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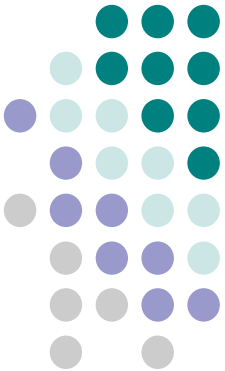
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1 OVERVIEW



Principles

I'm a writer and I love to write. Whenever possible, I spend my free time typing on my computer or researching. Writing is one of my favorite activities.

You probably aren't like me.

You might find writing difficult.

In fact, you might actually *hate* writing.

If so, you're not alone.

Why do people find writing so distasteful? When I ask students this question, sometimes they will tell me, "It's not my gift. I don't have any talent." Other times I hear, "It's too hard" or "It takes too much time" or my all-time favorite, "When I write, I have to think."

In truth, God equips some people to excel at writing just as He gives others special talent in sports, music, academics, or other areas. On the other hand, anyone can learn the basics of writing. Anyone can learn its fundamental principles. That includes you.

Fundamental principles? Are you surprised to learn a set of *rules* undergirds all of writing? Do you suppose if you learned these rules, you might find writing easier or even (dare I say it) enjoyable?

This is exactly my hope and the reason I put this course together. I would like to introduce you to the basics of essay organization. I would like to teach you a structure to use with every essay you write. I would like help to you write an elegant essay.

Five Writing Components

So just what is this essay structure or format that I want to introduce? Follow an analogy to understand this concept. Think of the essay (or any type of writing, for that matter) as a human body. All humans share certain characteristics, yet all retain the unique stamp of the Creator. In the same way, all essays share similarities, yet each remains distinct.

Form or Structure

Essays (and all writing) embrace five different areas. The first, *form*, is like the skeletons that support people. Most skeletons look the same. They may be young or old, short or tall, male or female, but they all contain a cranium, vertebrae, femurs, and tibias. Essay form is the essay's skeleton, organization, or structure. Just as bone structure holds a person together, essays contain features that support a writer's ideas. More about this in a minute.

Content

However, beyond skeletons, people's bodies contain circulatory, respiratory, and muscular systems. They are overlaid with a wonderful covering called skin. They encompass unique personalities. You know large people and small people, healthy people and sick people, shy people and outgoing people, blondes and brunettes, and dark and light. In the same way, essays contain different *content*. You can read an essay about building a model airplane or arguing against increased taxes or comparing life in America to life in India. Content is the second part of all writing.

Style

People don't walk around *au natural*. Instead they clothe themselves with various fashions—colorful dresses or drab business suits, golf shirts or tuxedos, or police uniforms or blue jeans. In the same way, authors dress essays with *style*. They might employ vivid verbs, similes, a variety of sentence openers, or many other choices. Style brings essays to life.

Mechanics

Have you ever seen a sick person, perhaps someone suffering from a lingering disease? If so, you probably saw the effects of their illness right away. They didn't look healthy. Just as people need to eat right, exercise, and treat their bodies with care, writers need to employ proper *mechanics*, such as correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Without these conventions essays don't look right—they're hard to understand and follow. *Mechanics*, as the fourth part of writing, comprise the rules that govern essay health.

Overall Effect

People have skeletons to keep them erect and hold them together, bodies and personalities to make them unique, and clothing to provide style. They operate according to a fixed set of principles to stay healthy. However, humans aren't skeletons, circulatory systems, dresses, or nutrition machines. Instead, they are people. In the same way, essays aren't form, content, style, or mechanics, rather they are the combination of all of these elements. They are essays. The way each of these separate parts combine creates their *overall effect*. This final part of essay-writing, overall effect, separates the good essay from the truly great.

What is a Skeleton?

This introductory course concentrates on an essay's skeleton or structure, what holds it together, and on its content, the information it contains. We won't be as concerned with style, mechanics, and overall effect. Although important, you can look forward to addressing these elements in another course.

So we need to ask ourselves: "What is an essay, and what are its bones?"

The dictionary defines an essay as, "a short literary composition on a particular subject," but you already knew that, didn't you? Perhaps we should ask ourselves, "What is the difference between an essay and a report?"

The difference concerns intent. A report presents basic information (such as meeting



minutes or a newspaper account), while an essay provides interpretation (why the company's vice president quit or how car safety has improved). While a report provides "raw" facts, an essay provides interpretation of those facts.

