



Strategies for Essay Writing

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Tips for Reading an Assignment Prompt

When you receive a paper assignment, your first step should be to read the assignment prompt carefully to make sure you understand what you are being asked to do. Sometimes your assignment will be open-ended (“write a paper about anything in the course that interests you”). But more often, the instructor will be asking you to do something specific that allows you to make sense of what you’ve been learning in the course. You may be asked to put new ideas in context, to analyze course texts, or to do research on something related to the course.

Even if the instructor has introduced the assignment in class, make sure to read the prompt on your own. You’d be surprised how often someone comes to the Writing Center to ask for help on a paper before reading the prompt. Once they do read the prompt, they often find that it answers many of their questions.

When you read the assignment prompt, you should do the following:

- **Look for action verbs.**

Verbs like *analyze*, *compare*, *discuss*, *explain*, *make an argument*, *propose a solution*, *trace*, or *research* can help you understand what you’re being asked to do with an assignment.

Unless the instructor has specified otherwise, most of your paper assignments at Harvard will ask you to make an argument. So even when the assignment instructions tell you to “discuss” or “consider,” your instructor generally expects you to offer an arguable claim in the paper. For example, if you are asked to “discuss” several proposals for reaching carbon neutral by 2050, your instructor would likely not be asking you to list the proposals and summarize them; instead, the goal would be to analyze them in relation to each other and offer some sort of claim—either about the differences between the proposals, the potential outcomes of following one rather than another, or something that has been overlooked in all of the proposals. While you would need to summarize those proposals in order to make a claim about them, it wouldn’t be enough just to summarize them.



Similarly, if you're asked to compare sources or consider sources in relation to each other, it is not enough to offer a list of similarities and differences. Again, this type of assignment is generally asking you to make some claim about the sources in relation to each other.

- **Consider the broader goals of the assignment.**

What kind of thinking is your instructor asking you to do? Are you supposed to be deciding whether you agree with one theorist more than another? Are you supposed to be trying out a particular method of analysis on your own body of evidence? Are you supposed to be learning a new skill (close reading? data analysis? recognizing the type of questions that can be asked in a particular discipline)? If you understand the broader goals of the assignment, you will have an easier time figuring out if you are on the right track.

- **Look for instructions about the scope of the assignment.**

Are you supposed to consult sources other than those you have read in class? Are you supposed to keep your focus narrow (on a passage, a document, a claim made by another author) or choose your own focus (raise a question that is sparked by course texts, pair texts in a new way)?

If your instructor has told you not to consider sources outside of those specified in the assignment, then you should follow that instruction. In those assignments, the instructor wants to know what you think about the assigned sources and about the question, and they do not want you to bring in other sources.

- **Consider your audience.**

It can be difficult to know how much background information or context to provide when you are writing a paper. Here are some useful guidelines:

- If you're writing a research paper, do not assume that your reader has read all the sources that you are writing about. You'll need to offer context about what those sources say so that your reader can understand why you have brought them into the conversation.
- If you're writing only about assigned sources, you will still need to provide enough context to orient the reader to the main ideas of the source. While you may not need to summarize the entire text, you will need to give readers enough information to follow your argument and understand what you are



doing with the text. If you're not sure whether you should assume that readers are familiar with the ideas in the text, you should ask your instructor.

- **Ask questions!**

If you're not sure what you're supposed to do, email your instructor or go to office hours and ask.



Asking Analytical Questions

When you write an essay for a course you are taking, you are being asked not only to create a product (the essay) but, more importantly, to go through a process of thinking more deeply about a question or problem related to the course. By writing about a source or collection of sources, you will have the chance to wrestle with some of the ideas that you are learning about in the course. Through the careful work of considering evidence and assumptions and thinking through the logic of arguments, you will begin to figure out what you think about complicated or controversial topics. Your goal when you write an essay should not be only to show readers what you know, but to learn more about something that you're genuinely curious about.

For some assignments, you'll be given a specific question or problem to address that will guide your thought process. For other assignments, you'll be asked to identify your own topic and/or question. In those cases, a useful starting point will be to come up with a **strong analytical question** that you will try to answer in your essay. Your answer to that question will be your essay's [thesis](#).

You may have many questions as you consider a source or set of sources, but not all of your questions will form the basis of a strong essay. For example, your initial questions about a source may be answered by reading the source more closely. On the other hand, sometimes you will identify a genuine ambiguity or problem in your sources that raises a question that others considering the same sources would also have. In that case, your answer to the question will be interesting not only for you, but also for your readers.

Properties of a strong analytical question

A strong analytical question

- **speaks to a genuine dilemma presented by your sources.** In other words, the question focuses on a real confusion, problem, ambiguity, or gray area, about which readers will conceivably have different reactions, opinions, or ideas.
- **yields an answer that is not obvious.** If you ask, "What did this author say about this topic?" there's nothing to explore because any reader of that text would answer that question in the same way. But if you ask, "how can we reconcile



point A and point B in this text,” readers will want to see how you solve that inconsistency in your essay.

- **suggests an answer complex enough** to require a whole essay's worth of discussion. If the question is too vague, it won't suggest a line of argument. The question should elicit reflection and argument rather than summary or description.
- **can be explored using the sources you have available for the assignment**, rather than by generalizations or by research beyond the scope of your assignment.

