. Each reason is a summary statement of evidence you found in your research. The kinds of
evidence considered convincing varies by discipline, so you will be looking at different sources, depending on your discipline. How many reasons you need depends on how complex your thesis and subject matter are, what you found in your sources, and how long your essay or research paper must be. It’s always a good idea to write your reasons in a way that is easy for your audience to understand and be persuaded by.

**EXAMPLES: Reasons in Hypothetical Essays or Research Papers**

- Current computer modeling and the analysis of historical data about previous hurricane strength do not indicate that global warming is increasing the strength of hurricanes.
- My content analysis and a comparison of publication rates four years before and after Mark Twain’s daughter died indicate that his writing was more urgent and less humorous for four years after. It is reasonable to conclude that her death caused that change.

**Evidence for Each Reason**

This is the evidence you summarized earlier as each reason your thesis is true. You will be directly quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing your sources to make the case that your audience should agree with you.

**EXAMPLES: Evidence for Reasons in Hypothetical Essays or Research Papers**

- Report the results of the computer modeling and the analysis of historical data on temperatures and hurricane strength.
- Report the results of your comparison of writing content and publication rate before and after Twain’s daughter’s death.

**Others’ Objections, Counterarguments, or Alternative Solutions**

Do any of your sources not agree with your thesis? You’ll have to bring those up in your research paper. In addition, put yourself in your readers’ shoes. What might they not find logical in your argument? In other words, which reason(s) and corresponding evidence might they find lacking? Did you find clues to what these could be in your sources? Or maybe you can imagine them thinking some aspect of what you think is evidence is illogical.

**EXAMPLES: Objections, Counterarguments, or Alternative Solutions in Hypothetical Essays or Research Papers**

- Imagine that the reader might think Computer modeling done in 2007-08 did show an effect for ocean temperature on hurricane strength.
- Imagine that the reader might think Computerized content analysis tools are sort of blunt instruments and shouldn’t be used to do precise work.
Your Acknowledgement of Others’ Objections, Counterarguments, or Alternative Solutions

What will you write to bring up each of those objections, counterarguments, and alternative solutions? Some examples:

- Skeptics will point out…
- Perhaps some readers would say…
- Those who come from XYZ would differ in that…

It all depends on what objections, counterarguments, and alternative solutions you come up with.

**EXAMPLES: Acknowledgement of Others’ Objections, Counterarguments, or Alternative Solutions in Hypothetical Essays or Research Papers**

- Some researchers may point out that computer modeling done in 2007-08 did show an effect for ocean temperature on hurricane strength.
- Readers may think that a computerized content analysis tool cannot do justice to the subtleties of text.

Response to Others’ Objections, Counterarguments, or Alternative Solutions

You must write your response to each objection, counterargument, or alternative solution brought up or that you’ve thought of. (You’re likely to have found clues for what to say in your sources.) The reason you have to include this is that you can’t very easily convince your audience until you show them how your claim stacks up against the opinions and reasoning of other people who don’t at the moment agree with you.

**EXAMPLES: Response to Others’ Objections, Counterarguments, or Alternative Solutions in Hypothetical Essays or Research Papers**

- But the more current modeling equipment used here is able to take the XYZ into effect, which negates any difference in readings for different temperatures.
- Unlike other content tools, the XYZ Content Analysis Measure is able to take into account an author’s tone.
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<td>Course: ARTS &amp; SCIENCES 3200</td>
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<td>Research Question: <strong>In what ways has the checklist movement affected surgery patient outcomes in U.S. hospitals?</strong></td>
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<td>Information Needs / Argument Component / Parts of Final Product</td>
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<td>To answer your research question / Thesis / Last couple sentences of introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To convince your audience / Evidence / Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To report what others have said / Evidence / Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To describe the situation and why it's important / Introduction / Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your plan for sources should include where to use them in your final product.
EXAMPLE: Where to Use Your Sources in a Research Paper or an Essay

**Information need:** To answer your research question(s) (and present your thesis statement)

**Use Sources:** Last couple of sentences of introduction

**Information Need:** To convince your audience that your answer is correct or, at least, the most reasonable answer

**Use Sources:** Evidence/Body

**Information Need:** To report what others have said about your question, including any different answers to your research question

**Use Sources:** Evidence/Body

**Information Need:** To describe the situation surrounding your research question for your audience and explain why it’s important

**Use Sources:** Introduction/Conclusion

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**Definitional Arguments**

Photo credit: castgen on Visual Hunt / CC BY-NC

**Why Write Definitional Arguments**

Often, definition arguments are necessary to establish context for proposal or problem-solution papers. Sometimes the definition piece is just a portion of a larger paper, but at times, depending on the complexity and purpose, a definition argument is the whole paper that prefaces other related writing assignments.
Defining terms helps audiences recognize that classifications change over time and are the result of cultural, social, and political forces. Definitions often serve group agendas while ignoring or attempting to silence others. However, in scholarly writing, they serve to establish the common ground and to qualify certain audience assumptions.

A definition essay can be deceivingly difficult to write. This type of paper requires you to write a personal yet academic definition of one specific word. The definition must be thorough and lengthy. It is essential that you choose a word that will give you plenty to write about, and there are a few standard tactics you can use to elaborate on the term. Here are a few guidelines to keep in mind when writing a definition essay.

**Part 1: Choosing a Concept to Define**

Choose an abstract word with a complex meaning. A simple word that refers to a concrete word will not give you much to write about, but a complex word that refers to an abstract concept provides more material to explore.

- Typically, nouns that refer to a person, place, or thing are too simple for a definition essay. Nouns that refer to an idea work better, however, as do most adjectives.
- For example, the word “house” is fairly simple and an essay written around it may be dull. By switching to something slightly more abstract like “home,” however, you can play around with the definition more. A “home” is a concept, and there are many elements involved in the creation of a “home.” In comparison, a “house” is merely a structure.

Make sure that the word is disputable. Aside from being complex, the word should also refer to something that can mean different things to different people.

- A definition essay is somewhat subjective by nature since it requires you to analyze and define a word from your own perspective. If the answer you come up with after analyzing a word is the same answer anyone else would come up with, your essay may appear to lack depth.

Choose a word you have some familiarity with. Dictionary definitions can only tell you so much. Since you need to elaborate on the word you choose to define, you will need to have your own base of knowledge or experience with the concept you choose.

- For instance, if you have never heard the term “pedantic,” your understanding of the word will be limited. You can introduce yourself to the word for your essay, but without previous understanding of the concept, you will not know if the definition you describe is truly fitting.

Read the dictionary definition. While you will not be relying completely on the dictionary definition for your essay, familiarizing yourself with the official definition will allow you to compare your own understanding of the concept with the simplest, most academic explanation of it.

- As an example, one definition of "friend" is "a person attached to another by feelings of affection or personal regard." Your own ideas or beliefs about what a "friend" really is likely include much more information, but this basic definition can present you with a good starting point in forming your own.
Research the word's origins. Look up your chosen word in the *Oxford English Dictionary* or in another etymology dictionary.\[1\]

- These sources can tell you the history behind a word, which can provide further insight on a general definition as well as information about how a word came to mean what it means today.

**Part 2: Potential Elements of an Effective Definition**

**Write an analysis.**\[4\] Separate a word into various parts. Analyze and define each part in its own paragraph.

- You can separate “return” into “re-” and “turn.” The word “friendship” can be separated into “friend” and “ship.”
- In order to analyze each portion of a word, you will still need to use additional defining tactics like negation and classification.
- Note that this tactic only works for words that contain multiple parts. The word “love,” for instance, cannot be broken down any further. If defining “platonic love,” though, you could define both “platonic” and “love” separately within your essay.

**Classify the term.** Specify what classes and parts of speech a word belongs to according to a standard dictionary definition.

- While this information is very basic and dry, it can provide helpful context about the way that a given word is used.

**Compare an unfamiliar term to something familiar.** An unfamiliar or uncommon concept can be explained using concepts that are more accessible to the average person.

- Many people have never heard of the term "confrere," for instance. One basic definition is "a fellow member of a profession, fraternity, etc." As such, you could compare "confrere" with "colleague," which is a similar yet more familiar concept.\[5\]

**Provide traditional details about the term.** Explain any physical characteristics or traditional thoughts used to describe your term of choice.

- The term "home" is often visualized physically as a house or apartment. In more abstract terms, "home" is traditionally thought to be a warm, cozy, and safe environment. You can include all of these features in a definition essay on "home."

**Use examples to illustrate the meaning.** People often relate to stories and vivid images, so using a fitting story or image that relates to the term can be used in clarifying an abstract, formless concept.

- In a definition essay about "kindness," for example, you could write about an act of kindness you recently witnessed. Someone who mows the lawn of an elderly neighbor is a valid example, just as someone who gave you an encouraging word when you were feeling down might be.

**Use negation to explain what the term does not mean.** If a term is often misused or misunderstood, mentioning what it is not is an effective way to bring the concept into focus.

- A common example would be the term "courage." The term is often associated with a lack of fear, but many will argue that "courage" is more accurately described as acting in spite of fear.
Provide background information. This is when your research about the etymology of a word will come in handy. Explain where the term originated and how it came to mean what it currently means.

Part 3: The Structure of the Essay

Introduce the standard definition. You need to clearly state what your word is along with its traditional or dictionary definition in your introductory paragraph.

- By opening with the dictionary definition of your term, you create context and a basic level of knowledge about the word. This will allow you to introduce and elaborate on your own definition.
- This is especially significant when the traditional definition of your term varies from your own definition in notable ways.

Define the term in your own words in your thesis. Your actual thesis statement should define the term in your own words.

- Keep the definition in your thesis brief and basic. You will elaborate on it more in the body of your paper.
- Avoid using passive phrases involving the word "is" when defining your term. The phrases "is where" and "is when" are especially clunky.[6]
- Do not repeat part of the defined term in your definition.

Separate different parts of the definition into separate paragraphs. Each tactic or method used to define your term should be explored in a separate paragraph.

- Note that you do not need to use all the possible methods of defining a term in your essay. You should use a variety of different methods in order to create a full, well-rounded picture of the term, but some tactics will work great with some terms but not with others.

Conclude with a summary of your main points. Briefly summarize your main points around the start of your concluding paragraph.

- This summary does not need to be elaborate. Usually, looking at the topic sentence of each body paragraph is a good way to form a simple list of your main points.
- You can also draw the essay to a close by referring to phrases or images evoked in your introduction.

Mention how the definition has affected you, if desired. If the term you define plays a part in your own life and experiences, your final concluding remarks are a good place to briefly mention the role it plays.

- Relate your experience with the term to the definition you created for it in your thesis. Avoid sharing experiences that relate to the term but contradict everything you wrote in your essay.
- Rather than using a first-person approach, expand on how the term plays a role in society and contemporary issues that impact how people live and think.

References

Adapted from Creative Commons, a non-profit organization that is devoted to expanding creative work for others to build upon and legally share.
Causal Analysis (Causes & Effects)

Written by Joe Moxley for Writing Commons

"Why are things like this? What is the effect, or result, of this?" and "What causes this?" These questions guide authors as they analyze or argue about causal relationships, such as "What is the effect of a college education on income?" View fascinating reports on various cause/effect topics and then explore your own causal relationship. Improve your critical thinking skills.

Unlike explanations of processes, which follow a chronological order of events, cause and effect texts are deeply speculative and tentative, relying on causal reasoning and argument. Your purpose is to answer

1. Why are things like this?
2. What is the effect, or result, of this?
3. What is the cause of this?
Analyzing cause-and-effect relationships requires you to question how different parts and sequences interact with each other over time, which is often more difficult than reporting a chronological order of events, as you do when describing a process.

**Why Write About Causes and Effects?**

Human beings ask why perhaps more than any other question. When we listen to the nightly news and hear about the atrocities of war, we wonder, "What causes the hatred?" When we read about the violence plaguing our country, we ask, "Why does the United States lead the world in violent crimes?" When we read studies that indicate that 28 percent of women in America have been raped and that the occurrence of date rape is rising on college campuses, we ask, "Why is this happening?" When we read about environmental problems such as the depletion of the ozone layer, we wonder, "Why don't we do something about it?" Whenever we make decisions in our daily lives, we ask ourselves, "Why should I do this?"

On a daily basis, we seek to understand why events occurred by identifying the factors that led up to them. For example, if you were not doing well in school and on homework assignments, you might ask, "Did my high school class(es) sufficiently prepare me for this class? Am I studying long enough? Am I taking effective lecture notes? Am I paying too much attention to the course texts and too little to the instructor's lectures? How is my attendance? Is my part-time job interfering too much with my school work? Am I using my time to study effectively? Are some of my friends having a negative influence on my study habits? Am I taking too many courses or putting too much time into another course? What can I do to improve my memory or study skills?" After asking these and other questions, you would eventually be able to identify a variety of causes for your poor performance, and once you recognize the causal relationship, you can set about realistically to improve your grade.

Cause-and-effect assignments are among the most interesting writing projects that you will tackle in school and in professional life. In school, teachers frequently assign these assignments. For example, humanities professors may ask for an analysis of what causes particular music genres or artistic genres to capture the imagination of popular culture; history professors, the impact of cultures on world history; social science professors, the effects of inventions on culture or the effect of gun control laws on violent homicide rates; business professors, the effects of changes in the interest rates on the economy.

Cause-and-effect texts are extremely common in professions—particularly the sciences, where researchers employ the scientific method to seek out cause-and-effect relationships. Writers commonly focus on analyzing causes or effects. A medical writer, for example, might explore the effects of a poor diet or the causes of a disease. A lawyer might argue the effect of an accident on his client. A sports writer might analyze why a team continues its losing or winning streak.

**Diverse Rhetorical Situations**

The purpose of many cause-and-effect texts is to explain the effects or causes of something. And the tone of these texts tends to be dispassionate and objective. In complex situations, however, the writer's purpose may shift from explaining to speculating or even arguing about an interpretation. Sometimes writers argue about a particular cause or effect because they want to sell you something or because they want to change your mind on a policy or interpretation.
People write about causes and effects for a variety of communication situations, and they employ a variety of media. The shape and content of cause-and-effect reports tend to be more diverse than the shape and content of texts that explain subjects, concepts, or processes, as suggested in the table below.

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<tr>
<th>Purposes</th>
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<td>Speculate</td>
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<td>First person</td>
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**Rhetorical Analysis of Cause and Effect Texts**

Consider the context, audience, purpose, and media invoked by the following readings. Also examine how ideas are developed in these texts. Are assertions grounded in personal experience, interviews with authorities, questionnaires, Internet and library research, or empirical research?

1. **GHB on Campus** [http://www.projectghb.org/](http://www.projectghb.org/): A subtext of a larger Web site created to educate readers about the dangers of GHB, this page summarizes the deadly effects of GHB on college campuses and urges readers to forward a listserv message to their friends, which reveals the deadly effects of GHB. Interestingly, a sidebar seeks readers' input to a survey on GHB usage on college campuses. On the Project GHB home page, the authors explain that Mr. and Mrs. Shortridges began the site following the death of their son to a GHB overdose: This GHB website started out as a quick project with the sole purpose of getting some truth about GHB on the Internet. In doing their original searches for GHB on the Internet, the Shortridges found that most websites advocate its use, etc. Some Internet pages about GHB have seemingly educated reports about GHB. They offer recipes, kits for sale, and tips for "safe" experiences.

2. **Rewards for Justice Program: Prevention of Terrorism Advertising Campaign** [https://www.state.gov/m/ds/terrorism/c8651.htm](https://www.state.gov/m/ds/terrorism/c8651.htm): The US Government summarizes the successful effects of its rewards program for preventing terrorism. Its purpose appears to be to defend the program, advertise its effectiveness, and outline future rewards.

3. **College graduation rate below 50 percent** [http://www.cnn.com/2010/OPINION/09/21/powell.americas.promise/index.html?iref=allsearch](http://www.cnn.com/2010/OPINION/09/21/powell.americas.promise/index.html?iref=allsearch): Written by a reporter for CNN.com, this text summarizes academic research conducted by the Council for Aid to Education. The research analyzed why 52 percent of students in public colleges and 45 percent of students in private colleges failed to graduate in 2000. The researcher focused on greater access to college as the cause for the high dropout rate, suggesting that students who are being accepted into college are not prepared and that colleges need to do more to help these students succeed. The author's tone/voice is impersonal and objective. The audience for the original research study was universities, while this report is written for a broader audience—readers of CNN's online education pages.
4. **The Impact of Arts Education on Workforce Preparation**

Sponsored by the National Governors Association, this report's primary audience is US governors. The purpose of this summary appears to be to encourage governors to fund arts education. This summary highlights conclusions found in a lengthier review of research: The Impact of Arts Education on Workforce Preparation https://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/050102ARTSED.pdf

This brief summary seems to present the other study's results as fact as opposed to speculation or argument based on empirical research:

The arts provide one alternative for states looking to build the workforce of tomorrow—a choice growing in popularity and esteem. The arts can provide effective learning opportunities to the general student population, yielding increased academic performance, reduced absenteeism, and better skill-building. An even more compelling advantage is the striking success of arts-based educational programs among disadvantaged populations, especially at-risk and incarcerated youth.

