Composition I: Join the Conversation

COMPOSITION I: JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Lexi Stuckey

CONTENTS

PART I

THE WRITING PROCESS

1

RESEARCH SHOULD START WITH QUESTIONS, NOT ANSWERS

Emily A. Wierszewski

Adapted by Liz Delf, Rob Drummond, and Kristy Kelly

Question marks on craft paper by Leeloo Thefirst / Pexels

Our collective belief in the importance of definite answers impacts many areas of our lives, including how we understand the process and purpose of research. Specifically, it leads to a *thesis-first* research model in which research is only used to verify our existing ideas or theses. In this model, there is no room for doubt or ambiguity. We assume we need to know the answers to our problems or questions before the process gets underway before we consult and evaluate what others have said.

Research can be productively used in this way to verify assumptions and arguments. Sometimes what we need is just a little support for an idea, a confirmation of the best approach to a problem, or the answer to simple questions. For example, we might believe the new iPhone is the best smartphone on the market and use research on the phone's specs to prove we're right. This kind of thesis-first approach to research becomes harmful, however, when we assume that it is *the only* or t*he most valuable way* to conduct research.

Evidence of this widespread assumption is easy to find. A simple search for the research process on Google will yield multiple hits hosted by academic institutions that suggest a researcher needs a thesis early in the research process. For instance, the University of Maryland University College's *Online Guide to Writing and Research* suggests that a thesis should be developed as soon as source collection gets underway, though that thesis may change over time. This strategy is endorsed by multiple research library websites, such as the University of Minnesota.

And yet genuine inquiry—the kind of research that often leads to new ideas and important choices—tends to begin with unsettled problems and questions rather than with thesis statements and predetermined answers. Wernher von Braun, an engineer whose inventions advanced the US space program in the mid-

twenty-first century, famously describes research as "What I'm doing when I don't know what I'm doing" (qtd. in Pfeiffer 238).

The understanding of research as discovery is echoed in the recent "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," a document authored by the Association of College and Research Librarians (ACRL). They write that research often begins with open-ended questions that are "based on information gaps or reexamination of existing, possibly conflicting, information" (7). In other words, research isn't just for backing up our hunches. It can, and should, also be used as a method of investigating areas of uncertainty, curiosity, conflict, and multiple perspectives.

As the ACRL's framework also emphasizes, when researchers review published source material around their topic, points of disagreement will be discovered; these points are expected as scholars propose ideas to address complicated issues. When we are open to selecting and engaging with these multiple published perspectives in our research, we're also forced to consider how they extend or challenge our beliefs and ideas about a topic. Considering all sides, we can then make a more informed decision about our questions or topics.

Another potential harm of the thesis-first model of research is the attendant assumption that the research process is linear. In a thesis-guided research process, a question is posed, an answer is generated, and sources are found that match up with that answer. Truthfully, research rarely progresses on an uncluttered path toward a clear solution. Instead, research is a recursive process that involves many diversions, bumps, and missteps.

Research is sometimes described as *cyclical* and *fluid.* As we research, we may find ourselves returning to and changing our question, or we may near the end of a project and think we're done but discover we need to go back to find more or better sources. The messiness of research requires us to be flexible, often modifying our approaches along the way. When we enter the research process with a narrow and rigid focus on our thesis, we can become discouraged and inclined to abandon our ideas when the research process does not unfold neatly.

In place of a thesis-first model, we would be better served to begin research with a question or a statement of a problem. We should conduct research not just to back up our preexisting assumptions and prove we're right about something but also when we feel curious or confused and do not have answers. *Why is something the way it is? Why doesn't the data quite add up? How could something be changed for the better?*

When we understand research as a process of discovery rather than a process of proof, we open ourselves up to be changed by our research—to better our lives, our decisions, and our world. We acknowledge that we do not have the only or the best answer to every question and that we might learn something from considering the ideas of others. While research definitely has the power to impact our lives and beliefs, research doesn't always have to be life altering. But in a thesis-first model where our only goal is just to prove we're right, there is no possibility of being changed by our research.

Here's a practical example of the difference. Just imagine the results of a research process beginning with a thesis like "Human trafficking should have harsher legal penalties" versus one that starts with an open-ended question like "Why does human trafficking persist in the democratic nation of the United States?" In the thesis-first model, a researcher would likely only encounter sources that argue for their preexisting belief: that harsher penalties are needed. They would probably never be exposed to multiple perspectives on this complex issue, and the result would just be confirmation of their earlier beliefs.

However, a researcher who begins with an open-ended question motivated by curiosity, whose goal is not to *prove* anything but to discover salient ideas about a human rights issue, has the chance to explore different thoughts about human trafficking and come to her own conclusions as she researches why it's a problem and what ought to be done to stop it, not just create stronger consequences for it.

