A Guide to Argumentative Writing

Writing is a challenging exercise in managing and structuring information—marrying content to composition and understanding how function leads to form. Too often these elements are in conflict with one another because students either misunderstand or have not acquired the tools to generate, organize, expand and explain their ideas.

The Argumentative Writing Guide is an attempt at providing concrete suggestions and guidelines for writing essays that analyze and argue for a particular point of view—to help students master the challenge of putting their thoughts down on the page in an organized and logical fashion. While neither rigid rules nor abstract formulas, these guidelines have proven to be useful to students over time because they focus on the principles that writers use in crafting prose—skills that are transferable to other writing tasks and over time lead to an understanding of the process of writing itself.

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True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance – Pope
1. Brainstorming the Thesis

1.1. Thesis Questions

Begin any piece of writing by brainstorming about your thesis question. The text or topic you’re writing on has likely already been determined, but the approach you take is up to you. The best thesis questions go beyond rehashing the plot to allow the writer to make inferences—conclusions drawn from the facts and evidence contained within the text coupled with reasons to support your analysis or interpretation.

Start by selecting a theme or idea that either interests you or inspires confidence that you can discuss it thoroughly. Then hone that idea down to a specific and worthwhile point that you believe you can support with evidence. There are many ways you can go about the task of selecting a theme or idea from within a pre-selected text or topic:

- One way to come up with a thesis question is to examine traditional topic areas: Theme, Cause and Effect, Character, Compare and Contrast, Foreshadowing, Setting, Direct and indirect reasons for action, Symbolism, Point of View, and Diction & Figurative Language—just to name a few. Sophisticated writers oftentimes take up two or more of these areas to create more complex theses—how symbolism illuminates character, how a historical figure’s background intertwined with the causes for an event, how a tragic theme might be juxtaposed with light-hearted diction—or even through drawing causal connections between ideas (e.g. “character is destiny”).

- A different approach for generating a thesis question is to try mapping your ideas out. Start with a single idea circled in the middle of a page. Draw lines to new ideas that radiate out and link to that first idea, and then do the same for each of those ideas, etc. Then look for “hot spots”—ideas that have a lot of connected ideas. For example, if you put “American Revolution” in the center and started radiating out with ideas to link to that idea, you’ll quickly discover where the hot spots are—like around the idea of General Washington or the concept of “taxation without representation.”

- Another approach is “notes and quotes.” Look through the text(s) you are writing about and see what you’ve highlighted—what interested you about the material you’ve been studying. Do the same for your notes. If you begin with a rough, general idea—say Macbeth’s guilt—it might help to find a specific passage for inspiration: the scene about blood on Macbeth’s hands could lead to an interesting discussion of whether the blood imagery in the play was consistently used to signal guilt.

- If you’re still looking for a thesis question, you might want to consider the following exercise (utilizing something called Burke’s Pentad). Ask yourself the following five questions: What was done? When and where was it done? Who did it? How was it done? And most importantly, why was it done? After having answered these questions, juxtapose the why question against the others to create truly interesting thesis questions. Take for instance the topic of Reconstruction after the Civil War. Combining the “how” and “why” produces the question of whether or not the Acts of Reconstruction supported the rebuilding of the South. Putting together the “who” and “why” changes the topic into explaining the role northern Congressmen played in formulating Reconstruction policy.

In short, there are many ways to come up with a thesis question that you then will want to answer. The key is to start looking—and keep looking—till you find a topic that interests you, and then work hard to hone that topic into a workable question. The best papers are usually ones that have thesis statements that interest the student writing the paper but have a concrete focus.
1.2. Thesis Statements

The next step is to arrive at a thesis statement—i.e. answering the thesis question you have created. Let’s say you are reading Macbeth and are interested in evil, and your thesis question is “Who causes the evil in Macbeth?” You might believe that the three witches are the primary source of evil in Macbeth, and that Lady Macbeth (despite what your classmates argued) is not the cause of her husband’s downfall. Your thesis could then read something like this:

Though the evil deeds of Macbeth appear to be initiated by his wife, a closer examination of the play reveals that the three malicious witches ultimately control the tragic actions of the king.

Using this as an example of a thesis statement, some interesting features emerge if examined closely:

- Thesis statements turn out to be complex single sentence encapsulations of what you are going to prove in your essay. Though the temptation might exist to try and say it in multiple sentences, the best thesis statements unambiguously attempt to frame the discussion in a single sentence that is easy to remember.

- Thesis statements should be interesting and merit discussion, yet state in a clear and unambiguous manner how the question is resolved. They are not questions, nor bland platitudes, but statements that can be proven with lots and lots of evidence.

- Successful thesis statements should address a “how” or “why” question, not a “who” or “when” or “what” question. Indeed, when writing about any literary text or about a historical event or figure, it is crucial to be guided by a thesis statement that doesn’t merely lead you to state what the text means or when something happened, but rather forces you to concentrate on showing how the figure was important or why the event happened (you will, of course, need to use what happened in a literary text or history to help explain why it happened and how it came to pass, but successful thesis statements cannot be reduced to simple plot regurgitation or biographical analysis).