5. **Women's Love/Hate Relationship With the Internet**: This analysis of the effects of gender on Internet usage begins with a strong, personal voice, yet this student writer quickly abandons the personal voice and adopts the more objective, passive, detached voice of the social scientist. Her chief purpose is to analyze barriers women face to using the Internet and outline ways to overcome these barriers. The writer has created a website to support her essay, including several bibliographies.

6. **The State of the World's Children by UNICEF** https://www.unicef.org/sowc08/: Mixing evocative pictures with extremely detailed analyses of the effects of poor nutrition on the world's children, UNICEF offers an informative and persuasive account of how countries and communities can and should help their children. Although this document is available on the Web, it lacks internal navigation links. Readers cannot tell how long the document is, either.

7. **It's About Oil by Ted Rall** http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/openforum/article/It-s-about-oil-2863416.php : Ted Rall's editorial, which appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, argues that our attack on Afghanistan is best linked to America's oil needs rather than the September 11th attacks: "Finally the Bushies have the perfect excuse to do what the United States has wanted to do all along—invade and/or install an old-school puppet regime in Kabul."

8. **Urban Legend: Cause and Effect** http://johnciacia.com/2009/08/31/lol-monday-standards/: Written anonymously, this humorous account frequently passes across listservs and usenet forums, explaining, for example, the relationship between the Imperial Roman war chariot and the United States standard railroad gauge: "The United States standard railroad gauge of 4 feet, 8.5 inches derives from the original specification for an Imperial Roman war chariot."

9. **The Dead Grandmother/Exam Syndrome and the Potential Downfall of American Society by Mike Adams**

Written for a university audience, Mike Adams pokes fun at social science methods and students' "grandmother" problems: "Overall, a student who is failing a class and has a final coming up is more than 50 times more likely to lose a family member than an A student not facing any exams."

**Focus**

When dealing with causes and effects, it is important to keep to a narrow topic. Time constraints and resources should always be kept in mind when pursuing a topic. Example: To find the reasons for world
hunger would take years of research and/or tons of hours, so focus on a specific entity of a broad topic. Perhaps you could identify one country's efforts over the past few years.

Writers often bring focus to their work by claiming cause-and-effect relationships upfront, in their introductions. These "thesis statements" guide the writer and reader throughout the document. And they also offer clues as to the writer's voice, tone, and persona. Consider, for example, this tongue-in-cheek analysis of the "The Dead Grandmother/Exam Syndrome and the Potential Downfall Of American Society."

*The basic problem can be stated very simply: A student's grandmother is far more likely to die suddenly just before the student takes an exam, than at any other time of year.*

*While this idea has long been a matter of conjecture or merely a part of the folklore of college teaching, I can now confirm that the phenomenon is real. For over twenty years I have collected data on this supposed relationship, and have not only confirmed what most faculty had suspected, but also found some additional aspects of this process that are of potential importance to the future of the country. The results presented in this report provide a chilling picture and should waken the profession and the general public to a serious health and sociological problem before it is too late.*

**Development**

Critical readers such as your instructors are quick to recognize shallow reasoning. College instructors expect you to cite multiple causes or effects when you are addressing a complex phenomenon. For example, if you were exploring the effects of TV on children, your readers would most likely expect you to do more than attack the violence as being unethical or immoral. Likewise, if you were analyzing the causes of our nation's high divorce rates, your instructors would expect you to do more than cite troubles with finances as the cause of divorces.

To help you develop a stronger sense of the level of detail your readers need to understand a particular cause-and-effect relationship, consider conducting research. What have others reported about the particular cause-and-effect relationship you are exploring? Read about what others have speculated or reported about your topic.

Below are some additional suggestions for developing your cause-and-effect report.

**Check for Post Hoc Fallacies**

Critical readers will expect you to develop the reasoning that demonstrates the cause and effect relationship isn't due to chance. Academic readers are reluctant to assume causality between two actions because they are trained to identify post hoc ("after this") fallacies. Essentially a post hoc fallacy occurs when an author assumes Event B was caused by Event A simply because it followed Event A; the connection is false because it is equally possible that Event B was caused by some other factor. For example, let us suppose that Bill has been jilted by his girlfriend Laura. Because Laura argued with Bill last Friday night that he never spent any money on her and that she always has to pay for their dates, Bill might assume that she left him because he was cheap. However, this might not be the true reason for Laura's dumping Bill. In fact, it could be that Laura was tired of Bill's negative view of life. Perhaps she truly left Bill because she found him to be insensitive, boring, and uncommunicative.
Identify Sufficient and Necessary Causes

In some instances you may be able to explain an effect by identifying sufficient causes and necessary causes.

A sufficient cause is one that can cause the effect to take place. By itself, a sufficient cause can explain a phenomenon or trend. For instance, in order for someone to contract the AIDS virus, any of the following forms of contact is a sufficient cause:

*A previously infected patient's bodily fluids must enter the uninfected person's body through either an open sore, sexual conduct, or a contaminated instrument such as a needle.*

Frequently more than one sufficient cause is necessary to explain a phenomenon or trend. Three or four causes, for example, may be necessary to explain an effect. You cannot say, for example, that all one needs is a match to start a fire. You also need oxygen and something to burn. When describing physical phenomena such as how acid rain is produced, you may have little difficulty identifying sufficient causes. Explaining human behavior is rarely so simple, of course.

Identify Remote/Speculative Causes

When we face complicated questions and problems, we often are unable to identify sufficient causes so we must speculate about necessary causes—those causes that can result in the effect. For instance, no single cause precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union, yet we could speculate that hunger, poor economic conditions, alienation from communism, and political corruption were all remote causes.

Because academic readers are sensitive to the complexity of most issues, they generally do not expect you to offer sufficient causes for complex problems. Instead, they expect you to speculate about possible causes and effects, while limiting the scope of your claims with qualifiers such as "usually," "may," "possible," "sometimes" or "most." No simple answer, no sufficient cause, can explain, for example, why some people become violent criminals or serial killers while others devote themselves to feeding the hungry or serving the helpless.

Establish an Appropriate Voice

You can choose from a range of tones, personas and voices. Some writers choose a contentious, argumentative tone. See, for example, Ted Rall's *It's About Oil.* In this short piece, Rall traces the reasons behind America's financial support for the Taliban from the 1980s to 1999, citing a variety of statistics and international political policies.

Sometimes writers will soften their tone, perhaps assuming a milder persona than they actually feel, because they fear providing the information in a more straightforward, argumentative way would cause readers to look elsewhere. For example, in "Tropical Forests and Climate Change," the Canadian Development Agency offers a terrifying, well-researched analysis of global warming, yet softens its message with this caveat in the introduction:

*Climate change predictions are difficult because of the complexity of the atmosphere and the interaction of the many variables involved.*
Humanize Abstract Issues

No matter how technical your subject is, you should keep in mind that you are writing to other people. When you sense that the human story is being lost in abstract figures or academic jargon, consider adding an anecdote of how the problem you are discussing affects particular people. For example, Melissa Henderson, a student writer, began her report on the effect of crack on babies with the following portrayal of a newborn, which she composed after reading numerous essays about the effect of crack cocaine on human fetuses:

*Lying restlessly under the warm lights like a McDonald's Big Mac, Baby Doe fights with all of his three pounds of strength to stay alive. Because he was born prematurely, Baby Doe has an array of tubes and wires extending from his frail body which constantly monitor his heartbeat, drain excess fluid from his lungs and alert hospital personnel in the event he stops breathing. As he lies in the aseptic incubator his rigid little arms and legs twitch and jerk as though a steady current of electricity coursed through his veins.

Suddenly, without warning or provocation, he begins to cry a mournful, inconsolable wail that continues steadily without an end in sight. As the nurses try to comfort the tiny infant with loving touches and soothing whispers, Baby Doe's over-wrought nervous system can no longer cope. Suffering from sensory overload, he withdraws into the security offered in a long, deep slumber. Welcome to the world, Baby Doe, your mother is a crack cocaine addict.*

As you write drafts of your causal report, consider incorporating an anecdote—that is, a brief story about how people are influenced by your subject. For example, if you are researching the effects of a sluggish economy on our nation's poor, you might want to flesh out your statistics by depicting the story of how one homeless family lost their jobs, income, medical benefits, house, community, and hope.

Organization

When analyzing causal relationships, you must reveal to readers how different parts and sequences interact with each other over time. Rather than merely reporting the order of events in chronological fashion as we do when describing a process, you need to identify the specific reasons behind the effects or causes. Your organization needs to reflect the logic of your analysis. This is often difficult because a single cause can result in many different effects. Likewise, an effect can have multiple causes.

For example, even a simple effect such as a minor car accident can have multiple causes. Yes, we could say that John D. caused the accident because he was driving while intoxicated. Yet if we knew more about John D.’s state of mind—if we knew, for instance, that he wasn't watching where he was going because he was thinking about his wife's threat to leave him—then we could identify additional causes for the accident. It could very well be that he was exhausted after a sleepless night. Or perhaps his personal predicament had nothing to do with the accident: Maybe the loss of his job that morning or his failure to have faulty brakes replaced is a more significant cause for the accident. If we get really carried away with
our reasoning, we could say that his former employers were responsible. After all, John D. would not have lost his job if the automobile manufacturer he worked for had not closed three of its American plants and moved manufacturing of some parts to plants in Mexico, Hong Kong, and Japan. In addition, we could also find potential causes for the accident by considering the other driver, Susan K. Maybe she rushed into the busy intersection expecting everyone else to make room for her because she was already late for an in-class exam. Perhaps if Susan K. had not consumed four pots of coffee, she would have been more mellow, more cautious, and less willing to risk her life to get to school on time.

**Introduce the Topic:** Typically, texts that explore cause-and-effect relationships summarize the author's position upfront, in the introduction. For example, back in 1985, Joseph K. Skinner began his influential essay "Big Mac and the Tropical Forests" with this dramatic opening—two sentences that immediately focus your attention on the causal connection he explicates throughout his essay: “Hello, fast-food chains. Goodbye, tropical forests.” However, you may want to avoid explicit thesis sentences and forecasting statements if your subject is likely to threaten the beliefs of your audience or if it is an inherently emotional subject. You may occasionally find it important to establish a credible persona first by reviewing what your readers are likely to believe about a causal relationship and then by stating your own opinion.

For example, assume you are writing an essay against spanking children. Now if your audience believes that spanking children is the proper way to discipline them, and if you claim in the introduction of the essay that spanking children may result in their becoming criminals, then your readers might assume you are an oddball and dismiss your essay. Yet if you intelligently discuss some of the reasons why parents and psychologists recommend spanking and then introduce extensive research from prominent journals and reports that all violent criminals were spanked as children, your readers might be more willing to listen to your reasoning.

**Style:** When grappling with difficult issues and concepts, your prose can understandably become unclear, dull, or cluttered. Eventually, though, as you continue to revise your drafts and further refine your message, you need to cut away the superfluous words, redundancies, and needless abstractions. You can make your language more interesting and more understandable by eliminating needless jargon; passive voice; lengthy, redundant sentences; or pompous and archaic language.

**Provide Descriptive, Sensory Language:** You can help your readers imagine your subject better by appealing to their senses. Whenever possible, describe how an object looks, sounds, tastes, feels, or smells. For example, in this excerpt from Carl Sagan's powerful essay on the effects of a nuclear war, "The Nuclear Winter," notice how Sagan appeals to our visual sense in his description of the effect of a single nuclear bomb on a city:

> In a 2 megaton explosion over a fairly large city, buildings would be vaporized, people reduced to atoms and shadows, outlying structures blown down like matchsticks and raging fires ignited. And if the bomb exploded on the ground, an enormous crater, like those that can be seen through a telescope on the surface of the Moon, would be all that remained where midtown once had been.

The lifeblood of effective writing is concrete and sensory language. A word, properly placed, can create a tone that angers or inspires a reader. Knowing the power of language to promote change, effective writers are selective in their use of concrete words—words that represent actual physical things like "chair" and
"house"—and sensory words—words that appeal to our five senses. Selecting the right word or group of words is a crucial step in drawing your readers into your work so that they can fully understand your vision and ideas. Note the masterful use of concrete and sensory words in this passage from a Newsweek essay, "Don't Go in the Water":

"Black mayonnaise": The problem for most landlubbers, of course, is that most of the effects of coastal pollution are hard to see. Bays and estuaries that are now in jeopardy—Boston Harbor, for example, or even San Francisco Bay—are still delightful to look at from shore. What is happening underwater is quite another matter, and it is not for the squeamish. Scuba divers talk of swimming through clouds of toilet paper and half-dissolved feces, of bay bottoms covered by a foul and toxic combination of sediment, sewage and petrochemical waste appropriately known as "black mayonnaise." Fishermen haul in lobsters and crab [sic] covered with mysterious "burn holes" and fish whose fins are rotting off. Offshore, marine biologists track massive tides of algae blooms fed by nitrate and phosphate pollution—colonies of floating microorganisms that, once dead, strangle fish by stripping the water of its life-giving oxygen.

In addition to selecting an abundance of distinctive concrete words (such as sediment, sewage, and nitrate) and sensory words (foul, burn holes, feces), the authors have used powerful images and metaphors. Note, for example, the clouds of toilet paper. Even more potent is the image of "black mayonnaise." Can you imagine biting into a sandwich spread with such poison?

**When Speculating, Use Qualifying Language**: When addressing complex issues and processes, you adopt an appropriate speculative voice by using words like "may cause" or "could also."

**Useful Qualifying Words and Phrases**: may, might, usually, typically, perhaps, can, I believe, it seems likely. As an example of carefully chosen qualifying words, consider the following passage from the US EPA's website on global warming impacts:

- **Rising global temperatures are expected to raise sea level, and change precipitation and other local climate conditions. Changing regional climate could alter forests, crop yields, and water supplies. It could also affect human health, animals, and many types of ecosystems. Deserts may expand into existing rangelands, and features of some of our National Parks may be permanently altered.**

- **Most of the United States is expected to warm, although sulfates may limit warming in some areas. Scientists currently are unable to determine which parts of the United States will become wetter or drier, but there is likely to be an overall trend toward increased precipitation and evaporation, more intense rainstorms, and drier soils.**

- **Unfortunately, many of the potentially most important impacts depend upon whether rainfall increases or decreases, which cannot be reliably projected for specific areas.**

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Proposing Solutions

Learn how to improve your problem-solving and persuasive skills. Employ your writing and reasoning skills to make a difference in the world. View samples and write a proposal to conduct research, develop a website, solve a problem, or provide a service. Proposals are persuasive texts that articulate ways to solve a problem, conduct needed research, or provide a service.

Proposals may attempt to persuade readers to act or they may seek funding. Writers of proposals support claims with reasoning, library and Internet research, and original research, including questionnaires, interviews, and ethnographers. Ironically, even a proposal that seeks funding to conduct research needs to be firmly grounded in research. In other words, you often have to conduct research in order to craft a proposal, even if your ultimate goal is to secure funding for additional research.

Why Write Proposals?

In school, your instructors may ask you to write proposals to solve or improve a problem. For example, you could write a proposal to better meet the needs of students so 50% of them don't fail to complete their degrees. Or you could attempt to solve that age-old problem of parking on overcrowded campuses. Instructors across the disciplines may ask you to write research proposals, outlining a topic, describing its significance, and presenting a schedule for more thoroughly researching the topic. In business classes, your teachers may assign business plans or your teachers may seek proposals to improve the curriculum.

Proposals are arguments that seek particular outcomes from the readers of the proposals. Proposals can offer to trade services for money or goods, proposals can seek funding to conduct research, and proposals might present a call for action.
Diverse Rhetorical Situations

In general, proposals address three distinct purposes:

1. **Research Proposals**: Students and professionals often write research proposals, describing research they'd like to complete in college classes, professional settings, and laboratories. For example, a student might write a proposal to conduct a full-length research report, essentially outlining the topic, describing the significance of the topic, and explaining when and how the research would be conducted.

2. **Essay Proposals**: People write proposals as editorials or essays, hoping to influence people about various topics. The proposals go beyond arguing one side of a topic: They present a call for action. For example, a student might write an editorial in the student newspaper calling for a task force to explore ways to create healthier food choices on campus. An activist might write an article for a magazine, advocating particular health care reforms. A terrorism expert might argue for enacting certain policies in airports.

3. **Consulting Proposals**: Did you know that billions of dollars are awarded to successful proposals every year? People write proposals seeking funding for necessary services. For example, an environmental consulting business might sell its services to the EPA, offering to conduct a water contamination report, or an accounting firm might sell its services as an independent auditor.

In the U.S. much of the research conducted by university faculty and scientists is funded by government agencies and private foundations. Professional researchers often refer to the Community of Science, a funding source database, which identifies $33 billion in funding opportunities. Another popular funding source database is IRIS.

As suggested by the table below, proposals are a remarkably diverse genre, coming in all shapes and sizes. Proposals can be page length or book length, covering hundreds of pages. Proposals can be presented in essay form and published in trade magazines. Alternatively, proposals can be submitted in an internal memo format or in an external report format. Some large organizations, such as the National Science Foundation, have online submission procedures.

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**Rhetorical Analysis of Online Readings**

Consider the context, audience, purpose, and media invoked by the following readings. Also examine how ideas are developed in these texts. Are assertions grounded in personal experience, interviews with authorities, questionnaires, Internet and library research, or empirical research?