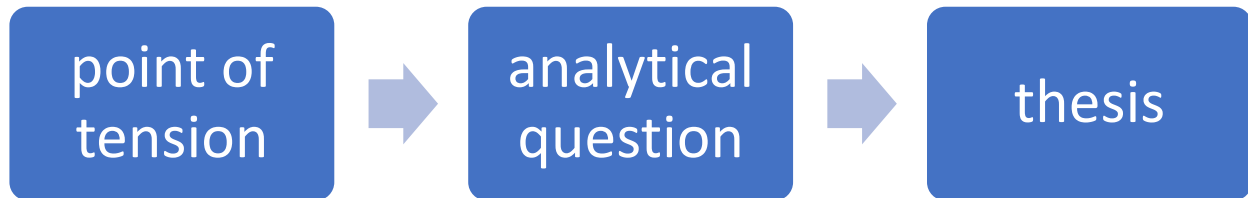
How to come up with an analytical question

One useful starting point when you're trying to identify an analytical question is to look for points of tension in your sources, either within one source or among sources. It can be helpful to think of those points of tension as the moments where you need to stop and think before you can move forward. Here are some examples of where you may find points of tension:

- You may read a published view that doesn't seem convincing to you, and you may want to ask a question about what's missing or about how the evidence might be reconsidered.
- You may notice an inconsistency, gap, or ambiguity in the evidence, and you may want to explore how that changes your understanding of something.
- You may identify an unexpected wrinkle that you think deserves more attention, and you may want to ask a question about it.
- You may notice an unexpected conclusion that you think doesn't quite add up, and you may want to ask how the authors of a source reached that conclusion.
- You may identify a controversy that you think needs to be addressed, and you may want to ask a question about how it might be resolved.
- You may notice a problem that you think has been ignored, and you may want to try to solve it or consider why it has been ignored.
- You may encounter a piece of evidence that you think warrants a closer look, and you may raise questions about it.



Once you've identified a point of tension and raised a question about it, you will try to answer that question in your essay. Your main idea or claim in answer to that question will be your thesis.



Tips

- "How" and "why" questions generally require more analysis than "who/what/when/where" questions.
- Good analytical questions can highlight patterns/connections, or contradictions/dilemmas/problems.
- Good analytical questions establish the scope of an argument, allowing you to focus on a manageable part of a broad topic or a collection of sources.
- Good analytical questions can also address implications or consequences of your analysis.



Thesis

Your **thesis** is the central claim in your essay—your main insight or idea about your source or topic. Your thesis should appear early in an academic essay, followed by a logically constructed argument that supports this central claim. A strong thesis is arguable, which means a thoughtful reader could disagree with it and therefore needs your careful analysis of the evidence to understand how you arrived at this claim. You arrive at your thesis by examining and analyzing the evidence available to you, which might be text or other types of source material.

A thesis will generally respond to an [analytical question or pose a solution to a problem](#) that you have framed for your readers (and for yourself). When you frame that question or problem for your readers, you are telling them [what is at stake in your argument—why your question matters and why they should care about the answer](#). If you can explain to your readers why a question or problem is worth addressing, then they will understand why it's worth reading an essay that develops your thesis—and you will understand why it's worth writing that essay.

A strong thesis will be **arguable** rather than **descriptive**, and it will be the right scope for the essay you are writing. If your thesis is descriptive, then you will not need to convince your readers of anything—you will be naming or summarizing something your readers can already see for themselves. If your thesis is too narrow, you won't be able to explore your topic in enough depth to say something interesting about it. If your thesis is too broad, you may not be able to support it with evidence from the available sources.

When you are writing an essay for a course assignment, you should make sure you understand what type of claim you are being asked to make. Many of your assignments will be asking you to make **analytical claims**, which are based on interpretation of facts, data, or sources.

Some of your assignments may ask you to make **normative claims**. Normative claims are claims of value or evaluation rather than fact—claims about how things should be rather than how they are. A normative claim makes the case for the importance of something, the action that should be taken, or the way the world should be. When you are asked to write a policy memo, a proposal, or an essay based on your own opinion, you will be making normative claims.



Here are some examples of possible thesis statements for a student's analysis of the article [“The Case Against Perfection” by Professor Michael Sandel](#).

Descriptive thesis (not arguable)

While Sandel argues that pursuing perfection through genetic engineering would decrease our sense of humility, he claims that the sense of solidarity we would lose is also important.

This thesis *summarizes* several points in Sandel’s argument, but it does not make a claim about how we should understand his argument. A reader who read Sandel’s argument would not also need to read an essay based on this descriptive thesis.

Broad thesis (arguable, but difficult to support with evidence)

Michael Sandel’s arguments about genetic engineering do not take into consideration all the relevant issues.

This is an arguable claim because it would be possible to argue against it by saying that Michael Sandel’s arguments *do* take all of the relevant issues into consideration. But the claim is too broad. Because the thesis does not specify which “issues” it is focused on—or why it matters if they are considered—readers won’t know what the rest of the essay will argue, and the writer won’t know what to focus on. If there is a particular issue that Sandel does not address, then a more specific version of the thesis would include that issue—hand an explanation of why it is important.

Arguable thesis with analytical claim

While Sandel argues persuasively that our instinct to “remake” (54) ourselves into something ever more perfect is a problem, his belief that we can always draw a line between what is medically necessary and what makes us simply “better than well” (51) is less convincing.

This is an arguable analytical claim. To argue for this claim, the essay writer will need to show how evidence from the article itself points to this interpretation. It’s also a reasonable scope for a thesis because it can be supported with evidence available in the text and is neither too broad nor too narrow.



Arguable thesis with normative claim

Given Sandel's argument against genetic enhancement, we should not allow parents to decide on using Human Growth Hormone for their children.

This thesis tells us what we should *do* about a particular issue discussed in Sandel's article, but it does not tell us how we should understand Sandel's argument.