Viewing research as a process of discovery allows us to accept that not every question is answerable and that questions sometimes lead only to more questions. For instance, the researcher in the previous paragraph exploring the issue of human trafficking might find that there is no clear, single explanation for the prevalence of this human rights violation and that she's interested to know more about the role of immigration laws and human trafficking—something she never even thought of before she did her research.

When researchers do discover answers, they may find those answers are fluid and debatable. What we have at any time is only a consensus between informed parties, and at any time, new research or insights can cause that agreement to shift. As we read in chapter 17, the philosopher and literary critic Kenneth Burke (1897–1993) explains the constructed nature of knowledge as an *unending conversation*. According to Burke, the moment in which a researcher reads and participates in scholarship around the research topic or problem is just a speck on a continuum of conversation that has been ongoing well before the researcher thought

of the question and will continue long after the researcher has walked away from it. As Burke writes, "The discussion is interminable" (110).

So how can we move toward embracing uncertainty? In his book *A More Beautiful Question*, Warren Berger suggests that parents and those who work with young children can foster curiosity by welcoming questions. Parents also need to learn to be comfortable with saying "I don't know" in response rather than searching for a simple answer. Berger also recommends that as children go through school, parents and educators can work together to support children's questioning nature rather than always privileging definite answers. When students graduate and move into the working world, employers can encourage them to ask questions about policies, practices, and workplace content; employees should be given the freedom to explore those questions with research, which can potentially lead to more sustainable and current policies, practices, and content. The same goes for civic and community life, where any form of questioning or inquiry is often misconstrued as a challenge to authority. To value questions more than answers in our personal and professional lives requires a cultural shift.

Although our culture would tell us that we have to know everything and that we should even begin a research project by knowing the answer to our question, there is obvious value in using research as a tool to engage our curiosity and sense of wonder as human beings—perhaps even to improve our lives or the lives of others. If all researchers started the process with preconceived answers, no new findings would ever come to be. In order to truly learn about a topic or issue, especially when it involves important decision-making, we need to learn to embrace uncertainty and feel comfortable knowing we might not always have an answer when we begin a research project.

The original chapter, Research Starts with a Thesis Statement by Emily A. Wierszewski, is from Bad Ideas about Writing

Additional Resources

- For additional information about the power and purpose of inquiry in our everyday lives, consult Warren Berger's book *A More Beautiful Question* (Bloomsbury), which provides an overview of how to engage in authentic inquiry in a variety of settings. Berger offers practical advice for learning to develop research questions that are driven by discovery and innovation. Robert Davis and Mark Shadle also provide a defense of inquiry in their article "'Building a Mystery': Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Art of Seeking" (*College Composition and Communication*).
- For more specific information about all of the stages of the research process, including formulating a question, Bruce Ballenger's classic guide to research, *The Curious Researcher* (Longman), and Ken Macrorie's canonical text *I Search* (Boynton/Cook), which focuses on research with personal value, may be useful. Clark College Libraries' website also provides a quick reference chart outlining the research process entitled "The Research Process Daisy."
- Wendy Bishop and Pavel Zemliansky's edited collection, *The Subject Is Research: Processes and Practices* (Boynton/Cook), provides perspectives from multiple authors about various research techniques such as interviewing and observation that can be used to engage in the inquiry process.

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2

FINDING A RESEARCH QUESTION

Shane Abrams

Adapted by Liz Delf, Rob Drummond, and Kristy Kelly

We live in an age of immediate answers. Although we have not achieved parity in access to technology worldwide, information has never been easier to uncover. This is, of course, a double-edged sword: the proliferation of ideas due to the technological revolution enables new kinds of learning but also has fundamentally changed the way we think and interact.

One of my friends refers to his iPhone as the "Wonder Killer": because he has such quick access to answers through the miniature computer he carries everywhere, the experience of sustained curiosity is now very rare in his life. All kinds of questions are easily answered by googling "Who was that guy in *Back to the Future Part II*?" or "Do spiders hibernate?" or by taking a brief crawl through Wikipedia: "How has globalization impacted Bhutan's economy?" "What life experiences influenced Frida Kahlo's painting?" But the answers to these questions, though easily discovered, paint a very one-dimensional portrait of human knowledge.

Selective focus photo of magnifying glass by Lil Artsy / Pexels

For scientists and writers alike, the spirit of curiosity motivates at once individual learning and also the growth and progress of our collective knowledge. Your innate ability to be curious puts you in the league of the most brilliant and prolific scholars—people who were driven by questions, seeking to interrogate the world around them.