As you’ve surmised from reading up to this point, writing a successful thesis statement takes time. It’s easy to rattle off a thesis statement of the “so and so is X, Y, and Z” variety—it’s much harder to write one that is greater than the sum of its parts (read section 3.4 below for specific guidance in avoiding writing an “X, Y, and Z type” of thesis statement that merely recapitulates the “road map” for your paper). Plan on spending time working on different formulations of your central idea, and don’t be surprised if your thesis continues to evolve as you write your essay. Save the initial drafts of your ideas for your thesis to recycle into your icebreaker (c.f. section 3.2 below for details). Take the time to get your thesis right, because an essay with a weak thesis never amounts to much.

The easily flowing connection of sentence with sentence and paragraph with paragraph has always been won by the sweat of the brow. What is easy to read has been difficult to write. – G. M. Trevelyan
2. Structuring an Essay

2.1. Thesis Statements and Organizational Strategy

An often overlooked fact about essays is that the thesis statement you choose determines the structure of your essay. That is to say that you should closely look at your thesis and see how you could divide it into smaller parts that you could prove in individual paragraphs rather than automatically default to the "standard" five paragraph essay—if your essay turns out to be five paragraphs long, make sure it's because you needed three body paragraphs to go with your introduction and conclusion.

In many instances, the thesis you have chosen will result in a straightforward exercise in writing an analysis—explaining how various parts of the text(s) you are writing about "add up" to prove your thesis. A thesis like "Lincoln's handling of his cabinet undermined his ability to resolve the civil war" calls for analysis. So does "Conrad's treatment of women in his fiction parallels his racist treatment of Africans." In these essays, you are assembling evidence in a systematic fashion to conclusively persuade your reader. You are proving a single point and not considering alternative explanations.

The key to these kinds of essays is thinking carefully about the order of your paragraphs—about how you will organize the presentation and flow of your ideas and citations that back them up. You must decide which paragraph logically links to the next, and how best to order your paragraphs so that your argument is lock-solid and irreversible. While there are many ways to organize these kinds of essays, cause and effect & compare and contrast are the most common:

- **Cause and effect** is a traditional organizational method wherein you organize your paragraphs chronologically from (i) origins or causes to (ii) crisis or event and conclude with (iii) consequences or outcome. The keys to this sort of paper include considering the possible range of causes for an event, how the event was triggered, and which outcomes to emphasize. Cause and effect relationships are rarely simple, and you must be careful not to claim more than you can prove in these types of essays.

- **Compare and contrast** essays are also a familiar organizational strategy. The key in these essays is to be sure to use all of your body paragraphs to make the comparison. Too often students will use the first paragraph to discuss X, the second to explain Y, and only in the third paragraph will they compare X to Y. If your thesis is making a sophisticated point about the similarities and differences between X and Y, then you truly will need all your body paragraphs to explain the relationship between them.

But not all thesis statements are straightforward analyses like this. If your thesis focuses on proving one point over another, then you should consider adopting a different strategy that pits the two views against one another. The earlier thesis we were looking at about Macbeth is this kind of thesis. Instead of proving a theme, comparing and contrasting characters, etc, this sort of thesis would require a paper that explicitly takes a stand in an argument between two (or more) positions that you carefully orchestrate. In such an essay, the point of view you oppose is given a full airing, although you will ultimately argue against it in defending your position.

These sorts of argumentative essays frequently frame the initial body paragraph defending an opposing point of view as partially or seemingly true, yet ultimately not the whole story—that there is a deeper, truer explanation revealed when the initial opposing point of view is rejected, augmented, or supplemented. In the example about Macbeth, the initial body paragraph would then explore the defensibility of attributing his evil to the actions of Lady Macbeth, only to reject that interpretation in favor of a deeper explanation that sees the agency of the witches as key. It is crucial then to fashion a thesis statement for these sorts of essays that allows you to transcend or attack a particular point of view and then smoothly transition to a positive, richer account of what you want to prove.
2.2. Developing an Organizational Strategy

Once you’ve determined which organizational strategy to adopt for your essay in order to prove your point, you then should identify those two to five points that if established would lead someone to agree with your thesis. Plan to devote a body paragraph to each point you will make—or with shorter essays collect enough evidence to make one or two solid paragraphs.

The next step once you’ve identified the points you will prove is to determine the order of those ideas—in essence to organize your essay based on the type of essay they are writing. While many students will begin by experimenting with the order of their ideas—trying to anticipate how proving one idea might logically lead them to discuss and prove another—many lose sight of the fact that you must have a reason for the order of your paragraphs. What follows is a discussion of the logic and rationale used to organize your thinking in an essay.

- In some essays the order will be dictated by **chronology**; in a hypothetical essay on Jane Eyre with the thesis statement "Bronte ties Jane Eyre's growing acquiescence towards male authority to her increased social standing and acceptance by men", the first paragraph could be devoted to Jane Eyre's school days at Lowwood, then her time as a young teacher at Thornwood, and then lastly her reconciliation with Rochester.