1. **DECA** (https://www.deca.org/), an association of marketing students, calls for a variety of proposals, which can be entered into a nationwide competition.
2. Students at Brown University rewrote the Student Code of Conduct because they weren't happy with the university's code.

3. The Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (http://www.aacap.org/), publishes "Children and TV Violence" to warn parents about the effects of violence on TV on their children, as suggested by the research of their members.

4. The American Psychological Association, the leading professional group of psychologists, has published "Childhood Exposure to Media Violence Predicts Young Adult Aggressive Behavior" (http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2003/03/media-violence.asp), according to a New 15-Year Study.


6. NSF, the National Science Foundation (https://www.nsf.gov/), offers many sample proposals on its Web site, helping to guide future proposal writers.

7. NEH, National Endowment for the Humanities (https://www.neh.gov/), publishes successful proposals (in DOC and HTML and PDF formats) on its website; see sample proposals.

8. Preventing AIDS: An Investment in the Future by Lawrence H. Summers (http://www.thebody.com/content/art2253.html). Representing the United States government as the Secretary of the Treasury, Lawrence H. Summers explains the importance of thinking globally when it comes to infectious diseases.

What Are Proposals?

Proposals typically outline a problem, detail solutions to the problem, and define the costs for solving the problem. Proposals provide information about the qualifications of the person or people suggesting the solution. When funds are sought to conduct the promised work, a detailed budget is provided. More formal proposals contain evaluation information—that is, a plan to evaluate the success of the proposal once it's implemented.

Key Features of Proposals

A proposal designed to affect readers' opinions about public policies differs from one seeking funding for research or to conduct research. Accordingly, the following analysis of key features is presented as a series of considerations as opposed to a comprehensive blueprint.

Focus

Proposal writers bring focus to their proposals by highlighting the urgency of the problem and by providing the evidence readers need to believe the proposed solution can work.

Development

It's true that some proposals are won on appeals to emotion. But ultimately, an argument needs to be based on reason. You need to conduct research to find the facts, opinions, and research that support your proposal.
Reading sample proposals can help you find and adopt an appropriate voice and persona. By reading samples, you can learn how others have prioritized particular criteria. Below are some additional suggestions for developing your proposal.

**Define the Problem(s)**

Obvious problems can be defined briefly, whereas more subtle problems may need considerable development. For example, Michael McManus details the problems with divorce for over five pages in “Why Is It in the Government's Interests to Save Marriages?” Thus, this part of your proposal may be as short as a sentence or many pages long. Occasionally writers will view the problem as so obvious to their audience that they won’t even introduce it; see, for example, “What You Can Do About Global Warming” by the Union of Concerned Scientists.

When they read the introduction to your proposals, readers are likely to ask these types of questions:

Who benefits from the proposal? Will the project have significant impact? Who is submitting the proposal? What is their interest in solving the problem? Is this person or organization qualified to solve the problem?

In order to answer these questions, provide specifics including statistics, quotes from authorities, results from past research, interviews, and questionnaires. Notice how the following excerpt stuns readers in its introduction with gruesome statistics. These statistics provide the background information that readers may need to understand the proposal:

*Three hundred million people live on less than US $1 per day. Life expectancy is 48 years and falling. More than one-third of all children are malnourished; more than 40 per cent have no access to education. Twenty-eight million people live with HIV/AIDS, and for over 100 million people, war is a part of daily life. And yet, in spite of these grim statistics, there are still grounds for optimism. The spread of democracy and the growing strength of African civil society, combined with the efforts by some African leaders to chart a new course, offer a real chance to tackle the root causes of poverty and conflict.*
Define Method(s)

How will you gather information (secondary research or primary research)? In the humanities, writers do not explicitly mention their methods, whereas in the sciences and social sciences writers often explicitly mention their methods.

1. If you are proposing to conduct research, your readers will want information regarding how you propose to conduct the research. Will your research involve Internet and library research? Will you interview authorities?
2. If your proposal calls for laboratory research, your readers will want to see that you have access to the laboratory and tools needed to carry out the research.
3. If you are proposing a service, readers will want to ensure you can actually provide the service.

Present Your Solution(s)

Successful proposals are not vague about proposed solutions. Instead, they tend to outline step-by-step activities and objectives, perhaps even associating particular activities and objectives with dollar figures—if money is sought to conduct the proposal.

Critical readers are likely to view proposals skeptically, preferring inaction (which doesn't cost anything) to action (which may involve risk). As they review the solutions you propose, they may ask the following three questions:

1. Is the solution feasible?
2. How much time will it take to complete the proposal?
3. Will other factors resolve the problem over time? In other words, is the problem urgent?

Appeal to Character/Persona

People often imply or explicitly make "appeals to character." In other words, they attempt to suggest they have credibility, that they are good people with the best interests of their readers in mind.

The persona you project as a writer plays a fundamental role in the overall success of your proposal. Your opening sentences generally establish the tone of your text and present to the reader a sense of your persona, both of which play a tremendous role in the overall persuasiveness of your argument. By evaluating how you define the problem, consider counterarguments, or marshal support for your claims, your readers will make inferences about your character.

When reviewing proposals, reviewers are particularly concerned about the credibility of the author. When an author is advocating a course of action, critical readers wonder about how the author(s) benefit from the proposal—or why they are presenting the proposal. Notice, for example, when the Brown American Civil Liberties Union rewrote the Code of Student Conduct, they were quick to agree with doubting readers that they also dislike "hate speech," yet they thought stifling free speech on campus wasn't the best way to counteract hate speech:

_We at the Brown American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) are proposing the following changes to the Code of Student Conduct in an effort to ensure a consistent, unambiguous, and Constitutionally acceptable disciplinary code that does not consider protected speech a violation or an aggravating factor under any circumstances. We fully support_
the University's efforts to promote tolerance, understanding, and to prevent discrimination and prejudice. However, we strongly disagree with the assertion that the current Code prohibits only "behavior" and not Constitutionally protected speech. In addition, we believe that although hate speech may be offensive, it should not be censored. The solution to hate speech is more speech, not less. Brown must insure that all opinions, no matter how unpopular, can be freely stated and challenged within a free and open University. The current "behavior" guidelines, no matter how well intentioned, can potentially still be used to punish unpopular, yet Constitutionally protected speech. The potential for the current code to be wrongly interpreted by the University Disciplinary Council (UDC) is great, and has been used in the past to justify harsher penalties for speech-related violations than for actual physical confrontations. We seek to rectify this situation, and we feel our proposals should satisfy both the desire to protect the Brown community and to protect the rights of community members. We urge the timely and respectful consideration of our reform proposals listed below. [Brown University: Revising the Code of Student Conduct]

In less formal circumstances, writers will speak personally about the importance of the proposal. Consider, for example, this excerpt from one of the students' proposals featured at MIT's site on Undergraduate Research Proposals:

"I am very enthusiastic to continue working with the multidisciplinary team of researchers involved with this project. As a student, I am excited to be able to supplement my education with out-of-class research. While learning about the organizations that are perceived to be on the "cutting edge," those that have incorporated the best technologies and most innovative organizational approaches into their management structures, I will gain a better understanding of the overall business environments of both our society and of our world. Because the scope of this initiative is greater than what current consulting firms have to offer, this project is particularly attractive. Having an interest in the field of professional consulting, work on this project would allow me to explore in greater depth the subject material that a future career in consulting would involve. In addition, I will have the honor of working with a distinguished group of faculty and staff members that are under the direction of [faculty supervisor's name].

Because I am a student majoring in economics, minoring in psychology, and I possess a strong interest in management science, this multidisciplinary research initiative, which draws upon all three of these fields, really feels like a "nice fit" in terms of what it has to offer and by what I can give back. [Sample UROP Proposals]"

In circumstances when a service is being proposed or when a research project is being proposed, they want to ensure the author has the resources, skills, and experience necessary to successfully provide the service.
Rhetorical Strategies

**Appeal to Emotion**

Proposals are more firmly grounded in appeals to logic and character than appeals to emotion. Often, appeals to emotion would seem unethical or unprofessional. Critical readers tend to emphasize facts and qualifications when assessing proposals. Notice, for example, that

*The AMA doesn't put a face on all of the deaths caused by insufficient organs.* [AMA House Supports Studies on Organ Donation Incentives]

*The Union of Concerned Scientists doesn't emotionally describe the effects of global warming.* [The Union of Concerned Scientists]

However, because of the power of emotional appeals, you may want to slip them into the introduction and conclusion of your proposal. Just be discreet and careful. Most modern, well-educated readers are quick to see through such manipulative attempts and they prefer the bulk of a proposal to be grounded in research and logic.

Additional emotional appeals include

- Appeals to authority. (According to the EPA, global warming will raise sea levels.)
- Appeals to pity. (I should be allowed to take the test again because I had the flu the first time I took it.)
- Personal attacks on the opposition, which rhetoricians call ad hominem attacks. (I wouldn't vote for that man because he's a womanizer.)

**Appeal to Logic**

Successful proposals are firmly grounded in logic. You need to provide evidence if you hope to sway educated readers. Your description of the problem must be firmly grounded in research. You can add depth and persuasiveness to your proposal by citing authorities, interviewing experts, and researching past attempts to solve the problem. Trained as critical readers, your teachers and college-educated peers expect you to provide evidence—that is, logical reasoning, personal observations, expert testimony, facts, and statistics.

**Consider Counterarguments**

Typically, proposal writers are under severe word-length restrictions. In professional contexts, they may be competing with hundreds, perhaps thousands of writers who each have five pages to sell their solution. Accordingly, each word is precious so proposal writers do not want to give significant air time to articulating counterarguments or counter solutions.

Even so, at some point in your proposal, you may need to present counterarguments or consider the wisdom of alternative solutions. Essentially, whenever you think your readers may think your alternative solutions are more feasible, you need to account for their concerns. Elaborating on counterarguments is particularly useful when you have an unusual claim or a skeptical audience.

Consider, for example, Jonathan Trager's "Libertarian Solutions: How Small-government Solutions Can Successfully Stop the Terrorist Threat." Addressing the best ways to protect our airports in light of 9/11,
Trager spends the bulk of his proposal critiquing other people's solutions. In particular he critiques these three recommendations:

1. Have government bureaucrats man x-ray machines in airports.
2. Regulate immigration more effectively.
3. Grant more power to law enforcement.

Using an inductive organization, it really isn't until the middle of his proposal that he cites his four solutions:

1. Stop disarming pilots.
2. Dismantle the drug war.
3. Return to a non-interventionist foreign policy.
4. Prohibit the American government from giving weapons—or money to buy weapons—to foreign nations.

**Organization**

Most proposals to conduct research or provide a service are organized as classical arguments: The author briefly presents the problem and then proposes the solutions. Occasionally, writers will employ a more inductive organization, particularly when the proposed solution may seem controversial.

**Style**

You can make your proposal more persuasive by using unambiguous, concrete language, appealing to the reader's senses and relating the subject or concept to information that the reader already understands, moving from given to new information.

**References**

“Proposals.” *Writing Commons*, University of Florida, 21 October 2009.

Chapter 4: Practical Applications of Research

Research assignments—resulting in final products such as research papers, essays, posters, multimedia projects, blog posts, 3-D models, etc.—are a common requirement in college courses, but they can also be a source of stress when you aren’t sure what to do. Studying the process can decrease your stress and increase your comfort with such assignments.

Think of research as an exploration, with unexpected twists and turns.

The Purpose of Research Questions

Research questions are very important.

Both professional researchers and successful student researchers develop research questions. That’s because research questions are more than handy tools; they are essential to the research process.

As suggested in Chapter 1, “Thinking Critically About Research,” the process of finding something to write about is complicated. In many ways, you need to think critically about the idea of research, you need to go to the library or the internet and conduct research, and you need to formulate a question or thesis to research all at the same time.

Sometimes, the subject of your research is called a “research question,” “problem statement” or “working thesis” to emphasize the idea that embarking on a research writing project involves making “a point” that is also a continually revised work in progress. A working thesis is tentative in that it will inevitably change as you go through the process of writing and researching. But if you’re more comfortable thinking of the starting point of your research project as being about asking the right questions or finding the right problem, that’s okay too.
By defining exactly what the researcher is trying to find out, these questions influence most of the rest of the steps taken to conduct the research. That’s true even if the research is not for academic purposes but for other areas of our lives.

For instance, if you’re seeking information about a health problem in order to learn whether you have anything to worry about, research questions will make it possible for you to more effectively decide whether to seek medical help—and how quickly.

Or, if you’re researching a potential employer, having developed and used research questions will mean you’re able to more confidently decide whether to apply for an internship or job there. The confidence you’ll have when making such decisions will come from knowing that the information they’re based on was gathered by conscious thought rather than serendipity and whim.

**Working with Assigned Topics**

Many times, starting an academic writing assignment is easy: you write about the topic as assigned by the instructor. In many college classes, the topic of your writing projects will be determined by the subject matter of the class and the directions of the instructor. If you are required to write a research paper for your political science class that focuses on the effects of nationalism, chances are an essay on the relaxation benefits of trout fishing would not be welcomed.

So, how do you write about topics assigned by the instructor? The answer to this question depends on the specific assignment and the class, but here are a few questions you should ask yourself and your instructor as you begin to write:

*What is the purpose and who is the audience for the essay you are being asked to write?* In other words, what do you understand to be the instructor’s and your goals in writing? Is the instructor’s assignment designed to test your understanding and comprehension of class lectures, discussions, and readings? Is the instructor asking you to reflect and argue about some aspect of the class activities? Is the intended audience for the essay only the instructor, or is the assignment more broadly directed to other students or to a “general reader”?

*What do you think about the topic?* What’s your opinion about the topic assigned by the instructor? If it is a topic that asks you to pick a particular “side,” what side are you on? And along these lines: to what extent would it be appropriate for you to incorporate your own feelings and opinions about the topic into your writing?

*How much “room” is there within the assigned topic for more specialized focuses?* Most assigned topics which at first appear limiting actually allow for a great deal of flexibility. For example, you might think that an assigned topic about the “fuel economy and SUVs” would have little room for a variety of approaches. But the many books and articles about fuel efficient vehicles suggest the topic is actually much larger than it might at first appear.
Does the assignment ask students to do additional research, or does it ask students to focus on the readings assigned in class? Assignments that ask students to do additional library and Internet research are potentially much broader than assignments that ask students to focus on class readings.

Coming Up with Your Own Ideas

At other times, instructors allow students to pick a topic for their research-based writing projects. However, rarely do instructors allow their students to write research-based essays on anything for a lot of good reasons. For example, your composition and rhetoric course might be structured around a particular theme that you are exploring with your other reading assignments, your discussions, and your writing. Other ideas and topics don’t really lend themselves to academic research writing. You probably have a special person in your life worth writing about (a parent, a grandparent, a boyfriend or girlfriend, etc.), but it is usually difficult to write a research-based essay on such a person. Some potential topics are too divisive or complex to write about in a relatively short academic research-based essay, or some are topics that have become so overly-discussed that they have become clichés.

Besides the general theme of the course and other potential limitations to ideas for research, you also need to carefully consider your own interests in the ideas you are thinking about researching.

If you are allowed to choose your own research project topic, be sure to choose carefully, especially if it is a topic you will be working with throughout the term. Don’t pick a topic simply because it is the first idea that comes to mind or because you imagine it will be “easy” to research. Focus instead on an idea that meets the goals of the assignment, is researchable, and, most importantly, is a topic that you are interested in learning more about.

Taking the time to develop a good research topic at the beginning of the research writing process is critical. Planning ahead can be difficult and time-consuming, and it can be tempting to seize on the first idea that seems “easy.” But all too often, these “easy” first ideas end up being time-consuming and difficult projects. In other words, the time you spend turning your research idea into a topic and then a working thesis will pay off when it comes time to actually write the research project assignment.

Exercise 4.1

- What are some ideas that would NOT make good research projects for this class? Working in small groups, try to come up with a list of items that you all agree would be difficult (if not impossible) to write a research project about for this class.
- Are there items that you can add to your list of topics that would NOT make good research projects, ones that are “researchable” but that seem too clichéd or controversial to do effectively in one semester?

Brainstorming for Ideas

Whether you are assigned a particular topic or are allowed to choose your own topic within certain guidelines, the next step is to explore the ideas that you might write about in more detail. This process is called “brainstorming,” though some instructors and textbooks might refer to similar techniques as
“invention” or “pre-writing.” Regardless of what it’s called, the goal is the same: to lay the foundation for focusing in on a particular topic and the working thesis of a research-writing project.

Keep three general concepts in mind when trying any approach to brainstorming with your writing:

- **Not all of these approaches to brainstorming will work equally well for everyone or work equally well for all topics.** Your results will vary and that’s okay. If one of these techniques doesn’t work for you, try another and see how that goes.
- **When trying any of these techniques, you can’t censor yourself.** Allow yourself the freedom to brainstorm about some things that you think are bad or even silly ideas. Getting out the “bad” or “silly” ideas has a way of allowing the good ideas to come through. Besides, you might be surprised about how some topics that initially seem bad or silly turn out to actually be good with a little brainstorming.
- **Even if you know what topic you want to write about, brainstorm.** Even if you know you want to write about a particular topic, you should try to consider some other topics in brainstorming because you never know what other things you could have written about if you don’t consider the possibilities. Besides, you still should do some brainstorming to shape your idea into a topic and then focus it into a working thesis.