In this section, I add my voice to the chorus of writing teachers whose rallying cry is a renewed investment in curiosity. Hopefully, you too will embrace inquisitive fascination by rejecting easy answers and using writing as a means of discovery.

Inquiry-Based Research

It's possible that you've already written research papers by this point in your academic career. If your experience has been like mine, writing these papers went one of two ways:

1. The teacher assigns a specific topic for you to research, and sometimes even a specific thesis for

you to prove.
2. The teacher provides more freedom, allowing students to choose a topic at their own discretion or from a set of options.

In both situations, my teacher expected me to figure out what I wanted to argue, then find research to back me up. I was expected to have a fully formed stance on an issue, then use my sources to explain and support that stance. Not until graduate school did I encounter inquiry-based research, which inverts this sequence.

Put simply, inquiry-based research refers to research and research writing that is motivated by curiosity rather than a teacher's requirement.

A Comparison of Research Styles

Table 19.1 A chart comparing inquiry and non-inquiry-based research

Non-inquiry-based research	Inquiry-based research
Your research begins with an answer and seeks out evidence that confirms that answer.	Your research begins with a question, reviews all the evidence available, and then develops that answer.
For example, a murder occurs, and I get a bad vibe from the butler. I look for all the clues that confirm that the butler did it; assuming I find what I need, I can declare that the butler did it.	For example, a murder occurs. I look for as many clues as I can, then determine the most likely culprit based on that evidence.

It's quite possible that the butler did do it, and both logical processes might lead me to the same conclusion. However, an inquiry-based investigation allows more consideration for the possibility that the butler is innocent.

Consider the difference this can make: if research is about **learning**, then an inquiry-based perspective is essential. If you only seek out the ideas that agree with you, you will never learn.

Even in the event that the investigation yields the same answers, their differences are crucial. When we only look for answers that agree with our preexisting ideas, we are more likely to ignore other important ideas, voices, and possibilities. Most importantly, **confirmation bias** inhibits genuine learning, which relies on challenging, expanding, and complicating our current knowledge and world views.

Consequently, inquiry-based research is time-consuming and intensive: instead of only dealing with evidence that supports a certain answer or perspective, it requires the reasoner to encounter a great diversity of evidence and answers, which can be difficult to sift through.

This distinction has important implications for the kind of research and research writing for which this book advocates.

- You don't have to—shouldn't, in fact—have a thesis set in stone before starting your thesis, but you must be tremendously flexible: be prepared to pivot, qualify, nuance, or entirely change your answer as you proceed.
- In order to pursue your research question, you will need to encounter *a lot* of sources. Not all of the sources you encounter will make it into your paper, which is a new practice for some students. This is a time-consuming process, but it leads to more significant learning, more complex thinking, and more interesting and effective rhetoric.

Developing a Research Question

Finding a conversation that you're excited about and genuinely interested in is the first and most important step. As you develop a topic, keep in mind that pursuing your curiosities and passions will make your research process less arduous, more relevant, and more pleasant. Such an approach will also naturally improve the quality of your writing: the interest you have for a topic will come across in the construction of your sentences and your willingness to pursue multiple lines of thought about a topic. An author's boredom results in a boring paper, and an author's enthusiasm translates to enthusiastic writing.

Depending on the parameters your teacher has set, your research topic might need to (1) present a specific viewpoint, (2) focus on a specific topic, or (3) focus on a certain theme or set of ideas. It's also possible that your teacher will allow complete autonomy for one or all of your research assignments. Be sure you review

any materials your instructor provides and ask clarifying questions to make sure your topic fits the guidelines of their assignment.

To generate ideas, identify areas of interest, then develop questions of all sizes and types. Eventually, you will zero in on a question or combination of questions as your path of inquiry.

What makes for a good research question or path of inquiry? Of course, the answer to this question will depend on your rhetorical situation. However, there are some common characteristics of a good research question in any situation:

It is answerable but not easily answerable.

Engaging and fruitful research questions require complex, informed answers. However, they shouldn't be so subjective, intricate, or expansive that they simply cannot be answered in the scope of your rhetorical situation.

It is specific.

By establishing parameters on your scope, you can be sure your research is directed and relevant.

It matters to someone.

Research questions and the rhetoric they inform are valuable only because they have stakes: even if it's a small demographic, the answers to your research question should impact someone.

It allows you to say something new or unique.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, inquiry-based research should encourage you to articulate a unique standpoint by synthesizing many different voices, interpreted from your individual perspective, with your life experiences and ideas. What you say doesn't have to be groundbreaking, but it shouldn't just reiterate ideas, arguments, histories, or perspectives.

