

Unit 3: Writing Techniques

Lesson 3 Writing Fundamentals

In this lesson we'll look at thesis statements and paragraphs, the main building blocks of an essay. All well-constructed prose essays have a controlling idea around which all the paragraphs are centered. The controlling idea is also called a thesis. Think of the thesis as being like the hub of a wheel that connects to the axle. The paragraphs are all connected to the thesis like the spokes that radiate out from the wheel hub. Transitions are linking phrases and sentences that connect the paragraphs to each other and to the thesis. Transitions are like the rim or tire of the wheel, connecting smoothly as the wheel rotates and enabling the entire vehicle to move forward. The power that turns the wheel on the axis is the strength of the ideas in the essay.

In this lesson you'll learn how to create a strong thesis, how to construct effective paragraphs, and how to link these paragraphs together into an essay centered on the thesis.

You can think of writing as a process of building. A building is constructed of different parts that all work together to keep it standing. And a piece of writing is composed of elements that work together to convey meaning to the reader.

Each time you sit down to write you build from the ground up. You use a standard set of building blocks. Ideas take shape in words. Words are combined into sentences. Sentences are grouped into paragraphs. Paragraphs are linked to form essays. The aim of this building process is to produce writing that is clear and organized.

In order to create a coherent piece of writing, you need to make sure your building blocks are sound, and work together. The building blocks we will explore in this tutorial include the thesis and the paragraph

The thesis states the main idea of a piece of writing. It tells the reader the topic of a written piece, as well as what you want to say about that topic. Your thesis may take different forms, depending on the kind of writing you're doing. For example, a thesis might illustrate your opinion about something, indicate your interpretation of a piece of literature, or present an argument you'll develop in the essay. No matter what kind of writing you do, the thesis always has two parts: a topic section and a comment section. The topic section identifies the topic of discussion. The comment section makes a point about that topic.

Let's look at an example. How would you create a thesis about genetically engineered food? What if you felt that genetically engineered food should be clearly labeled? Think about this for a while, then try writing a thesis about it. Press continue when you're ready to go on.

You might have written a thesis that looks something like this: Labels that identify genetically engineered food are necessary so shoppers can make informed choices about the kinds of food they consume. In this thesis the topic part of the thesis is: "Labels that identify genetically engineered food are necessary." It tells what the point is. The comment part of the thesis is: "so shoppers can make informed choices about the kinds of food they consume." It explains why labels that identify genetically engineered foods are necessary.

When you have combined the topic and comment to create a thesis, you should ask yourself three questions:

1. Will my thesis be interesting for my audience?
2. Is my thesis specific to the issue at hand?
3. Is my thesis manageable, given the amount of time I have to write about this topic?

These questions will help you determine if you can successfully develop your thesis in your essay.

Your thesis will help you stay on track as you write. It should control the kind and amount of information you include in your essay. You might think about the thesis as an umbrella. Everything you say in the essay should fall within the area protected by the umbrella. All of your paragraphs should relate back to and help develop the thesis. Tangents that take you

beyond the reach of the umbrella are extraneous; they don't help you explain or support your thesis.

Once you have a thesis, you're ready to construct paragraphs that help you explain and develop the thesis. Put simply, a paragraph is a group of sentences that center on the same idea. The paragraph makes sense as a unit because the ideas and sentences it contains all relate to each other. The paragraph is not a stagnant unit it has a flow. This means the paragraph develops an idea as it progresses from beginning to end.

Just as the thesis has standard parts, the paragraph has standard parts. Each time you construct a paragraph you'll use these building blocks: topic sentence, evidence, signal words and phrases, and transitions. Let's talk about each one.

First the topic sentence. The first sentence of your paragraph should provide direction for the reader. It lets the reader know where the paragraph is headed. In many cases this lead sentence is the topic sentence. It indicates what the paragraph. So, it performs for the paragraph the same role the thesis performs for the essay. Since the topic sentence carries the main idea of the paragraph, all the other sentences in the paragraph should relate back to and develop the topic sentence.