- But if you had selected a different thesis statement—for instance something about how Jane Eyre's reluctance to become Rochester's mistress is linked to her experiences in childhood—the paragraphs of the essay would be dictated by **logical progression**: the paper would start off in the middle of the novel with Rochester, and then shift to her early experiences as a child at the hands of her aunt, and then conclude with her time at Lowwood—following no particular chronological order at all.

- When writing about art, the logical ordering principle followed is often **spatial**. If explaining the evolution of the Renaissance depiction of the Madonna and Child, you might start with the changes occurring to the central figures—Mary and Jesus—and then radiate outward to secondary figures, and then finally conclude with an analysis of the overall composition. Conversely, you might organize your paragraphs based on the importance of the figures relative to the theme—starting with the angels, moving towards Jesus, and ending with Mary.

- In an essay tracing parallels between two different texts, it is critical that the organization forces the writer to make the comparison. In other words, if you are comparing Hamlet to Claudius, you should not write a whole paragraph about Hamlet and then another about Claudius, but write one paragraph where you compare Hamlet and Claudius in regard to X, and then another where you compare them both in regard to Y.

- In a **compare and contrast** essay, the key is to make the comparisons in each and every body paragraph, and therefore logically organize the progression of contrasts with chronology or by strength. If comparing General Lee to General Grant, for instance, you would start by identifying whether the similarities (X, Y) are stronger than the differences (Z). Suppose the differences are **not** stronger: then you would want to start with Z and end with X and Y—because you should always end with your “side” of the argument speaking last.

In short, regardless of the subject matter, **you must have a compelling reason for why you are putting your paragraphs in the order they are**, as you’ll rely on this thinking in compositing the transitions between your paragraphs (c.f. section 4.5 below).

Now consider how to organize an essay that pits two (or more) opposing viewpoints against one another:

- Organize your essay by spelling out the opposing point of view that you will ultimately refute in the first body paragraph. Devoting the next paragraph to attacking that point of view. Only then move on to defend your perspective in the third and subsequent paragraphs. **Rhetorically it's**
better to air the opposition’s perspective first and end with your viewpoint, rather than giving the viewpoint you disagree with the final say. If your thesis is something like “Although a case can be made against farming animals, a closer look at the notion of rights ultimately reveals that the moral standing of animals does not prevent their being used to sustain human life,” then your organizational strategy will be to spend a paragraph conditionally defending the perspective that if an animal feels pain then it shouldn’t be killed, another refuting that viewpoint (by attacking the idea that moral decisions should be made on the basis of pain at all and instead defending the notion of rights), and then moving on to your viewpoint that animals have no meaningful moral rights and therefore can be ethically harvested.

As noted above, the crucial aspect of these kinds of essays is how the paragraphs are framed. For the thesis on animals we are considering, the opposing point of view might look something like this: “Because of their capacity to feel pain, some people believe animals should never be used for the purposes of food.” Note how the claim made here is conditional: “some people believe” indicates that not everyone agrees. You must articulate the opposing point of view this way because you are going to attack the truth of this claim as you segue into a defense of your position. If you make the opposing point of view a blunt declarative sentence (e.g. “Animals should never be killed for food”) but then shift to declare it false later, your introduction will sound confused.

Similarly, the next section of your essay should be framed in such a way to let your reader know that you are attacking the opposing point of view in the first paragraph: “Despite their ability to suffer, a closer look at our moral intuitions reveal a higher value placed on rationality than sentience, leading to the belief that moral rights trump considerations of pain.” The use of “despite” to begin this sentence and the admonition to “look closer” indicates that you’ve shifted from defending the opposing point of view to undermining it. This “attack” paragraph should ultimately clear the way for you to defend your thesis in a paragraph or two by both undermining the opposing point of view (i.e. pain matters) and defending the grounds by which you’ll defend your position (i.e. rights matter). The final paragraph or paragraphs of the essay therefore will defend your viewpoint that animals are not rational, therefore have no rights, and hence can be used for supper.

Sometimes your thesis is a middle ground position between two extremes: “While many readers identify the tragedy of Shakespeare’s play with Hamlet’s indecision or Laertes’ rashness, the genuine tragedy is that which befalls the admirable yet ultimately flawed Claudius.” The strategy to use here is the same as above—letting your thesis dictate the structure. In this case, following the dictum above that you want to end your essay defending your thesis, you should:

1) devote a paragraph to one opposing point of view (e.g. Hamlet’s indecision) backed up with evidence

2) then attack this viewpoint (either as an independent paragraph or as the second half of the paragraph above)

3) then a paragraph explaining the other opposing point of view (e.g. Laertes’ rashness)—again with evidence

4) then an attack on the other opposing point of view (again either as an independent paragraph or as the second half of the paragraph that goes with 3)

5) transitioning into one or two paragraphs defending a middle-ground that is your position (e.g. a paragraph explaining the “true” meaning of tragedy, and then a second showing how Claudius fits the role of tragic hero).

