

## **An Introduction to Critical Writing and Analytical Thinking**

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Much of the material in this guide is taken from the following writing lab and writing program web sites:

- Purdue <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>
- UNC Chapel Hill <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/>
- Harvard <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos/>

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## **PART ONE: The Philosophy of Critical Writing**

## ***I. The Search for Meaning***

Writing an analysis of a piece of fiction can be a mystifying process. First, literary analyses (or papers that offer an interpretation of a story) rely on the assumption that stories must mean something. How does a story *mean* something? Isn't a story just an arrangement of characters and events? And if the author wanted to convey a meaning, wouldn't he or she be much better off writing an essay just telling us what he or she meant?

It's pretty easy to see how at least some stories convey clear meanings or morals. Just think about a parable like the Prodigal Son or a nursery tale about crying "wolf." Stories like these are reduced down to the bare elements, giving us just enough detail to lead us to their main points, and because they are relatively easy to understand and tend to stick in our memories, they're often used in some kinds of education.

But if the meanings were always as clear as they are in parables, who would really need to write a paper about them? Interpretations of fiction, after all, would not be interesting if the meaning of the story were clear to everyone who reads it. The paper would become superfluous. Thankfully (or perhaps regrettably, depending on your perspective) the stories we're asked to interpret in our classes are a good bit more complicated than most parables. These stories can't be easily reduced to one specific meaning that every reader can agree upon, but instead they use characters, settings, and actions to illustrate issues that have no easy resolution. They show different sides of a problem, and they can raise new questions about a problem. Nothing against the parable, but if stories all led to clear lessons or meanings, there wouldn't be much reason to read them more than once, study them closely, or talk to others about the impressions they get from a story. In short, the stories we read in class have meanings that are arguable and complicated, and it's our job to sort them out.

It might seem that the stories do have specific meanings, and the instructor has already decided what that meaning is. Not true. Instructors can be pretty dazzling (or mystifying) with their interpretations, but that's because they have a lot of practice with stories and have developed a sense of the kinds of things to look for. Even so, the most well-informed professor rarely arrives at conclusions that someone else wouldn't disagree with--and often for good reasons. In fact, most professors are aware that their interpretations are debatable and actually love a good argument. But let's not go to the other extreme. To say that there is no *one* answer is not to say that anything we decide to say about a novel or short story is valid, interesting, or valuable. Interpretations of fiction are often opinions, but not all opinions are equal. So, what makes one literary interpretation stronger or more compelling than another? The answer is a good argument.

Source: UNC Writing Center, "Writing About Literature" Handout  
(<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature.html>)

## II. The Nature and Importance of Arguments

When you write a literary essay, you are essentially making an argument. You are arguing that your perspective—an interpretation, an evaluative judgment, or a critical evaluation—is a valid one (Purdue, OWL).

### A. What is an Argument?

In academic writing, an argument is usually a main idea, often called a "claim" or "thesis statement," backed up with evidence that supports the idea. Ninety-nine percent of the time you will need to make some sort of claim and use evidence to support it, and your ability to do this well will separate your papers from those of students who see assignments as mere accumulations of fact and detail. In other words, gone are the happy days of being given a "topic" about which you can write anything that comes to mind. It is time to stake out a position and prove why it is a good position for a thinking person to hold.

Claims can be as simple as "protons are positively charged and electrons are negatively charged," with evidence such as, "In this experiment, protons and electrons acted in such and such a way." Claims can also be as complex as "the end of the South African system of apartheid was inevitable," using reasoning and evidence such as, "Every successful revolution in the modern era has come about after the government in power has given and then removed small concessions to the uprising group." In either case, the rest of your paper will detail reasons and facts that have led you to believe that your position is best.

When beginning to write a paper, ask yourself, "What is my point"? For example, the point of this guide is to help you become a better writer, and it's arguing that an important step in the process of writing argumentation is understanding the concept of argumentation. If your papers do not have a main point, they cannot be arguing for anything. Asking yourself what your point is can help you avoid a mere "information dump."

Source: UNC Writing Center, "Effective Academic Writing: The Argument" Handout (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/argument.html>).

### B. Why are arguments important?

Most material you learn in college is or has been debated by someone, somewhere, at some time. Even when the material you read or hear is presented as simple "information" or "fact," it may actually be one person's interpretation of a set of information or facts. In your writing, instructors may call on you to question that interpretation and either defend it, refute it, or offer some new view of your own. In writing assignments, you will almost

always need to do more than just present information that you have gathered or regurgitate information that was discussed in class. You will need to select a point of view and provide evidence (in other words, use "argument") to shape the material and offer your interpretation of the material.

If you think that "fact," not argument, rules intelligent thinking, consider these examples. At one point, the "great minds" of Western Europe firmly believed the Earth was flat. They had discussions about how obviously true this "fact" was. You are able to disagree now because people who saw that argument as faulty set out to make a better argument and proved it. The more recent O.J. Simpson trial provides another example. Both the prosecution and the defense used DNA testing but in totally different ways. The prosecution brought in DNA experts to prove that DNA testing was good evidence, while the defense called other experts to prove it was poor evidence. Differences of opinion are how human knowledge develops, and scholars like your instructors spend their lives engaged in debate over what may be counted as "true," "real," or "right" in their fields. In their courses, they want you to engage in similar kinds of critical thinking and debate in your writing. The more you improve your skills in this area, the better you will be at thinking critically, reasoning, making choices, and weighing evidence.

Source: UNC Writing Center, "Effective Academic Writing: The Argument" Handout (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/argument.html>).

### **III. A Formal Definition of Critical Writing**

Critical writing develops an idea in the form of an argument and uses a text or other cultural artifact as a medium for developing that idea. Effective critical papers require complex, argumentative theses; clear and compelling significance for a general academic audience; specific and thorough introductions; strong topic sentences; solid transitions between ideas and between paragraphs; convincing evidence; careful interpretation of evidence, including clear warrants and close readings; effective word choice; thought-provoking counterarguments; and conclusions that showcase the paper writer's extensive thinking about his or her topic. As you may already suspect, critical writing is different from writing or speech found in: diaries; sermons; journalism (newspapers, etc.); television and radio talk shows; campaign (or "stump") speeches; journals; digests; executive summaries; rants; blogs; and late-night dorm debates.

### **IV. Developing a Topic**

Students often speak of the trouble they have in "finding" topics for papers—as if topics were somehow pre-existing entities that were secretly hidden in the pages of a book! The truth is that good topics are the result of a process of critical thinking that begins with your reading of a text.

## A. Critical Reading

The first step in becoming a good critical writer is training yourself to be a good critical reader. Critical reading is a big part of understanding an argument. Remember that the author of every text—even a literary text like a novel or a poem—has an agenda, something that he or she wants you to believe. Take notes either in the margins or on a separate sheet as you read. Put away that highlighter! Simply highlighting a text is only good for memorizing that text—it does not encourage critical reading. Part of the goal is to put the author's ideas in your own words. Then you can stop thinking of these ideas as facts and start thinking of them as arguments. When you read, ask yourself the following questions:

- "What is the author trying to prove?"
- "What is the author assuming I will agree with?"
- Do I agree with the author?
- Does the author adequately defend her argument? What kind of proof does she use? Is there something she leaves out that I would put in? Does putting it in hurt her argument?

As you get used to reading critically, you will start to see the sometimes hidden agendas of other writers, and you can use this skill to improve your own ability to argue.

Source: UNC Writing Center, "Effective Academic Writing: The Argument" Handout (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/argument.html>).