Next on our list is evidence. Evidence is the meaty stuff you use to support the main point of your paragraph. It's the ideas, quotes, facts, etc. that you use to help support and explain the thesis. The type of evidence you use may differ depending on the kind of writing you do. In an essay about literature your evidence might consist of quotes from the text. In an essay that describes a process your evidence might detail steps for completing the process. In an essay that aims to persuade your reader, your evidence might be a series of opinions.

You can organize evidence by dividing your evidence into different paragraphs, giving each paragraph a topic sentence. This way you can help set a path for your reader. Don't put all the evidence that develops your thesis into one long paragraph. Break it up into different paragraphs. This will help guide your reader through your thought process. The way you divide groups of sentences into paragraphs shows your reader which ideas are related to each other and why these relationships are important.

The third item on our list of paragraph components is signal words and phrases. Signal words and phrases, such as *however*, *in addition to*, *similarly*, *of course*, and *for example*, also help guide the reader through the paragraph. They act like road signs so the reader doesn't get lost in the paragraph. Signal words and phrases help illustrate the relationships between ideas in the paragraph.

Consider the phrase "for instance." It indicates that you are going to provide an example or illustration for your reader. Now think of "In other words," another signal phrase. This lets the reader know that you are going to revisit, in slightly different words, whatever you just said. You might think about signal words as directional words. However, remember the directions they give are subtle. Used in the correct ways, signal words and phrases will contribute greatly to the coherence of your paragraphs.

Now for the last item on our list of transitions. Transitions function as links between paragraphs. They occur at the ends and beginnings of paragraphs. Like the signal words used within paragraphs, transitions guide the reader as he or she passes from one paragraph to the next. As with signal words and phrases, transitions help indicate the relationships between your ideas. The same signal words you use within paragraphs can be used for transitions between paragraphs.

To create transitions between paragraphs you need to think about the function of each paragraph. That is, if you want to further develop the same idea in another paragraph, you might create a transition that repeats key words from the first paragraph. If the next paragraph details a contrasting example, you would use words that signal contrast in your opening sentence.

Remember that the ending of one paragraph is next to the opening of the following paragraph. This neighborly proximity means that the relationship between the end of one paragraph and the beginning of the next needs to be clear. For example, at the end of a paragraph a transitional sentence might review the contents of that paragraph. The beginning of the next paragraph might reference the idea contained in the final sentence of the previous paragraph and then identify how the topic of the current paragraph is related to the topic of the preceding paragraph.

The Thesis

The thesis is the controlling idea of a piece of writing. It helps guide the reader. The thesis is where you begin your essay. The rest of the essay develops, explains, and augments the thesis. Your thesis, then, is the heart of your writing. If it isn't interesting, you'll have a hard time making the rest of the writing compelling.

The thesis statement has two parts, the topic and the commentary. These two parts, taken together, provide focus for both the writer and the reader. The topic identifies the subject of the piece. The comment identifies the writer's thoughts about the topic. The thesis helps the reader stay attentive to the writing, and it aids the writer in staying on the topic by reminding him or her about the specific point at issue. By the end of the essay the reader should have a clear understanding of the writer's thoughts on the subject. This is the purpose of the essay—to communicate what the writer thinks about a particular subject to a larger audience.

Some strategies for developing a thesis

Remember, a thesis statement always has two parts: a topic and a comment that can be developed and explained. The clearer the thesis is in your mind and on paper, the easier it will be to create an essay that flows well and expresses your point to the reader. To make sure you have both parts of the thesis statement, examine the relationship between the two sections of your statement. For the second section to be a comment about the topic, it has to express an opinion, present an interpretation, or raise an interesting point.

If the topic is assigned, do a ten-minute brainstorm session during which you write down all your ideas about the topic. Then examine your brainstorm notes for interesting and arguable

points. You need to match your thesis to the length of the writing assignment. An assignment that asks you to write one page demands a much narrower thesis than an assignment that asks you to write five pages.