Middle ground positions abound in history papers as well: consider the following thesis and how its various parts would conform to the outline above: “In the end analysis, Napoleon appears to be
neither an Enlightenment saint nor a Machiavellian sinner, but rather a middle-class striver who forgot his roots on the way to his tragic end.”

Lastly, it’s worth noting that sometimes your essay is about **three different points of view that do not lie on a continuum**, and therefore the mean between extremes approach is not a good strategic fit. If for instance you’re writing about the causes of the civil war, there are multiple theories as its origins—northern aggression, southern honor, states rights, slavery, etc. Depending on what your position is, you can select two other strong but incomplete explanations for the war and use those as opposing (but not necessarily opposite) points of view.

In these situations it’s advisable to start with the opposing point of view that is most diametrically different than your position, and follow the instructions above for advocating that viewpoint **conditionally**, then attacking it, and then spelling out your position. At that juncture you should then begin a new paragraph **attacking** your position using the second opposing point of view—after all, if you can attack the first opposing point of view, why shouldn’t someone be able to attack your viewpoint? Still, this is a paper in defense of your position, not that second opposing point of view, so the final paragraph should be a **rebuttal** of the attack and the second opposing viewpoint—using, unsurprisingly, additional insights and materials from your position. This “three viewpoint” essay strategy looks like this:

1) a paragraph devoted to opposing viewpoint #1
2) then an **attack** paragraph on opposing viewpoint #1
3) a section defending your point of view, usually taking two paragraphs
4) an attack paragraph on your point of view using opposing viewpoint #2
5) then a rebuttal paragraph using your position to rebut the second opposing viewpoint

This type of paper organization results in a very thorough and very convincing argument, as it shows that your viewpoint is the superior position when compared to multiple other options.

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Let us, when we sit down and write, take a solemn oath to say exactly what we mean and to say nothing more, to use the simplest words that will serve our purpose, and to use as few of them as we can. – C.E.M. Joad
3. Writing the Essay: Introductions

3.1. The Point of an Introduction

It's perhaps redundant to point out that the introduction of an essay is supposed to introduce the reader to what you'll be saying in the essay. Too often, however, students pack the introduction with filler that does not perform this crucial task, and wait till the very last sentence to try and spell out both their organizational strategy and their thesis. We just spent the last seven pages talking about these two crucial issues, so it's fair to say that they should not be an afterthought in your introduction, but rather the heart of your introduction.

An introduction is the crucial first impression you'll give to your reader about what you are saying—and first impressions matter when it comes to writing. The task therefore is to quickly engage the reader with an icebreaker that connects to the thesis, then spell out the organizational road map you will be following—the train of thought that you will use to prove your point—and end by stating your thesis so that your reader begins the body of your essay with the most important sentence fresh in their mind.

A useful analogy for thinking about the introduction is that of a map: Icebreakers locate you on the map, road maps are directions to your destination, and the thesis is where you'll wind up. Icebreakers propose the topic, the road map details features of the topic that you'll discuss, and the thesis announces what you've proven as a result of your analysis. In short, if you've written a good icebreaker, it will make sense to follow it with your road map, and then conclude with your thesis statement—showing the logical progression of your thought process.

Introductions are perhaps the hardest paragraph to write in an essay. Once they are written many students find that the rest of the essay (except for the broadening section of the conclusion; c.f. section 5.2 below) writes itself. As it is the reader's first impression of your essay, extra time and care should be devoted to making sure that the introduction flows and is crystal clear.

3.2. Titles and Icebreakers

To begin your essay, you'll need both an intriguing title to head your essay and an icebreaker to kick it off. The latter is a sentence that begins the essay and orientates the reader to the issue at hand. Likewise, titles should be neither cliché nor bland, but rather helpful statements that begin to inform your reader about the specific argument you'll be advancing. Titles and icebreakers are essential because they point the reader in the right direction. “Evil in Macbeth” as a title for the earlier thesis we considered is dull, boring, and frankly obvious (and note it refers to the thesis question rather than the thesis answer)–try to at least hint at what your paper is about. The thesis is really about women and evil in Macbeth, so a title like “The Feminine Sources of Evil: Lady Macbeth versus the Witches” immediately points your reader in the direction the paper is headed—discussing the pros and cons of attributing evil to different females within the play.

Now you have to begin the essay. How should you start—what should your first sentence look like? It makes sense that your opening sentence will be something like your thesis. Recall those first attempts at drafting a thesis—see if you can recycle one of them to use as your icebreaker. For instance, a student might initially draft the following thesis: "Jane Eyre's attitudes towards male authority change over time." This is not a good thesis statement—while indicating an interesting idea about authority, it does not indicate how or why her attitudes change—just that they change.

Despite being vague and imprecise, it can be altered into a useful icebreaker: "In Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, the title character's attitudes towards authority transform over time from defiance to compliance." This icebreaker lets the reader know how her attitudes changed, and entices the reader to find out why. It also leads the reader (and the writer) to the following much more focused and directed thesis statement: "Bronte ties Jane Eyre's growing acquiescence towards male authority to her increased social standing"
and acceptance by men." Here the writer has developed the how and why questions in the icebreaker by way of explaining the direction of the transformation.