## B. More Strategies for Critical Reading: Rants and Other Ways of Responding to a Text

### 1. Dealing with Your Feelings-Go Ahead and Rant

Students, like you, often feel frustrated when they are asked to write a critical analysis of a text. Let's face it: we live in a culture where books and other commodities (like movies and automobiles) are usually marketed in ways that emphasize how they make us *feel*, not what they make us *think*. While there's nothing wrong with feelings, of course, there's certainly a lot more to living an intellectual life than reading a novel or a poem only because you're seeking emotional comfort, or because you're trying to "escape" from other feelings. A vast majority of us respond to certain texts at a very visceral level: we get angry, we laugh, we cry . . . we feel the futility of the world or the miniscule nature of our own existence. It's important to treasure these experiences of reading a text, but it's also crucial, if you want to be a serious scholar, to learn how to contextualize those experiences and to how to put them into a productive relationship with *other ways* of experiencing a text. The bottom line is this: *99% percent of the time, your personal feelings about a text are going to be really, really boring to other people.*



If you find yourself unable to move beyond your feelings after reading a text, then why not put those feelings to work for you? Let's say you read a short story and one of its characters made you really, really angry. Try to back away from your anger just a little, enough to ask: Why am I angry? What specific qualities or behaviors related to that character made me feel this way? Maybe the character lied a lot, or maybe he was a thief or a murderer.

Naturally, your first impulse will likely be to say or write something judgmental about that character. If that's the case, go ahead and say or write whatever you feel like writing, no matter how judgmental it is. This is what's known as a *rant*. Rants show up frequently in early drafts of student papers, and they're something you should learn to have in the privacy of your own dorm room or apartment. The only way to work through a rant is to have it: go ahead and feel your feelings and get them out in the open. Just remember to spare your readers from having to read this huge emotional dumping fest!

Once your rant is out of the way, go back to the specifics: Is the character a liar? A murderer? Now, ask yourself:

- Why did the author create this unsavory character?
- What's the author trying to show here?
- What's the larger dynamic or problem into which this character and his/her/its behaviors fit?

## 2. Character as a Literary Device

The discussion of rants above brings us to a very important statement about characters in a text: CHARACTERS ARE NOT REAL PEOPLE. Literary characters may act like real people, they may “look” like real people, they may talk like real people, they may make us feel like they are real people, they may be based on real people, and they may even be able to teach us about real people, but they are NOT real. This idea, as basic as it sounds, is one of the hardest ideas for students of literature to grasp. When authors create characters for their stories, they do just that: they *create* them. All characters, at one level or another, are works of the imagination. It's your job as a critic to stop seeing characters as real people, and to think about them as *messengers or vehicles for narrative content*. Students are always tempted—compelled even—to write about characters as if they are real people. You'll find yourself doing this even when you're trying not to! Thinking about character as yet another literary device or convention—like plot, setting, symbols, imagery, metaphor, etc.—is one of the hardest critical leaps you'll have to make if you want to write intelligently about literature.

## 3. Thinking about a text's “rhetorical situation”: Questions for Analytical Readers

Rhetoric, simply put, is the art of using language. While the word “rhetoric” has a negative connotation today (i.e., “The politician's words were empty rhetoric”), that negative meaning is relatively new. For centuries, and especially in the classical era of ancient Greece and Rome, “rhetoric” was the most important topic a student could choose to study. Rhetoric includes the arts of exposition, argumentation, and virtually all other

“work” that you might wish to do with or through language. Thinking about a text rhetorically is one of the most important and powerful ways of beginning a critical analysis.

Here’s a long and very useful list of questions to ask of every text you read:

- Who is the text’s author, and what is important to know about him or her?
- For whom is the author writing, and why? How would you describe the text’s audience?
- How does the *genre* of your text (poetry, novel, play, etc.) actually work? What assumptions do readers have to bring to various genres in order for them to make sense? What *conventions* (traditional and widely accepted ways of conveying information) does the particular genre you’re interested in use to communicate with its readers?
- What ideological assumptions (that is, unspoken and/or unexamined beliefs) hold your text together? What ways of thinking are in place that make your text intelligible to its readers?
- How does this text challenge or agree with other texts? What, in other words, are its *intertextual* characteristics?
- Does the author refer to other texts within this text? What kinds of texts are they? Do they help establish or challenge the current text’s credibility?
- What is the historical context in which your text was written? How does this text engage the intellectual, social, and political climate of its time?
- How would you describe the *aesthetics* of your text? How are those aesthetics related to genre, ideology, other art forms, history, etc?
- What key terms, images and concepts has the author chosen to highlight in this text? Where in the piece do you encounter these terms, and are their patterns to their use?
- Are there any terms or phrases that seem historically specific?
- How does the author formulate relationships among key terms, images, and concepts?
- What claims (about people, the world, history, science, life, death, etc.) are made in this text? Which claims are the most important? Are they supported?

Source: G. Tomso; some questions adapted from “Helpful Questions for Analytical Reading,” author unknown, possibly Sharon Crowley

### C. Some Common Topics for Literary and Cultural Analysis

What kinds of topics are good ones?

The best topics are ones that originate out of your own reading of a work of literature. Here are some common approaches to consider:

- A discussion of a work’s characters: Are they realistic, symbolic, historically-based?
- A comparison/contrast of the choices different authors or characters make in a work.
- A reading of a work based on an outside philosophical perspective (Ex. How would a Freudian read Hamlet?).
- A study of the sources or historical events that occasioned a particular work (Ex. comparing G.B. Shaw’s Pygmalion with the original Greek myth of Pygmalion).
- An analysis of a specific image occurring in several works (Ex. the use of moon imagery in certain plays, poems, novels).
- A "deconstruction" of a particular work (Ex. unfolding an underlying racist worldview in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness).
- A reading from an established political or intellectual perspective (Ex. How would a Marxist read William Blake’s "London"?).
- A study of the social, political, or economic context in which a work was written—how does the context influence the work?

Source: Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL), “Writing about Literature” Handout ([http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl\\_lit.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_lit.html))

### D. Using Patterns and Problems to Develop Topics

After reading your story, a topic may just jump out at you, or you may have recognized a pattern or identified a problem that you’d like to think about in more detail. What is a pattern or a problem? A pattern can be the recurrence of certain kinds of imagery or events. Usually, repetitions of particular aspects of a story (similar events in the plot, similar description, even repetitions in particular words) tend to render those elements more conspicuous. Let’s say I’m writing a paper on Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein*. In the course of reading that book, I keep noticing the author’s use of biblical imagery: Victor Frankenstein anticipates that "a new species would bless me as its creator and source" (52) while the monster is not sure whether to consider himself as an Adam or a Satan. These details might help me interpret the way characters think about themselves and about each other, as well as allow me to infer what the author might have wanted her reader to think by using the Bible as a frame of reference. On another subject, I also notice that the book repeatedly makes reference to types of education. The book routinely

makes reference to books that its characters read and the different contexts in which learning takes place.

A problem, on the other hand, is something in the story that, to put it plainly, bugs you or that doesn't seem to add up. A character might act in some way that's unaccountable, a narrator may leave out what we think is important information (or may focus on something that seems trivial), or a narrator or character may offer an explanation for something that doesn't seem to make sense to us. Not all problems that we have with a story lead in interesting directions, but some definitely do and even seem to be important parts of the story. In *Frankenstein*, Victor works day and night to achieve his goal of bringing life to the dead, but once he realizes his goal, he is immediately repulsed by his creation and runs away. Why? Is there something wrong with his creation, something wrong with his goal in the first place, or something wrong with Victor himself? The book doesn't give us a clear answer, but seems to invite us to interpret this problem.

If nothing immediately strikes you as interesting or no patterns or problems jump out at you, don't worry. Just start making a list of whatever you remember from your reading regardless of how insignificant it may seem to you now. Consider a character's peculiar behavior or comments, the unusual way the narrator describes an event, or the author's placement of an action in an odd context.

Once you have a working topic in mind, skim back over the story and make a more comprehensive list of the details that relate to your point. For my paper about education in *Frankenstein*, I'll want to take notes on what Victor Frankenstein reads at home, where he goes to school and why, what he studies at school, what others think about those studies, etc. And even though I'm primarily interested in Victor's education, at this stage in the writing, I'm also interested in moments of education in the novel that don't directly involve this character. These other examples might provide a context or some useful contrasts that could illuminate my evidence relating to Victor. With this goal in mind, I'll also take notes on how the monster educates himself, what he reads, and what he learns from those he watches. As you make your notes keep track of page numbers so you can quickly find the passages in your book again and so you can easily document quoted passages when you write without having to fish back through the book.

