

WRITING IN THE HUMANITIES

Who is Your Audience?

- Your immediate audience is your classmates and the professor of the course. But you should think of yourself as writing for a more general audience. Think of yourself as writing for anyone who has read the texts you are discussing or who has an interest in your topic.
- Hence, you should avoid an overly colloquial or familiar tone, and (unless absolutely necessary to your argument) avoid referring to class discussions. Be sure to cite texts fully and properly so that anyone who picks up your essay could track down the quotations or references you present.

What is Your Job in this Essay?

- In most essays for humanities courses, your job is to provide a convincing interpretation of a text (or texts) and/or a convincing argument concerning some issue or problem that the text presents to you as a reader.

Choose a Topic

- The first step is to choose a topic. The topic is the most general frame of an essay, the general issue or area the essay will consider, e.g., “Alienation in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.”

Develop a Thesis

- Once you have chosen a topic, you need to determine what you want to say about it, that is, you need to develop a *thesis*.
- A “thesis” differs from a “topic” in that the former provides a *point of view* on the topic, an interpretive claim that needs to be supported by an argument. Indeed, a thesis can be considered the *conclusion* of an argument or essay—what the writer hopes the reader will accept by the end of the essay, e.g., “Marx does not adequately argue that human nature is tied to labor. Hence he fails to show that alienated labor implies an alienated humanity.”
- A thesis is a claim about which reasonable people could disagree. A good thesis is modest enough that it can be supported in the allotted space, yet interesting and provocative enough to spark the reader’s interest.
- In a short essay such as those you will be writing for this class, you should state your thesis in the first or second paragraph so that your reader knows, from the start, what the essay will attempt to do. The thesis often appears at the end of the first paragraph or at the beginning of the second paragraph.
- Often, the process of writing an essay will lead you to change in the original thesis. If this happens, be sure to go back and change the essay to make it consistent with the revised thesis.

Introduction

- Every essay begins with an introduction. The purpose of an introduction is to bring the reader into the world of the essay, the domain of its questions and problems. The introduction will often present a question or problem that the thesis seeks to answer or solve.

- Avoid opening sentences that make overly general claims (e.g., “Marx was one of the most brilliant social theorists of all time” or “Throughout history, human beings have struggled with the question of free will”). Such claims are too broad to be verified or supported by any piece of writing, let alone a short essay. And they generally contribute nothing to the essay’s argument.
- Begin slowly. Present the text, issue, or problem to be discussed. Explain why this text or issue is important, why it deserves the reader’s attention.
- In the introduction, you may want to provide a hint or a very short synopsis of the argument that you will present in the essay. But don’t try to say everything right away. After stating your thesis, move onto the body of your essay, where you will slowly and carefully present and develop your argument.

Argument and Evidence

- An argument is a sequence of claims that provide support for the thesis and do so in a methodical and coherent manner. An essay writer is, in many ways, like a lawyer: he or she slowly and carefully presents evidence and interprets this evidence in support of a specific conclusion.
 - Note that an argument is *not* merely a series of “points.” Rather, it is a sequence of claims that are logically or otherwise connected with one another so that they lead naturally to a conclusion.
- What is “evidence” and what is “interpretation”? In humanistic writing, “evidence” is usually textual evidence, i.e., words found on a page. But such evidence does not explain itself. (If it did, everyone who read a text would have the same interpretation of it.) Rather, evidence requires interpretation.
 - Interpretations take many different forms. Often, they point out things that might have gone unnoticed by the reader. Sometimes this takes the form of close and careful attention paid to a specific passage in the text. Or, an interpretation might draw connections between disparate parts of a text or between the text and other relevant texts. In any case, an interpretation *makes sense* of the evidence drawn from the text; it *provides a context* for this evidence, connecting it with other pieces of evidence and to the overall thesis.
 - Often, one’s aim will be to criticize an author’s view. For example, one might want to challenge Marx’s view that communism is the inevitable goal of world history. Before criticizing an idea, however, one must first present it fairly and thoroughly so that the reader (and writer!) knows just what is being criticized.

Outline

- Before beginning to write, I strongly recommend that you produce a working outline of your argument. There are many ways to organize an outline, some of which are summarized in Joseph Gibaldi and Walter S. Achtert, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 3rd edition (New York: Modern Language Association, 1988), pp. 25–30. Whichever way you choose, start by stating your thesis. Then, present your major claims and organize them in a logical manner. Under each of these claims, present the minor claims or pieces of evidence that support it. While writing, you will probably need to revise your outline, adding detail, re-arranging items, and generally shaping it so that it reflects the current state of your essay.

Questions

• In summary, make sure that, before beginning to write, you can answer the following questions:

- What is your topic?
- What is your thesis?
- How will you argue in favor of this thesis? What is your argument?
- What evidence will you draw upon in support of this thesis?
- How will you structure your argument?

• One final piece of advice. The best way to learn how to *write* an essay, with regard to both form and content, is to *read* essays and to pay attention to what you are reading, asking yourself: how does the author use words, sentences, paragraphs, sections, punctuation? what is the tone of the essay? what is the style of the essay? how does the author achieve that tone and style? are they convincing? what is the author's thesis? how does he or she support this thesis? what evidence does he or she provide? how is this evidence introduced? how is this evidence interpreted? is the argument successful?

Proof-reading

• I assume that, before coming to Hampshire, you have learned how to spell and use English grammar; and I expect that your essays will be free of spelling and grammatical errors. You must make every effort to insure that this is the case. I encourage you to use any available "spell check" programs to check your spelling and grammar. But bear in mind that these programs do not catch all errors; and so you must proof-read your essays carefully. The presence of spelling and grammatical errors in an essay will significantly affect my evaluation of the essay.

WORKS CITED

Gibaldi, Joseph and Walter S. Achtert. 1988. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 3rd edition. New York: Modern Language Association.
Weston, Anthony. 1992. *A Rulebook for Arguments*, 2nd edition. Indianapolis: Hackett.