Questions to ask about your thesis

- Is the thesis truly arguable? Does it speak to a genuine dilemma in the source, or would most readers automatically agree with it?
- Is the thesis too obvious? Again, would most or all readers agree with it without needing to see your argument?
- Is the thesis complex enough to require a whole essay's worth of argument?
- Is the thesis supportable with evidence from the text rather than with generalizations or outside research?
- Would anyone want to read a paper in which this thesis was developed? That is, can you explain what this paper is adding to our understanding of a problem, question, or topic?



Introductions

The introduction to an academic essay will generally present an analytical question or problem and then offer an answer to that question (the thesis).

Your introduction is also your opportunity to explain to your readers what your essay is about and why they should be interested in reading it. You don't have to "hook" your readers with a dramatic promise (every other discussion of the topic you're writing about is completely wrong!) or an exciting fact (the moon can reach 127 degrees Celsius!). Instead, you should use your introduction to explain to your readers why your essay is going to be interesting to read. To do this, you'll need to frame the question or problem that you're writing about and explain why this question or problem is important. If you make a convincing case for why your question or problem is worth solving, your readers will be interested in reading on.

While some of the conventions for writing an introduction vary by discipline, a strong introduction for any paper will contain some common elements. You can see these common elements in [the sample introductions on this page](#). In general, your introductions should contain the following elements:

- **Orienting information**

When you're writing an essay, it's helpful to think about what your reader needs to know in order to follow your argument. Your introduction should include enough information so that readers can understand the context for your thesis. For example, if you are analyzing someone else's argument, you will need to identify that argument and possibly summarize its key points. If you are joining a scholarly conversation about education reform, you will need to provide context for this conversation before explaining what your essay adds to the discussion. But you don't necessarily have to summarize your sources in detail in your introduction; that information may fit in better later in your essay.

When you're deciding how much context or background information to provide, it can be helpful to think about that information in relation to your thesis. You don't have to tell readers everything they will need to know to understand your entire essay right away. You just need to give them enough information to be able to understand and appreciate your thesis.



For some assignments, you'll be able to assume that your audience has also read the sources you are analyzing. But even in those cases, you should still offer enough information for readers to know which parts of a source you are talking about. When you're writing a paper based on your own research, you will need to provide more context about the sources you're going to discuss. If you're not sure how much you can assume your audience knows, you should consult your instructor.

- **An explanation of what's at stake in your essay, or why anyone would need to read an essay that argues this thesis**

You will know why your essay is worth writing if you are trying to answer a question that doesn't have an obvious answer; to propose a solution to a problem without one obvious solution; or to point out something that others may not have noticed that changes the way we consider a phenomenon, source, or idea. In all of these cases, you will be trying to understand something that you think is valuable to understand. But it's not enough that *you* know why your essay is worth reading; you also need to explain to your readers why they should care about reading an essay that argues your thesis.

In other words, part of the role of an introduction is to explain to your reader **what is at stake in your argument**. As you draft your introduction, it can be helpful to think about how you arrived at your thesis and to take your reader through a shortened version of that process by framing the question or problem that you are trying to answer and explaining why it's worth exploring. It's not enough to explain why the topic you're writing about matters; rather, you need to explain what *your essay* adds to that discussion.

So, for example, if you were writing an essay about the Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs vs. Jackson Women's Health*, it wouldn't be enough to say that what's at stake is that "people care about reproductive rights." That would explain why, in general, someone might want to read about this topic. But your readers need to know why *your* thesis is worth arguing. Does it challenge an accepted view? Does it present a new way of considering a concept? Does it put the Supreme Court decision into a historical context in a way that is unusual or surprising?

- **Your thesis**

This is what you're arguing in your essay.



Tips for writing introductions

- If you are writing in a new discipline, you should always make sure to ask about conventions and expectations for introductions, just as you would for any other aspect of the essay. For example, while it may be acceptable to write a two-paragraph (or longer) introduction for your papers in some courses, instructors in other disciplines, such as those in some Government courses, may expect a shorter introduction that includes [a preview of the argument that will follow](#).
- In some disciplines (Government, Economics, and others), it's common to offer an overview in the introduction of what points you will make in your essay. In other disciplines, you will not be expected to provide this overview in your introduction.
- Avoid writing a very general opening sentence. While it may be true that "Since the dawn of time, people have been telling love stories," it won't help you explain what's interesting about your topic.
- Avoid writing a "funnel" introduction in which you begin with a very broad statement about a topic and move to a narrow statement about that topic. Broad generalizations about a topic will not add to your readers' understanding of your specific essay topic.
- Avoid beginning with a dictionary definition of a term or concept you will be writing about. If the concept is complicated or unfamiliar to your readers, you will need to define it in detail later in your essay. If it's not complicated, you can assume your readers already know the definition.
- Avoid offering too much detail in your introduction that a reader could better understand later in the paper.



What Do Introductions Across the Disciplines Have in Common?

While different disciplines have different conventions and expectations, many aspects of strong writing are shared across the disciplines. Below, you'll find three examples of introductions written for Harvard College courses in different disciplines. While the introductions focus on very different topics, each one contains the key elements of an introduction: [orienting information, an explanation of what's at stake, and a thesis](#).

Each introduction has been annotated to show these three common features. If you have questions about what an introduction should look like for one of your courses, you should always consult your instructor.

Introduction #1

This is the introduction to a paper written by Talia Blatt '23 for a biology course called "Ecology: Populations, Communities, and Ecosystems."

Coastal dunes are key sites for the study of ecological succession – the process of structural change in an ecological community after a disturbance (Martinez et al., 2018). The further the dune is from the shoreline, the more time has passed since the disturbance, enabling a space-for-time substitution approach called a chronosequence. Dune succession is allogenic and primary: Pioneer species colonize bare land after an extrinsic, abiotic disturbance. Dunes are also biodiverse, heterogenous, and overexploited (Sarmati et al., 2019). Studying dunes thus fulfills the double role of investigating succession and using succession to further conservation goals, protecting important and fragile ecosystems.