### Brainstorming Techniques

**Freewriting**

One of the most common and effective brainstorming techniques for writing classes, freewriting, is also easy to master. All you do is write about anything that comes into your head without stopping for a short time—five minutes or so. The key part of this activity though is **you cannot stop for any reason.** Even if you don’t know what to write about, write “I don’t know what to write about” until something else comes to mind. And don’t worry—something else usually does come to mind.

**Looping or Targeted Freewriting**

Looping is similar to freewriting in that you write without stopping, but the difference is you are trying to be more focused in your writing. You can use a more specific topic to “loop” back to if you would like, or, if you do the more open-ended freewriting first, you can do a more targeted freewriting about one of the things you found to be a potentially workable idea. For example, you might freewrite with something general and abstract in mind, perhaps the question “what would make a good idea for a research project?” For a more targeted freewriting exercise, you would consider a more specific questions, such as “How could I explore and write about the research idea I have on computer crime?”

**Small Group Discussion**

One of the best ways we all get different ideas is to talk with others. The same is true for finding a topic for research: sometimes, bouncing ideas off of each other in small groups is a great place to start, and it can be a lot of fun.

Here’s one way to do it: name someone in a small group as the recorder. Each person in turn should give an idea for a potential topic, and the recorder should write it down. Every person should take a turn quickly sharing an idea out for the others—no “I don’t know” or “come back to me!” Remember: no ideas are bad or silly or stupid at this point, so do not censor yourself or your group members.
**Clustering**

Clustering is a visual technique that can often help people see several different angles on their ideas. It can be an especially effective way to explore the details of a topic idea you develop with freewriting or looping. On a blank sheet of paper, write a one- or two-word description of your idea in the middle and circle it. Around that circle, write down one- or two-word descriptions of different aspects or characteristics of your main idea. Draw circles around those terms and then connect them to the main idea. Keep building outward, making “clusters” of the main idea as you go. Eventually, you should get a grouping of clusters that looks something like the illustration below.

![Cluster Diagram](image)

**Journalist Questions**

One of the key elements of journalistic style is that journalists answer the basic questions of “What?” “Who?” “Where?” “When?” “How?” and “Why?” These are all good questions to consider in brainstorming for your idea, though clearly, these questions are not always equally applicable to all ideas. Here are some examples of the sort of journalistic questions you might want to ask yourself about your idea:

- What is my idea? What are the key terms of my idea?
- Who are the people involved in my idea? Who is performing the action of my topic? Who are the people affected by my idea?
- Where does my idea take place? Where did it come from? Is it restricted to a particular time and place?
- When did my idea happen? How does it relate to the other events that might have taken place at a similar time? Are there events that happened before or after my idea that might have affected it?
- How did my idea happen, or how is it still happening?
- Why did my idea happen, or why is it still happening?
From Ideas to Topics using the Library and the Web

Coming up with an idea, especially using these brainstorming techniques, is not that hard to do. After all, we are surrounded by potential ideas and things that could be researched: teen violence, computer crime, high-fat diets, drugs, copyright laws, Las Vegas, dangerous toys. But it can be a little more tricky to figure out how ideas can be more specific and researchable topics. Ideas are general, broad, and fairly easy for all of us to grasp. Topics, on the other hand, are more specific, narrow, and in need of research. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idea</th>
<th>Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer Crime</td>
<td>Terrorism and the ‘net, credit card fraud, computer stalking, “helpful” hackers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-fat diets</td>
<td>Health risks, obesity, cholesterol, heart disease, health benefits of, weight loss from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmaceutical Drugs</td>
<td>Cost of prescriptions, medical advances, advertising, disease prevention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In other words, a topic is a step further in the process of coming up with a researchable project for academic writing.

Chances are, your brainstorming activities have already helped you in the process of developing your idea into a topic. But before you move onto the next step of developing a working thesis, you should consider two more helpful topic developing techniques: a quick library subject search and a Web engine search.

A quick library subject search is just what it sounds like: using the computerized catalog system for your library, you can get a sense about the sort of ways other researchers have already divided up your idea into different topics.

For example, imagine your brainstorming has led you to the general idea “fisheries” and the potential problem of over-fishing in some part of the world. While this seems like it might be a potentially good and interesting thing to write about and to research, “fisheries” is an idea that could be narrowed down. If you conduct a subject search on your library’s book catalog for “fisheries,” you might find the library keeps track of different books in several categories. Some examples of these categories include

- Fisheries, Atlantic Ocean.
- Fisheries, Canada.
- Fisheries, Environmental Aspects.

You might also want to use your library’s periodical databases for some quick keyword searches. For example, a keyword search for “computer crime” in a periodical database returns article titles like “Demands for coverage increase as cyber-terrorism risk is realized” and “Making sense of cyber-exposures” (which are both articles about the concern businesses and insurance companies have about cybercrime), and also articles like “Meet the Hackers,” an insider’s view of computer hacking that disputes it being a “crime.” At this point in the research process, you don’t need to look up and read the
sources you find, though you will probably want to keep track of them in case you end up needing them later for your research project.

Another great place to go to brainstorm ideas into topics is one of the many search engines on the World Wide Web, and you are probably already familiar with these services such as Google, Yahoo!, or Firefox. News sites like nytimes.com, npr.org, and csmonitor.com, as well as general topic sites like aeon.co, also can lead to topics you haven’t considered in your brainstorming exercises.

Your college library has an Issues & Controversies database that lists possible topics. In addition, the library offers both topic generation and narrowing tools. A keyword search in the library databases and on the Web can give you some good direction about how to turn your idea into a topic.

However, keep these issues in mind when conducting your Web searches:

- Search engine searches are done by computer programs, which means that they will not sort out for you what is relevant from what is irrelevant for your search.
- Most search engines and search directories offer an “advanced search” option that explains how to do a smarter search. Read these instructions and you will be on your way to better searches.
- Different search engines index and collect information in different ways. Therefore, you should do keyword searches with the same phrase with a few different search engines. You might be surprised how your results will differ.
- If you aren’t having much luck with the keywords of your general idea, try a couple of synonyms. For example, with “computer crime,” you might want to try “Internet crime,” or a related term such as “computer hacking.”

**Exercise 4.2**

With an idea in mind, try doing a quick keyword search on the library's website and on a World Wide Web search engine.

- What sort of differences are there in the information you get back from doing a quick keyword search at the library versus doing one on the Web?
- If you are having a hard time getting results with your searches, can you come up with any synonyms for your key words?
Chapter 5: Narrowing the Topic

For many students, having to start with a research question is the biggest difference between how they did research in high school and how they are required to carry out their college research projects. It’s a process of working from the outside in: you start with the world of all possible topics (or your assigned topic) and narrow down until you’ve focused your interest enough to be able to tell precisely what you want to find out instead of only what you want to “write about.”

Process of Narrowing a Topic

Visualize narrowing a topic as starting with all possible topics and choosing narrower and narrower subsets until you have a specific enough topic to form a research question.

All Possible Topics – You’ll need to narrow your topic in order to do research effectively. Without specific areas of focus, it will be hard to even know where to begin.

Assigned Topics – Ideas about a narrower topic can come from anywhere. Often, a narrower topic boils down to deciding what’s interesting to you. One way to get ideas is to read background information in a source like Wikipedia.

Topic Narrowed by Initial Exploration – It’s wise to do some more reading about that narrower topic to a) learn more about it and b) learn specialized terms used by professionals and scholars who study it.

Topic Narrowed to Research Question(s) – A research question defines exactly what you are trying to find out. It will influence most of the steps you take to conduct the research.
Why Narrow a Topic?

Once you have a need for research—say, an assignment—you may need to prowl around a bit online to explore the topic and figure out what you actually want to find out and write about.

For instance, maybe your assignment is to develop a poster about “spring” for an introductory horticulture course. The instructor expects you to narrow that topic to something you are interested in and that is related to your class.

Another way to view a narrowed topic is as a sliver of the whole topic.

Ideas about a narrower topic can come from anywhere. In this case, a narrower topic boils down to deciding what’s interesting to you about “spring” that is related to what you’re learning in your horticulture class and small enough to manage in the time you have.

One way to get ideas would be to read about spring in Wikipedia, looking for things that seem interesting and relevant to your class, and then letting one thing lead to another as you keep reading and thinking about likely possibilities that are more narrow than the enormous “spring” topic. (Be sure to pay attention to the references at the bottom of most Wikipedia pages and pursue any that look interesting. Your instructor is not likely to let you cite Wikipedia, but those references may be citable scholarly sources that you could eventually decide to use.)

Or, instead, if it is spring at the time you could start by just looking around, admire the blooming trees on campus, and decide you’d like your poster to be about bud development on your favorites, the crabapple trees.

Background Reading

It’s wise to do some more reading about that narrower topic once you have it. For one reason, you probably don’t know much about it yet. For another, such reading will help you learn the terms used by
professionals and scholars who have studied your narrower topic. Those terms are certain to be helpful when you’re looking for sources later, so jot them down or otherwise remember them.

For instance, if you were going to do research about the treatment for humans with bird flu, this background reading would teach you that professionals and scholars usually use the term avian influenza instead of bird flu when they write about it. (Often, they also use H1N1 or H1N9 to identify the strain.) If you didn’t learn that, you would miss the kinds of sources you’ll eventually need for your assignment.

Most sources other than journal articles are good sources for this initial reading, including the New York Times or other mainline American news outlets, Wikipedia, encyclopedias for the discipline your topic is in (horticulture for the crabapple bud development topic, for instance), dictionaries for the discipline, and manuals, handbooks, blogs, and web pages that could be relevant.

This initial reading could cause you to narrow your topic further, which is fine because narrower topics lead to greater specificity for what you have to find out. After this upfront work, you’re ready to start developing the research question(s) you will try to answer for your assignment.

**Fuel Your Inspiration**

It’s worth remembering that reading, scanning, looking at, and listening to information resources is very useful during any step of the process to develop research questions. Doing so can jog our memories, give us details that will help us focus, and help us connect disparate information—all of which will help us come up with research questions that we find interesting.

**Regular vs. Research Questions**

Most of us look for information to answer questions every day, and we often act on the answers to those questions. Are research questions any different from most of the questions for which we seek information? Yes.

See how they’re different by looking over the examples of both kinds below and answering questions about them in the next activity. After you’ve considered the examples, see the summary of the differences that follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXAMPLES: Regular vs. Research Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regular Question:</strong> What time is my movie showing at Harkins on Friday?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Question:</strong> How do “sleeper” films end up having outstanding attendance figures?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regular Question:</strong> What can I do about my insomnia?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Question:</strong> How do flights more than 16 hours long affect the reflexes of commercial jet pilots?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Regular Question: How many children in the U.S. have allergies?
Research Question: How does his or her country of birth affect a child’s chances of developing asthma?

Regular Question: What year was metformin approved by the U.S. Food and Drug administration?
Research Question: Why are nanomedicines, such as doxorubicin, worth developing?

Regular Question: Could citizens register to vote at branches of the Phoenix Public Library in 2012?
Research Question: How do public libraries in the United States support democracy?

Regular Question: What is the Whorfian Hypothesis?
Research Question: Why have linguists cared about the Whorfian hypothesis?

Regular Question: Where is the Apple, Inc. home office?
Research Question: Why are Apple’s marketing efforts so successful?

Regular Question: What is Mers?
Research Question: How could decision making about whether to declare a pandemic be improved?

Regular Question: Does MLA style recommend the use of generic male pronouns intended to refer to both males and females?
Research Question: How do age, gender, IQ, and socioeconomic status affect whether students interpret generic male pronouns as referring to both males and females?

Summary: Regular vs. Research Questions

Research questions cannot be answered by a quick Web search. Answering them involves using more critical thinking than answering regular questions because they seem more debatable. Research questions require more sources of information to answer and, consequently, take more time to answer. They, more often than regular questions, start with the word “how” or “why.”

Influence of a Research Question

Whether you’re developing research questions for your personal life, your work for an employer, or for academic purposes, the process always forces you to figure out exactly:

- What you’re interested in finding out.
- What it’s feasible for you to find out (given your time, money, and access to information sources).
- How you can find it out, including what research methods will be necessary and what information sources will be relevant.
• What kind of claims you’ll be able to make or conclusions you’ll be able to draw about what you found out.

For academic purposes, you may have to develop research questions to carry out both large and small assignments. A smaller assignment may be to do research for a class discussion or to, say, write a blog post for a class; larger assignments may have you conduct research and then report it in a lab report, poster, research paper, or article.

For large projects, the research question (or questions) you develop will define or at least heavily influence:

• Your topic, in that research questions effectively narrow the topic you’ve first chosen or been assigned by your instructor.
• What, if any, hypothesis you test.
• Which information sources are relevant to your project.
• Which research methods are appropriate.

What claims you can make or conclusions you can come to as a result of your research, including what thesis statement you should write for a research paper or what results section you should write about the data you collected in your own science or social science study.

**Influence on Thesis**

Within an essay, poster, or research paper, the thesis is the researcher’s answer to the research question(s). So as you develop research questions, you are effectively specifying what any thesis in your project will be about. While perhaps many research questions could have come from your original topic, your question states exactly which one(s) your thesis will be answering.
For example, a topic that starts out as “desert symbiosis” could eventually result in a research question that is “how does the diversity of bacteria in the gut of the Sonoran Desert termite contribute to the termite’s survival?” In turn, the researcher’s thesis will answer that particular research question instead of the numerous other questions that could have come from that topic.

It’s all part of a process that leads to greater and greater specificity.

**TIP: Don’t Make These Mistakes**

Sometimes students inexperienced at working with research questions confuse them with the search statements they will type into the search box of a search engine or database when looking for sources for their project. Or, they confuse research questions with the thesis statement they will write when they report their research.

**Influence on Hypothesis**

If you’re doing a study that predicts how variables are related, you’ll have to write at least one hypothesis. The research questions you write will contain the variables that will later appear in your hypothesis(es).

**Influence on Resources**

You can’t tell whether an information resource is relevant to your research until you know exactly what you’re trying to find out. Since it’s the research questions that define that, it’s they that divide all information sources into two groups: those that are relevant to your research and those that are not—all based on whether each can help you find out what you want to find out and/or report the answer.

**Influence on Research Methods**

Your research questions will help you figure out what research methods you should use because the questions reflect what your research is intended to do. For instance, if your research question relates to describing a group, survey methods may work well. But they can’t answer cause-and-effect questions.

**Influence on Claims or Conclusions**

The research questions you write will reflect whether your research is intended to describe a group or situation, to explain or predict outcomes, or to demonstrate a cause and effect relationship(s) among variables. It’s those intentions and how well you carry out the study, including whether you used methods appropriate to the intentions, that will determine what claims or conclusions you can make as a result of your research.

**Developing the Research Question**

Because of all their influence, you might worry that research questions are very difficult to develop. Sometimes it can seem that way. But we’ll help you get the hang of it and, luckily, none of us has to come up with perfect ones right off. It’s more like doing a rough draft and then improving it. That’s why we talk about developing research questions instead of just writing them.
Steps for Developing a Research Question

The steps for developing a research question, listed below, help you organize your thoughts.

**Step 1:** Pick a topic (or consider the one assigned to you).

**Step 2:** Write a narrower/smaller topic that is related to the first.

**Step 3:** List some potential questions that could logically be asked in relation to the narrow topic.

**Step 4:** Pick the question that you are most interested in.

**Step 5:** Change that question you’re interested in so that it is more focused.

**Practice**

Once you know the order of the steps, only three skills are involved in developing a research question:

- Imagining narrower topics about a larger one,
- Thinking of questions that stem from a narrow topic, and
- Focusing questions to eliminate their vagueness.

Every time you use these skills, it’s important to evaluate what you have produced—that’s just part of the process of turning rough drafts into more finished products.

Maybe you have a topic in mind, but aren’t sure how to form a research questions around it. The trick is to think of a question related to your topic, but not answerable with a quick search. Also, try to be specific so that your research question can be fully answered in the final product for your research assignment.
ACTIVITY: Thinking of Questions

For each of the narrow topics below, think of a research question that is logically related to that topic. (Remember that good research questions often, but not always, start with "Why" or "How" because questions that begin that way usually require more analysis.)

Topics:
- U.S. investors’ attitudes about sustainability
- College students’ use of Snapchat
- The character Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Nature-inspired nanotechnologies
- Marital therapy

After you think of each research question, evaluate it by asking whether it is
- Logically related to the topic
- In question form
- Not answerable with a quick Google search
- Specific, not vague

Sometimes the first draft of a research question is still too broad, which can make your search for sources more challenging. Refining your question to remove vagueness or to target a specific aspect of the topic can help.

ACTIVITY: Focusing Questions

The first draft research questions below are not focused enough. Read them and identify at least one area of vagueness in each. Check your vagueness with what we identified. It’s great if you found more than we did because that can lead to research questions of greater specificity. See the bottom of the page for the answers.

First Drafts of Research Questions:
1. Why have most electric car company start-ups failed?
2. How do crabapple trees develop buds?
3. How has NASA helped America?
4. Why do many first-time elections soon after a country overthrows a dictator result in very conservative elected leaders?
5. How is music composed and performed mostly by African-Americans connected to African-American history?
ANSWER TO ACTIVITY: Focusing Questions

The answers to the “Focusing Questions” Activity:

**Question 1:** Why have most electric car company start-ups failed?
Vagueness: Which companies are we talking about? Worldwide or in a particular country?