The point of the icebreaker then is to get your reader quickly orientated to the issues you are going to focus on, rather than spell out the precise details of how and why: "The controversy surrounding vegetarianism centers largely on the moral standing of animals" or "In Shakespeare's Hamlet, Claudius is more of a victim than victimizer." As an icebreaker, these tell your reader that you are going to be writing about vegetarianism or Claudius, and that your essay will specifically address the question of whether or not animals can be killed or whether Claudius is as guilty as he appears.

A thesis statement for these icebreakers, on the other hand, will specifically defend a stance on an issue instead of just identifying the topic in the icebreaker: "In light of the lack of specific psychological and physiological capabilities, the moral standing of animals does not prohibit killing them humanely for food" or "Despite the widely held view of him as a callous and vindictive monarch, Claudius' words and deeds show him instead to be a sensitive soul grappling with his feelings of guilt and the pressures of the crown."

### 3.3. The Road Map

The ideas you have sketched for the order of your paragraphs will form the basis of your road map in the introduction. Your road map is a series of sentences that gives a clear indication of the order of the points you are going to develop your thesis in your internal paragraphs. The flow of sentences then "maps out" the flow of the paragraphs in the body of your essay.

Generally speaking, each sentence of the road map corresponds to a single paragraph. In other words, each sentence of the road map closely follows the topic sentence of the body paragraph it is about. Many students find it useful to have a one-to-one match between road map sentences and body paragraphs of the essay—one sentence for each body paragraph that reflects (but is not word-for-word identical) with the topic sentence for that paragraph. Therefore, if you are writing an essay with three body paragraphs, a tentative introduction would consist of the following five sentences: an ice-breaker, three road map sentences corresponding to the three internal body paragraphs, and ending with the thesis statement.

Take for instance a hypothetical essay on Jane Eyre where the three points you’re going to make to prove your thesis statement cover her school days at Lowwood, her time as a young teacher at Thornwood, and then finally her reconciliation with Rochester. Each of these ideas would be developed into a stand-alone sentence that would create a three sentence road map.

Formulating a road map therefore forces you to (a) plan your essay before you begin writing it, (b) create a brief outline from which to compose your essay, and (c) prepare helpful guides in the form of your road map sentences for later when you write the topic sentences of your body paragraphs. The road map also serves the critical introductory function of establishing your logical train of thought.

Lastly, it’s worth noting that transitional language in your road map sentences depends on the kind of essay you are writing. Your reader should be able to see the transitions between paragraphs in the road map—i.e. why your paragraphs are in the order they are. Because you’ve devoted considerable amounts of time to determining the logical flow of your paragraphs, your writing must reflect why your first paragraph comes first, your second next, and your final paragraph last (if you are struggling to articulate your reasons, section 4.4 below on transitional language can help).

### 3.4. The Thesis in Relation to the Road Map

It’s important to note that your thesis should not be a restatement of your road map, nor of a particular sentence within the road-map. For example, in the hypothetical essay on Jane Eyre, your thesis should not read like an “X, Y, and Z” restatement of your roadmap: “Jane Eyre’s school days at Lowwood, her
time as a young teacher at Thornwood, and then her reconciliation with Rochester illustrate her growing acceptance by men.” This is both a dull and a repetitive thesis, since these three points will already have been mentioned in the road map.

Instead, a thesis statement should state what these three points taken together as a whole prove, i.e. “Bronte ties Jane Eyre’s growing acquiescence towards male authority to her increased social standing and acceptance by men.” The same is true of an essay that pits opposing viewpoints against one another: the thesis statement should re-cap the debate as a whole, not merely focus on the final position you are advocating for. In our earlier example about animal rights, the thesis then does not merely advocate using animals as food, but both considers and rejects pain based arguments before settling on the permissibility of eating meat: “A close look at the debate over using animals for food reveals that the relevant consideration regarding eating animals is not the pain inflicted but rather their lack of moral rights, leading to the conclusion that the possession of autonomy lies at the heart of decisions related to killing.” In short, the thesis statement is the culmination rather than merely the summation of the claims made in the road map.

Importantly, a rich, complex thesis like this sets the stage as well for a broadening in the conclusion that explores the ramifications of having proved your point (c.f. section 5.2 below).

Most people don’t realize that writing is a craft. You have to take your apprenticeship in it like anything else. – Katherine Anne Porter
4. Writing the Essay: Body Paragraphs

4.1. Topic Sentences

The goal of every body paragraph is the same as the goal of each sentence in it: to move your reader just a little closer towards agreeing with your topic sentence, and therefore agreeing with your thesis statement. However, there are distinct roles different sentences play in each body paragraph, and an understanding of the different kinds of sentences in a body paragraph is crucial for knowing how to construct a successful paragraph that blends into an effective essay.