At this point, you want to include anything, *anything*, that might be useful, and you also want to avoid the temptation to arrive at definite conclusions about your topic. Remember that one of the qualities that makes for a good interpretation is that it avoids the obvious. You want to develop complex ideas, and the best way to do that is to keep your ideas flexible until you've considered the evidence carefully. Above all, you don't want to write a simplistic paper, and to avoid that, you need to be willing to challenge or expand your own thoughts. A good gauge of complexity is whether you feel you understand more about your topic than you did when you began (and even just reaching a higher state of confusion is a good indicator that you're treating your topic in a complex way).

Source: UNC Writing Center, "Writing About Literature" Handout  
(<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature.html>)

## E. Thinking about Literary Form to Help Develop a Topic

When you jot down ideas, you can focus on the observations from the narrator or things that certain characters say or do. These elements are certainly important. In addition, it might help you come up with more evidence if you also take into account some of the broader components that go into making fiction, things like plot, point of view, character, setting, and symbols.

1. Your plot could have similarities to whole groups of other stories, all having conventional or easily recognizable plots. These types of stories are often called genres. Some popular genres include the gothic (like *Frankenstein*), the romance (like *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre*), the detective story (any Sherlock Holmes story), the *bildungsroman* (this is just a German term for a novel that is centered around the development of its main characters, as in *Great Expectations* or *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), and the novel of manners (a novel that focuses on the behavior and foibles of a particular class or social group as do all of Jane Austen's novels). These categories are often helpful in characterizing a piece of writing, but as with any attempt to categorize, this approach has its limitations. Many novels don't fit nicely into one genre and others seem to borrow a bit from a variety of different categories. For example, a reader could actually read *Frankenstein* as a *bildungsroman*, and given my own working thesis on education, I'm more interested in Victor's development than in relating *Frankenstein* to the gothic genre.

2. The question of genre also introduces questions of point of view, that is, who is telling the story and what do they or don't they know. Is the tale told by an omniscient or all-knowing narrator who doesn't interact in the events, or is it presented by one of the characters within the story? Can the reader trust that person to give an objective account, or does that narrator color the story with his or her own biases and interests?

3. Character refers to the qualities assigned to the individual figures in the plot. Consider why the author assigns certain qualities to a character or characters and how any such qualities might relate to your topic. For example, a discussion of Victor Frankenstein's education might take into account aspects of his character that appear to be developed (or underdeveloped) by the particular kind of education he undertakes. Victor tends to be ambitious, even compulsive about his studies, and I might be able to argue that his tendency to be extravagant leads him to devote his own education to writers who asserted grand, if questionable, conclusions.

4. Setting is the context in which all of the actions take place. What is the time period, the location, the time of day, the season, the weather, the type of room or building? What is the general mood, and who is present? All of these elements can reflect on the story's events, and though the setting of a story tends to be less conspicuous than plot and character, setting still colors everything that's said and done within its context. If Victor Frankenstein does all of his experiments in "a solitary chamber, or rather a cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a staircase" (53) we might

conclude that there is something anti-social, isolated, and stale, maybe even unnatural about his project and his way of learning.

Obviously, if you consider all of these elements, you'll probably have too much evidence to fit effectively into one paper. Your goal is merely to consider each of these aspects of fiction and include *only* those that are most relevant to your topic and most interesting to your reader. A good interpretive paper does not need to cover all elements of the story—plot, genre, narrative form, character, and setting. In fact, a paper that did try to say something about all of these elements would be unfocused. You might find that most of your topic could be supported by a consideration of character alone. That's fine. For my *Frankenstein* paper, I'm finding that my evidence largely has to do with the setting, evidence that could lead to some interesting conclusions that my reader probably hasn't recognized on his or her own.

Source: UNC Writing Center, "Writing About Literature" Handout (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature.html>)

## F. Avoiding Pitfalls

An important part of becoming a good critical writer is breaking away from some of the assumptions about critical writing that we all tend to develop in high school.

These four common assumptions about writing about fiction interfere with rather than help the writer. Learn to avoid them.

### 1. Plot Summary Syndrome

Assumes that the main task is simply recalling what happened in detail. Plot summary is just one of the (less important) aspects of writing about fiction, not the intended goal. See Part Two, Section II of this booklet (the section is called "Close Reading") for more on the difference between summary and critical analysis.

### 2. Right Answer Roulette

Assumes that writing about fiction is a "no win" game in which the student writer is forced to try to guess the RIGHT ANSWER that only the professor knows.

### 3. The "Everything is Subjective" Shuffle

Assumes that ANY interpretation of any literary piece is purely whimsy or personal taste. It ignores the necessity of testing each part of an interpretation against the whole text, as well as the need to validate each idea by reference to specifics from the text or quotations and discussion from the text.

#### 4. The "How Can You Write Three to Five Pages About One Short Story?" Blues

Assumes that writing the paper is only a way of stating the answer rather than an opportunity to explore an idea or explain what your own ideas are and why you have them. This sometimes leads to "padding," repeating the same idea in different words or worse, indiscriminate "expert" quoting: using too many quotes or quotes that are too long with little or no discussion.

Source: Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL), "Writing about Literature" Handout ([http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl\\_lit.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_lit.html))

## V. Higher Order Thinking

### A. Significance and the "So What" Question.

Avoid writing a paper that only identifies a pattern in a story, but doesn't quite explain why that pattern leads to an interesting interpretation. Identifying the biblical references in *Frankenstein* might provide a good start to a paper—Mary Shelley does use a lot of biblical allusions—but a good paper will also tell the reader why those references are meaningful. Identifying a pattern alone simply won't reward your reader, or yourself for that matter. So what makes an interesting paper topic? Simply put, it has to address issues that we can use in our own lives, and that are interesting to a general audience of scholarly readers. Your thesis should be able to answer the brutal question "So what?"

Some categories, like race, gender, and social class, are dependable sources of interest these days. This is not to say that all good papers necessarily deal with one of these issues. Still, a lot of readers would probably be less interested in reading a paper that traces the instances of food imagery in a novel than in reading a paper that compares male or female stereotypes used in a story or one that takes a close look at the way an African-American or an Indian character is perceived by the other characters.

The main idea here is that you ask yourself whether the topic you've selected connects with a major intellectual concern. What's at stake for you, and for other scholars, in what you're thinking/writing about? The possibilities, at this stage in the game, are endless. *This is where your intellectual creativity gets to come alive.* Where do you want to take your reader? What idea do you really want to explore in more detail? What uncharted territory do you want your reader to explore with you? The goal is to combine analytical rigor with critical creativity: you can't just write about anything—critical writing is not fiction writing—but is, most certainly, creative writing. Unfortunately, most students only think of creative writing as fiction writing. They don't ever stop to explore the possibilities for *creative non-fiction*. Good critical writing requires as much invention as any form of creative writing; however, it also requires invention to be guided by the standards of analytical rigor: methodical logic, careful argumentation, and generous

follow-through. Again, the good news here is that your options are virtually without limit. You might use your analysis of a text to make a foray into thinking about:

- Economics
- Family Dynamics
- Education
- Religion
- Law
- Politics
- Sexuality
- History
- Psychology
- Race
- Gender
- Class
- Nationhood

Don't assume that as long as you address one of these issues, your paper will be interesting. You need to address these big topics in a complex way. Doing this requires that you don't go into a topic with a preconceived notion of what you'll find. Be prepared, for example, to challenge your own ideas about what gender, race, or class mean in a particular text.

You should, in some respects, begin to think of yourself as a philosopher when you are writing critical papers. Don't be afraid to take up abstract questions that feel more theoretical than concrete. The art of critical writing involves using concrete examples from a particular text to move convincingly into open intellectual territory. Good critical writers develop ways to lead their readers from the immediate concerns of a novel or story to larger, heavy-hitting intellectual questions that can galvanize readers and really get them thinking about the "big picture."

So, you might be wondering, how can I articulate my own "big picture" for my readers? Read the next section to find out one important way to begin!

Original Source: UNC Writing Center, "Writing About Literature" Handout (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature.html>). Significant additions by G. Tomso.