(An aside: In reality facts are never "raw." Writers employ many techniques to slant a seemingly factual account of an event. One is *connotation*. Denotation is the dictionary definition of the word. I remember this because both words begin with the letter "d." Connotation, on the other hand, is its emotional impact. I could say that a dog wasn't very bright or I could say he was stupid. Although the denotation of these two phrases is similar, the connotation of one is mild, while the other is insulting. All facts will be interpreted according to an author's *bias*. You might look for articles in your local newspaper to see how writers employ this device. Sorry, I couldn't pass up commenting on the concept of bias. OK, now back to our regularly scheduled program.)

So, the main difference between a report and an essay is the theme, point, agenda, message, purpose, or reason for writing it in the first place. One will present information, facts, and data. The other will add personal opinion, interpretation, and commentary.

Taking a Journey

As you might imagine, especially since this course will take a number of weeks to complete, essay form or structure contains several elements. We will look at each one in turn, but first I'd like to give you an overview. To do this, I need a new analogy, so let's compare essay form to taking a journey. Your mission will be to convince me to take a trip with you.

Thesis Statement

When you plan a trip, you first decide on a destination. Where do you want to go? Why? What do you hope to accomplish on your trip? Will you rest in Hawaii to revive your tired body? Visit the monuments and governmental institutions of Washington, D.C. on a civics field trip? Increase your faith in and knowledge of the Bible by traveling to Israel and walking in the footsteps of Jesus? What is the purpose of your trip?

In the same way, you need to ask yourself why you are writing your essay. (I mean, other than the fact that your teacher requires it!) What will you write about and how will you write? Do you want to inform, describe, or persuade? What is your point and reason for writing, or as I ask my students, what are you selling? The first element of essay form is the *thesis statement*. That's a one-sentence synopsis of your entire essay and usually appears in your introduction. In the same way that you might describe your destination, "Let's go whale-watching in Monterey Bay," your thesis statement describes where you want to take your reader (to Monterey Bay) and why (to go whale-watching).

Introduction

Next, you will need to spend some time making your trip look inviting. Frankly, whale-watching doesn't sound very exciting to me. In fact, I really don't like boats at all, especially those that sail through water. I don't want to go on your trip, so you will need to introduce your idea and convince me that it will be fun. You might begin with a funny story to melt

down my natural reluctance or you might list some benefits I would gain by taking the trip.

The *introduction* of an essay functions in the same way. It convinces the reader to take the trip or to read on. In some ways it's the most important part of the essay, so we will spend a fair amount of time on it.

Transitions

OK, I'll go whale-watching with you. I'll begin the trip, but you have the responsibility to get me to your destination. I'm not familiar with the roads in the Monterey Bay area, and I don't know my way to the wharf. You will need to bring me along and make sure I get there.

You have the same responsibility when you write essays. You need to move your reader from sentence to sentence, thought to thought, and paragraph to paragraph in a smooth way. If your reader gets lost following your logic, if he says to himself, "huh?" he will leave you and go back home. *Transitions* keep your essay on track. They give your reader instructions such as, "I'm building on my previous thought" or "Now I'm beginning a new thought." Transitions act as road markers, giving directions and pointing the way.

Conclusions

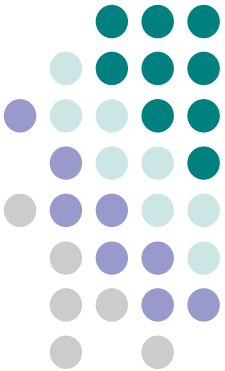
The best part of a journey is often its completion, the return home (especially from whale-watching trips). After our trip (notice I didn't talk about that part, the content), you can't leave me out in the middle of Monterey Bay, you have to bring me back to shore, then back to my home. Additionally, you have to convince me the trip was worthwhile. Maybe I'll have a funny story to tell my grandchildren. Maybe I've received a benefit such as learning to cope with seasickness. Maybe you want to move me to action and so I will tell others how much fun it is to bob around in a small container of wood surrounded by waves the size of houses. Perhaps I could inspire others by sharing the wonder of encountering one of the largest of God's majestic sea creatures (and, in truth, the experience *was* truly awesome).

