

Constructing a Well-Crafted Academic Essay:

Created by Catherine Kula
Adjunct Composition Instructor
University of Pittsburgh at Bradford

Regardless of the discipline you are writing in:

- Determine the **expectations** of the writing **assignment**
- Determine **audience** and **purpose**
- Formulate thesis
- Gather **evidence** and **conduct research**
- Identify required **citation style** (APA, MLA)

Introductions vs. Thesis Statements

- **Introductions:** general, provide background information, at least one paragraph in length, help set up a writer's argument
- **Thesis Statements:** specific, precise, usually one or two sentences in length, focus on paper's purpose, list writer's position and reasons for it, found in the introduction

Introductions (according to UNC.edu)

- A **concise, engaging, and well-written introduction** will start your readers off thinking highly of you, your analytical skills, your writing, and your paper. This impression is especially important when the audience you are trying to reach (your instructor) will be grading your work. You must capture your reader's interest.
- Your introduction should **contain a thesis** that will assert your main argument. Your introduction should give your reader a sense of the **kinds of information you will use to support your argument** along with the **organization** of the body paragraphs. **Think of the introduction as a road map for your reader to follow.** Once the introduction has been read, your reader should not be surprised with any information found in the body paragraphs.

Effective Introductions

- Think about the question(s) you are trying to answer; **don't ask questions, answer them.**
- Write your introduction last; it may be easier to write your body paragraphs and argument first so you will know what to state in your introduction.
- Start with a hook (a quote, interesting fact, anecdote, etc.).
- Make sure your **first sentence says something useful!!** **Write with confidence**, and avoid statements like "In this paper, I will argue that Frederick Douglass valued education." It is more convincing to say "Frederick Douglass valued education" than to tell us you are going to say he did.

Ineffective Introductions:

Examples of what does **NOT** work.

- **1. The place holder introduction.** Essentially, this is weak and contains several sentences that are vague and don't really say much.
- **2. The restated question introduction.** Don't simply restate what the essay prompt asks you to do. You must answer the question asked.
- **3. The Webster's Dictionary introduction.** Do not begin an essay with a definition from a dictionary; anyone can look a word up and copy down what Webster says. Develop your own definition of the term in the specific context of the assignment, or if you use a definition from one of the sources you've been reading for class.
- **4. The "dawn of man" introduction.** This kind of introduction generally makes broad, sweeping statements about the relevance of this topic since the beginning of time. It is usually very general and fails to connect to the thesis. *Example: Since the dawn of man, slavery has been a problem in human history.*

Thesis Statements (according to UNC.edu)

- Thesis statements **present your argument** to the reader. Your thesis directly answers the question asked in the prompt. It is **an interpretation of a question or subject**, not the subject itself.
- Depending on the length of the essay, the thesis statement should be **one or two sentences in length**. It is very **specific**, and it explains to your reader what the body paragraphs will contain along with the evidence you use to persuade your reader the logic of your interpretation.

How is your thesis? Ask yourself...

- *Do I answer the question?* Re-read the essay prompt; it may help you focus.
- *Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?* If somebody could disagree with your thesis, then you have started your argument. If not, rethink it.
- *Is my thesis statement specific enough?* If your thesis contains words like "good" or "successful," see if you could be more specific: *why* is something "good"; *what specifically* makes something "successful"?

- *Does my thesis pass the "So what?" test?* If a reader's first response is, "So what?" then you need to clarify or connect to a larger issue.
- *Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?* If the body of your essay introduces new ideas not found in your thesis, you need to rewrite. Always reassess and revise your writing as necessary.
- *Does my thesis pass the "how and why?" test?* If a reader's first response is "how?" or "why?" your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader.

Body Paragraphs

- **1. Topic Sentence**
 - Formulate a controlling idea that relates back to reasons given in the thesis. This idea will direct the paragraph's development.
- **2. Explain the controlling idea**
 - Explain how your reader should interpret the information. Explain your thoughts about the topic/idea.
- **3. Provide multiple examples for support**
 - Provide support or evidence for the idea/explanation. This establishes a relationship between the main idea and the explanation.

- 4. Explain and analyze the examples
 - You must explain why each example is relevant to the controlling idea. It shows the reader why you chose the examples for your support.
- 5. Complete the idea and transition into the next paragraph
 - Tie up any loose ends in your paragraph and make sure your reader will understand the paragraph's importance. Transition the reader to your next development in the next paragraph.
 - Transitions signal relationships between ideas; they establish logical connections between paragraphs; they function as signals for the reader so he/she knows what to do with the given information

Conclusions

- **DO NOT:** begin with ‘in conclusion’ or ‘in closing’; state the thesis for the first time; introduce a new idea; end with a rephrased thesis statement; make appeals that are out of sync/tone with the rest of the paper; include evidence/support that should be in the body
- **DO:** ask yourself ‘so what?’ to figure out the importance of your topic; refer back to the introduction; synthesize and show your reader how your argument, examples, and ideas fit together; include provocative insight

Researching

- Most academic essays will require **secondary sources** to be used as supporting evidence for your argument. Brainstorm key terms to search for depending on your topic.
- Begin searching PITTCat to locate books.
- Search the library's databases for journal, magazine, and newspaper articles.
- **Researching takes time.** Plan ahead, and begin your research as soon as the essay is assigned.

- Use **scholarly sources**: books, journal articles from the databases, websites (.org, .edu, .gov), etc.
- Once you locate a credible source, write down the needed information to **create a citation**. Always consult *A Writer's Reference*.
- Talk to a librarian!

Plagiarism

- You must **cite all sources**. Anytime you summarize, paraphrase, or directly quote from a source, **you must credit the author**.
- Plagiarism is defined as the passing off of another person's work as if it were one's own. An unacknowledged use of words, ideas, information, research, or findings not your own, taken from any source, is plagiarism.
- At the very least, if caught performing plagiarism, you will get an F on the assignment, perhaps for the course, and could possibly be expelled from the university. In other words, **DON'T PLAGIARIZE!**

Editing and Revising

- Once you have a completed draft, **you must edit and revise** it. Begin with **global revisions**: thesis, organization, focus, body paragraphs, support, etc.
- Revise your essay for proper grammar, punctuation, sentence structure and mechanics, format requirements, citations, etc.
- Pitt Brad now has a Writing Center. Make an appointment with one of the consultants for extra help!