## **B. Moving from Literal to Abstract Thinking**

For young scholars, perhaps the most challenging—and thrilling—aspect of critical writing is finding the right angle when writing about a text or artifact. Where, students often ask, should I begin? What should my first sentence be? Knowing how to begin, or how to *frame*, your critical close readings and arguments is one of the great arts of



scholarly writing. It can take years to develop this skill, as it involves forming a deep awareness of how your own intellectual trajectory relates with the broader intellectual society around you. If you've spent the last three weeks pondering the fine points of a text, you'll need to do quite a bit of work to leave your intellectual microcosm and to pitch your arguments to readers in ways that will capture and hold their attention.

One powerful way to connect with readers who haven't shared your private musings is to think about how your ideas and close readings tie into larger intellectual debates that can ultimately stand alone from the text you'll be writing about. Let's *not* call this moving from a specific topic to a general one (I'll explain why a little bit later), but instead let's call it moving from a *literal* topic to an *abstract* one. For example, let's say your excited about writing a paper on Washington Irving's 1820 short story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." In particular, you're interested in Irving's descriptions of Katrina van Tassel, the wealthy farmer's daughter whom Ichabod Crane is trying to marry, and in descriptions of Ichabod as a bird—a "crane"—who seems to feed on everything in sight. Irving's narrator calls Katrina a "ripe peach," and you notice that Ichabod wants to consume her—as if she were an object—along with all the other riches of the van Tassel farm. So, you sit down at your computer and you turn out the following opening lines for a paper:

Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" describes characters in great detail. Specifically, Irving portrays Ichabod Crane as a devouring bird and Katrina van Tassel as a piece of fresh, ripe fruit—a peach—ready for the "plucking." Thus, Irving suggests that men are greedy and all-consuming, and women are objects that are easily manipulated by men.

And you're thinking to yourself: "This is really *good*! I mention specific examples I'll be analyzing, and I also state a clear thesis about greedy men and objectified women. I'm definitely going to get an "A" on this paper now!" Well, the truth is, while you should feel proud about having articulated the beginnings of your argument, you still have some important work to do if you want to make your writing more sophisticated and "sell" it to other smart readers. To be honest, a lot of undergraduate writers never really make it beyond this point, and it's a real shame, since they are so close to breaking through to the next level of critical writing!

Step back from those opening lines on Irving for just a minute and think about how an educated person who hasn't spent the last several weeks reading Irving would respond if she/he picked up your paper and started reading it. Better yet, let's say you picked up the latest issue of a fancy critical journal like *American Literature* and you read those lines above. "Ugh!" you'd say, "this sounds so *simplistic*!" and you'd throw down the essay and move on with your life. The truth is that those opening lines are simplistic, and they have the air of a high-school English theme. They're simplistic because *all* they offer is the rock-bottom basics: author, story, subject, simple argument. Moreover, the writing itself is a little stilted; it feels forced, as if the author were writing for some robotic English teacher who was merely checking off a list of basic components in order to assign a grade. In short, *the writing here is very literal: it makes the story itself, not*

*the ideas contained within the essay, the most important reason for writing.*

Understanding this difference makes ALL the difference in the world when it comes to critical writing. It is crucial that you break away from the “book report” mentality when you are mastering the art of critical writing. Part of breaking away from this mentality is learning the difference between summary and argumentation (as explained in Part Two, Section II) of this booklet; but equally important is learning how to express your arguments in ways that don’t force them to hide behind stilted and limiting prose that still sounds like the 500-word “themes” you wrote in high school. Just because you’re writing about a text doesn’t mean that you can’t frame that writing in a way that brings your ideas and your own prose style to the forefront.

One way to make those opening lines about “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” more appealing to readers, and more sophisticated in their argumentation, is to rewrite them from a more *abstract* point of view. Reread the lines again, and then step back once more and ask yourself what’s really being discussed here. Remember, as you ask yourself this question, avoid the literal answer which is, of course, “Irving’s story ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.’” Avoid, too, the equally literal answer of “how Irving portrays his characters.” Both of these answers are limiting in that they don’t really get beyond the “I must report on this text” mentality. Instead, wouldn’t it be fair to say that what’s being introduced by these opening lines is an essay on *gender roles*? That’s right, whether you meant to sound like a feminist theorist or not, you’ve actually written lines that point to how Irving’s text can teach us something (you don’t quite say what yet) about how gender roles function in American society. The next step in writing this critical essay would be to develop a specific series of statements about how our thinking about gender is put into play by the story. These sentences should have the specificity of the early ones, but they should be about your *abstract topic*—gender roles—and not your literal topic, Irving’s story. It’s important here not to confuse *abstract* with *general*. You still need to write about specifics, but you can do so in an abstract way that won’t bore your readers!

So, at last, consider the following new introduction to the essay on “Sleepy Hollow”:

If all knowledge about what gender is were to be based on Washington Irving’s short story “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” it might seem as if gender were a fixed and highly rigid personal quality, one that doomed people, much like fate, to live out a specific course in life. Irving’s consuming men, embodied most strikingly in the figure of Ichabod Crane, and his consumable women, represented by Katrina van Tassel, suggest that gender is not only fixed, but tied to the imperatives of capitalism: masculinity is defined by its desire to consume, and femininity by its ability to satiate that desire.

The differences between these opening lines and the earlier ones is rather striking, isn’t it? And yet, both introductions address the very same issues. In the latter one, however, the writing is much more powerful because it employs specific yet abstract claims to frame a discussion of Irving’s story.

One important thing to notice here is that the move to an abstract presentation of the topic required the introduction of a new idea, “the imperatives of capitalism.” Don’t be afraid, when thinking about your own ideas abstractly, to pursue connections to other ideas that may cross your mind. Often, in moving to the abstract level of presentation, you make the essential intellectual connections that help you grasp your own “big picture” ideas. In fact, the move to the abstract is precisely an attempt to grasp these ideas—to see how one seemingly isolated part of a story—like the description of a character as a bird or a piece of fruit—is actually an important point of entry for thinking about meaty topics, like capitalism and gender roles.

## **Part Two: The Practice of Critical Writing**

## I. Thesis Statements

A thesis is the statement of your argument. All critical writing must have a specific, detailed thesis statement that reveals your perspective, and, like any good argument, your perspective must be one which is debatable. (OWL)

### A. Do's and Don'ts

In crafting a thesis statement, you would *not* want to make an argument of this sort:

Shakespeare's Hamlet is a play about a young man who seeks revenge.

That doesn't *say* anything—it's basically just a summary and is hardly debatable. A better, though not ideal, thesis would be this:

Hamlet experiences internal conflict because he is in love with his mother.

That is debatable, controversial even. The rest of a paper with this argument as its thesis will be an attempt to show, using specific examples from the text and evidence from scholars, (1) *how* Hamlet is in love with his mother, (2) *why* he's in love with her, and (3) *what* implications there are for reading the play in this manner. The reason this thesis isn't ideal, however, is that it doesn't offer an answer to the "so what" question. Why should anyone care that Hamlet's internal conflict is a result of his love for his mother? If you can answer this question, you'll have a great thesis.

You also want to avoid a thesis statement like this:

Spirituality means different things to different people. King Lear, The book of Romans, and Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance each view the spirit differently.

Again, that says nothing that's not already self-evident. Why bother writing a paper about that? You're not writing an essay to list works that have nothing in common other than a general topic like "spirituality." You want to find certain works or authors that, while they may have several differences, do have some specific, unifying point. That point is your thesis.

A better thesis would be this:

Lear, Romans, and Zen each view the soul as the center of human personality.

Then you prove it, using examples from the texts that show that the soul is the center of personality.

Source: Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL), "Writing about Literature" Handout ([http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl\\_lit.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_lit.html))

## **B. More Do's and Don'ts**

A thesis is never a question. Readers of academic essays expect to have questions discussed, explored, or even answered. A question ("Why did communism collapse in Eastern Europe?") is not an argument, and without an argument, a thesis is dead in the water.