**Question 2:** How do crabapple trees develop buds?
Vagueness: There are several kinds of crabapples. Should we talk only about one kind? Does it matter where the crabapple tree lives?

**Question 3:** How has NASA helped America?
Vagueness: NASA has had many projects. Should we focus on one project they completed? Or projects during a particular time period?

**Question 4:** Why do many first-time elections soon after a country overthrows a dictator result in very conservative elected leaders?
Vagueness: What time period are we talking about? Many dictators have been overthrown and many countries have been involved. Perhaps we should focus on one country or one dictator or one time period.

**Question 5:** How is music composed and performed mostly by African-Americans connected to African-American history?
Vagueness: What kinds of music? Any particular performers and composers? When?
How to Write an Engaging Introduction

Written by Jennifer Janechek for Writing Commons

In what ways does your opening engage your reader?

Writers who produce engaging openings keep their audience in mind from the very first sentence. They consider the tone, pace, delivery of information, and strategies for getting the reader’s attention. Many teachers generally recommend that students write their introductions last, because oftentimes introductions are the hardest paragraphs to write.

They’re difficult to write first because you have to consider what the reader needs to know about your topic before getting to the thesis. So, I, like other instructors, suggest writing them last—even after the conclusion—though it’s always a good idea to write with a working thesis in mind. Here are some general principles to consider when writing an introduction.

Avoid Opening with Cosmic Statements

Think about the term “cosmic.” What does it mean? “Far out.” Do you want your introductions to be “far out” (in a bad way)? Then avoid beginning your papers with a cosmic statement—a generalization, an overly broad idea. Publishers say that the first one or two sentences make or break a submission: if the first two sentences are poorly written or are uninteresting, they won’t keep reading. Consider what your target audience would think if the first two lines were so broad that they really meant nothing at all. Here
is a list of a few phrases that signify cosmic statements and that are often seen in the emerging level of student writing:

- From the beginning of time . . .
- Ever since the dawn of time . . .
- Since man first walked the earth . . .
- There are two sides to every issue.
- There are many controversial issues over which people disagree.

That’s just a short list; there are many more cosmic phrases. But you can see from these examples that they preface statements that are so broad they will either lead into an incorrect or bland statement or will disconnect the reader from the real point that you want to make. Let’s take the first cosmic phrase from this list and finish it:

> From the beginning of time, people have been tattooing each other.

Though the writer might think this is a good broad statement to introduce a paper on tattooing practices, it’s too broad—not to mention historically incorrect. How might we revise this cosmic statement so that it’s more engaging?

> Tattooing practices have widely varied over the past few centuries.

Though still pretty broad, this statement is at least accurate. Consider, though, how we might draw the reader in even more:

> Imagine you’re in a tattoo parlor, and you’re about to get a tattoo for the first time. You look over and see the tattoo artist coming at you with a piece of glass. How would you feel? Well, tattooing practices have only become standardized in the last two centuries.

By incorporating narrative into the introduction, the writer can engage the reader and entice him or her to continue reading. Note that narrative doesn’t suit all genres of writing, though. See "Employing Narrative in an Essay" at writingcommons.org for more information. More formal assignments may ask you to construct an introduction without figurative language or narrative. Think about the requirements of your assignment and your rhetorical situation when crafting your introduction.

**Avoid Opening with a Dictionary Definition**

Just like it’s important to avoid using cosmic statements in your introductions, it’s also important to avoid starting your papers with a dictionary definition. If your paper topic is abortion, for instance, your reader doesn’t need to know what Merriam Webster considers abortion to be; he or she needs to know what broader idea will lead him or her to your thesis. So don’t look to dictionary.com for a snazzy opener; you won’t find one there.

Before writing the first line of your introduction, it’s a good idea to write out the thesis. You will need to build up to that thesis statement: the purpose of the introduction paragraph is to give the reader the information he or she needs to understand the thesis statement.
Wade Your Reader in to Your Paper

Why is it important to gradually move your reader through your introduction toward your thesis? Let's say that you're showing your friend this great new lake you’ve discovered. When you reach the edge, do you push your friend in or do you wade into the lake with him? Perhaps you’d push your friend in, but you don’t want to shove your reader into your paper. You want to wade him or her into your paper, gradually taking him or her to the thesis statement.

If you write your introduction paragraph last, you will be familiar with your argument and its direction. You can then use this knowledge to structure your introduction paragraph, asking yourself questions like, "What details do I include in my body paragraphs (so that I avoid bringing them in to the paper too soon)?" and "What background information, either about the greater conversation surrounding this topic or about the topic's historical context, might my reader need to appreciate my thesis?"

Let’s take a look at an example of an introduction paragraph that shoves the reader into the paper:

> Tattooing practices have varied widely over the past few centuries. Indeed, tattooing has become much safer. Whereas in the nineteenth century tattooing was performed with sharp instruments like glass in countries such as Africa, in the twenty-first century tattooing is performed with sanitary needles.

This introduction can’t really stand on its own as a paragraph, anyway; it’s far too short. How might we add material to this paragraph (revise it) so that it gradually brings the reader to the thesis?

> Imagine you’re in a tattoo parlor, and you’re about to get a tattoo for the first time. You look over and see the tattoo artist coming at you with a piece of glass. How would you feel? Well, tattooing practices have only become standardized in the last two centuries. In fact, in the nineteenth century, some tattoo artists used sharp instruments like shards of glass to mark the skin. Yet with the public focus in the modern world on health and healthful practices, tattooing practices have evolved accordingly. Whereas in the nineteenth century tattooing was performed in unsanitary, dangerous ways, in the twenty-first century tattooing is performed with sanitary needles, demonstrating a shift in ideas regarding health in public opinion.

Whereas the first introduction galloped into the thesis statement, this paragraph wades the reader into the paper. Guiding the reader toward your thesis statement will also help him or her better understand the context for your particular topic, thereby giving him or her a greater stake in your writing.

Ultimately, then, practice writing your introduction last. If it doesn’t work for you, then switch back to writing it first. But writing it last may help you avoid writing two introduction paragraphs or foregrounding your argument too much. Overall, consider the progression of ideas in your introduction: you should move from global to local, from the general (but not over-generalized) to the specific (your thesis statement).

References

Two-Paragraph Introductions from ENG102 PVCC Students

Often, students coming out of high school have been taught to write only in the five-paragraph essay format. However, longer essays require more than longer paragraphs. While the basic model is the same (introduction with thesis statement, body paragraphs that develop the thesis points, and conclusion), the in-depth essay or research paper has a clear progression of paragraphs that develop the thesis, but multiple paragraphs are often needed for the individual points covered by the thesis. In addition, introductions and conclusions may develop over two or more paragraphs. Two-paragraph introductions are used in more lengthy essays. In the two-paragraph model, the first paragraph is an attention-grabber; the second paragraph states the issue and contains the thesis statement, which is underlined in the following examples from PVCC students.

A Weak Introduction Containing No Focus or Clear Thesis

The second question on a random survey about marketing tactics asked: “How do you feel about the direction America is heading? Good, bad or indifferent?” Many people have thought the same thing time and time again year after year, one generation to the next. The question may come up in conversations all over the country and even the world. A plethora of answers, feelings and thoughts come to mind no matter who you are talking to, in what language and what country. That is what makes the world such an interesting and diverse experience. In the same sense it can make it a scary, uncertain and possibly tragic existence for some.

To listen to a conversation between middle aged parents today, children ranging in age from two to twenty-two, it begins with social standards, annual salaries, crime rates and pop culture. Despite the differences in their kids’ ages, their social status, their income, their upbringing and their experiences, they find a shared concern: How will the introduction of sex affect their children? How has this subject, or lack of attention to it, affected their lives and society as a whole?

A Strong Introduction Using a Shocking Statistics Strategy: Causal Analysis

*begin with an attention grabber:*

According to China’s recent report to the United Nations, the country has released nearly five billion tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere in 2004 alone, nearly doubling their emissions since 1990 and placing them second as the top greenhouse gas emitter. Worse than China is the United States, leading in greenhouse gas emissions by producing about 6.8 tons annually in carbon dioxide alone (citation needed). China has signed on to the world’s effort to reduce the deadly emissions by joining the Kyoto Protocol; the U.S. leads the research effort, investing more than $1.3 billion since 2000 (citation needed). But is this effort enough?

*then define the issue/lead-in to the thesis statement:*

The truth is the atmosphere is thinning at an ever-increasing rate, and some scientists say the damage is close to irreversible. Other research points to atmospheric change as a normal part of the weather cycle. Even if warming and cooling are natural and inevitable environmental patterns, does it mean civilized nations should not do their part in reducing the damage before it’s too late? *then state thesis:* The causes of atmospheric thinning need to be understood and addressed before the deterioration becomes permanent and irreversible, or there will be no world left to worry about.
A Strong Introduction with an Anecdotal Opening Strategy:
Solution Proposal

The ferocious crowd gathers into a mass of screams around the armed soldiers. Furious over a tax unlawfully imposed, the colonists’ anger erupts with the hurling of a stone. Now under attack by this violent mob, the armed soldiers open fire, killing five (“Boston Massacre 1”). Three years later under cover of night, a group of revolutionaries disguised as Indians board three British cargo ships. They fling all of the 342 chests of tea into the harbor as a protest to the tax placed on tea. After the British catch wind of the “tea party,” England closes the Boston port and demands payment of the tax in full (“Boston Tea Party” 1). Tensions escalate and two years later, on April 15, 1775, in the black of night and with a flurry of hoofbeats, Paul Revere and two other patriots ride through the town warning of the British army’s arrival (“Paul Revere” 1). By the time Colonel Prescott shouts his famous order to the American militia at Bunker Hill, “Don’t fire until you see the whites of their eyes,” and 1,000 of the British army’s 2,500 soldiers are killed, the spectacular display of American military force shows England that their enemy is formidable and ultimately unbeatable (“Bunker Hill” 1). The revolution that gave birth to this great nation was fought because of taxes.

How has America fared with taxes since the revolt? Fairly well until recently. Taxation in America has become a problem. Many feel that adjustments to the current system are necessary. Others believe it is necessary to do away with America’s tax system completely and start from scratch. History has proven that incremental changes to the current system have not corrected the problems. A more effective approach to tax reform is fundamental change. What America needs is a value-added consumption tax that is fair to all taxpayers and spurs economic growth.

Causal Analysis

This final example has a strong attention grabber in the first paragraph but an issue paragraph which has tried to do too much. How would you edit this intro for the student?
“They’ve been hit!” Army Staff Sergeant Jose Santos yelled out to Private First Class Brown, the 18-year-old medic who had been attached to the convoy. They could hear the pop of bullets shot by nearby Taliban fighters. Pfc. Brown slowly cracked open the door of the Humvee only to discover that one of the four other in the convoy was engulfed in flames. Instead of taking cover, Pfc. Brown and SSgt. Santos ran through a barrage of AK-47 gunfire toward fellow soldiers who were trapped inside the burning vehicle. During the effort to get the injured soldiers carried out to safety into a nearby ditch, the insurgents began firing mortars. It was then that Pfc. Brown lay over the injured soldiers in attempt to shelter them from the incoming fire and the chunks of ammunition flying around that had been ignited from their burning Humvee. In the midst of danger, Pfc. Brown continued to focus on the priority of providing the necessary medical attention to the wounded soldiers in the ditch. U.S. Army Pfc. Monica Brown received the Silver Star (the third highest military decoration) for her actions that day. Just one week after her heroic acts, she was pulled out of the combat unit she was attached to by “higher-ups” because, as Pfc. Brown states, her “presence as a female in a combat arms unit had attracted attention” (qtd. in Tyson, “Woman Gains…” 1). Even though her actions proved she was just as capable of serving in a combat unit as the men were, she was removed solely because of her gender.

As surprising as it may seem in this day and age, women are, by law, excluded from being able to be “assigned” to or serve in any unit whose purpose is front-line offensive combat, or any Special Forces unit; however, the military does indirectly “attach” women to these combat units which puts them in very close proximity to the so-called “front-lines.” The common causes for these combat exclusions usually include arguments about the biological differences between men and women, the way women are viewed in society and the traditional “roles” for women. These causes are argued to cause disruption in the unit cohesion. Erin Solaro claims “That connection [cohesion] has served the military for decades as an excuse to exclude whom ever it didn’t think belonged in the service. Once it was black men who ‘disrupted’ cohesion. Later, many of the same arguments were used against women and gays” (“Women in the…” 20). Even though this law of exclusion exists, it does not stand in the way of these military women from stepping up, and upholding their obligations and duties, even if it means being faced with direct combat without the same formal combat training that is given to the males of the combat units.

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Exercise 6.1

Working alone or in small groups, revise one of the following “weak” introductions, being sure to get the reader’s attention, to make clear what the essay being introduced would be about, and to eliminate unneeded words and clichés. Of course, since you don’t have the entire essay, so you may have to take certain liberties with these passages. But the goal is to improve these weak beginnings without changing their meaning.

Example #1:

In society today, there are many problems with television shows. A lot of them are not very entertaining at all. Others are completely inappropriate for children. It’s hard to believe that these things are on TV all. In fact, because of a lot of the bad things that have been on television in recent years, broadcasters have had to censor more and more shows. They have done some of this voluntarily, but they have also been required to do this by irate
advertisers and viewers as well. For example, consider Janet Jackson’s famous “wardrobe malfunction” at the 2004 Super Bowl. I contend that Jackson’s performance in the 2004 Super Bowl, accident or not, has lead to more censorship on television.

Example #2:
There are a lot of challenges to being a college student. We all know that studying and working hard will pay off in the end. A lot of college students also enjoy to cheer for their college teams. A lot of colleges and universities will do whatever it takes to have winning teams. In fact, some colleges and universities are even willing to allow in students with bad test scores and very low high school grades as long as they are great athletes and can make the team better. All of this leads to a difficult to deny observation: college sports, especially Division I football, is full of corruption and it is damaging the academic integrity of some of our best universities.

Background Information (or Helping Your Reader Find a Context)

It is always important to explain, contextualize, and orientate your readers within any piece of writing. Your research essay is no different in that you need to include background information on your topic in order to create the right context for the project.

In one sense, you’re giving your reader important background information every time you fully introduce and explain a piece of evidence or an argument you are making. But oftentimes, research essays include some background information about the overall topic near the beginning of the essay. Sometimes, this is done briefly as part of the introduction section of the essay; at other times, this is best accomplished with a more detailed section after the introduction and near the beginning of the essay.

How much background information you need to provide and how much context you need to establish depends a great deal on how you answer questions in which you are asked to consider your purpose and your audience. If one of the purposes of your essay is to convince a primary audience of readers who know little about your topic or your argument, you will have to provide more background information than you would if the main purpose of your essay was to convince a primary audience that knows a lot about your topic. But even if you can assume your audience is as familiar with the topic of your essay as you, it’s still important to provide at least some background on your specific approach to the issue in your essay.

It’s almost always better to give your readers “too much” background information than “too little.” Students too often assume too much about what their readers know about their research topic. There are several reasons why this is the case; perhaps it is because students so involved in their research forget that their readers haven’t been doing the same kind of research. The result is that sometimes students “cut corners” in terms of helping their audience through their essay. Always remember that your readers don’t know as much about your specific essay as you do, and part of your job as a writer is to guide your reader through the text.

In the following excerpts of a research essay, the context and background information for the subject matter appear after the introduction:
The problems surrounding corruption in university athletics have been around ever since sports have been considered important in American culture. People have emphasized the importance of sports and the significance of winning for a long time. According to Jerome Cramer in a special report published in Phi Delta Kappan, "Sports are a powerful experience, and America somehow took this belief of the ennobling nature of sports and transformed it into a quasi-religion" (Cramer K1).

The author’s subject matter, college athletics, was one that she assumed most of her primary audience of fellow college students and classmates were familiar with. Nonetheless, she does provide some basic information about the importance of sports team in society and in universities in particular.

Weaving in Evidence to Support Your Points

Throughout your research essay, you need to include evidence that supports your points. There is no firm rule as to “how much” research you will want or need to include in your research essay. Like so many other things with research writing, it depends on your purpose, the audience, the assignment, and so forth. **But generally speaking, you need to have a piece of evidence in the form of a direct quote or paraphrase every time you make a claim that you cannot assume your audience “just knows.”**

Stringing together a series of quotes and paraphrases from different sources might show that you have done a lot of research on a particular topic, but your audience wants to know your interpretation of these quotes and paraphrases, and your reader wants and needs to be guided through your research. To do this, you need to work at explaining the significance of your evidence throughout your essay.

For example, this passage is weak in introducing and weaving in evidence to support a point:

> In America today, the desire to have a winning team drives universities to admit academically unqualified students. “At many universities, the tradition of athletic success requires coaches to produce not only competitive but championship-winning teams” (Duderstadt 191).

The connection between the sentence and the evidence is not as clear as it could be. Further, the quotation is simply “dropped in” with no explanation. Now, compare it with this revised example:

> The desire to always have a winning team has driven many universities to admit academically unqualified student athletes to their school just to improve their sports teams. According to James Duderstadt, former president of the University of Michigan, the corruption of university athletics usually begins with the process of recruiting and admitting student athletes. He states, "At many universities, the tradition of athletic success requires coaches to produce not only competitive but championship-winning teams" (Duderstadt 191).