Theories of succession remain contested: Frederic Clements envisioned a steady progression towards a climax community, which has been the traditional understanding. Conversely, Henry Gleason imagined a more contingent, polyclimax theory of succession, in which different organisms are adapted to live together in different environments.

Orienting information. The author identifies the area of study, defines key terms, and explains the purpose of studying dunes.

What's at stake? The author has identified a debate within her area of study about theories of ecological succession. A reader can see that the author of this paper is going to contribute to that ongoing discussion.



Using the sand dunes at Crane Beach in Ipswich, Massachusetts, this study uses the chronosequence approach to study primary succession, characterizing an ecological community’s change over time with the proxy of distance from the shore. I hypothesize that overall diversity will increase with time, as pioneer grasses colonize and facilitate shrubs and eventually trees. This biotic shift will likely be accompanied by an abiotic shift in soil texture, from coarse to fine. Altogether, I hypothesize that the dune chronosequence will show a progression in line with Clements’ vision of a maximally biodiverse climax community.

Thesis. The author explains that her study is going to align with one of the two theories she laid out above.

Introduction #2

This is the introduction to a paper written by Eliza Hirsch '25 for the course “Why Shakespeare?”

In the first scene of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Barnardo, a sentinel, begs Horatio to “once again let [them] assail [Horatio’s] ears” (1.1.37) with their story of seeing King Hamlet’s ghost for the past two nights. This image of ears being assailed characterizes Barnardo's story as an attack on Horatio’s physical person, with the idiom conflating the physical ear with the act of listening. The play mentions ears both figuratively and physically twenty-five times. Eight of these occurrences are in act one, a portion of the play which ends in the ghost’s telling Hamlet that Claudius poisoned King Hamlet through his ear. For comparison, the play uses the word “mouth” five times and the word “nose” only twice. Why, especially in conjunction with imagery of ears, does Shakespeare so frequently connect words and life-threatening physical violence throughout the play? In Hamlet, the motif of ears being physically attacked creates a connection between physical and verbal violence and ultimately suggests that the two are equal.

Orienting information. The author tells readers what the focus of this essay is going to be.

What’s at stake? There’s something that doesn’t immediately make sense—Shakespeare’s focus on the imagery of ears—and the author thinks this is worth investigating and explaining.

Thesis. The author offers an explanation for how readers should understand the relationship between the imagery of ears and physical violence in Hamlet.



Introduction #3

This is the introduction to a paper that Charlotte Baker '24 wrote for Social Studies 10.

From between the lines of his *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith emerges as a deeply pragmatic—if not cynical—thinker; he is concerned with the roots of commercial life, and he finds them in what he illustrates as the universal sovereignty of individual self-love. The 1776 inquiry’s most recognizable quote—“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest”—definitively identifies this love as the foundation of commercial society (*Wealth* 26-27). *The Wealth of Nations* garnered enduring clout, as Smith’s philosophy in its totality was ultimately abstracted and politicized in defense of unbridled free trade and market deregulation. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, however, did not receive the same sustained recognition. At first glance, the Smith behind this earlier book, published in 1759, appears irreconcilable with the Smith behind *The Wealth of Nations*. When contrasted with *The Wealth of Nations*, this earlier version of Smith appears optimistic and soft: *Theory’s* Smith identifies and explores the function of an original passion that he terms “sympathy,” the human tendency to put ourselves in another’s shoes (*Theory* 1). Given the profound differences between the two books—and the apparent differences between the temperaments of the writer behind them (are humans predominantly self-interested? Or are we naturally other-regarding?)—it is easier to let Smith’s dichotomous selves exist in separate worlds; *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is easier left forgotten.

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith’s self-love-borne economy is organized by the “division of labor” (11). This term refers to the specialization that forms the basis of a commercial trading society. Smith designates the division as the inevitable result of trading itself—it flows naturally from our human “propensity...to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another” (*Wealth* 25). This is the extent of his reasoning here—humans are endowed with an impulse to barter and exchange. But what about us—or in us—generates this “propensity” (*Wealth* 25)? *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* answers this question. In this paper I will argue that

Orienting information. The author orients readers to the topic at hand: Adam Smith and his philosophy—and the apparent contradictions within his philosophy.

What’s at stake? The author notes that in *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith has not explained why humans possess this “propensity . . . to truck, barter, and exchange.”



Theory's notion of sympathy is intimately intertwined with the “propensity” that *Wealth* sees driving commerce (*Wealth* 25). According to Smith, sympathy endows us with a love for conversation and drives our pursuit of wealth, both of which lead to trade; additionally, Smith’s conception of sympathy is essential to barter. In performing these functions—initiating, driving, and facilitating trade—sympathy travels across and unites Smith’s two works; it is impossible to fully understand *The Wealth of Nations* without *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

Thesis. In this passage, the author makes her case that reading both of Smith’s works together answers the question she has raised—and thus both works must be read in order to fully understand *The Wealth of Nations*.



The Anatomy of a Body Paragraph

When you write strong, clear paragraphs, you are guiding your readers through your argument by showing them how your points fit together to support your thesis. The number of paragraphs in your essay should be determined by the number of steps you need to take to build your argument. To write strong paragraphs, try to focus each paragraph on one main point—and begin a new paragraph when you are moving to a new point or example.

A strong paragraph in an academic essay will usually include these three elements:

- **A topic sentence.** The topic sentence does double duty for a paragraph. First, a strong topic sentence **makes a claim or states a main idea** that is then developed in the rest of the paragraph. Second, the topic sentence signals to readers how the paragraph is connected to the larger argument in your paper.