A thesis is never a list. "For political, economic, social, and cultural reasons, communism collapsed in Eastern Europe" does a good job of "telegraphing" the reader what to expect in the essay—a section about political reasons, a section about economic reasons, a section about social reasons, and a section about cultural reasons. However, political, economic, social and cultural reasons are pretty much the only possible reasons why communism could collapse. This sentence lacks tension and doesn't advance an argument. Everyone knows that politics, economics, and culture are important.

A thesis should never be vague, combative, or confrontational. An ineffective thesis would be, "Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe because communism is evil." This is hard to argue (Evil from whose perspective? What does evil mean?), and it is likely to mark you as moralistic and judgmental rather than rational and thorough. It also may spark a defensive reaction from readers sympathetic to communism. If readers strongly disagree with you right off the bat, they may stop reading.

An effective thesis has a definable, arguable claim. "While cultural forces contributed to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of economies played the key role in driving its decline" is an effective thesis sentence that "telegraphs," so that the reader expects the essay to have a section about cultural forces and another about the disintegration of economies. This thesis makes a definite, arguable claim: that the disintegration of economies played a more important role than cultural forces in defeating communism in Eastern Europe. The reader would react to this statement by thinking, "Perhaps what the author says is true, but I am not convinced. I want to read further to see how the author argues this claim."

A thesis should be as clear and specific as possible. Avoid overused, general terms and abstractions. For example, "Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe because of the ruling elite's inability to address the economic concerns of the people" is more powerful than "Communism collapsed due to societal discontent."

Source: Writing Center at Harvard, author Maxine Rodburg  
(<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/Thesis.html>)

### C. Word Choice and Thesis Writing

One of the most common problems with writing good thesis sentences is finding the words or phrases that best capture both the important elements and the significance of the essay's argument. It is not always easy to summarize several paragraphs or several pages into concise key terms that, when combined in one sentence, can effectively describe the argument. But finding the right words offers writers a significant edge in the clarity and organization of their arguments. Concise and appropriate terms will help both the writer and the reader keep track of what the essay will show, and how it will show it. Graders, in particular, like to see clearly stated thesis statements.

Let's look at one example: You've been assigned to write an essay that contrasts the river and shore scenes in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Your first effort at a thesis is this:

There are many important river and shore scenes in *Huckleberry Finn*.

The problem with this thesis statement can be put in terms of word choice. The word "important"-like "interesting"-is both overused and vague; it suggests that the author has an opinion but gives very little indication about the framework of that opinion. As a result the sentence gives your reader almost no idea what the essay is going to argue. She knows you're going to talk about river and shore scenes, but not what you're going to say. So you give it another try:

The contrasting river and shore scenes in *Huckleberry Finn* suggest a return to nature.

In terms of word choice, this is an improvement in one regard: through a more vivid choice of words-"return to nature"- your reader has a better idea of where the paper is headed. On the other hand, she still does not know how this return to nature is crucial to your understanding of the novel. So, after several more drafts and revisions, you arrive at the following thesis statement:

The contrasting river and shore scenes in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* suggest that to find American democratic ideals, one should return to nature.

This is a strong thesis because it offers a sophisticated argument, and because the key terms it uses to make this argument are clear. By saying that the contrast between the river and shore scenes shows that a return to nature will help recover American democratic ideals creates at least three key terms: the contrast between river and shore scenes, a return to nature, and American democratic ideals. By itself, each key term is merely a topic-an element of the argument but not the argument itself (as we've seen in the first two examples above).

The argument, then, becomes clear to the reader through the way in which you combine key terms. In this case, the essay will contrast river and shore scenes to show that they suggest the recovery of American democratic ideals through a return to nature. While one can certainly write a good argument on the river and shore scenes without such clearly



defined key terms, it will be easier to follow the construction of the argument by using these or other equally concise terms.

In other words, repetition can be good. You can continue to reemphasize the argument by using the key terms in your topic sentences. This kind of repetition can give your paper cohesion. (Whereas repeating the same point over and over again can give your reader narcolepsy.)

Source: UNC Writing Center, “Word Choice/Wordiness” Handout  
[http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/word\\_choice.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/word_choice.html)

## **II. Close Reading**

Close reading is the heart and soul of all academic writing in the humanities. Without close reading, our arguments would have neither evidence nor persuasive argument. During close reading, you engage with very specific parts of a text and dazzle your reader with your interpretive ability.

### **A. Close Reading Defined**

When you close read, you observe facts and details about the text. You may focus on a particular passage, or on the text as a whole. Your aim may be to notice all striking features of the text, including rhetorical features, structural elements, and cultural references; or, your aim may be to notice only selected features of the text—for instance, oppositions and correspondences, or particular historical references. Either way, making these observations constitutes the first step in the process of close reading.

The second step is interpreting your observations. What we're basically talking about here is inductive reasoning: moving from the observation of particular facts and details to a conclusion, or interpretation, based on those observations. And, as with inductive reasoning, close reading requires careful gathering of data (your observations) and careful thinking about what these data add up to.

### **B. How to Close Read: Lesson One**

1. Read with a pencil in hand, and annotate the text.

"Annotating" means underlining or highlighting key words and phrases—anything that strikes you as surprising or significant, or that raises questions—as well as making notes in the margins. When we respond to a text in this way, we not only force ourselves to pay close attention, but we also begin to think with the author about the evidence—the first step in moving from reader to writer.

Here's a sample passage by anthropologist and naturalist Loren Eiseley. It's from his essay called "The Hidden Teacher."

. . . I once received an unexpected lesson from a spider. It happened far away on a rainy morning in the West. I had come up a long gulch looking for fossils, and there, just at eye level, lurked a huge yellow-and-black orb spider, whose web was moored to the tall spears of buffalo grass at the edge of the arroyo. It was her universe, and her senses did not extend beyond the lines and spokes of the great wheel she inhabited. Her extended claws could feel every vibration throughout that delicate structure. She knew the tug of wind, the fall of a raindrop, the flutter of a trapped moth's wing. Down one spoke of the web ran a stout ribbon of gossamer on which she could hurry out to investigate her prey. Curious, I took a pencil from my pocket and touched a strand of the web. Immediately there was a response. The web, plucked by its menacing occupant, began to vibrate until it was a blur. Anything that had brushed claw or wing against that amazing snare would be thoroughly entrapped. As the vibrations slowed, I could see the owner fingering her guidelines for signs of struggle. A pencil point was an intrusion into this universe for which no precedent existed. Spider was circumscribed by spider ideas; its universe was spider universe. All outside was irrational, extraneous, at best raw material for spider. As I proceeded on my way along the gully, like a vast impossible shadow, I realized that in the world of spider I did not exist.

2. Look for patterns in the things you've noticed about the text--repetitions, contradictions, similarities.

What do we notice in the previous passage? First, Eiseley tells us that the orb spider taught him a lesson, thus inviting us to consider what that lesson might be. But we'll let that larger question go for now and focus on particulars—we're working inductively. In Eiseley's next sentence, we find that this encounter "happened far away on a rainy morning in the West." This opening locates us in another time, another place, and has echoes of the traditional fairy tale opening: "Once upon a time . . .". What does this mean? Why would Eiseley want to remind us of tales and myth? We don't know yet, but it's curious. We make a note of it.

Details of language convince us of our location "in the West"—gulch, arroyo, and buffalo grass. Beyond that, though, Eiseley calls the spider's web "her universe" and "the great wheel she inhabited," as in the great wheel of the heavens, the galaxies. By metaphor, then, the web becomes the universe, "spider universe." And the spider, "she," whose "senses did not extend beyond" her universe, knows "the flutter of a trapped moth's wing" and hurries "to investigate her prey." Eiseley says he could see her "fingering her guidelines for signs of struggle." These details of language, and others, characterize the "owner" of the web as thinking, feeling, striving—a creature much like ourselves. But so what?