In the same way, you need a *conclusion* to your essay, a way to bring your reader back to the place he started, but with something added. Perhaps you've added knowledge by telling him about your favorite American hero or moved him to reconsider his position on a controversial issue or brightened his day by sharing a humorous story. The last part of your essay, the conclusion, ties all of your thoughts together.

Now that we've discussed an overview of where we are going in this course, let's get started. It's time to begin our journey.



2 THESIS STATEMENTS



What is a Thesis Statement?

If you have written a paragraph, you are probably familiar with the concept of a topic sentence, usually the first sentence in your paragraph that introduces your topic or main idea. A thesis statement is similar to a topic sentence. Where a topic sentence usually begins a paragraph and tells readers what to expect from it, a thesis statement does the same for an entire essay. You can think of a thesis statement as a mega-topic sentence. Often, it can act as a one-sentence summary of your essay. It's your essay's mission statement.

English handbooks usually define a thesis statement as

- a statement of purpose, intent, or main idea of an essay

Think of the thesis statement as compass. Like a compass, it gives direction and points the way:

- **For your readers**, the thesis statement keeps their brains on track, moving their thoughts towards your point. It establishes boundaries. If an essay traveled outside the bounds of its thesis statement, your reader might become confused. Confused readers stop reading.
- **For you as the writer**, the thesis statement also helps keep the essay on track. Writing choices abound. Should you include this fact, that detail, or another story? A well-formulated thesis statement outlining your essay's purpose will help you decide what to include and what to leave out. For research papers, it can also help you manage your time. You might decide to skim a book or website rather than read it thoroughly if it falls on the outskirts of your thesis.

Kinds of Thesis Statements

Narrative, Expository, & Persuasive

Most essays contain a thesis statement to give form and scope and state the author's point—why he or she took the time to write the essay in the first place. In a *narrative* essay, which is a story with a purpose, the thesis statement will reveal a lesson that the author learned or an emotion that he wants to share or re-live. In an *expository* essay, which explains or informs, the thesis statement will narrow the focus of the explanation, such as how to choose a family pet, or the information, such as methods used to design and construct Hoover Dam. In a *persuasive* essay, which tries to change the reader's mind, the thesis statement will present the claim or argument the author wants to convince you to adopt. In an essay, the thesis statement glues thoughts together.



Working Thesis Statements

Let's say you have settled on a topic for your essay and you write a thesis statement. However, it has issues. It's dull, boring, and lifeless. No problem. Just call it a *working thesis statement* and you'll be fine. A working thesis statement is a preliminary statement of purpose that can keep your thoughts organized and your essay on track. If you change directions, just change your thesis. At the end of your writing, revisit it and see if you can breathe some life into it as you polish it up.

Occasionally, my students tell me they don't want to feel confined by a thesis statement. Rather, they want to begin their essay and see where it leads. This idea has some merit. Sometimes my writing takes on a life of its own, and what I end up with bears no resemblance to what I originally intended to convey. On the other hand, writing is thinking. You must use your brain at some point. You can use it before you begin writing, during your writing, or after you are finished during the editing step. If you wait until your rough draft is complete to develop a thesis statement, you might find it hard to locate a controlling or unifying idea, and you might have to discard some of your work. Giving thought to your thesis before you begin to write might actually save you time.

Academic Thesis Statements

If you intend to go to college or have occasion to write for someone in the academic world, you might need to write a three-pronged thesis statement to introduce the three main points of your paper. This gives focus for a busy teacher who may have a stack of papers to read. Additionally, an *academic thesis* makes a great working thesis because it clarifies your thoughts and forces you to constantly ask yourself whether or not you should include a particular detail in your essay. The academic thesis statement does the following:

- announces the essay's topics or arguments.
- usually occurs at the end of the introductory paragraph.
- completes the unspoken statement, "In this essay, I will [inform, describe, argue, or defend] this topic in these three ways."
- echoes the topics of the three main body paragraphs.



A thesis statement is like an big beach umbrella covering your essay and helps you to make choices about what information to include and what to pass by. Ask yourself, "Does this topic add something to my essay? Does it fit under the umbrella of my thesis statement?" If so, include it. If not, leave it, or change your thesis statement.