Each body paragraph should be devoted exclusively to the development of a single idea—explaining, exploring, and elaborating that insight. That idea is called the topic sentence, and leads off the paragraph to focus the reader (and the writer!). Begin the paragraph with a topic sentence that clearly states an assertion—one that can be systematically proven throughout the course of the paragraph. By starting each internal paragraph with a crisp summation of what will be proven, you will be guided in offering the subsequent evidence and explanation in support of the assertion you are making.

Treat each topic sentence then as if it were a “mini”—thesis statement, and each paragraph as its own mini-essay. Note that your topic sentence should have a clear link to the corresponding road map sentence as articulated in the introduction and help prove your thesis (c.f. section 3.3 above). Hence topic sentences are sometimes best envisioned as re-written road map sentences in different words.

4.2. Evidence: How much and How to Present it

Each paragraph should contain enough sufficient evidence to support the topic sentence. Evidence can take all different forms, but usually comes in the form of examples, illustrations, hypotheticals, facts, details—a quote or citation that can be subsequently explained by you as to how it supports the topic sentence. The only evidence you should include in a paragraph should be in support of that specific topic sentence and should be properly cited using parenthetical citation.

How much evidence is enough? There should be enough evidence in a body paragraph to establish the veracity of your topic sentence. Experience has shown that one piece of evidence is not enough to support a paragraph and that two is rarely enough (unless they are lengthy and rich citations that are explained in-depth and at length). Usually you’ve reached safe ground for having thoroughly proven your claim with three or even four different examples of what you are trying to explain. Students struggle with this at first, but with time find that their paragraphs are much more substantial when they have lots of evidence—and not surprisingly have much more to write about as a result of having sufficient material to work with.

What follows is some advice regarding how to cite evidence:

- The first step in presenting your evidence is putting it in context by introducing it. Much like you need to introduce your essays, you need to introduce your evidence. Without providing the proper context for your citations, you leave it up to the reader to guess who is speaking and how it fits into your argument. You need to frame how your reader will hear the evidence by carefully introducing the citation and providing the framework for interpreting the citation that follows.

- The same is true for the subsequent explanations that follow the citation—too often writers fail to fully explain the reasons how they see the evidence proving their point. The explanation should clearly illustrate why the evidence supports the topic sentence and offer the necessary transitional material between citations such that the body of evidence provided smoothly and cumulatively offers a convincing set of reasons that proves your topic sentence.

- Here’s a good example of evidence that is introduced, properly cited, and explained:
Paralyzed by his intense feeling of guilt, Macbeth asks "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/Clean from my hands?" (III, ii, 32-3). Testifying to the emotional tumult he feels, Macbeth wonders aloud if anything can be done to atone for his violent deeds.

Notice how the quote above is elegantly blended into the introductory sentence, avoiding a "floating quotation" that appears out of nowhere and is either not explained or analyzed (a floating quotation is one of the most common writing errors by students). Included in the contextual introduction of the quote is mention of who is speaking (Macbeth) and what he is speaking about (feelings of guilt). By blending the context with the quote, the writer avoids the following awkward introduction that puts the context sentence in the passive voice, and uses "He states" in a blunt and boring way to introduce evidence: "Macbeth is paralyzed by his intense feeling of guilt. He states 'Will all great Neptune's...'

The explanation offered above is also quite good: notice how the quotation is not artificially referred to—the explanation does not begin with the awkward “Here...” “It is evident that...” “It should be pointed out...” or “It is interesting to note that...” These sort of prefatory remarks are simply unnecessary and clutter your essay. The writer has also correctly not used words from the actual quote to explain the quote, but rather put the explanation into her own words with an eye towards proving her topic sentence by offering reasons. Her explanation then is not simply a restatement of the content of the quote (“can I get this blood off my hands?”) but rather an explanation of how or why that quote illustrates her larger point (Macbeth wondering if he can atone for his sins).

Note that a single piece of evidence does not “prove” your claim, but rather merely buttresses it—proof comes when all the evidence is presented in an orderly fashion. For individual pieces of evidence, consider using words like demonstrates, implies, indicates, suggests, shows, supports, or underscores in your explanation: there is more precision in “Macbeth’s claim indicates his desire to atone for his sin” than in the false overgeneralization that “Macbeth’s claim proves his desire to atone for his sin.”

Sometimes it’s more appropriate to paraphrase your evidence rather than quoting it in cases when the idea matters more than the words themselves. To paraphrase a text is to put the ideas found there into your own words. Despite the effort put into converting the information into sentences of your own, you must still cite the source of the idea. Take, for example, the following quote from a book Carol Shields wrote on Jane Austen:

“The countryside, especially a landscape as familiar as that corner of Hampshire, fostered contemplation, & was not only unthreatening but also heartening” (Shields, 99).

A correct paraphrase would be as follows:

When at her Hampshire country home, Austen was able to think freely—indeed, residing there was an encouragement, not a hindrance (Shields, 99).

You should not just change a couple of words as in the following example:

Jane Austen’s corner of Hampshire was an especially familiar landscape to her, fostering contemplation in an unthreatening but heartening fashion (Shields, 99).