It is difficult to find a question that hits all these marks on your first try. As you proceed through research, prewriting, drafting, and revising, you should refine and adjust your question(s). Just like any other part of writing, developing a path of inquiry is iterative: you've got to take a lot of chances and work your way toward different results.

Working Questions

In order to find the best version of your research question, you should develop "working questions"—questions of all sizes and types that are pertinent to your subject. As you can see below, you can start with a handful of simple working questions that will eventually lead to a viable research question.

Revising Simple Questions into Research Questions

Table 19.2 Chart showing the steps of revising a research question from working question to research question

Beginning interest	Working question	Working research question	Revised research question
Vietnamese food and culture	What do people eat in Vietnam? *Too easy to answer; low stakes; not specific enough*	What does Vietnamese food reflect about Vietnamese culture? *Higher stakes, more specific*	How does Vietnamese cuisine reflect a history of colonialism? *More complex answers, higher stakes, very specific*
Health	Are people in the United States more obese than they used to be? *Too straightforward, not specific enough*	Have obesity rates increased in the United States over the last one hundred years? *More specific*	Is there a correlation between obesity rates and economic instability in the United States over the last one hundred years? *More complex answers, higher stakes, very specific*
World religion	What is the role of religion in the Middle East? *Not specific enough, difficult to answer in depth*	How has religion influenced politics in the Middle East in the last fifty years? *More specific, easier to answer*	How has religion's influence on government impacted the day-to-day lives of Qatari citizens? *Very specific, higher stakes, more complex answers*

As you hone your path of inquiry, you may need to zoom in or out in terms of scope: depending on your rhetorical situation, you will need different degrees of focus. Just like narration, research writing benefits from a careful consideration of scope. Often, a narrower scope is easier to work with than a broader scope—you will be able to write more and write better if your question asks for more complex thinking.

It's important to be flexible throughout your research project. Be prepared to pivot topics, adjust your research question, change your opinions, and confront unanticipated challenges.

As you build a working knowledge of your topic, you might complicate or narrow your working questions. Gradually, try to articulate a research question (or combination of questions). Remember to be flexible as you research though: you might need to pivot, adjust, refocus, or replace your research question as you learn more.

Consider this imaginary case study as an example of this process:

Ahmed began his project by identifying the following areas of interest: racism in the US, technology in medicine and health care, and independent filmmaking. After doing some freewriting and preliminary research on each, he decided he wanted to learn more about racially motivated police violence. He developed working questions:

- Are police officers likely to make judgments about citizens based on their race?
- Have police forces instituted policies to avoid racism?
- Who is most vulnerable to police violence?
- Why does it seem like police officers target people of color? Who is responsible for overseeing the police?

He realized that he needed to narrow his focus to develop a more viable path of inquiry, eventually ending up with the following research question:

- Over the last thirty years, what populations are most likely to experience police violence in the US?

However, after completing more research, Ahmed discovered that his answers came pretty readily: young Black men are significantly more vulnerable to be victims of police violence. He realized that he was not really saying anything new, so he had to tweak his path of inquiry.

Ahmed did some more freewriting and dug around to find a source that disagreed with him or added a new layer to his answers. He discovered eventually that there are a handful of police organizations that have made genuine efforts to confront racism in their practices. Despite the widespread and normalized violence enacted against people of color, these groups were working against racial violence. He reoriented his research question to be the following:

- Have antiracist police trainings and strategies been effective in reducing individual or institutional racism over the last thirty years?

The original chapter, Research Concepts by Shane Abrams, is from EmpoWord: A Student-Centered Anthology and Handbook for College Writers

3

PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE: TOPIC SENTENCES, EVIDENCE, AND SUMMARY SENTENCES

Additional Resource

- Essay Development PowerPoints, available in Blackboard

Dr. Jennie A. Harrop

Every paragraph must have a topic sentence that clearly states your purpose for that paragraph. [Image: Diego PH | Unsplash]

Topic Sentences

Definition to Remember:

- **Topic Sentence = the purpose of your paragraph**

Every paragraph must have a topic sentence that states clearly for your readers the purpose of that specific paragraph. If you do not have a topic sentence, how will your readers understand your intent? If you are unsure what your topic sentence should be, how can you expect your readers to dig through to locate your meaning? If you aren't clear on the purpose of a single paragraph, why have you bothered to include it?

As we move from the sentence equation to the paragraph equation, it is important to recognize that the simple math is equally important at the paragraph

level. Just as *subject + verb = sentence*, your readers will expect this equation of each paragraph you write: *topic sentence + evidence = paragraph*.