Remember: the point of using research in writing (be it a traditional research essay or any other form of research writing) is not merely to offer your audience a bunch of evidence on a topic. Rather, the point of research writing is to interpret your research in order to persuade an audience.
Antithetical Arguments and Answers

Most research essays anticipate and answer antithetical arguments, the ways in which a reader might disagree with your point. Besides demonstrating your knowledge of the different sides of the issue, acknowledging and answering the antithetical arguments in your research essay will go a long way toward convincing some of your readers that the point you are making is correct.

Antithetical arguments can be placed almost anywhere within a research essay, including the introduction or the conclusion. However, you want to be sure that the antithetical arguments are accompanied by “answering” evidence and arguments. After all, the point of presenting antithetical arguments is to explain why the point you are supporting with research is the correct one.

For example:

To be fair, being a student-athlete isn’t easy. They are faced with difficult situations when having to juggle their athletic life and their academic life at school. As Duderstadt said, “Excelling in academics is challenging enough without the additional pressures of participating in highly competitive athletic programs” (Duderstadt 190). So one can see why some athletes might experience trouble fitting all of the studying and coursework into their busy schedules.

The Conclusion

As research essays have a beginning, so do they have an ending, generally called a conclusion. While the main purpose of an introduction is to get the reader’s attention and to explain what the essay will be about, the goal of a conclusion is to bring the reader to a satisfying point of closure. In other words, a good conclusion does not merely “end” an essay; it wraps things up.

It is usually a good idea to make a connection in the conclusion of your essay with the introduction, particularly if you began your essay with something like a relevant anecdote or a rhetorical question. You may want to restate your thesis, though you don’t necessarily have to restate your thesis in exactly the same words you used in your introduction. It is also usually not a good idea to end your essay with obvious concluding cues or clichéd phrases like “in conclusion.”

Conclusions are similar to introductions on a number of different levels. First, like introductions, they are important since they leave definite “impressions” on the reader—in this case, the important “last” impression. Second, conclusions are almost as difficult to write and revise as introductions. Because of this, be sure to take extra time and care to revise your conclusion.

For example:

As James Moore and Sherry Watt say in their essay “Who Are Student Athletes?”, the “marriage between higher education and intercollegiate athletics has been turbulent, and always will be” (7). The NCAA has tried to make scholarly success at least as important as athletic success with requirements like Proposition 48 and Proposition 16. But there are still too many cases where under-prepared students are admitted to college because they can play a sport, and there are too still too many instances where universities let their athletes get away with being poor students because they are a sport
superstar. While cheering for college teams is a part of the game, universities should cheer for college players who were students who learn and are successful in the classroom, too.

**Exercise 6.2**

If you worked with the examples in Exercise 6.1, take another look at the revised introductions you wrote. Based on the work you did in that exercise, write a fitting conclusion. Once again, since you don’t have the entire essay, you’ll have to take some liberties with what you decide to include in your conclusion.

**Writing a Working Thesis**

The next step, developing a working thesis, can be a difficult and time-consuming process. However, as was the case when considering different ideas for research in the first place, spending the time now on devising a good working thesis will pay off later.

For our purposes here (and for most college classes), a thesis advocates a specific and debatable issue. In academic writing (including the writing done by your professors), the thesis is often stated fairly directly in the first third or so of the writing, though not usually at the end of the first paragraph where students are often told to place it.

The sentence or two that seems to encapsulate the issue of the essay is called a thesis statement.

Frequently, theses are implied—that is, while the piece of writing clearly has a point that the reader understands, there may not be a specific sentence or two that can easily be identified as the thesis statement. For example, theses are often implied in newspapers and magazines, along with a lot of the writing that appears on Web pages.

The point is a thesis is a point. Theses are not statements of facts, simple questions, or summaries of events. They are positions that you as the writer take on and defend with evidence, logic, observations, and the other tools of discourse. Most kinds of writing—and particularly academic writing—have a thesis, directly stated or implied. Even most of the writing we largely think of as informational has a directly stated or implied thesis.
Theses also tend to lend a certain organization to written arguments since what you include (or exclude) in a written text is largely controlled by the thesis. The main goal of the thesis (either as a specific statement or as an implied statement) is to answer two key questions that are concerns of all readers: “what’s your point?” and “why should I care?”

Now, a **working thesis** is more or less a *temporary* thesis you devise in the beginning of the research process in order to set some direction in your research. However, you should remember: Your working thesis is temporary and should change as you research, write, and learn more about your topic.

Think of the working thesis as the scaffolding and bracing put up around buildings when they are under construction: these structures are not designed to forever be a part of the building. Just the opposite. But you couldn’t build the building in the first place if you didn’t have the scaffolding and bracing that you inevitably have to tear away from the finished building.

Here’s another way of thinking of it: while the journey of 1000 miles begins with just one step (so the saying goes), you still have to pick some kind of direction in the beginning. That’s the purpose of a working thesis. You might change your mind about the direction of your research as you progress through the process, but you’ve got to start somewhere.

What does a working thesis look like? Before considering some potentially strong examples of working theses, read through these weak examples of statements, ones that are not theses, at least for the purposes of academic writing:

- Computer crime is bad.
- Fisheries around the world are important.
- *The Great Gatsby* is an American novel.

None of these sentences would make effective theses because each of these is more or less a statement of fact. Of course, we could debate some of the details here. But practically speaking, most people would assume and believe these statements to be true. Because of that, these statements don’t have much potential as working theses.

These statements are not really theses either:

- There are many controversial ways of dealing with computer crime.
- There are many things that could be done to preserve fisheries around the world.
- *The Great Gatsby* is a wonderful novel for several different reasons.

These revised working thesis statements are better than the previous examples, but they are not quite working theses yet. The problem with these possible working theses is that they are hopelessly vague and give no idea to the reader where the essay is going. Also, while these statements are a bit more debatable than the previous group of examples, they are still statements that most people would more or less accept as facts.

While this next group of statements is yet another step closer, these statements are not really good working theses either:
• This essay will be about the role computer hackers play in computer crime committed on the Internet.
• This essay will discuss some of the measures the international community should take in order to preserve fisheries around the world.
• My essay is about the relevance today of *The Great Gatsby’s* depiction of the connection between material goods and the American dream.

Each of these statements is close to being a working thesis because each is about an idea that has been focused into a specific topic. However, these statements are not quite working thesis statements because they don’t offer a position or opinion that will be defended in some way. To turn these topics into working theses, the writer needs to take a side on the issues suggested in the statements.

Now, these revised statements are examples of possible working theses:

• While some computer hackers are harmless, most of them commit serious computer crimes and represent a serious Internet security problem.
• The international community should enact strict conservation measures to preserve fisheries and save endangered fish species around the world.
• *The Great Gatsby’s* depiction of the connection between material goods and the American dream is still relevant today.

If you compare these possible working theses with the statements at the beginning of this section, you will hopefully see the differences between the weak and strong working theses, and hopefully you can see the characteristics of a viable working thesis.

Each of the strong working thesis statements:

• takes a stand that is generally not considered a fact;
• is specific enough to give the writer and potential reader some idea as to the direction the writing will take; and
• offers an initial position on the topic that takes a stand.

Another useful characteristic of a good working thesis is that it can help you as writer to determine what your essay will NOT be about. For example, the phrasing of the working thesis on computer hackers suggests to both the reader and the researcher that the essay will NOT be about the failure of “dot com” business, computer literacy, or computer software. Certainly these issues are related to the issue of computer hackers and computer crime, but these other issues will not become the focus of the essay.

**Exercise 6.3**

• Working with the topic you’ve chosen, create a working thesis similar to the above examples. Try to ensure that your working thesis is focused and to the point by keeping it to only one sentence. Creating a working thesis can be tricky, so be sure to devote some time to try out different possible working thesis statements. And don’t forget: a working thesis is the temporary scaffolding that will help you build your essay. It will and should change in the process of writing, so it doesn’t need to be perfect at this stage.
• After you have individually formed working theses, get together with a small group of classmates to share and revise them.
Using Academic Language

Written by Joe Moxley for Writing Commons

In what ways have you fulfilled the assignment requirements as they relate to audience, appropriate persona/tone, and rhetorical stance? Why is this word choice/diction inappropriate (conversational) for your audience? What might be more appropriate?

For students and teachers alike, most writing occurs in non-academic settings—notes, e-mails, Facebook posts, blogs, shopping lists, etc. In these writing settings, it is perfectly fine to “write as you speak,” using a conversational tone and slang terms. However, when you enter the classroom (and the professional workspace), writing expectations change. These changes in expectation and acceptability occur because the topic or subject of academic writing is more complex than what we write about in our day-to-day writing settings—not because scholars and professionals say so or because they want to sound “snobby” or superior. Also, there is a shift in audience and level of audience interaction. Basically, college-level and professional writing require clarity both in grammar and word choice so that complex ideas can be easily understood by the reader.

Grammatical Differences in Writing and Speaking

Using conversational language and informal tone—or, “writing as we speak”—in academic writing can be problematic because it can lead to unclear communication between writer and reader. In conversations, we often speak in sentence fragments because we are reacting to the other person’s dialogue. For example, when someone asks “How was your day?” we might answer, “Good.” However, “good” is not a complete sentence, because it has neither a noun (subject) nor a verb. What we really mean to say is, “My day was good,” but because the question implies the subject (my day) and verb (was), our answer can still make sense without repeating these words back to the speaker. However, in writing, the reader cannot necessarily infer the missing subjects and verbs insinuated by the writer. In order for a writer’s ideas to be understood, he or she must include a subject and verb in each sentence and not assume that a reader will infer the correct meaning without these words.

We also tend to use run-ons frequently in our conversations, but they usually go unnoticed.

For example, a friend was explaining to me a trip she took to Disney World in which she used several run-ons:

_We took the kids to see “The Country Bear” show and on the “It’s a Small World” ride, which Cole absolutely loved and couldn’t stop singing the song the rest of the day, and then we took them on “The Haunted House” ride which was a huge mistake because Noah started screaming and yelling and Cole started crying while we were strapped in the moving seats so we couldn’t get off and now the past few nights he’s been having nightmares about the ghost who follows you home._

Run-ons are problematic because they create confusion. We can, to some degree, follow the story about my friend’s trip to Disney World in this really long run-on sentence, but some of the details are muddled: Which song was Cole singing? Who is having nightmares—Noah or Cole? What is “the ghost who follows you home”? When we have conversations, we don’t notice run-ons, and if a detail isn’t clearly communicated, the listener has the opportunity to ask for clarification. However, someone who is reading
text cannot simply ask for clarification from the author. Many of us have visited Disney World, so we may be able to piece together what my friend meant, but it would be very difficult to understand a story about a foreign country we had never visited if it had been recounted in that way.

**Communicating Clearly Using Academic Language and Word Choice**

Clarity is especially important in academic and professional writing because in these settings we usually are asked to write about more complex subjects that may be unfamiliar to the reader. When my students adopt the method of “write as you speak,” their papers usually become confusing and their explanations are difficult to follow because of both grammatical errors and word choice. Correcting grammatical errors that occur in speech is a bit easier than identifying problematic language. The rules of grammar are much more concrete than rules about word choice, which are virtually non-existent. So, if there is no official guide to choosing acceptable words, how do we know when and what colloquial terms—and when colloquial terms—are unacceptable?

One way to decide what word to use is to think about words in terms of audience. The issue with colloquial diction is that it is not inclusive of all audiences. Certain terms and words are only familiar to specific generations or groups.

For example, my roommate used to play an online game called “World of Warcraft.” One day we were playing tennis together, and after hitting the game-winning shot, she exclaimed, “I totally pwned you!” I later found out that *pwn* is a verb used by people in the gaming community that means “to dominate, conquer, or gain ownership of.” Because I had never played World of Warcraft, the meaning of my friend’s celebratory exclamation was lost to me. A barrier in communication also occurs between generations, especially now that technology has influenced us to use abbreviations and create terms such as *LOL* in order to save time. I can assure you that if my grandmother were to read some of my friends’ Facebook posts, she would think that they were speaking a foreign language. My grandmother, then, is not considered a member of the intended audience of my friends’ Facebook posts.

Obviously, we can eliminate Web and text language from our academic writing. However, there are several other colloquial terms that are more well-known but are still questionable. So how do we know what terms are unacceptable and why? Keeping in mind that in academic writing we want to be as clear and direct as possible, we can decide against using several of these terms by analyzing if their meaning would be clearly understood by audiences of all groups and generations.

For example, several of my students used the phrase “name dropping” in their papers when analyzing one of President Obama’s speeches. While most people have heard the phrase or can infer its intended meaning, it is still rather ambiguous and problematic. When I hear the phrase “name dropping,” I don’t simply think of people mentioning authoritative figures; I think about people who like to talk about their relationships or interactions with famous or important individuals for no purpose other than to brag. President Obama, however, doesn’t mention names simply to feel important. Instead, he establishes his credibility to his audience by referencing people who are knowledgeable about an issue. Students know why President Obama mentions certain people’s names and professions, but their use of the term “name dropping” may confuse readers who have different associations with the word. In order to avoid these misconceptions, it is best to replace all colloquial terms—which are often ambiguous—with direct and clear language.
Colloquial Diction as Part of the Writing Process and Final Product

The assignments you complete in English composition courses will prompt you to carefully identify your chosen audience and write clearly with that particular audience in mind. The choices and changes you make in your writing indicate that you are becoming a more aware writer. This means that you understand who you are writing for, that you know what is appropriate for your audience, and that you have made a deliberate effort to adjust your writing accordingly. When evaluating your papers and projects, instructors read carefully, looking at your sentence structure, voice, tone, and word choice to determine whether or not you have been a rhetorically aware writer. Yet knowing how to make these rhetorical choices does not occur naturally for most of us. Instead, the writing process can help all writers continually think about their audience by providing them with opportunities to make changes during each stage of the drafting process. During phases of revision is also the best time to identify and replace colloquial diction in order to better clarify writing.

Academic writing often should appeal to a broad audience and always should be as clear and direct as possible. As discussed above, it is best to eliminate any and all uses of colloquial diction in order to achieve clarity in your writing. However, many of students find it difficult to write using academic language when they are simultaneously trying to organize their thoughts and to think critically about the assigned topic. Since we don’t speak or even think in academic language, shifting from conversational language to more formal language can be extremely difficult. This task may seem less daunting if we approach it as a process of change, including several steps rather than a single giant leap. In the initial draft of a paper, using colloquial language is acceptable because it may be easier to understand and organize your thoughts. During successive drafts, you can then revise sentences in order to eliminate colloquialisms, thereby reaching a broader audience. Eventually, with practice, writing clearly and directly will come more naturally to you.

References

Chapter 7: Logical Fallacies

Written by Jessica McKee and Megan McIntyre for Writing Commons

By now you know that all arguments operate according to an internal logic. No matter which of the four rhetorical appeals the author uses, her thesis will succeed or fail based on the soundness of her argument. In classical logic, an argument is sound only if all of its premises are true and the argument is valid. And an argument is valid only if its conclusion follows logically from the combination of its premises. For example, Plato’s classic syllogism, “All men are mortal; Socrates is a man: therefore, Socrates is mortal” is both valid and sound. Its premises are true, and the conclusion is undeniable given an understanding of the definitions of the terms.

Plato’s famous syllogism is an example of a deductive argument; that is, it relies on a process of reasoning from general statements of common knowledge to arrive at a specific and logically consistent conclusion. But most of the arguments you will encounter in college and in life in general take the form of inductive arguments, which move in the opposite direction: from statements of specific instances toward a general conclusion. For instance, if I say that the sun has always risen in the morning, and then conclude that the sun will therefore rise tomorrow, I have formulated an inductive argument. Notice, however, that my conclusion is not necessarily valid given the definitions of the terms. I can be fairly confident that the sun will rise tomorrow in the morning, but I can’t be absolutely certain of it. After all, the sun might go supernova overnight.

Of course, given the fact that astronomers suggest that the sun isn’t likely to die for at least another four billion years, my inductive argument’s lack of absolute certainty shouldn’t bother anyone. The point is that because my argument relies on a specific instance known to be true (“the sun has always risen in the morning”), and then moves to a general conclusion (“the sun will therefore rise tomorrow in the morning”), the possibility that I have committed a logical fallacy in the course of my argument is relatively high. That is, somewhere in the chain of reason leading from the premise to the conclusion, I
might have unknowingly violated the internal logic my argument needs in order to succeed. The term “logical fallacy” refers to the point—or points—at which that chain of reason snaps, rendering the conclusion invalid.

Not all inductive arguments commit logical fallacies. Indeed, most of the argumentative texts you will encounter in college manage to avoid such faulty reasoning, mainly because successful authors—i.e., those who publish—have learned how to avoid such pitfalls. They know that inductive argumentation is vulnerable to logical fallacies, not only because such arguments start with specific premises and move to general conclusions, but also because their premises so often rely on human values and abstract concepts. Furthermore, poorly constructed inductive arguments often make statements that on the surface appear plausible, but after consideration or further research reveal inconsistencies or outright falsehoods.