Below is an example of a topic sentence from a paper by Laura Connor '23 that analyzes rhetoric used by Frederic Douglass, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Karl Marx. In her paper, Connor argues that Marx's rhetoric was most effective in driving social change.

In his numerous writings, Marx critiques capitalism by identifying its flaws.

This topic sentence makes a claim that will then need to be supported with evidence: readers can expect that the sentence will be followed by a discussion of what Marx saw as the flaws in capitalism, which will in turn help them understand Connor's thesis about how these three authors used their rhetoric to effect social change.

A topic sentence signals to your readers what idea is most important in that paragraph—and it also helps you know if you've effectively made your point. In this case, Connor has set up the expectation for readers that by the end of the paragraph, they will understand Marx's view of the flaws in capitalism.

Imagine that, instead of writing "Marx critiques capitalism by identifying its flaws," Connor had begun that paragraph with a descriptive sentence. For example, she could have written something like this: "Marx wrote a critique of



capitalism.” While that sentence describes something that happened, it does not give readers information about what will be in the rest of the paragraph—and it would not have helped Connor figure out how to organize the paragraph.

- **Evidence.** Once you’ve made a claim in your topic sentence, you’ll need to help your readers see how you arrived at that claim from the evidence that you examined. That evidence may include quotations or paraphrased material from a source, or it may include data, results, or primary source material. In the paragraph that follows Connor’s topic sentence above, she offers several quotations from Marx that demonstrate how he viewed the flaws in capitalism.
- **Analysis.** It’s not enough to provide evidence to support a claim. You have to tell your readers what you want them to understand about that evidence. In other words, you have to analyze it. How does this evidence support your claim? In Connor’s paragraph, she follows her presentation of evidence with sentences that tell readers what they need to understand about that evidence—specifically that it shows how Marx pointed to the flaws in capitalism without telling his own readers what to think about it, and that this was his strategy.

It might be tempting to end your paragraph with either a sentence summarizing everything you’ve just written or the introduction of a new idea. But in a short paragraph, your readers don’t need a summary of all that you’ve just said. And introducing a new point in the final sentence can confuse readers by leaving them without evidence to support that new point.

Instead, try to end your paragraph with a sentence that tells readers something that they can now understand because they’ve read your paragraph. In Connor’s paragraph, the final sentence doesn’t summarize all of Marx’s specific claims but instead tells readers what to take away from that evidence. After seeing what Marx says about capitalism, Connor explains what the evidence she has just offered suggests about Marx’s beliefs.

Below, you’ll find Connor’s complete paragraph. The topic sentence appears in blue. The evidence appears in green. Connor’s analysis of the evidence appears in yellow.

Example paragraph

In his numerous writings, Marx critiques capitalism by identifying its flaws. By critiquing the political economy and capitalism, Marx implores his reader to



think critically about their position in society and restores awareness in the proletariat class. To Marx, capitalism is a system characterized by the “exploitation of the many by the few,” in which workers accept the exploitation of their labor and receive only harm of “alienation,” rather than true benefits (MER 487). He writes that “labour produces for the rich wonderful things – but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces—but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty—but for the worker, deformity” (MER 73). Marx argues capitalism is a system in which the laborer is repeatedly harmed and estranged from himself, his labor, and other people, while the owner of his labor – the capitalist – receives the benefits (MER 74). And while industry progresses, the worker “sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class” (MER 483). But while Marx critiques the political economy, he does not explicitly say “capitalism is wrong.” Rather, his close examination of the system makes its flaws obvious. Only once the working class realizes the flaws of the system, Marx believes, will they - must they - rise up against their bourgeois masters and achieve the necessary and inevitable communist revolution.

Not every paragraph will be structured exactly like this one, of course. But as you draft your own paragraphs, look for all three of these elements: topic sentence, evidence, and analysis.



Transitions

Transitions help your readers move between ideas within a paragraph, between paragraphs, or between sections of your argument. When you are deciding how to transition from one idea to the next, your goal should be to help readers see how your ideas are connected—and how those ideas connect to the big picture.

One useful way to do this is to **start with old information and then introduce new information**. When you begin a sentence or a paragraph with information that is familiar to your readers, you help your readers make connections between your ideas. For example, consider the difference between these two pairs of sentences below:

Sentence pair #1: Ineffective Transition

Some experts argue that focusing on individual actions to combat climate change takes the focus away from the collective action required to keep carbon levels from rising. Change will not be effected, say some others, unless individual actions raise the necessary awareness.

While a reader can see the connection between the sentences above, it's not immediately clear that the second sentence is providing a counterargument to the first. In the example below, key "old information" is repeated in the second sentence to help readers quickly see the connection. This makes the sequence of ideas easier to follow.

Sentence pair #2: Effective Transition

Some experts argue that focusing on individual actions to combat climate change takes the focus away from the collective action required to keep carbon levels from rising. Other experts argue that individual actions are key to raising the awareness necessary to effect change.

You can use this same technique to create clear transitions between paragraphs. Here's an example:

Some experts argue that focusing on individual actions to combat climate change takes the focus away from the collective action required to keep carbon levels from rising. Other experts argue that individual actions are key to raising the awareness necessary to effect



change. According to Annie Lowery, individual actions are important to making social change because when individuals take action, they can change values, which can lead to more people becoming invested in fighting climate change. She writes, “Researchers believe that these kinds of household-led trends can help avert climate catastrophe, even if government and corporate actions are far more important” (Lowery).

So, what’s an individual household supposed to do?