The easiest place to situate the topic sentence is as the first line of each new paragraph, followed by direct evidence. But you are free to place the topic sentence anywhere that is most effective for your meaning, as long as you have one.

"Keep the main thing, the main thing. Use the best words to make your point, rather than the most words. Clear, concise writing is a gift for the reader." *Heather Rainey, Administrative Assistant, Doctor of Ministry Program*

To write an effective topic sentence, picture your audience sitting beside your desk. If you had to state the purpose of your paragraph in a single sentence to your audience, whether it is a single person or a convention center full of thousands, what would you say? If you are not used to including a topic sentence with each new paragraph you write, save this step for your revision work. Often the topic sentence can be fine-tuned or even added after you have finished writing the draft.

Rules to Remember:

1. Every paragraph must have a clear topic sentence.
2. The topic sentence must clearly state your purpose for that paragraph.
3. If you have more than one paragraph, the topic sentence must be a single sentence (*subject + verb = sentence*) that both presents your topic for the paragraph and builds on the ideas you have presented already. If you line up your topic sentences, one after the other, are they repetitive of one another? Do the ideas drift forward and back, or does your line of thinking move clear forward to a single main point? Remember, too, that each new topic sentence should relate directly to your overall thesis statement if you are writing an essay.

Common Errors:

- **Skipping the topic sentence because the meaning is self-evident or implied.** Never assume that your readers are heading in the same direction you are. Instead offer them the simple math necessary to keep your communication clear, concise, and meaningful.
- **Combining the topic sentence with other information**, with an assumption that the readers will understand which is which. Instead include a single clear topic sentence in each new paragraph you write.

The more specific your evidence is, the more persuasive and memorable your claim will be. [Image: StockSnap | Pixabay]

Evidence

Definition to Remember:

- **Topic Sentence + Evidence = Paragraph**

Rules to Remember:

1. Once you have decided what *claim* you will make about your *topic*, you must decide what supporting material will best demonstrate to your readers that you have good reason to believe what you do about your subject. Without evidence, you will find yourself merely repeating your ideas.
2. The more specific your *evidence* is, the more persuasive and memorable your claim will be. The key here – regardless of the kind of writing you are doing, whether an anthropology term paper or an email to your boss – is to *show* your readers, rather than merely *tell* them.
   Consider, for example, the following paragraph. It begins with a clear *topic sentence*, followed by very specific *evidence*. Take note that the author does not bother to explain and re-explain the ideas (telling), but instead offers specific, visual details (showing) so we readers can better identify with the claims at hand:

   - *My oldest son was a daredevil as a child. When he was in second-grade, he was called to the principal's office for encouraging a crowd of boys to toss rocks over the school yard fence at passing cars. When he was in fourth grade, he built a jump for his bike at the neighborhood park and gained so much air that he nearly fractured his spine when he landed. When he as a sophomore in high school, I grounded him for an entire summer after he organized a drag race at the beach and ran our family Jeep directly into oncoming waves. Indeed, life with my spirited oldest son has never been dull.*

"As a social change-agent, I ended up writing and editing policies for a startup charter school. These policies codified our commitment to being a healthy civic partner, protected public assets, and helped clarify – in a time of rapid change and growth – our community expectations."
Kirsten Rayhawk, Board Member, Portland Village School

3. *Evidence* can mean a number of different kinds of support. *Examples* are just one option. To develop a topic sentence into a full paragraph, you might also include any of the following: *examples, reasons, facts, details, statistics, anecdotes,* or *quotations from experts*.
4. Your *evidence* should always be (1) relevant and unified, (2) specific, (3) adequate, (4) accurate, (5) representative, and (6) if borrowed, properly documented.

Common Errors:

- **Repeating the topic sentence rather than moving directly into evidence.** If you need to repeat or clarify your topic sentence in order to ensure that your readers understand, rewrite your topic sentence until it is sufficient on its own and you are able to move on to your specific evidence. Consider the person you know who repeats a certain conviction over and over but never offers any evidence. Most of us eventually stop listening, right? Instead offer your readers solid evidence to support your assertions and see what changes you are able to bring about.
- **Including general *always evidence* rather than specific *single-moment evidence*.** If your topic sentence states that a particular author offers an effective new approach to global warming, would it be more effective to wax on about how he *always* writes the most interesting arguments, or would it make more sense to reference specific sources, showing your readers what you have witnessed rather than merely telling them?
- **Saving evidence for a later paragraph without remembering that every paragraph must adhere to the simple math of *topic sentence + evidence = paragraph*.** If you are writing an academic essay, an email to your boss at work, or a letter to a client, this equation applies to every new paragraph you write.