3. Ask questions about the patterns you've noticed—especially how and why.

To answer some of our own questions, we have to look back at the text and see what else is going on. For instance, when Eiseley touches the web with his pencil point—an event "for which no precedent existed"—the spider, naturally, can make no sense of the pencil phenomenon: "Spider was circumscribed by spider ideas." Of course, spiders don't have ideas, but we do. And if we start seeing this passage in human terms, seeing the spider's situation in "her universe" as analogous to our situation in our universe (which we think of as the universe), then we may decide that Eiseley is suggesting that our universe (the universe) is also finite, that our ideas are circumscribed, and that beyond the limits of our universe there might be phenomena as fully beyond our ken as Eiseley himself—that "vast impossible shadow"—was beyond the understanding of the spider.

But why vast and impossible, why a shadow? Does Eiseley mean God, extra-terrestrials? Or something else, something we cannot name or even imagine? Is this the lesson? Now we see that the sense of tale telling or myth at the start of the passage, plus this reference to something vast and unseen, weighs against a simple E.T. sort of interpretation. And though the spider can't explain, or even apprehend, Eiseley's pencil point, that pencil point is explainable—rational after all. So maybe not God. We need more evidence, so we go back to the text—the whole essay now, not just this one passage—and look for additional clues. And as we proceed in this way, paying close attention to the evidence, asking questions, formulating interpretations, we engage in a process that is central to essay writing and to the whole academic enterprise: in other words, we reason toward our own ideas.

Source: Writing Center at Harvard, author Patricia Kain  
(<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CloseReading.html>)

### **C. How to Close Read: Lesson Two: Plot Summary vs. Analysis**

Here's a passage from Joseph Conrad's 1899 novel, *Heart of Darkness*, a story about the presence of European colonizers in the Congo region of West Africa:

I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know I am not used to such ceremonies, and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy—I don't know—something not quite right; and I was glad to get out. In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly. People were arriving, and the younger one was walking back and forth introducing them. The old one sat on her chair. Her flat cloth slippers were propped up on a foot-warmer, and a cat reposed on her lap. She wore a starched white affair on her head, had a wart on one cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles hung on the tip of her nose. She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent

placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. *Ave!* Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant.* Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again—not half, by a long way. (25)

**Now here’s a summary of the passage from Conrad’s novel:**

This scene occurs towards the beginning of Book I and describes Marlowe’s encounter with the company he’ll be working for in the Congo.

Marlowe immediately feels uneasy when he walks into the office. He is not exactly sure what is the matter, but there is “something ominous in the air” and a feeling of conspiracy. There are two strange women, one young and one old, who are knitting “black wool feverishly.” They guard “the door of Darkness”: the younger cheerfully introducing people into the unknown, and the elder looking at those who enter with indifference. Marlowe observes that he’ll often think about these two women when he is in the Congo, a statement that suggests that the women are important and that Conrad inserts them into this scene for a reason.

**What’s wrong with summarizing?**

Nothing is technically “wrong” with it, it’s just not what scholars do. The business of literary studies is analyzing literature and this summary doesn’t really do that (not to mention it’s pretty boring to read!). It is like reading a *Cliff Notes* summary of the scene; it doesn’t go beyond the surface of plot level. Summary doesn’t “do” anything in the sense of illustrating a point or furthering an argument. It does, however, take up space in student essays. Too much summary means not enough time for analysis and interpretation.

What if I’m trying to analyze, but find I keep summarizing?

The most common reason you might feel compelled to retell a story is because you haven’t yet worked through what you think about it. Your analysis may still be in the percolating stage: you know that a passage is going to be important to your final argument, but you’re just not able to say why.

If you find yourself summarizing:

- Ask yourself *why* you are summarizing. What is the point you are trying to make? What is it *about* or *in* this particular scene or passage that is *essential* for making an interpretive point?
- If you still *can't stop* summarizing, ask yourself if you really have something intelligent and interesting to say about the text. Do you really have an argument yet? (This is a painful but necessary question to ask).

**Here's a sample analysis of the passage from Conrad, using several instances of close reading:**

This scene occurs towards the beginning of Book I and describes Marlowe's initial encounter with the company he'll be working for in the Congo.

Marlowe immediately feels uneasy when he walks into the office, noting that there is "something ominous in the air" and a feeling of conspiracy. This statement is repeated at the end of the paragraph, in which Marlowe states, "An eerie feeling came over me." The description of the two women at the company office is sandwiched between these statements, a position that invites the reader to consider that the women and their behavior and appearance are at least in part responsible for the ominous and eerie feeling. And indeed, there is something eerie about the women. For one, they guard "the door of Darkness." While the meaning of "darkness" constantly shifts throughout the novel, here the capitalization of the word (which happens infrequently) suggests that the women are guarding the entrance to a particular place—perhaps metaphorically hell? Certainly they are associated with death in this passage. They are described as knitting black wool as if for "a pall," a fabric draped over a coffin. Given the continuous way in which Conrad employs black and white imagery in this novel, it is undoubtedly significant that the object they are knitting is made of "black wool." "Black wool" is repeated three times in this paragraph and appears on the previous page as well. The sense in this passage is that the women are not only guarding "the door of Darkness," but also constructing the darkness itself through their feverish knitting.

Two pages later the reader is told, "It's queer how out of touch with truth women are" (27). As the novel unfolds we do see some out of touch women, including the aunt and, perhaps most notably, Kurtz's "Intended." But in this passage it seems as if these women are anything but "out of touch." Rather, the older woman in particular seems to possess a keen awareness of what is about to happen to those who join the company: "she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful." This "unconcerned wisdom," which provokes uneasiness in Marlowe, does not give the reader the impression that these women are "out of touch." Instead, they are much like the station manager who has a genius for producing unease (37) or the Accountant, who is unconcerned about those suffering around him. Thus, while Marlowe implies that women are "out of touch"—that they really don't understand what is actually happening around them—this passage makes them seem as much part of the colonial machinery as are the men that the narrator describes.

Further support for this reading can be found towards the end of the novella, when the knitting women appear at a seeming incongruous moment. Marlowe is in the process of hunting down Kurtz and suddenly, as he comes upon him on all-fours, he recalls the old woman he saw at the beginning of the novel: “The knitting old woman with the cat obtruded herself upon my memory as a most improper person to be sitting at the other end of such an affair” (81). Marlowe is somewhat dismissive of this thought, calling it imbecilic (81), but I would suggest that the old woman’s sudden appearance makes complete sense. While the narrator suggests that women are out of touch, this passage demonstrates that they are anything but—that they are implicated right from the beginning in the colonial project. As the narrator goes on to tell the reader, the reason for the lie, the “idea” that sustains colonialism, is that women are too fragile to accept reality. In actuality, the novel projects onto women responsibility for the unchecked expansion and the atrocities that happen, even though greed and economic motivations are as much (if not more) the root cause. In a sense, the novel makes women the “knitters” in the fabric of colonialism.

### **Things to Keep in Mind**

- The point isn’t whether one analysis is right or wrong, but rather whether a reading is sustainable given the evidence you provide. This example is meant to give you a sense of just how much one can do with a passage.
- You only have a limited amount of time and space to discuss something and you don’t want to waste it quoting a part of the text that you’re not going to say anything about. When you quote from a text, ask yourself these questions:
  1. Why am I quoting here?
  2. Am I trying to illustrate a point, demonstrate something, etc?
  3. Have I made it clear to the reader how, exactly, the quotation does this (that is, have I taken my reader through my logic)?
  4. Do I “quote and run,” or do I take the time to take my reader through the quotation under discussion, showing the reader how my quotation illustrates or furthers my point?
- If you aren’t really adding any interpretive comments to a quote—that is, if you’re not really “doing” anything with it (proving, illustrating, demonstrating, suggesting, arguing)—then the quote doesn’t belong in your essay.

Lesson Two courtesy of Diane Cady, Ph.D., Saint John’s University, New York; edited by Gregory Tomso.

### III. Refining Close Readings and Making Them a Part of Your Larger Argument

The work of formulating a thesis and close reading a text described in sections I and II above will most likely take place simultaneously. Rarely do we write or think in ways that be fully explained in outline form. However, once you have a tentative thesis and you know which parts of a text you want to read closely, you can refine your close reading work by making even more careful choices about which parts of a text you'll be analyzing and interpreting. For instance, you can also decide how much time to spend sharing your close readings with your readers. Will you choose just one passage, or perhaps two or three? Does one passage need several paragraphs worth of your attention, while another only needs a sentence or two? Knowing how much attention to give a passage is crucial in critical writing.