For example, let’s say that I’m writing an essay attempting to prove that same-sex marriage is wrong and should not be allowed. One of my premises suggests that if same-sex marriage were legal, pretty soon humans would be marrying their dogs. This statement commits a number of logical fallacies, but the most egregious of them is called the slippery slope, which describes a situation in which a generally unacceptable situation (humans marrying dogs) is proposed as the inevitable outcome of a policy change (allowing same-sex marriage). But no evidence exists that such an outcome will in fact obtain. Furthermore, the argument commits a variant of a categorical mistake, because dogs and humans do not belong to the same species; a dog cannot consent to or decline a marriage vow, and marriage legally requires that both parties are willing and able to provide consent. A reader who accepts such arguments at face value simply cannot make an informed decision about the issue at hand. Logical fallacies not only result in bad writing; they also translate to irresponsible citizenship.

Many more logical fallacies exist than can be included in this article. In the sections that follow, you will find explanations of some of the more common examples as they play out within the context of the four rhetorical appeals. Further research in the library and on reliable websites will yield an inexhaustible amount of information on the various logical fallacies (see some example websites below). As you read assigned texts and write your own argumentative essays, you should constantly test the arguments they contain, examining the premises and their links to one another and to the conclusion. Learning to recognize logical fallacies is a skill essential to college-level writing and to critical thinking in general.

Each of the following categories contain companion videos which can be found at writingcommons.org.

**Fallacious Logos**

Written by Emily Lane, Jessica McKee, and Megan McIntyre for *Writing Commons*

- **Appeal to Nature:** Suggesting a certain behavior or action is normal/right because it is "natural." This is a fallacious argument for two reasons: first, there are multiple, and often competing, ways to define "nature" and "natural." Because there is no one way to define these terms, a writer cannot assume his or her reader thinks of "nature" in the same way he or she does. Second, we cannot assume that "unnatural" is the same as wrong or evil. We (humans) have made lots of amendments to how we live (e.g., wearing clothes, living indoors, farming) with great benefit.

- **Argument from Ignorance:** Assuming something is true because it has not been proven false. In a court of law, a defendant is, by law, "innocent until proven guilty." However, judges and jurors must
hear testimonies from both sides and receive all facts in order to draw conclusions about the defendant's guilt or innocence. It would be an argument from ignorance for a judge or juror to reach a verdict without hearing all of the necessary information.

- **Straw Man**: Intentionally misrepresenting your opponent's position by over-exaggerating or offering a caricature of his or her argument. It would be fallacious to claim to dispute an opponent's argument by creating a superficially similar position and refuting that position (the "straw man") instead of the actual argument. For example, "Feminists want to turn men into slaves." This statement fails to accurately represent feminist motivations—which can be very diverse. Most feminists agree in their goal to ensure women's equality with men. Conceptions of equality can vary among feminists, but characterizing them as men-haters detracts from their true motivations.

- **False Dilemma**: Assuming that there are only two options when there are, in fact, more. For example, "We either cut Social Security, or we have a huge deficit." There are many ways to resolve deficit problems, but this statement suggests there is only one.

- **Hasty Generalization**: Drawing a broad conclusion based on a small minority. For instance, if you witnessed a car accident between two women drivers, it would be a hasty generalization to conclude that all women are bad drivers.

- **Cum Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc (With This, Therefore Because of This)**: Confusing correlation with causation—that is, thinking that because two things happened simultaneously, then one must have caused the other. For example, "There has been an increase in both immigration and unemployment; therefore, immigrants are taking away American jobs." This statement is fallacious because there is no evidence to suggest that immigration and unemployment are related to each other—other than that their rates increased simultaneously.

- **The Slippery Slope**: We already noted that the slippery slope argument is often a way to scare readers or listeners into taking (or not taking) a particular action (see "Fallacious Pathos"). The slippery slope argument can also function as a false invocation of logic or reason in that it involves a causal statement that lacks evidence. For example, I might argue that if the drinking age were lowered from 21 to 18, vast numbers of college students would start drinking, which in turn would lead to alcohol poisoning, binge drinking, and even death. This conclusion requires evidence to connect the legality of drinking with overindulgence. In other words, it does not follow that college students would drink irresponsibly if given the opportunity to drink legally.
Fallacious Pathos

Written by Kendra Gayle, Jessica McKee, and Megan McIntyre for Writing Commons

- **Argument by Dismissal**: Rejecting an idea without providing a reason or explanation for its dismissal. For instance, there is a tendency to cry "socialism" when faced with calls for a single-payer system in the ongoing health care debate. Such a dismissal of the single-payer system may include the observations, "This is America!", or, "You are free to live elsewhere if you prefer." While we do live in the United States and people are free to live wherever they want, neither of these observations actually addresses the argument, either for or against the single-payer system. The observer relies on the simple (and fallacious) dismissal of the opposing viewpoint.

- **Argument by Emotive Language**: Using emotional words that are not supported by evidence and/or are unconnected to the argument being made. For example, in abortion debates regarding a woman's right to choose, the argument sometimes shifts from a discussion of medical or legal rights to a graphic description of the abortion process or extreme analogies between abortion and genocide. Most would agree that genocide should be prevented and that the destruction of a fetus is a violent procedure, but these observations distract from the conversation about a woman's medical and legal rights.

- **Appeal to Pity**: Drawing on irrelevant personal experiences or feelings in order to produce a sympathetic response. For instance, if I were writing about the necessity of universal health care and I included a personal anecdote about falling ill in Canada and being unable to receive free health care, that anecdote would be a fallacious appeal to pity. My personal experience, though interesting, does not illuminate the issue of universal health care.

- **The Slippery Slope**: Suggesting that a particular argument or course of action will lead to disastrous consequences without offering evidence. This fallacy usually produces an emotional response. A common example is the assertion that legalizing gay marriage will lead to polygamy, bestiality, and/or pedophilia.

Fallacious Ethos

Written by Jessica McKee and Megan McIntyre for Writing Commons

- **Ad Hominem (Argument to the Person)**: Attacking the person instead of the argument. For example, "You say I shouldn't drink so much, but you drink every day." The validity of the argument (drink less) can't be based on the behavior of the person making the argument. Instead, the validity of the argument should be evaluated on its own terms—separate from the person making the claim.

- **Argument from Authority**: Claiming to be an expert and, on that basis, to be deserving of trust. It's important to remember that there are different kinds and levels of expertise: My weekend cooking class doesn't make me an authority on recipes, though I can honestly say I've studied cooking. So, I might be an authority on some elements of cooking, but not all of cooking. When faced with an argument from authority, it is important to investigate the credentials of the speaker or writer.

- **Appeal to Authority**: Using a statement taken out of context as authoritative support. For instance, it would be fallacious to use Malcolm X's declaration "by any means necessary" to justify an oppressed group's violence against police officers. Such an assertion ignores the context, and therefore the complexity, of Malcolm X's statement.
• **Argument from False Authority**: Using an expert in a specific field as an expert in all related fields. For instance, if I am writing a paper about heart disease and I quote my chiropractor, Dr. Wallace, then I would be making an appeal to fallacious ethos; despite being a doctor, she is not an authority on heart disease.

• **Appeal to Anonymous Authority**: Using appeals to nonspecific groups (e.g., doctors, scientists, researchers, and so on). For example, "Research shows that all women are inferior to men." Or, "Studies indicate that all college students binge drink." Neither of these statements offers a specific credible source, so both claims lack authority.

• **Inflation of Conflict**: Using a conflict between two authorities as a reason to dismiss their arguments and knowledge. For instance, it would be fallacious to assert that global climate change does not exist because two scientists disagree about its effects.

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**Fallacious Kairos**

Written by Kate Pantelides, Megan McIntyre, and Jessica McKee for *Writing Commons*

• **Red Herring**: Introducing irrelevant facts or claims to detract from the actual argument. For instance, our invasion of Iraq was predicated, in part, upon the connection between the attacks of 9/11 and Saddam Hussein. The war was described by some as an appropriate response to the terrorist attacks on 9/11, but in reality, the connection between Iraq and Saddam Hussein was a red herring. Hussein was not connected to Al Qaeda, the terrorist network that perpetrated the attacks, or 9/11.

• **Argument from Authority**: We already noted that an argument from false authority involves a speaker or writer claiming authority in a particular area without giving evidence of that authority (see "Fallacious Ethos"). These claims of authority are obviously connected to ethos, but depending on the argument, may also be connected to kairos. For example, when a political candidate claims that, if action is not taken right now, the nation risks ruin, he or she is identifying him- or herself as an expert on both the nature of the problem as well as the timing.

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**Further Research**

- The *OWL at Purdue* lists some of the most common logical fallacies with examples:
  
  [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/659/03/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/659/03/)

- The Writing Center at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has a more extensive list:
  

- Finally, the *Fallacy Files* devotes its entire web presence to all things fallacious:
  
At a certain point in your research and writing process, you might find yourself quite attached to your topic and your working thesis. Perhaps you are so attached and focused on your topic that you have a hard time imagining why anyone would disagree with you. This attachment is certainly understandable. After you have done so much hunting in the library and on the Internet and thinking about your working thesis, you might have a hard time imagining how anyone could possibly disagree with your position, or why they would want to. But it is important to remember that not all of your potential readers are going to automatically agree with you. If your topic or take on an issue is particularly controversial, you might have to work hard at convincing almost all of your readers about the validity of your argument.

**Solving Problems by Negotiating Differences**

*Writing Commons* author Joe Moxley, writes about this type of logical argument using the Rogerian conciliatory approach. Excerpts of his article follow.

How many times have you been in an argument that you knew you couldn't win? Are you reluctant to change your mind about certain social, political, or personal issues? Do you have an unshakable faith in a particular religion or philosophy? For example, are you absolutely certain that abortion is immoral under all circumstances? Are you categorically against animal experimentation for advancements in medicine? Do you believe that criminals who have tortured and killed people should receive the death penalty? Do you believe that parents should have no more than two children because of the world population problem? Do you believe it is your patriotic duty to buy solely American products?
Some of our beliefs and arguments are based on faith, some on emotion, and some on logic problems and to negotiate differences between opposing parties. We all hold different religious, political, and personal beliefs that largely define who we are and how we think. Within the past fifty years, as the size of our global village has appeared to shrink with the use of television, fax, and jets, we have become increasingly more sophisticated and knowledgeable. As a result, most educated people now realize that few significant issues have simple solutions. Thanks to modern scholarship and research, we have come to realize that our personalities and thoughts are shaped to some degree by cultural expectations. Philosophers have challenged us to recognize that our worldviews—our assumptions about reality, what is good, what is possible—are influenced by our day-today experiences. We have realized that truth is not a fixed, static entity that can be carried into a battle like a banner.

One result of our increasingly sophisticated world is that you cannot assume that your readers will believe or even understand everything you say. On the contrary, you need to assume that your readers will doubt you. They will question the validity of our evidence and test the logic of your conclusions. Modern readers tend to be particularly contentious when you insist on assertions that they find objectionable. Because of this shift in audience attitude, writers need to develop compelling ways of organizing and presenting arguments.

When you wish to address an emotional and controversial issue and when your audience is likely to be threatened by your ideas, you will probably not be successful if you make your claim in the introduction of your essay (or verbal argument). No matter how thoroughly you go on to support your ideas with careful reasoning and to refute other claims (such as those held by your audience) respectfully, your readers have already decided to ignore you.

Most of us tend to resist change and are threatened by ideas that challenge what we believe. Also, most of us dislike being told what to do and how to think, so even if our brains tell us to agree, our emotions (and egos) tell us to shut down and ignore what we are hearing. A male chauvinist who believes that women are intellectually inferior to men will be unlikely to listen to your argument that women are as intelligent as me. Your quotes from world-renowned educators and philosophers and your statistics from the Stanford-Binet of SAT, GRE, and MCAT scores would probably be dismissed as inaccurate because they threaten his assumptions. Of course, you could hope that the chauvinist would change his mind over time when he wasn’t being pressed, yet you couldn’t bet on this outcome.

Because conflict is inevitable, we need to seek creative ways to solve complicated problems and to negotiate differences between opposing parties. Although there are no simple formulas for bringing opposing factions together, we do have a relatively new form of communication founded on Carl Rogers's client-centered therapeutic approach to one-on-one and group counseling. Essentially, the Rogerian problem-solving approach reconceptualizes our goals when we argue. Instead of assuming that an author or speaker should hope to overcome an antagonistic audience with shrewd reasoning, the Rogerian approach would have the author or speaker attempt to reach some common ground with the audience.

Thus, in a very real way, Rogerian "persuasion" is not a form of persuasion so much as it is a way of opening communication for negotiating common ground between divergent points of view. In terms of writing, we could say that the Rogerian approach melds the techniques of informative analyses with those of persuasive reports. Your goal when you employ the tactics of Rogerian problem-solving is not for you to win and for your opponent to lose, a scenario that more often results in both parties losing. Instead, you explore ways that will allow both you and your audience to win.
On Rogerian Argument

Adapted by Joe Moxley for Writing Commons from Rhettoric Matters: Language and Argument in Context by Megan McIntyre and Curtis LeVan.

This Rogerian process started to make its way into textbooks in 1970. Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike's introduction of Rogerian psychology in their book Rhetoric: Discovery and Change seeks to simplify some of Rogers's terminology and begin to present the process as a set of rhetorical objectives: The writer who uses the Rogerian strategy attempts to do three things:

1. To convey to the reader that he is understood.
2. To delineate the area within which he believes the reader's position to be valid.
3. To induce him to believe that he and the writer share certain moral qualities (275).

Put like this, in such a simple and reductive way, the process of attaining and expressing Rogerian understanding seems almost easy.

It is important to note that these are not developmental steps intended as heuristics, that indeed there are no sequential stages to a Rogerian argument. They are instead objectives to be pursued independently and recursively with the probably effect of facilitating communication. As Young, Becker, and Pike write, "Rogerian argument has no conventional structure; in fact, users of the strategy deliberately avoid conventional persuasive structures and techniques because these devices tend to produce a sense of threat." This is not to say the argument has no structure, but rather that "the structure is more directly the product of a particular writer, a particular topic, and a particular audience" (275). The danger of argumentative form becoming an exclusionary force, silencing rather than evoking discussion, is therefore greatly reduced.

At this point, then, you may be wondering what Rogerian argument might actually look like in terms of an essay for a composition class. An essay modeled on Rogers's approach should include a few particular parts:

- A discussion of the problem from both points of view that uses value-neutral language.
- A discussion of the writer's opponent's point of view and a selection of facts or assertions the writer might be willing to concede to his opponent.
- A discussion of the writer's point of view and a selection of facts or assertions the writer's opponent might be able to accept about his point of view.
- A thesis that establishes a compromise between these two points of view and represents concessions from both the writer and his opponent.

Analyzing Pertinent Conventions

Below are some of the strategies that you can use to negotiate consensus between opposing parties. As usual, you should not consider the following to be a rigid formula. Instead, pick and choose from these strategies in light of your audience, purpose, and intended voice.
Present the Problem

In the introduction, identify the issue and clarify its significance. Because you need to adopt a nonthreatening persona throughout your essay, however, avoid dogmatically presenting your view as the best or only way to solve the problem. Unlike your strategy for shaping a conventional persuasive text, at this point in your discussion you will not want to lay your cards on the table and summarize your presentation. Instead, explain the scope and complexity of the issue. You might want to mention the various approaches that people have taken to solve the problem and perhaps even suggest that the issue is so complicated that the best you and your readers can hope for is consensus - or agreement on some aspect of the matter.

In your introduction and throughout your essay, you will want to explain the problem in ways that will make your audience say, "Yes, this author understands my position." Because the people whom you are writing for may feel stress when you confront them with an emotionally charged issue and may already have made up their minds firmly on the subject, you should try to interest such reluctant readers by suggesting that you have an innovative way of viewing the problem. Of course, this tactic is effective only when you can indeed follow through and be as original as possible in your treatment of the subject. Otherwise, your readers may reject your ideas because they recognize that you have misrepresented yourself.

Challenge Yourself to Risk Change

Rather than masking your thoughts behind an "objective persona," the Rogerian approach allows you to express your true feelings. However, if you are to meet the ideals of Rogerian communication, you need to challenge your own beliefs; you must be so open-minded that you truly entertain the possibility that your ideas are wrong, or at least not absolutely right. According to Rogers, you must "run the risk of being changed yourself. You ... might find yourself influenced in your attitudes or your personality."

Elaborate on the Value of Opposing Positions

In this part of your argument you will want to elaborate on which of your opponent's claims about the problem are correct. For example, if your roommate's messiness is driving you crazy but you still want to live with him or her, stress that cleanliness is not the be-all-and-end-all of human life. Commend your roommate for helping you focus on your studies and express appreciation for all of the times that he or she has pitched in to clean up. And, of course, you would also want to admit to a few annoying habits of your own, such as taking thirty-minute showers or talking on your cell phone late at night while your roommate is trying to sleep! After viewing the problem from your roommate's perspective, you might even be willing to explore how your problem with compulsive neatness is itself a problem.