Once you identify your most intriguing idea, begin to write. You will be writing a first draft, so it's OK if your thesis statement isn't crafted at this point. As you write into your subject and develop your thoughts, you'll come to a clearer understanding of what you're actually saying. Often, at the end of your first draft you'll find material with which to construct your thesis. You'll have written through all the vague and unrelated statements and finally reached what you wanted to say all along. Now, take this new focus and create a thesis statement with it. Be sure to include both the topic and the commentary. Then you can go back through your draft to add details that support the thesis. You should also delete sections that are unrelated to the thesis. Remember that the thesis is like an umbrella. Everything in the essay should fall under the scope of the thesis. Every detail you provide should develop and support the point or argument you intend to make. Although this method of thesis construction may seem like extra work, it will result in more efficient and coherent writing.

If the topic isn't assigned, go back to your reading notes to generate ideas. Then follow the same procedure you would if your topic were assigned.

Once you've created a thesis, whether through writing into your subject or through another method, think about the kind of writing it will help you produce. The more interesting your thesis is, the more interesting your evidence and developing ideas will be. This, in turn, will help spur you to more interesting writing. To help figure out if you have a good thesis, ask yourself these questions:

Will my thesis be interesting for my audience?

- Are you writing for an instructor, the general public, a professional in a specialized field? Will the audience expect technical explanations or specialized language?
- Would the average reader be able to follow your points?

Is my thesis specific to the topic?

- What point do you want to make about the subject?
- What specifically do you want your writing to achieve? Do you intend to inform, persuade, argue, interpret, explain?
- Does your thesis help you with the goal of your writing?

Is my thesis manageable, given the amount of time I have to write about this topic?

- Do you have enough material to support and develop this thesis? Would it take ten pages to properly support this thesis?
- Would this thesis require outside research?

- Could you support this thesis if you only had thirty minutes to write?
- In the number of pages you're assigned, can you present your reader with a full understanding of your ideas?

An example of how to construct a thesis

Imagine that you've read the novel *Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov. Your assignment is to produce one single-spaced, typed page in which you create an interesting thesis about the narrator, Humbert Humbert. You sit down and brainstorm all the fascinating things about Humbert Humbert you can think of and decide that you'd really like to write about how his narrative style is manipulative. This is your topic. Then you think about why it matters that he's a manipulative narrator. You decide this is important because it makes the reader sympathize with him, even though he's a creepy character. This is your comment. Putting these two ideas together, your thesis statement might look something like this.

In the novel *Lolita*, the manipulative narrative style of Humbert Humbert creates an unexpectedly sympathetic response in the reader.

Then you'd choose three main ideas to develop in your essay.

- What the manipulative narrative style looks like
- Why you'd expect not to sympathize with Humbert Humbert
- Why the reader's sympathetic response is important for the novel

This is a literary example. Using the same process, you could create a thesis for any piece of writing. Once you've constructed the thesis. It's helpful to note the main ideas you need to develop. This will help keep you focused as you write. For example, if you suddenly started to write about Humbert Humbert's wife, Charlotte, the essay would be off topic.

Paragraphs

Paragraphs are important because they guide your reader through your essay. Every time a reader sees a new paragraph, he or she knows that the author is going to develop a new idea. Because your reader expects one idea per paragraph, you need to be sure that each paragraph you write centers on **an** idea. This doesn't mean that the sentences within the paragraph are repetitive, even though they all talk about the same idea. It means that the sentences need to build on one another to develop the idea you want the paragraph to convey.

For each paragraph you should have one sentence that conveys the topic of the paragraph. This sentence, called the topic sentence, is often the first sentence of the paragraph. Placing the topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph alerts the reader to the idea you'll develop in the paragraph. If the rest of the paragraph doesn't relate to the topic of the first sentence, the reader will be confused.