The repetition of the word “household” in the new paragraph helps readers see the connection between what has come before (a discussion of whether household actions matter) and what is about to come (a proposal for what types of actions households can take to combat climate change).

Sometimes, transitional words can help readers see how ideas are connected. But it’s not enough to just include a “therefore,” “moreover,” “also,” or “in addition.” You should choose these words carefully to show your readers *what kind of connection* you are making between your ideas.

To decide which transitional word to use, start by identifying the relationship between your ideas. For example, you might be

- **making a comparison or showing a contrast**

Transitional words that compare and contrast include *also, in the same way, similarly, in contrast, yet, on the one hand, on the other hand*. But before you signal comparison, ask these questions: Do your readers need another example of the same thing? Is there a new nuance in this next point that distinguishes it from the previous example? For those relationships between ideas, you might try this type of transition: *While x may appear the same, it actually raises a new question in a slightly different way.*

- **expressing agreement or disagreement**

When you are making an argument, you need to signal to readers where you stand in relation to other scholars and critics. You may agree with another person’s claim, you may want to concede some part of the argument even if you don’t agree with everything, or you may disagree. Transitional words that signal agreement, concession, and disagreement include *however, nevertheless, actually, still, despite, admittedly, still, on the contrary, nonetheless*.

- **showing cause and effect**

Transitional phrases that show cause and effect include *therefore, hence, consequently, thus, so*. Before you choose one of these words, make sure that what



you are about to illustrate is really a causal link. Novice writers tend to add *therefore* and *hence* when they aren't sure how to transition; you should reserve these words for when they accurately signal the progression of your ideas.

- **explaining or elaborating**

Transitions can signal to readers that you are going to expand on a point that you have just made or explain something further. Transitional words that signal explanation or elaboration include *in other words*, *for example*, *for instance*, *in particular*, *that is*, *to illustrate*, *moreover*.

- **drawing conclusions**

You can use transitions to signal to readers that you are moving from the body of your argument to your conclusions. Before you use transitional words to signal conclusions, consider whether you can write a stronger conclusion by creating a transition that shows the relationship between your ideas rather than by flagging the paragraph simply as a conclusion. Transitional words that signal a conclusion include *in conclusion*, *as a result*, *ultimately*, *overall*—but strong conclusions do not necessarily have to include those phrases.

If you're not sure which transitional words to use—or whether to use one at all—see if you can explain the connection between your paragraphs or sentence either out loud or in the margins of your draft.

For example, if you write a paragraph in which you summarize physician Atul Gawande's argument about the value of incremental care, and then you move on to a paragraph that challenges those ideas, you might write down something like this next to the first paragraph: "In this paragraph I summarize Gawande's main claim." Then, next to the second paragraph, you might write, "In this paragraph I present a challenge to Gawande's main claim." Now that you have identified the relationship between those two paragraphs, you can choose the most effective transition between them. Since the second paragraph in this example challenges the ideas in the first, you might begin with something like "but," or "however," to signal that shift for your readers.



Tips for Organizing Your Essay

If you are used to writing essays that are similar to the five-paragraph essay (one claim and then three points that support that claim), it can be daunting to think about how to structure your ideas in a longer essay. Once you've established your thesis, you need to think about how you will move your reader through your argument. In some courses, you will be expected to provide a roadmap in your introduction that explicitly tells readers how your argument is organized. But even when you don't provide a roadmap, your reader should be able to see the connections between your ideas. As you think about how your ideas fit together, try these three strategies:

Strategy #1: Decompose your thesis into paragraphs

A clear, arguable thesis will tell your readers where you are going to end up, but it can also help you figure out how to get them there. Put your thesis at the top of a blank page and then make a list of the points you will need to make to argue that thesis effectively.

For example, consider this example from [the thesis handout](#): *While Sandel argues persuasively that our instinct to “remake”(54) ourselves into something ever more perfect is a problem, his belief that we can always draw a line between what is medically necessary and what makes us simply “better than well”(51) is less convincing.*

To argue this thesis, the author needs to do the following:

- Show what is persuasive about Sandel's claims about the problems with striving for perfection.
- Show what is *not* convincing about Sandel's claim that we can clearly distinguish between medically necessary enhancements and other enhancements.

Once you have broken down your thesis into main claims, you can then think about what sub-claims you will need to make in order to support each of those main claims. That step might look like this:

- Show what is persuasive about Sandel's claims about the problems with striving for perfection.



- Evidence that Sandel provides to support this claim
- Discussion of why this evidence is convincing even in light of potential counterarguments
- Show what is *not* convincing about Sandel's claim that we can clearly distinguish between medically necessary enhancements and other enhancements.
 - Discussion of cases when medically necessary enhancement and non-medical enhancement cannot be easily distinguished
 - Analysis of what those cases mean for Sandel's argument
 - Consideration of counterarguments (what Sandel might say in response to this section of your argument)

Each argument you will make in an essay will be different, but this strategy will often be a useful first step in figuring out the path of your argument.

Strategy #2: Use subheadings, even if you remove them later

Scientific papers generally include standard subheadings to delineate different sections of the paper, including "introduction," "methods," and "discussion." Even when you are not required to use subheadings, it can be helpful to put them into an early draft to help you see what you've written and to begin to think about how your ideas fit together. You can do this by typing subheadings above the sections of your draft.

If you're having trouble figuring out how your ideas fit together, try beginning with informal subheadings like these:

- Introduction
- Explain the author's main point
- Show why this main point doesn't hold up when we consider this other example
- Explain the implications of what I've shown for our understanding of the author
- Show how that changes our understanding of the topic

For longer papers, you may decide to include subheadings to guide your reader through your argument. In those cases, you would need to revise your informal subheadings to be more useful for your readers. For example, if you have initially



written in something like “explain the author’s main point,” your final subheading might be something like “Sandel’s main argument” or “Sandel’s opposition to genetic enhancement.” In other cases, once you have the key pieces of your argument in place, you will be able to remove the subheadings.