Rather than serve as a repetition of your topic sentence, a closing summary sentence should summarize your ideas in a way that is unique and meaningful for your readers. [Image: Jakob Owens | Unsplash]

Summary Sentences

Definition to Remember:

- **Topic Sentence + Evidence (+ Summary Sentence) = Paragraph**

Rules to Remember:

1. While a topic sentence and solid evidence are essential parts of any new paragraph, a summary sentence is an optional component worth acknowledging. If the information you are presenting is complex or your paragraph is longer than usual, a summary sentence at the end of the paragraph can be an excellent way to remind your readers of your overall purpose for the paragraph as you prepare to move on to a new point.
2. Rather than serve as a repetition of your topic sentence, a closing summary sentence should summarize your ideas in a way that is unique and meaningful for your readers. Consider the following example:

    - *My doctoral adviser was a difficult woman. When I took a literary criticism course from her, she spent at least a portion of the time grilling me on the merits of my master's degree and whether I should really be sitting in her course. When I walked by her in the hallway on my way to teach, she made a point of looking the other way so she didn't have to engage with me. And when she arrived late and unprepared for my oral exams in April, I knew I was in for a difficult session. It was little consolation to learn years later that she had struggled with an addiction problem during those years; mostly I wondered how such a difficult woman could possibly find joy in the depth and nuance of canonized literature.*While the closing summary sentence here echoes some of the language of the topic sentence, it does more than merely repeat.

3. A summary sentence is also an effective way to consistently remind your readers of your paper's overall thesis statement. If you include summary sentences consistently at the close of each paragraph, use that final sentence to clearly connect the evidence of that specific paragraph to the thesis of your paper.
4. If you are writing a paragraph to a boss or client, a summary sentence is an effective way to remind your readers of how your ideas relate specifically to their needs or concerns.

Common Errors:

"In my cross-cultural context, my writing must be clear and concise. I focus on 'write-bites' that are easily translated and transferable." *Dr. David Toth, Missionary*

- **Including a summary sentence that is repetitive of information already offered** and adds nothing to further the discussion. Remember that the summary sentence is optional; use it only when it strengthens your argument rather than waters it down.
- **Neglecting to remind readers of the larger purpose of the overall paper.** If you are going to include a summary sentence at the end of each paragraph, let it serve a robust purpose for you.
- **Using the summary sentence to introduce the next paragraph.** While some English teachers teach this method as a means of transitioning from one idea to the next, it rarely works. The formula your readers will expect to see in each paragraph you write is this: *topic sentence + evidence (+ optional summary sentence) = paragraph*. When you introduce new information without addressing it fully, your ideas will begin to sound scattered and diluted. Hold to the simple math instead.

4

ESSAY STRUCTURE: THESIS STATEMENTS, INTRODUCTIONS, BODY PARAGRAPHS, CONCLUSIONS

Additional Resources

- Essay Introductions PowerPoint, available in Blackboard
- Essay Alignment, Topic Sentences, and Transitions PowerPoint, available in Blackboard

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Thesis Statements

The thesis statement should be a single, concise sentence. An effective thesis statement has two parts: (1) the topic and (2) your claim about the topic. [Image: Edu Lauton | Unsplash]

Definition to Remember:

- **Thesis = Topic + Claim**

Rules to Remember:

1. A *thesis statement* is the main idea or subject of your paper, while a topic sentence is the main idea of a single paragraph. Sometimes the thesis may develop in your mind early in the writing process, and sometimes it will become more clear or shift as you work through the writing process.
2. The thesis statement should be a single, concise sentence. An effective thesis statement has two parts: (1) the topic and (2) your claim about the topic.
3. Your thesis is a contract that you establish with your readers. The voice, tone, assurances, and promises of your thesis must continue throughout the essay.
4. An effective thesis statement should be as specific as possible and be limited enough to make it manageable. Keep your thesis statement specific enough to be adequately discussed within the length of your paper. If a thesis statement is too general or vague, it can be difficult to decide what to write about.
5. Be wary of absolute words like *all, none, everyone, no one, always, never* in your thesis statement. If a reader can think of an exception to your absolute statement, he or she may set your entire argument aside. Be careful, too, to avoid claims that are too over-arching and, therefore, suspect.
6. Your thesis should serve as an umbrella for the essay that follows. Every topic sentence for each of the body paragraphs must fit neatly beneath the umbrella, just as every item of evidence also must fit. If anything does not fit under the umbrella of your thesis, revise accordingly to either broaden or narrow your umbrella until the simple math works.
7. To compose an effective thesis statement, follow these three steps:
    - **Restate your topic as a question.** If, for example, your topic is about the health and care of domestic cats, you might restate your topic as follows: *Should domestic cats be permitted to roam freely in residential neighborhoods?* Do you see how this restatement begins to give both your research and your writing better purpose?
    - **Answer your question with a single-sentence claim.** An effective thesis statement (1) announces a topic and (2) states a claim. What assertion will you make about your topic and why? To answer our domestic cat question, we might assert the following: *Domestic cats should only be permitted to roam freely in residential neighborhoods if they meet specific county-designated standards.*
    - **Focus your thesis.** Remember that the more specific you are, the easier it will be to effectively discuss and prove your thesis: *Domestic cats should only be permitted to roam freely in residential neighborhoods if they have a chip inserted that identifies their home, homeowner, and vaccination record.*