Once you have your topic sentence in place, you have to develop your idea by using evidence. The evidence you use will depend on the kind of essay you're writing. For some

essays you might use statistics or facts as evidence. Other types of essays might demand quotations or anecdotes as evidence. However, the function of evidence is the same in all types of writing. Use evidence to prove your point and make your ideas believable to your reader. Evidence helps you show the reader what you're thinking, so it's important that you explain your evidence. In other words, you can't just insert facts, opinions, or quotations into a paragraph. If you just drop evidence into your paragraph without explaining why it's important, you can expect your reader to come up with a different interpretation of that evidence. Remember that everyone has unique ideas when they read. Your job, in presenting evidence to the reader, is to indicate how your evidence supports your argument.

As you present the points of your paragraph, make sure you use signal words to guide your reader. These words or phrases (some examples are *for example*, *in addition to*, *therefore*, *of course*) direct your reader. In other words, they give the reader some preparation for the idea that comes next. The signal phrase *in other words*, at the beginning of the previous sentence, lets you know that the sentence was going to say again, in different words, what came before it. Although as a reader you may not be consciously aware of signal words, the effect they have on your understanding is immense. You can use signal words to help your reader follow your argument by signaling the relationship between your ideas. .

Once you've written a paragraph, you should re-read it to make sure all your sentences relate back to the first one. Take out sentences that begin to talk about ideas other than those covered by the topic sentence. You don't necessarily have to completely erase those tangential sentences. They might become different topic sentences of their own.

When you've finished developing one idea, it's time to close that paragraph and begin another one. To signal the change of paragraph and indicate the relationship between paragraphs, be sure to use transitions. Just as you need to guide your readers within the paragraph, you also have to guide them between paragraphs.

As you re-read your paragraph, ask yourself these questions:

- For each sentence in the paragraph—Does this sentence relate to the topic sentence? How does it help me develop my point?
- For the paragraph as a whole—Does this paragraph say whatever is necessary for the audience to completely understand the topic sentence?
- For the paragraph as a whole—Does the order of the paragraph make sense? Do my ideas flow logically? Is each part of the idea clear before I move on to the next part?
- For the paragraph as a whole—Do I have signal words that help guide the reader through my ideas? Do these signal words accurately signpost the relationships between my ideas?
- As you move between paragraphs—How does the idea in this paragraph relate to the one before it? Do I have a transition that indicates this relationship?

Also as you re-read, consider the language you use. Try to be as specific as possible with your word choice. You don't want to make the reader do too much work. That is, the more exact you can be with your words, the less ambiguity there is in your writing, and the more certain you can be about communicating your point. Most words can be interpreted many ways. Not everyone will make the same associations with the same word. For example, the sentence "She was mad" could mean either she was angry or she was mentally ill. Don't worry about being exact when you first pen your paragraphs. Agonizing over word choice during the writing stage might lead to writer's block. Instead, leave the agonizing for the editing stage.

The paragraph below is a sample paragraph, complete with all the components of a wellstructured, coherent paragraph. Spend a few minutes examining the paragraph. Identify the topic sentence. Look at the signal words and how they indicate the relationships between the sentences. Examine how each sentence builds on the previous one to develop the main idea of the paragraph.

Example

The use of war metaphors to characterize cancer treatment and research can be traced back to the connection between World War II and the growth in cancer research centers in the 1940s and 1950s. The influence of the war on cancer research was most evident in the mass media of the time. Illustrations for articles in 1950s magazines that celebrated the advances of medical technology relied on war imagery to depict new treatments for cancer. For example, one image from a Life magazine article shows the new treatments as pistols used to pump radioactive pellets into tumors. Another illustration, from 1952, portrays an angry cancer cell under an ominous mushroom cloud, demonstrating the connection between the atomic bomb and the importance of technology to new cancer treatments. The relationship was more than symbolic; one of today's most commonly used cancer treatments, chemotherapy, grew out of chemical warfare studies in World War II. The connection between war and cancer continued into the 1970s, when Richard Nixon declared a national "War on Cancer" in 1971, and continues today to affect popular understandings of the treatment of this common disease.

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Lesson 3 Assessment(s)

- Complete 3.03 Graded Assignment: Creating Theses, Constructing Paragraphs
- Complete 3.03 Quiz: Writing Fundamentals