Strategy #3: Create a reverse outline from your draft

While you may have learned to outline a paper before writing a draft, this step is often difficult because our ideas develop as we write. In some cases, it can be more helpful to write a draft in which you get all of your ideas out and then do a “reverse outline” of what you’ve already written. This doesn’t have to be formal; you can just make a list of the point in each paragraph of your draft and then ask these questions:

- Are those points in an order that makes sense to you?
- Are there gaps in your argument?
- Do the topic sentences of the paragraphs clearly state these main points?
- Do you have more than one paragraph that focuses on the same point? If so, do you need both paragraphs?
- Do you have some paragraphs that include too many points? If so, would it make more sense to split them up?
- Do you make points near the end of the draft that would be more effective earlier in your paper?
- Are there points missing from this draft?



Counterargument

When you make an argument in an academic essay, you are writing for an audience that may not agree with you. In fact, your argument is worth making in the first place *because* your thesis will not be obvious—or obviously correct—to everyone who considers the question you are asking or the topic you’re addressing. Once you figure out what you want to argue—your essay’s thesis—your task in writing the essay will be to share with your readers the evidence you have considered and to explain how that evidence supports your thesis.

But just offering your readers evidence that supports your thesis isn’t enough. You also need to consider potential counterarguments—the arguments that your readers could reasonably raise to challenge either your thesis or any of the other claims that you make in your argument. It can be helpful to think of counterarguments to your thesis as alternative answers to your question. In order to support your thesis effectively, you will need to explain why it is stronger than the alternatives.

A counterargument shouldn’t be something you add to your essay after you’ve finished it just because you know you’re supposed to include one. Instead, as you write your essay, you should always be thinking about points where a thoughtful reader could reasonably disagree with you. In some cases, you will be writing your essay as a counterargument to someone else’s argument because you think that argument is incorrect or misses something important. In other cases, you’ll need to think through—and address—objections that you think readers may have to your argument.

While it may be tempting to ignore counterarguments that challenge your own argument, you should not do this. Your own argument will be stronger if you can explain to your readers why the counterarguments they may pose are not as strong or convincing as your own argument. If you come up with a counterargument that you can’t refute, then you may decide to revise your thesis or some part of your argument. While that could be frustrating in the moment, challenging your own thinking is an important part of the writing process. By considering potential counterarguments, you will figure out if you actually agree with your own argument. In many cases, you will discover that a counterargument *complicates* your argument, but doesn’t refute it entirely.



Some counterarguments will directly address your thesis, while other counterarguments will challenge an individual point or set of points elsewhere in your argument. For example, a counterargument might identify

- a problem with a conclusion you've drawn from evidence
- a problem with an assumption you've made
- a problem with how you are using a key term
- evidence you haven't considered
- a drawback to your proposal
- a consequence you haven't considered
- an alternative interpretation of the evidence

Example

Consider the following thesis for a short paper that analyzes different approaches to stopping climate change:

Climate activism that focuses on personal actions such as recycling obscures the need for systemic change that will be required to slow carbon emissions.

The author of this thesis is promising to make the case that personal actions not only will not solve the climate problem but may actually make the problem more difficult to solve. In order to make a convincing argument, the author will need to consider how thoughtful people might disagree with this claim. In this case, the author might anticipate the following counterarguments:

- *By encouraging personal actions, climate activists may raise awareness of the problem and encourage people to support larger systemic change.*
- *Personal actions on a global level would actually make a difference.*
- *Personal actions may not make a difference, but they will not obscure the need for systemic solutions.*
- *Personal actions cannot be put into one category and must be differentiated.*



In order to make a convincing argument, the author of this essay may need to address these potential counterarguments. But you don't need to address every possible counterargument. Rather, you should engage counterarguments when doing so allows you to strengthen your own argument by explaining how it holds up in relation to other arguments.

How to address counterarguments

Once you have considered the potential counterarguments, you will need to figure out how to address them in your essay. In general, to address a counterargument, you'll need to take the following steps.

- State the counterargument and explain why a reasonable reader could raise that counterargument.
- *Counter* the counterargument. How you grapple with a counterargument will depend on what you think it means for your argument. You may explain why your argument is still convincing, even in light of this other position. You may point to a flaw in the counterargument. You may concede that the counterargument gets something right but then explain why it does not undermine your argument. You may explain why the counterargument is not relevant. You may refine your own argument in response to the counterargument.
- Consider the language you are using to address the counterargument. Words like *but* or *however* signal to the reader that you are refuting the counterargument. Words like *nevertheless* or *still* signal to the reader that your argument is not diminished by the counterargument.

Here's an example of a paragraph in which a counterargument is raised and addressed. The two steps are highlighted (yellow for the counterargument and blue for the "counter" to the counterargument):

But some experts argue that it's important for individuals to take action to mitigate climate change. In "All That Performative Environmentalism Adds Up," Annie Lowery argues that personal actions to fight climate change, such as reducing household trash or installing solar panels, matter because change in social behavior can lead to changes in laws.¹ While Lowery may be correct that

¹ Annie Lowery, "All that Performative Environmentalism Adds Up." *The Atlantic*. August 31, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/08/your-tote-bag-can-make-difference/615817/>



individual actions can lead to collective action, this focus on individual action can allow corporations to receive positive publicity while continuing to burn fossil fuels at dangerous rates.