Another option to consider is a half-way solution between citing an entire sentence and merely paraphrasing the sentence—by using just a couple of key words from a text as evidence. There are
a variety of different ways to incorporate brief quotations: the most familiar is introducing the evidence through the “according to X” model:

According to Hightower, Macbeth’s “guilty conscience” weighs heavily on his mind (3).

Another is to pull out a critical word or clause to signal the author’s meaning and integrate it into your sentence:

Hightower argues that Macbeth’s “emotional tumult” lies at the core of the drama (4).

In this sentence, “emotional tumult” is cited in such a way as to be a part of the explanation rather than stand on its own.

A third method for integrating evidence might be called “divide and conquer”:

"Ghosts,” Hightower notes, "surround Macbeth both day and night” (42). Indeed, they hover over all the characters of the play “like umbrellas,” ready to shield them from misfortune or blow away at a moment’s notice to expose them to the “elements of misfortune” (62).

The effect of splitting up the evidence gives weight and stature to Hightower’s claim, conferring rhetorical emphasis while downplaying it’s brevity by linking it to a more complex explanation.

4.3. Citing Evidence

All evidence you use in your paper (including both quotations and paraphrases) must be properly cited using parenthetical citation—a much simpler and easier method of citation to use than footnotes or endnotes. If you are citing from a single source in your essay and have mentioned that source in the introduction, at the end of a sentence that includes a quotation, merely add the page number of the citation.

Dickens begins with the observation “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” (1). If you are citing from a play, use the Act, Scene, and line numbers in parentheses:

In order to succeed, Hamlet must “[s]harpen his wit / to the quick” (4.2.132-3). If the source you are citing is a web page, then the author’s name or title will be sufficient (Smith).

If you are using multiple citations from the same author but different texts, use the title and page number to differentiate between them—i.e. (Persuasion, 93) and (Sense and Sensibility, 45). Please note that the title of a longer work goes in italics, whereas shorter works (poems and short stories) go in quotation marks—underlining is for hypertext links, not for titles.

In the Hamlet citation above, because the quote begins in the middle of a sentence, the writer dropped the capitalization that began the quote by using brackets to indicate the change they made, and also inserted a slash (“/”) to indicate a line break (common in poetry and plays). When using parenthetical citation, the period comes after the parenthetical citation, and no commas appeared before the quote. Note also that the quotation marks only go around the actually words from the quoted text—not the citation as well.

Longer quotes of three lines or more should be in block quote format: double indented, single spaced, without quotation marks or a change in the size of the font, but introduced with a colon (unless it is a continuation of the sentence that introduces it). A block quote therefore looks like this:
The spacing, colon, and indentation all serve to indicate that the selection is being quoted, so quotation marks are not necessary. Block quotes are very effective in breaking up long paragraphs, making your essay easier to read.

Once you have finished quoting the necessary material and cited it parenthetically, return your margins to their regular settings, insert a space between the top and bottom of the quote and the text (like above) and continue with your explanation.

If you have a long quote and want to remove material from the middle of the quote to preserve only the relevant material (which you always should do with a very long quote), you can use an ellipse: “Proper use of spacing, punctuation, and indentation all serve... to make your essay easier to read.”

4.4. Organizing Evidence with Transitional Language

As you did with the order of the road map sentences and body paragraphs, experiment with the order of your evidence within a paragraph to find the most appropriate series to present it in. Just like you must have a reason for the order of your body paragraphs, you should also have a reason for why your evidence is in the order it is. Your reader should be able to see the transitions between the ideas in your body paragraph, and anticipate why your citations are progressing in the direction they are.

Consider the discussion in Section 2 on organizing your essay when organizing your evidence. Is your evidence best presented chronologically? Through cause and effect? As a compare and contrast paragraph? As a logical progression? Do not merely “pile on” your citations and explanations one after another—you must show how you are linking together your ideas. Your evidence is not a mere “grocery list” of items needed to make the “cake” that is your paragraph; instead it’s a recipe—a specific set of instructions for which ingredient comes first, then which is added next, and so on.

Employing the right transitional language is then crucial. Weak writers rely too heavily on and or also to make the connection between the points they are trying to link together. These connectors are very imprecise—when used to excess, the message they convey is one of just adding on the evidence rather than showing why it is systematically in the order that it is. The same can be said about using transitional phrases like:

- “It is also important to note that...”
- “Thus, it can be said that...”
- “Another important aspect to realize is that...”
- “Also, this shows that...”

These represent inflated transitional prose that doesn’t mean anything. Instead, consider the type of connection you want to make, and then select the appropriate phrase. Here are some suggestions:

- Sometimes you will have evidence that amplifies and maintains continuity with what you said earlier—try furthermore, likewise, moreover, similarly, or in addition in those instances.

- If your evidence is organized chronologically, let your reader know where it occurs in the continuum of events: before, earlier, meanwhile, at the same time, eventually, after, later, or subsequently.

- If your evidence is logically ordered, say so: finally, lastly, first, or primarily.