"Write succinctly. There is a better chance people will read and appreciate your thoughts." *Dr. Aimee Stone Cooper, Pastor*

Common Errors:

- **Assuming that the implied focus of an introduction is enough**. Every essay must have a clear, concise thesis statement; never assume that your readers understand your intentions.

- **Including a thesis that does not make a claim.** With the advent of the internet, gone are the days when informational papers were a necessary exercise. Because most information is available at the touch of an app, your focus must be on the claim you intend to make about the topic you have chosen.
- **Presenting a thesis that is too broad or too narrow.** While the line between the two can be tenuous and difficult to locate, it is worth the effort. When a thesis is too broad, it is difficult to argue adequately without leaving notable holes in your rationale; when a thesis is too narrow, it can be challenging to find much at all to say to one another.
- **Neglecting to revise the thesis umbrella as the project unfolds.** The more flexible you are, the more successful your end result will be.

First impressions are critical. If you want your readers to continue reading, you must capture their attention, present yourself as reasonably authoritative, and offer a clear sense of purpose – all in your introductory paragraph. [Image: Ashim D'Silva | Unsplash]

Introductions

Definition to Remember:

- **Catchy First Line + Inspiration + Thesis = Introduction**

Rules to Remember:

1. First impressions are critical. If you want your readers to continue reading, you must capture their attention, present yourself as reasonably authoritative, and offer a clear sense of purpose – all in your introductory paragraph.
2. A **catchy first line** is essential. If humor is appropriate to your purpose and audience, use it. If a question might help draw your readers in, open with one. Remember that your first line and your thesis statement are typically not the same; most essays open with a catchy first line, with the thesis statement falling somewhere near the end of the first paragraph. Your first line does not need to carry the weight of a thesis statement, so have fun with it. Keep it short, and keep your readers wondering so they will choose to read on.
   Consider the following first lines. Would you keep reading? Why or why not?

- It was a morning that would never end.
- Ralph fell sideways.
- When the sun set over the national forest on May 17, 1980, no one realized the enormity of what the next day would bring.
- Saturdays were chicken-soup-making days, which meant Beulah was required to select the best chicken from the coop, snap its neck with a firm twist, and pluck feather after feather from the warm skin.
- Politicians rarely listen well.
- I was done.
- Thirty-two emails later, the deal was signed.
- When Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone to the world in June 2007, everything changed.
- They spent the first two years of their marriage in a Japanese internment camp in northern Washington state.
- The root system of the Douglas fir is surprisingly shallow for a tree that often grows to more than 70 feet tall.

3. Without **inspiration**, you will have a difficult time convincing your readers that they should be inspired to read further. If you want your readers to be engaged, you must be energetic about the ideas you want to communicate, and that energy should show through in your very first opening lines. What excites or interests you about this topic? Should you open with a particularly inviting story, or a surprising fact, or a compelling question? How will you inspire your readers to join you for this journey?
   Consider the following options to bring life and energy to your introduction:

   - a related story
   - a provocative question or series of questions
   - a hypothetical scenario
   - a surprising fact or series of facts
   - an engaging direct quotation
   - a striking statement
   - background information or context
   - an opposing argument
   - the who, what, where, when, and why of the paper's focus
   - a combination of the types listed above

4. Your readers will expect to see your **thesis** as the closing line of your introductory paragraph, which can be an effective way to transition from your introductory ideas to the main points of your paper. But the thesis does not have to be the final line of the first paragraph. If you choose to place it elsewhere, be sure it is very clear to your readers which sentence is your thesis statement.

"I believe that the ability to communicate complex ideas in a simple fashion is more important to engineering than technical ability. It helps you be sure you are solving the correct problem." *Andrew Gracey, Software Engineer*

Common Errors:

- **Writing a "since the dawn of mankind" introduction.** Remember that your goal here is to intrigue and inspire, not diffuse. Always write something that you would be excited to read.
- **Composing an obligatory introduction.** If you are writing your introduction because you know it is required but your inspiration is minimal, consider how much less inspired your readers will be. Don't include an introductory paragraph just because you must; let it sing.
- **Including Wikipedia or another encyclopedia or dictionary definition in your introduction.** If you are looking for the authoritative voice of an effective definition, consider looking at disciplinary-specific source, such as a medical journal or a sociology textbook. Encyclopedias and dictionaries are not considered credible sources at the university level and beyond.