Where to address counterarguments

There is no one right place for a counterargument—where you raise a particular counterargument will depend on how it fits in with the rest of your argument. The most common spots are the following:

- **Before your conclusion**

This is a common and effective spot for a counterargument because it's a chance to address anything that you think a reader might still be concerned about after you've made your main argument. Don't put a counterargument in your conclusion, however. At that point, you won't have the space to address it, and readers may come away confused—or less convinced by your argument.

- **Before your thesis**

Often, your thesis will actually be a counterargument to someone else's argument. In other words, you will be making your argument because someone else has made an argument that you disagree with. In those cases, you may want to offer that counterargument *before you state your thesis* to show your readers what's at stake—someone else has made an unconvincing argument, and you are now going to make a better one.

- **After your introduction**

In some cases, you may want to respond to a counterargument early in your essay, before you get too far into your argument. This is a good option when you think readers may need to understand why the counterargument is not as strong as your argument before you can even launch your own ideas. You might do this in the paragraph right after your thesis.

- **Anywhere that makes sense**

As you draft an essay, you should always keep your readers in mind and think about where a thoughtful reader might disagree with you or raise an objection to an assertion or interpretation of evidence that you are offering. In those spots, you can introduce that potential objection and explain why it does not change your argument. If you think it does affect your argument, you can acknowledge that and explain why your argument is still strong.



Conclusions

One of the most common questions we receive at the Writing Center is “what am I supposed to do in my conclusion?” This is a difficult question to answer because there’s no one right answer to what belongs in a conclusion. How you conclude your paper will depend on where you started—and where you traveled. It will also depend on the conventions and expectations of the discipline in which you are writing. For example, while the conclusion to a STEM paper could focus on questions for further study, the conclusion of a literature paper could include a quotation from your central text that can now be understood differently in light of what has been discussed in the paper. You should consult your instructor about expectations for conclusions in a particular discipline.

With that in mind, here are some general guidelines you might find helpful to use as you think about your conclusion.

Begin with the “what”

In a short paper—even a research paper—you don’t need to provide an exhaustive summary as part of your conclusion. But you do need to make some kind of transition between your final body paragraph and your concluding paragraph. This may come in the form of a few sentences of summary. Or it may come in the form of a sentence that brings your readers back to your thesis or main idea and reminds your readers where you began and how far you have traveled.

[So, for example, in a paper about the relationship between ADHD and rejection sensitivity, Vanessa Roser](#) begins by introducing readers to the fact that researchers have studied the relationship between the two conditions and then provides her explanation of that relationship. Here’s her thesis: “While socialization may indeed be an important factor in RS, I argue that individuals with ADHD may also possess a neurological predisposition to RS that is exacerbated by the differing executive and emotional regulation characteristic of ADHD.”

In her final paragraph, Roser reminds us of where she started by echoing her thesis: “This literature demonstrates that, as with many other conditions, ADHD and RS share a delicately intertwined pattern of neurological similarities that is rooted in the innate



biology of an individual's mind, a connection that cannot be explained in full by the behavioral mediation hypothesis."

Highlight the "so what"

At the beginning of your paper, you explain to your readers what's at stake—why they should care about the argument you're making. In your conclusion, you can bring readers back to those stakes by reminding them why your argument is important in the first place. You can also draft a few sentences that put those stakes into a new or broader context.

In the conclusion to her paper about ADHD and RS, Roser echoes the stakes she established in her introduction—that research into connections between ADHD and RS has led to contradictory results, raising questions about the "behavioral mediation hypothesis."

She writes, "as with many other conditions, ADHD and RS share a delicately intertwined pattern of neurological similarities that is rooted in the innate biology of an individual's mind, a connection that cannot be explained in full by the behavioral mediation hypothesis."

Leave your readers with the "now what"

After the "what" and the "so what," you should leave your reader with some final thoughts. If you have written a strong introduction, your readers will know why you have been arguing what you have been arguing—and why they should care. And if you've made a good case for your thesis, then your readers should be in a position to see things in a new way, understand new questions, or be ready for something that they weren't ready for before they read your paper.

In her conclusion, Roser offers two "now what" statements. First, she explains that it is important to recognize that the flawed behavioral mediation hypothesis "seems to place a degree of fault on the individual. It implies that individuals with ADHD must have elicited such frequent or intense rejection by virtue of their inadequate social skills, erasing the possibility that they may simply possess a natural sensitivity to emotion." She then highlights the broader implications for treatment of people with ADHD, noting that recognizing the actual connection between rejection sensitivity and ADHD "has profound implications for understanding how individuals with ADHD might best be treated in educational settings, by counselors, family, peers, or even society as a whole."



To find your own “now what” for your essay’s conclusion, try asking yourself these questions:

- What can my readers now understand, see in a new light, or grapple with that they would not have understood in the same way before reading my paper? Are we a step closer to understanding a larger phenomenon or to understanding why what was at stake is so important?
- What questions can I now raise that would not have made sense at the beginning of my paper? Questions for further research? Other ways that this topic could be approached?
- Are there other applications for my research? Could my questions be asked about different data in a different context? Could I use my methods to answer a different question?
- What action should be taken in light of this argument? What action do I predict will be taken or could lead to a solution?
- What larger context might my argument be a part of?

What to avoid in your conclusion

- a complete restatement of all that you have said in your paper.
- a substantial counterargument that you do not have space to refute; you should introduce counterarguments before your conclusion.
- an apology for what you have not said. If you need to explain the scope of your paper, you should do this sooner—but don’t apologize for what you have not discussed in your paper.
- fake transitions like “in conclusion” that are followed by sentences that aren’t actually conclusions. (“In conclusion, I have now demonstrated that my thesis is correct.”)