- If you are making claims about the frequency of events, state how often when introducing your evidence: at times, sometimes, frequently, often, rarely or once.

- Examples should be signaled with for example, for instance, and in particular.
4.5. Body Paragraphs that Conclude and Transition

The final sentences of each body paragraph should summarize the argument of that paragraph, i.e. restate in different words the topic sentence. Good essays as well as good paragraphs follow the old adage about public speaking: "Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them." In your introduction you are telling them what you are going to tell them; in your body paragraphs you are telling them; and in your conclusion you will tell them what you told them. The same holds true of your body paragraphs: your topic sentence tells the reader what you are going to tell them, your evidence tells them, and your conclusion sentence tells the reader what you told them. Not surprisingly, your conclusion sentence therefore ought to mirror the meaning of your topic sentence for that body paragraph.

Equally important as summing up your paragraph is establishing a transition between it and the next body paragraph. The transition typically occurs as part of the conclusion sentence, but sometimes the transition can be incorporated into the topic sentence of the next paragraph. In either location students should provide a smooth logical connection between the paragraphs. Doing so offers the reader a compelling causal justification for why their paragraphs are in the order they are.

Questions make effective transitions at the end of a paragraph once you’ve summarized the main claim. Ending with "Although Hamlet is resolved to kill Claudius, his many delay continue to puzzle readers” indicates that you’ve summarized a particular quandary in the paragraph, and the next paragraph will go on to solve it. Transitions therefore help create forward momentum, pushing the reader onward. Oftentimes an effective transition can be performed with just one sentence—topic sentences that include a transition from the previous paragraph. Consider this example: “Although The Sistine Chapel depicts a well-known story, the paintings contain hidden mysteries that point beyond a merely narrative purpose.” This sentence illustrates a truism about transitions as well: always move from old to new information.

If you do find yourself using cliché transitions or struggling with transitioning, ask yourself why. More likely than not, it is because there’s a gap in your essay where another paragraph belongs, or perhaps that your paragraphs are not in the right order. Go back to your road map to consider whether there is a gap in your logic that you could fill with a paragraph or whether this is the correct sequence to your paragraphs.
5. Writing the Essay: Conclusions

5.1. Restating the Thesis and Logical Train of Thought

The challenge in writing a conclusion is to find a paragraph form that allows you to both summarize your point while also indicating the possibilities for further inquiry. Below is one model for writing a conclusion that both sums up and yet opens new doors.

Just like the introduction “funneled” and focused the issue at hand from the icebreaker to the thesis, the conclusion should expand back out by beginning with a restatement of the thesis and then seguing into a brief summation of the logical train of thought (i.e. recapping the road map). Of course both the restatement of the thesis and road map employs different words than used in the introduction. This first half of the conclusion usually writes itself if you have done a good organizational job in the introduction and the body paragraphs. Someone who did not read the essay ought to be able to read the first half of your conclusion and have a firm grasp of what your thesis was, how you proved it, and why you thought it was true—in three or four sentences.

5.2. Broadening the Argument

Unfortunately most students simply let their conclusions end with a simple restatement of what they have proved, but thoughtful and reflective essays end with an analysis that reaches beyond the text itself to the implications of the thesis outside the context of the essay. The true test of originality comes in the conclusion, where a creative and unique essay ends with a springboard, leading the author to a further insight that emerges from a close analysis of the logical development of the argument they have presented. Composing this part of the essay is difficult and demanding, but clearly distinguishes the good from the great essay. The key here is to trust that you’ve established your thesis, and ask how else the insight you’ve discovered applies outside the context of the essay.

In ending this way, you don’t need prove this further point with quotes—rather, by following the logic of your roadmap you create an “icebreaker in reverse”—showing how your thesis also applies to this new issue. In doing so you are inviting the reader to consider the deep truth of what you’ve proven and how widely it applies to the human condition—in three or four additional sentences smoothly added to the summation you’ve already given. Here are some examples:

- For the thesis formulated above concerning Bronte’s novel, the conclusion could go on to point out that Jane Eyre's acceptance of male authority was in part conditioned on the lack of opportunities to gain social acceptance outside of spheres controlled by men. You could go on to note that the feminist movement, if viewed as an attempt to free women from male authority, only came into full fruition when the social status and acceptance of women was made independent of male acceptance. You could end by speculating what that means for women now, or whether the novel today would have ended in the same way today as it did in the mid-nineteenth century.

- If you’ve proved that eating meat is morally permissible because the moral standing of animals does not prohibit using them for food, you might then have something to say further about how your analysis of moral standing affects the mentally impaired. If the rights of animals was conditioned on their capacity for choice, then a degenerative neurological disease like Alzheimer’s would potentially reduce the rights of patients suffering from it as they lost their capacity to reason.

The point then of spring-boarding into a broadening at the end of your essay is that by extrapolating what you’ve said initially, you can make cogent observations into the state of society today that are both useful and worth exploring. In sum, the best essays always include a high level of creativity in their thinking: the writer does not simply parrot what was said in class or simply string along class notes, but builds towards a striking and original insight that could be applied to the world.