Every body paragraph must adhere to the simple math of topic sentence + evidence = paragraph. [Image: Alejandro Alvarez | Unsplash]

Body Paragraphs

Definition to Remember:

- **Topic Sentence + Evidence = Body Paragraph**

Rules to Remember:

1. Each body paragraph must adhere to the simple math of *topic sentence + evidence = paragraph*. Remember that your readers will expect a new topic with each new paragraph, or at least a very clear progression forward of ideas.
2. If it seems appropriate, include a *summary sentence* at the end of each body paragraph to remind your readers of your overall purpose for the essay.
3. While there is no rule about the expected length of a paragraph, your readers will expect general uniformity. If your opening paragraphs are short, maintain that pattern throughout your essay. If your opening paragraphs are long, all paragraphs in your essay should be similarly long.

"I always imagine my emails being carefully read by a panel of experts critiquing me on my efforts years after I sent them. I put a lot of time into crafting well-articulated emails to ensure my point is coming across without being too rushed or too lengthy no matter who the audience. I never include anything I wouldn't want written on my tombstone." *Dale Harris, IT Professional*

Common Errors:

- **Forgetting to adhere to the simple math of the paragraph.** When we "just write," we tend to either contradict or repeat ourselves. While "just writing" is the preferred approach for a first draft, use the revision process to apply the simple math that will aid your readers in reading quickly, efficiently, and energetically.
- **Assuming that a topic sentence is not necessary with each new paragraph.** When you assume, your readers will assume, and those assumptions almost never align.
- **Losing track of your main purpose.** Here is where the umbrella metaphor can be helpful. Once

you have a clear thesis statement, imagine each new body paragraph resting beneath that open umbrella. Does the new topic fit? Does it move your argument forward? Is your thesis statement broad enough to include all that you hope to include, and yet narrow enough to be manageable in the length required?

For many readers, your concluding words are what they will remember long after they have finished reading your piece. For that reason, your concluding paragraph is critical. [Image: Vlad Shapochnikov | Unsplash]

Conclusions

Definition to Remember:

- **Thesis + Wisdom + Catchy Last Line = Conclusion**

Rules to Remember:

1. Much as your introduction gives readers a first impression of who you are and what you hope to accomplish, your conclusion is your chance to offer final wisdom. For many readers, your concluding words are what they will remember long after they have finished reading your piece. For that reason, your concluding paragraph is critical.
2. Always end your essay in a way that reinforces your thesis and your purpose. A conclusion must provide a sense of closure. Readers should recognize your final paragraph as an ending. If you feel compelled to type the words "The End," you're not there yet.
3. Remember to look ahead. Is there future research that you intend or would recommend? Is there something specific you hope your readers will do with the ideas you have shared? Is there a new direction to turn? How can you use your conclusion to keep your readers thinking, even after they have set your essay aside?
4. Remind your readers of your overall **thesis**. Do not merely repeat your thesis. If you have added sufficient evidence in your essay to support your claim, your thesis should sound different to your readers than it did in the introduction. As you remind your readers of your purpose, allow your thesis to express the fullness of all of the evidence you have brought to bear.
5. Offer **wisdom** that your readers can take with them. Much like the introduction, here are several

possible approaches for ending an essay well:

- a related story
- a provocative question or series of questions
- a hypothetical scenario
- a surprising fact or series of facts
- an engaging direct quotation
- a striking statement
- background information or context
- an opposing argument
- the who, what, where, when, and why of the paper's focus
- a combination of the types listed above

6. Finish with a **catchy last line** that is both conclusive-sounding and memorable. Much like a catchy first line, an effective last line should be concise, poetic, persuasive, and provocative.

"Writing well may offer little respect, but writing poorly certainly loses it." *David Hartmann, Director of Client Success*

Common Errors:

- **Tacking on a placeholder conclusion.** Writers are often fatigued by the time they are ready to write that final paragraph, and, unfortunately, it shows. As with any kind of writing, if you are finding the work tedious, imagine how uninterested your readers will be. Always save time to set your work aside and refresh before writing your conclusion; the added effort will always pay off.
- **Repeating what has been said already.** While many of us were taught in elementary school to use the conclusion as an opportunity to remind your readers of everything you just said, an effective post-elementary school conclusion should aspire for more than merely repetition.