Keep in mind that close reading, as discussed in section II above, means far more than simply stating evidence or quoting the text. In fact, the interpretive aspect of close reading is far more essential than merely listing examples or pasting quotations into a paper. With this fact in mind, choose passages or even smaller portions of a text (a single line or phrase is often enough) that you'll be able to say the most about. Again, *readers tend to be more dazzled with your interpretations of specific language than with a lot of quotes from the book*. Select the details that will allow you to show off your own reasoning skills and allow you to help the reader see the story in a way he or she may not have seen it before.

For example, if you were writing a paper on *Frankenstein*, it might seem interesting to mention Victor Frankenstein's youthful reading in alchemy, but your reader will be more impressed by some analysis of how these writers—who pursued magical principles of chemistry and physics—reflect the ambition of his own goals. Merely referring to something in the text is not enough! You have to make that reference take on meaning by placing an interpretive framework of your own making around it. In most cases, interpreting your evidence merely involves putting into your paper what is already in your head. As Eve Sedgwick once wrote, "It's only by risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative." Remember that we, as readers, are lazy--all of us. We don't want to have to figure out a writer's reasoning for ourselves; we want all the thinking to be done for us in the paper.

Once you have a clear thesis you can go back to your list of selected elements (passages, images, specific words or phrases) for close reading and group all the similar details together. The ideas that tie these clusters of close readings together can then become the claims that you'll make in your paper. As you begin thinking about what claims you can make (i.e. what kinds of conclusion you can come to), *keep in mind that they should not only relate to your evidence (that is, your close readings) but should clearly support your thesis as well*. Once you're satisfied with the way you've grouped your evidence and with the way that your claims relate to your thesis, you can begin to consider the most logical

way to organize each of those claims. At this stage, some writers find detailed outlines helpful while others simply group their evidence in a less rigid way and let the finer points of organization take shape as they write.

Source: UNC Writing Center, “Writing About Literature” Handout (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature.html>), additions by G. Tomso

## **IV. Structuring your Essay**

When putting together your paper, here are two crucial considerations to keep in mind:

### **A. Choose your Examples Carefully, and Limit their Number**

Avoid the temptation to load your paper with too many examples of the same idea or too many passages from your story. If you make a real commitment to close reading, you won’t suffer from this problem too much. One or two thorough close readings is more than enough to fill up several pages. Pick the very best example for your thesis, offer your interpretation, and then briefly reference other examples or leave them out altogether. If you find yourself quoting passages without interpreting them, you’re not taking full advantage of your evidence or demonstrating your reasoning skills.

### **B. Death to the Five Paragraph Essay!**

Avoid, at all costs, the “five paragraph essay” or “keyhole diagram” approach to writing critical essays. The five paragraph essay format you learned in high school encourages you to repeat three examples of the same point. Who wants that much repetition? Your goal is to find a more complex structure that fits your particular argument. Don’t cram your ideas into a pre-existing format—doing so generally leads to a failure of argumentation! Successful college-level writing requires moving beyond the five paragraph model—that means coming up with complex arguments that have real intellectual significance. If you find yourself writing a typical five paragraph essay—repeating one example after another without really going anywhere—then you need to re-evaluate your thesis to see if it is complex enough to support your time and efforts. (Note: You might end up writing an essay that has five paragraphs but that doesn’t follow the stultifying format of listing three similar examples for no intelligible reason. There’s nothing wrong with the number five—only with the “repeat your example three times in three separate paragraphs” format.)

One unfortunate result of people writing bad five-paragraph essays is that they allow us to completely avoid two of the most important elements of critical essays: topic sentences and signposts. Read the next section for more information on both..

## **V. Structuring Your Argument: Topic Sentences and Signposts**



Topic sentences and signposts make an essay's claims clear to a reader. Good essays contain both. Topic sentences reveal the main point of a paragraph. They show the relationship of each paragraph to the essay's thesis, telegraph the point of a paragraph, and tell your reader what to expect in the paragraph that follows. Topic sentences also establish their relevance right away, making clear why the points they're making are important to the essay's main ideas. They argue rather than report. Signposts, as their name suggests, prepare the reader for a change in the argument's direction. They show how far the essay's argument has progressed vis-a-vis the claims of the thesis.

Topic sentences and signposts occupy a middle ground in the writing process. They are neither the first thing a writer needs to address (thesis and the broad strokes of an essay's structure are) nor the last (that's when you attend to sentence-level editing and polishing). Topic sentences and signposts deliver an essay's structure and meaning to a reader, so they are useful diagnostic tools to the writer—they let you know if your thesis is arguable—and essential guides to the reader.

## A. Forms of Topic Sentences

Sometimes topic sentences are actually two or even three sentences long. If the first makes a claim, the second might reflect on that claim, explaining it further. Think of these sentences as asking and answering two critical questions: How does the phenomenon you're discussing operate? Why does it operate as it does?

There's no set formula for writing a topic sentence. Rather, you should work to vary the form your topic sentences take. Repeated too often, any method grows wearisome. Here are a few approaches.

**Complex sentences.** Topic sentences at the beginning of a paragraph frequently combine with a transition from the previous paragraph. This might be done by writing a sentence that contains both subordinate and independent clauses, as in the example below.

Although *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* depicts an unknown, middle-class woman at an ordinary task, the image is more than "realistic"; the painter [Vermeer] has imposed his own order upon it to strengthen it.

This sentence employs a useful principle of transitions: always move from old to new information. The subordinate clause (from "although" to "task") recaps information from previous paragraphs; the independent clauses (starting with "the image" and "the painter") introduce the new information's claim about how the image works ("more than realistic") and why it works as it does (Vermeer "strengthens" the image by "imposing order").

**Questions.** Questions, sometimes in pairs, also make good topic sentences (and signposts). Consider the following: "Does the promise of stability justify this unchanging hierarchy?" We may fairly assume that the paragraph or section that follows will answer

the question. Questions are by definition a form of inquiry, and thus demand an answer. Good essays strive for this forward momentum.

**Bridge sentences.** Like questions, "bridge sentences" (the term is John Trimble's) make an excellent substitute for more formal topic sentences. Bridge sentences indicate both what came before and what comes next (they "bridge" paragraphs) without the formal trappings of multiple clauses. For example: "But there is a clue to this puzzle."

**Pivots.** Topic sentences don't always appear at the beginning of a paragraph. When they come in the middle, they indicate that the paragraph will change direction, or "pivot." This strategy is particularly useful for dealing with counter-evidence: a paragraph starts out conceding a point or stating a fact ("Psychologist Sharon Hymer uses the term "narcissistic friendship" to describe the early stage of a friendship like the one between Celie and Shug"); after following up on this initial statement with evidence, it then reverses direction and establishes a claim ("Yet ... this narcissistic stage of Celie and Shug's relationship is merely a transitory one. Hymer herself concedes . . . "). The pivot always needs a signal, a word like "but," "yet," or "however," or a longer phrase or sentence that indicates an about-face. It often needs more than one sentence to make its point.

## B. Signposts

Signposts operate as topic sentences for whole sections in an essay. (In longer essays, sections often contain more than a single paragraph.) They inform a reader that the essay is taking a turn in its argument: delving into a related topic such as a counter-argument, stepping up its claims with a complication, or pausing to give essential historical or scholarly background. Because they reveal the architecture of the essay itself, signposts remind readers of what the essay's stakes are: what it's about, and why it's being written.

Signposting can be accomplished in a sentence or two at the beginning of a paragraph or in whole paragraphs that serve as transitions between one part of the argument and the next. The following example comes from an essay examining how a painting by Monet, *The Gare Saint-Lazare: Arrival of a Train*, challenges Zola's declarations about Impressionist art. The student writer wonders whether Monet's Impressionism is really as devoted to avoiding "ideas" in favor of direct sense impressions as Zola's claims would seem to suggest. This is the start of the essay's third section:

It is evident in this painting that Monet found his Gare Saint-Lazare motif fascinating at the most fundamental level of the play of light as well as the loftiest level of social relevance. *Arrival of a Train* explores both extremes of expression. At the fundamental extreme, Monet satisfies the Impressionist objective of capturing the full-spectrum effects of light on a scene.