Show Instances When Your Assertions Are Valid

Once you have identified the problem in as nonthreatening a way as possible, established a fair-minded persona, and called for some level of consensus based on a "higher" interest, you have reached the most important stage in Rogerian negotiation: you can now present your position. At this point in your argument, you do not want to slap down a "But!" or "However!" and then come out of your corner punching. Remember the spirit of Rogerian problem solving: your ultimate goal is not to beat your audience, but to communicate with them and to promote a workable compromise. For example, in the sample argument with your roommate, rather than issuing an ultimatum such as "Unless you start picking
up after yourself and doing your fair share of the housework, I'm moving out," you could say, "I realize that you view housekeeping as a less important activity than I do, but I need to let you know that I find your messiness to be highly stressful, and I'm wondering what kind of compromise we can make so we can continue living together." Yes, this statement carries an implied threat, but note how this sentence is framed positively and minimalizes the emotional intensity inherent in the situation.

To achieve the nonthreatening tone needed to diffuse emotional situations, avoid exaggerating your claims or using biased, emotional language. Also, avoid attacking your audience's claims as exaggerated. Whenever you feel angry or defensive, take a deep breath and look for points in which you can agree with or understand your opponents. When you are really emotional about an issue, try to cool off enough to recognize where your language is loaded with explosive terms. To embrace the Rogerian approach, remember that you need to defuse your temper and set your pride and ego aside.

**Present Your Claim in a Nonthreatening Way**

Admittedly, it is difficult to substantiate an argument while acknowledging the value of competing positions. Yet if you have done an effective job in the early part of your essay, then your audience perceives you to be a reasonable person—someone worth listening to. Consequently, you should not sell yourself short when presenting your position.

Because of the emotionally charged context of your communication situation, you still need to maintain the same open-minded persona that you established in the introductory paragraphs. Although your main focus in this section is to develop the validity of your claim, you can maintain your fair-minded persona by recalling significant counterarguments and by elaborating on a few limitations of your claim. You can also remind your readers that you are not expecting them to accept your claim completely. Instead, you are merely attempting to show that under certain circumstances your position is valid.

**Search for a Compromise and Call for a Higher Interest**

Near the conclusion of your essay, you may find it useful to encourage your audience to seek a compromise with you under a call for a "higher interest."

**Writing Assignments**

The Rogerian method of problem solving is designed for exploring controversial interpersonal, social, and political problems. You can use these techniques to help you begin or end a personal relationship or to help you effectively communicate with your professors, etc. Knowledge of the Rogerian method can help you deal with instances of sexual discrimination in the workplace or help you encourage insecure authorities to take the
action that you want. You could use Rogerian approaches to encourage your classmates and other
students at your school to be more sympathetic about social problems such as poverty and ecological
issues. To select a subject for a Rogerian analysis, try reviewing your journal and freewrite about
significant interpersonal problems you have dealt with in your life. Below are a few questions that may
help you identify a subject:

1. Do I want to write about an interpersonal issue? For example, am I having trouble communicating
with someone? Could the breakdown be linked to my failure to employ Rogerian strategies? Are
there any major differences in belief that I could bridge by communicating with him or her in a
Rogerian way?

2. Do I want to write about a social or political problem? Are there any on-campus or work-related
problems that I wish to explore? For example, am I worried about an important national issue
such as the federal deficit? Or could I promote harmony in a local or campus conflict?

3. Are there any sports-related topics that I could tackle? For example, do I want to convince skiers
that short skis have carved up the mountain in an ugly way? Do I want to persuade tennis players
that we need to throw away the wide-body power rackets and go back to the days of wooden
rackets because power tennis is killing finesse tennis?

4. Consider playing the role of a marketing executive. Find a new product that you believe is
superior to an established product and then write some advertising copy that explains why people
should shift their loyalty to the new product.

**Prewriting and Drafting Strategies**

To help you get a handle on which claims you are willing to relinquish and which you wish to negotiate,
write a profile of your anticipated audience. Because awareness of the opinions and fears of your
audience is so crucial to successfully negotiating differences among competing positions, you need to try
to "become" your audience. As usual, this process involves asking, "What do my readers believe and
know about the subject? Why do they think and feel my position is wrong?" Ideally, this process extends
beyond merely considering your audience's needs to setting aside your thoughts and feelings and
embracing the opposition's notions about the subject.

After you have gotten "under the skin" of your audience, freewrite an essay about your subject from their
perspective. Doing this in a Rogerian way means that you truly challenge your own beliefs and present
your opponent's viewpoints as strongly as you would your own. If you find yourself unwilling to explore
the strengths of your opponent's position, then you should select a new subject.

**Write an Outline**

After freewriting about your opponent's positions as if they were your own, you will probably have
excellent ideas about how best to shape your essay. You may find it useful to jot down your objectives as
suggested in the following outline. Remember, though, don't let the outline control your thoughts. If
insights occur while you are writing, experiment with them.

1. Explain the issue's significance and scope.
2. In what ways are the major assumptions of the opposing position valid?
3. In what ways are your assumptions invalid and valid?
4. What consensus can you establish?
Revising and Editing Strategies

Analyze Your Communication Situation

By analyzing the strengths and weaknesses that your classmates and instructor have identified in past papers, you can know what special problems you should look for when evaluating your persuasive essay. As always, give yourself as much time as possible between drafts. Below I have listed some questions that highlight special concerns you will need to address when writing your Rogerian essay.

Is the Subject Appropriate for a Rogerian Approach?

A day or so after you have completed the first draft of your essay, reread it from the perspective of your intended audience. To conduct an honest self-evaluation, try to answer the following questions:

1. In the introduction, have I truly been open-minded? Have I thoroughly reviewed the strengths of my opponent's counterarguments? Have I honestly challenged the weaknesses of my own position?
2. How could I change the essay to make it less emotionally charged?
3. Are the transitions from the opposing position to my position as smooth as possible?
4. When I present my claims, do I sound informed, intelligent, compassionate? What additional data would help my readers better understand my position? Do I need more facts and figures? Can I incorporate more outside quotations to substantiate my argument?
5. Have I successfully limited my analysis and elaborated on one specific, significant claim? Have I presented my position clearly and accurately?
6. Is the compromise I have suggested reasonable? Can I be more original in my call for a higher interest?

Read Your Work Aloud

Before submitting your essay to your peers or teacher, read it aloud to yourself several times. As you read, make a note of passages that seem difficult to read or sound awkward. Question whether the tone in the paragraphs is appropriate, given your audience and purpose. For example, can you find any passages that sound insincere or condescending?

Share Your Work with People Who Disagree with You

Ask people with different viewpoints from yours to critique your work. Let them know that you are attempting to seek a compromise between your position and theirs and that you welcome their suggestions.

Do a Criteria-Based Evaluation

In addition to making notes on criticisms of your text and ideas for improving it, you may find the following criteria-based format a useful way of identifying and correcting any weaknesses in your peers' drafts or your own.
Rogerian Appeals

- Author establishes an emphatic persona and avoid threatening challenges.
- Author clarifies instances in which opposing assertions are valid.
- Author show instances when assertions are valid.
- Author develops claim in as nontreating way as possible.
- Author seeks compromise and calls for a higher interest.

References


Revisiting the Working (and Inevitably Changing) Thesis

The process of considering opposing viewpoints is the goal of this exercise, the Antithesis essay. Think about this exercise as a way of exploring the variety of different and opposing views to the main argument you are trying to make with your research project. Chapter Six, “Writing a Working Thesis,” describes the process of developing a working thesis. Here is a quick review of the characteristics of a good thesis:

- A thesis advocates a specific and debatable issue.
- A thesis can either be directly stated (as is often the case in academic writing) or implied.
- A thesis is NOT a statement of fact, a series of questions, or a summary of events.
- A thesis answers the two most basic reader questions “What’s your point?” and “Why should I care?”

While it is important that you start your research project with a working thesis that is as clear as you can possibly make it, it is also important to remember that your working thesis is temporary and it will inevitably change as you learn more about your topic and as you conduct more research.

Here are examples of some working theses:

- While some computer hackers are harmless, most of them commit serious computer crimes and represent a serious Internet security problem.
- The international community should enact strict conservation measures to preserve fisheries and save endangered fish species around the world.
- The Great Gatsby’s depiction of the connection between material goods and the American dream is still relevant today.

Chances are, if you started off with a working thesis similar to one of these, your current working thesis has changed a bit. For example, let’s consider the working thesis “While some computer hackers are harmless, most of them commit serious computer crimes and represent a serious Internet security problem.” While the researcher may have begun with this thesis in mind, perhaps she changed it slightly, based on interactions with other students, her instructor, and her research.

Suppose she discovered journal articles and websites that suggested that, while many computer hackers are dangerous, many are also helpful in preventing computer crimes. She might be inclined then to shift
her emphasis slightly, perhaps to a working thesis like, “While many hackers commit serious computer crimes and represent a serious Internet security problem, they can also help law enforcement officials to solve and prevent crime.” This change is the same topic as the original working thesis (both are still about hackers and computer crime, after all), but it does suggest a different emphasis, from “hackers as threat and problem” to “hackers as potentially helpful.”

Of course, these changes in the working thesis are not the only changes that were possible. The original working thesis could have just as easily stayed the same as it was at the beginning of the process or research. Further, just because the emphasis of the working thesis may be in the process of changing doesn’t mean that other related points won’t find their way into the research project when it is put together. While this research writer might change her emphasis to write about “good” hackers as crime solvers, she still would probably need to discuss the fact that there are “bad” hackers who commit crimes.

The point here is simple: your working thesis is likely to change in small and even large ways based on the research you do, and that’s good. Changing the way you think about your research topic and your working thesis is one of the main ways the process of research writing becomes educational, interesting, and even kind of fun.

**Why Write an Antithesis Essay?**

One of the key tests of a working thesis is the presence of logical points of disagreement. There’s not much point in researching and writing about how “computer crime is bad” or “fisheries are important” or similar broad arguments because everyone more or less would agree with these assertions. Generating an antithesis essay will help you

- **test how “debatable” your working thesis actually is.** If you are able to arrive at and write about the ways in which readers might disagree with your working thesis, then chances are, your working thesis is one that readers need to be persuaded about and need evidence to prove.

- **consider ways of addressing the anticipated objections to your thesis.** There’s nothing wrong with reasonable readers disagreeing with your point of view on a topic, but if you hope to persuade at least some of them with your research, you will also need to satisfy the objections some of these readers might have.

- **revise your working thesis into a stronger position.** If you’re having a hard time coming up with any opposition to your working thesis, you probably have to do more work on shaping and forming your working thesis into a more arguable position.

**Generating Antithetical Points in Five Easy Steps**

Generating potential objections to your working thesis—the points you can use to develop your antithesis essay—is a simple process. In fact, if your working thesis is on a controversial topic and you’ve already done a fair amount of research, you might need very little help generating antithetical points. If you are doing research on gun control, you have undoubtedly found credible research on both sides of the issue, evidence that probably supports or rejects your working thesis.

In addition to those points that seem straight-forward and obvious to you already, consider these five basic steps for generating ideas to consider your antithesis: have a working thesis, think about opposing
viewpoints, think about the alternatives, and imagine hostile audiences. Once you have generated some plausible antithetical arguments, you can consider different ways to counter these positions.

Step 1: Have a working thesis you have begun researching and thinking about.

If you are coming to this chapter before working through the working thesis essay exercises, you might want to take a look at that exercise now.

You also need to have at least some preliminary research and thinking about your working thesis done before you consider the antithesis. This research is likely to turn up evidence that will suggest more clearly what the arguments against your working thesis might actually be.

Step 2: Consider the direct opposite of your working thesis.

Assuming you do have a working thesis that you’ve begun to research and think about, the next step in generating ideas for a working thesis is to consider the opposite point of view. Sometimes, this can be as simple as changing the verb or modifying term from positive to negative (or vice-versa). Consider these working theses and their opposites:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working Thesis</th>
<th>The Opposite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drug companies <em>should</em> be allowed to advertise</td>
<td>Drug companies <em>should not</em> be allowed to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prescription drugs on TV.</td>
<td>advertise prescription drugs on TV.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The international community <em>should not</em> enact</td>
<td>The international community <em>should</em> enact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strict conservation measures to preserve fisheries.</td>
<td>strict conservation measures to preserve fisheries.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This sort of simple change of qualifiers can also be useful in exposing weak working theses because, generally speaking, the opposite of positions that everyone simply accepts as true are ones that everyone accepts as false. If you were to change the qualifying terms in the weak working theses “Drunk driving is bad” or “Teen violence is bad” to their opposites, you end up with theses for positions that are difficult to hold. After all, just as most people in modern America need little convincing that drunk driving or teen violence are “bad” behaviors, few credible people could argue that drunk driving or teen violence are...
“good” decisions. Usually, considering the opposite of a working thesis is more complex than simply changing the verb or modifying term from positive to negative (or vice-versa). For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working Thesis</th>
<th>The Opposite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>While many hackers commit serious computer crimes and represent a serious Internet security problem, they can also help law enforcement officials to solve and prevent crime.</td>
<td>Computer hackers do not represent a serious threat or Internet security problem. There is little hackers can do to help law enforcement officials solve and prevent computer crime.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both opposites are examples that counter the working thesis, but each takes a slightly different emphasis. The first one questions the first premise of the working thesis about the “threat” of computer hackers in the first place. The second takes the opposite view of the second premise.

**Step 3: Ask “why” about possible antithetical arguments.**

Of course, these examples of creating oppositions with simple changes demand more explanation than the simple opposite. You need to dig further than that by asking and then answering—the question of *why*. For example:

- *Why* should drug companies not be allowed to advertise prescription drugs? Because...
  - The high cost of television advertising needlessly drives up the costs of prescriptions.
  - Television commercials too frequently provide confusing or misleading information about the drugs.
  - The advertisements too frequently contradict and confuse the advice that doctors give to their patients.

- *Why* should the international community enact strict conservation measures to preserve fisheries? Because...
  - Without international cooperation, many different kinds of fish will become extinct in the coming decades.
  - Preventing over-fishing now will preserve fish populations for the future.
  - Unchecked commercial fishing causes pollution and other damage to the oceans’ ecosystems.

**Step 4: Examine alternatives to your working thesis.**

For example, consider the working thesis “Drug companies should not be allowed to advertise prescription drugs on television because the commercials too often contradict and confuse the advice that doctors give their patients.” This working thesis assumes that drug ads are an important cause of problems between doctors and patients. However, someone could logically argue that there are other more important causes of poor communication between doctors and patients. For example, the number of patients doctors see each day and the shortness of each visit certainly causes communication problems. The billing and bureaucracy of insurance companies also often complicates doctor/patient communication.
Now, unlike the direct opposite of your working thesis, the alternatives do not necessarily completely invalidate your working thesis. There is no reason why a reader couldn’t believe that both drug advertisements on television and the bureaucracy of the insurance companies are the cause of bad doctor/patient communication. But it is important to consider the alternatives within your research project in order to convince your readers that the position that you are advocating in your working thesis is more accurate.

**Step 5: Imagine hostile audiences.**

Whenever you are trying to develop a clearer understanding of the antithesis of your working thesis, you need to think about the kinds of audiences who would disagree with you. By thinking about the opposites and alternatives to your working thesis, you are already starting to do this because the opposites and the alternatives are what a hostile audience might think.

Sometimes, potential readers are hostile to a particular working thesis because of ideals, values, or affiliations they hold that are at odds with the point being advocated by the working thesis. For example, people who identify themselves as being “pro-choice” on the issue of abortion could be hostile to an argument for laws that restrict access to abortion; people who identify themselves as being “pro-life” on the issue of abortion could be hostile to an argument for laws that provide access to abortion.

At other times, audiences are hostile to the arguments of a working thesis because of more transparent reasons. For example, the pharmaceutical industry disagrees with the premise of the working thesis “Drug companies should not be allowed to advertise prescription drugs on TV” because they stand to lose billions of dollars in lost sales. Advertising companies and television broadcasters would also be against this working thesis because they too would lose money. You can probably easily imagine some potential hostile audience members who have similar reasons to oppose your point of view.

Of course, some audiences will oppose your working thesis based on a different interpretation of the evidence and research. This sort of difference of opinion is probably most common with research projects that are focused on more abstract and less definitive subjects. A reader might disagree with a thesis like “*The Great Gatsby*’s depiction of the connection between material goods and the American dream is still relevant today” based on differences about how the book depicts “the American dream,” or about whether or not the novel is still relevant, and so forth.

But there are also different opinions about evidence for topics that you might think would have potentially more concrete “right” and “wrong” interpretations. Different researchers and scholars can look at the same evidence about a subject like conservation of fisheries and arrive at very different conclusions. Some might believe that the evidence indicates that conservation is not necessary and would not be effective, while other researchers and scholars might believe the completely opposite position.

Regardless of the reasons why your audience might be hostile to the argument you are making with your working thesis, it is helpful to try to imagine your audience as clearly as you can. What sort of people are they? What other interests or biases might they have? Are there other political or social factors that you think are influencing their point of view? If you want to persuade at least some members of this hostile audience that your point of view and your interpretation of the research is correct, you need to know as much about your hostile audience as you possibly can. Of course, you’ll never be able to know everything.
about your hostile audience, and you certainly won’t be able to persuade all of them about your point. But the more you know, the better chance you have of convincing at least some of them.

Exercise 8.1

- Working through these steps, try to sketch out in more detail the antithetical points to your working thesis. Consider the opposites and the alternatives to your working thesis.
- Try to imagine as clearly as you can potentially hostile readers. Make a list of readers that might be hostile to your thesis and note the reasons for their hostility.
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