Developing Thesis Statements

In my experience, developing a thesis statement is one of the highest hurdles students need to hop over to write elegant essays. To help, I impose a few artificial rules on my beginning and intermediate students. First, the thesis may not be longer than one sentence. Although a thesis statement might span several sentences under the direction of an accomplished writer, beginners will focus better if they have fewer options. Second, the thesis must be the last sentence in the introduction. When students move on to more advanced essay structures, the thesis can move, too.

Steps to create a thesis statement:

To generate a thesis statement, follow these three steps:

1. Determine your essay's intent. Will it inform, describe, or persuade?
2. Narrow your focus or your topic. Instead of writing about Scotland, you might choose a specific aspect of Scotland—famous castles or the origin of golf, for example. Make sure you can explain your topic in the time and space allotted to you. A one-page paper requires a very narrow topic, while ten pages would let you broaden it.
3. Develop a two-part statement. In part one, state your narrow focus. In part two, add details concerning what you want to say about it.

Some examples follow.

Types of Thesis Statements

	Expository or Informative Essay	Narrative or Descriptive Essay	Persuasive Essay
Definition	Gives information on a particular topic.	Describes a person, place, idea, or event. Tells a story with a purpose.	Reasons and argues to change a reader's viewpoint or perspective.
Essay Types	Most biographies, reports, directions and instructions, analysis, and other essays that offer some or little interpretation.	Travelogues, personal narratives, some biographies, nostalgia, and writing that appeals to the five senses.	Any essay that makes an assertion and calls for the reader to agree or disagree with the writer's conclusion.
Purpose of Thesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Announces the essay's subject • States the topic(s) • Completes the unspoken statement, "What I want to say is that..." or "This essay will tell you about..." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describes the mood or emotion the writer wishes to impart • Expresses a feeling • Completes the unspoken statement, "This essay will make you feel or experience..." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • States the position you want to defend, what you believe, or what you want to explore • Takes a stand • Completes the unspoken statement, "This essay will explore or make you believe or persuade you to..."
Thesis Example	Men and women who wish to protect their country's freedoms can choose to serve in five different branches of the military.	As the movie ended, I thought about my grandfather's sacrifice on Iwo Jima and how his courage allowed me to live in freedom.	Women have no business endangering their country's security by serving alongside men on battlefields. or If women excel in civilian jobs, they can undoubtedly make positive contributions to the military.

More Thesis Statement Examples

Intent	Topic	Slant/Details	Thesis Example
Inform	Golf	Began in Scotland	The game of golf originated in Scotland.
Inform	Paul's third journey	Spread Christianity	Paul spread Christianity to thousands on his third missionary journey.
Describe	Me on September 11th	Fear	As I watched events unfold on that fateful Tuesday, I shuddered to think perhaps they foretold the beginning of WWII.
Describe	Contestants	Anticipation	The girls eagerly huddled around the announcer and waited for the judges' decision.
Persuade	Television	Beneficial	TV's educational programs expand a child's experience.
Persuade	Sports	Steroids	Steroid use destroys the competitive spirit of professional sports.

Working or Academic Thesis Statement Examples

Intent	Subject	Three Topics	Thesis Example
Inform	History of golf	In Scotland In England In the United States	The game of golf originated in Scotland, moved to England, but hit its swing in the United States.
Inform	Sports	Baseball Football Hockey	America's favorite sports include baseball, football, and hockey.
Describe	Hawaiian vacation	Refreshment Economy Culture	Stressed-out people journey to Hawaii to refresh their spirits, support the economy, and experience a different culture.
Persuade	Daytime curfews	Freedom Taxes Ineffective	Daytime curfews infringe on the freedom of minors, waste taxpayers' money, and prove ineffective.
Persuade	Television	Obesity Inappropriate Content Solitude	Unmonitored television viewing harms children physically, mentally, and socially.

Name: _____
Class: _____

Date: _____
Exercise I: Thesis Statements

Thesis Statements

Develop thesis statements for the following topics. Make sure one example is a three-pronged academic thesis.

1. Courage

Circle essay type: describe, inform, or persuade

Slant/details _____

Thesis

2. A gift

Circle essay type: describe, inform, or persuade

Slant/details _____

Thesis

3. Women in the military

Circle essay type: describe, inform, or persuade

Slant/details _____

Thesis

4. Education

Circle essay type: describe, inform, or persuade

Slant/details _____

Thesis