The writer signposts this section in the first sentence, reminding readers of the stakes of the essay itself with the simultaneous references to sense impression ("play of light") and

intellectual content ("social relevance"). The second sentence follows up on this idea, while the third serves as a topic sentence for the paragraph. The paragraph after that starts off with a topic sentence about the "cultural message" of the painting, something that the signposting sentence predicts by not only reminding readers of the essay's stakes but also, and quite clearly, indicating what the section itself will contain.

Without effect signposts, readers will be lost in your essay. There will be little or no sense of transitioning from one idea or argumentative task to the next. If your professors frequently write "TRANSITION?" in the margins of your paper, or between your paragraphs, you are likely having trouble with signposting and perhaps with writing clear topic sentences as well.

Source: Writing Center at Harvard, author Elizabeth Abrams  
(<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/TopicSentences.html>)

### C. Some Templates for Beginners

The following templates can help you begin using topic and signpost sentences in your essays. These templates are obviously a bit clunky, but you can use them until you're more comfortable with the demanding logic required by critical thinking and writing.

#### Template Option I

I am analyzing \_\_\_\_\_A\_\_\_\_\_ in order to argue \_\_\_\_\_B\_\_\_\_\_.

An important element of \_\_\_\_\_B\_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_C\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_C\_\_\_\_\_ is significant because \_\_\_\_\_.

#### Template Option II

I am analyzing \_\_\_\_\_A\_\_\_\_\_ in order to argue \_\_\_\_\_B\_\_\_\_\_.

In order to complicate our understanding of \_\_\_\_\_B\_\_\_\_\_, I will now discuss \_\_\_\_\_C\_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_C\_\_\_\_\_ complicates our understanding of \_\_\_\_\_B\_\_\_\_\_ in

the following ways: \_\_\_\_\_X\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_Y\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_Z\_\_\_\_\_.

## VI. Some Strategies for Writing an Effective Introduction

**A.** When writing an introduction for a critical paper, keep in mind the following maxim: “GIVE AWAY THE STORE!” If you were a shopkeeper, this is the last thing you’d want an employee to do—how could you make any money if your employees kept giving things away? In critical writing, however, you are not subject to the imperatives of a profit economy, and the best introductions are those that get right to the heart of the matter and detail for readers exactly what the paper will discuss and how that discussion will take place. This means stating your thesis, the texts you’ll be analyzing, the most important claims made in the body of your essay, the methods you’ll be using to make your claims, and the reason you’re writing in the first place (i.e., what makes your thesis important or interesting to a larger, educated audience—this is the famous “so what” question discussed in Part One, Section IV-E above). You don’t have to mention all of this in great detail—except, of course, for your thesis—but you do need to mention ALL of these things in an introduction. For some reason, high school teachers often teach their students to write titillating introductions that never get around to stating the significance of an argument or anything about its conclusion. This makes absolutely no sense for busy academics who want to pick up a paper and know immediately what it’s about. Critical introductions are not times to hold back! GIVE AWAY THE STORE!

**B.** Write your introduction last. You may think that you have to write your introduction first, but that isn’t necessarily true, and it isn’t always the most effective way to craft a good introduction. In fact, it’s virtually impossible to introduce a paper until you’ve written it. You may find that you don’t know what you are going to argue at the beginning of the writing process, and only through the experience of writing your paper and working out your claims and close readings do you discover your main argument. It is perfectly fine to start out thinking that you want to argue a particular point, but wind up arguing something slightly or even dramatically different by the time you’ve written most of the paper. The writing process can be an important way to organize your ideas, think through complicated issues, refine your thoughts, and develop a sophisticated argument. However, an introduction written at the beginning of that discovery process will not necessarily reflect what you wind up with at the end. You will need to revise your paper to make sure that the introduction, all of the evidence, and the conclusion reflect the argument you intend. Sometimes it helps to write up all of your evidence first and then write the introduction -- that way you can be sure that the introduction matches the body of the paper. Note: Don’t be afraid to write a tentative introduction first and then change it later. Some people find that they need to write some kind of introduction in order to get the writing process started. That’s fine, but if you are one of those people, be sure to return to your initial introduction later and rewrite.

**C.** Just because your introduction has to meet the demands of critical writing, doesn’t mean it has to be artless. The elements mentioned in section “A” above are the bare minimum for an introduction. Most good introductions will add other elements—a short,

catchy example, for instance—that shows off the paper’s “wares” to potentially interested readers. (Perhaps critical writing does owe something to the demands of the profit economy after all!)

**D.** Pay special attention to your first sentence. If any sentence in your paper is going to be completely free of errors and vagueness, it should be your first one. Start off on the right foot with your readers by making sure that the first sentence actually says something useful and that it does so in an interesting and error-free way. Be straightforward and confident.

### **E. Five Kinds of Less Effective Introductions**

1. **The Place Holder Introduction.** When you don't have much to say on a given topic, it is easy to create this kind of introduction. Essentially, this kind of weaker introduction contains several sentences that are vague and don't really say much. They exist just to take up the "introduction space" in your paper. If you had something more effective to say, you would probably say it, but in the meantime this paragraph is just a place holder.

Weak Example: Slavery was one of the greatest tragedies in American history. There were many different aspects of slavery. Each created different kinds of problems for enslaved people.

2. **The Webster's Dictionary Introduction.** This introduction begins by giving the dictionary definition of one or more of the words crucial to the paper. This introduction strategy is on the right track—if you write one of these, you may be trying to establish the important terms of the discussion, and this move builds a bridge to the reader by offering a common, agreed-upon definition for a key idea. You may also be looking for an authority that will lend credibility to your paper. However, anyone can look a word up in the dictionary and copy down what Webster says - it may be far more interesting for you (and your reader) if you develop your own definition of the term in the specific context of your class and assignment. Also recognize that the dictionary is also not a particularly authoritative work—it doesn't take into account the context of your course and doesn't offer particularly detailed information. If you feel that you must seek out an authority, try to find one that is very relevant and specific. Perhaps a quotation from a source reading might prove better? Dictionary introductions are also ineffective simply because they are so overused. Many graders will see twenty or more papers that begin in this way, greatly decreasing the dramatic impact that any one of those papers will have. You might find a more creative way to define your terms, or perhaps you could weave a definition into a more attention-grabbing introductory paragraph.

Weak Example: Webster's dictionary defines slavery as "the state of being a slave," as "the practice of owning slaves," and as "a condition of hard work and subjection."

3. **The Dawn of Man Introduction.** This kind of introduction generally makes broad sweeping statements about the relevance of this topic since the beginning of time. It is

usually very general (similar to the place holder introduction) and fails to connect to the thesis. You may write this kind of introduction when you don't have much to say—which is precisely why it is ineffective.

Weak Example: Since the dawn of man, slavery has been a problem in human history.

4. The Book Report Introduction. This introduction is what you had to do for your fifth-grade book reports. It gives the name and author of the book you are writing about, tells what the book is about, and offers other basic facts about the book. You might resort to this sort of introduction when you are trying to fill space because it's a familiar, comfortable format. It is ineffective because it offers details that your reader already knows and that are irrelevant to the thesis.

Weak Example: Frederick Douglass wrote his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, in the 1840s. It was published in 1986 by Penguin Books. He tells the story of his life.

If you want more advanced help on writing introductions, read Part One, Section V, Part B of this booklet. It's a section called "Moving from Literal to Abstract Thinking."

Source: UNC Writing Center, "Introductions" handout  
(<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/introductions.htm>)

## VII. Warrants

Warrants are statements that connect claims to evidence or reasons. Stephen Toulmin, a philosopher and rhetorician, has drawn our attention to the importance of warrants in making critical arguments. You'd be surprised to learn how many people fail to pay attention to warrants in their writing. Many writers assume that the link between their evidence and their claims is clear. All too often, this is far from the case.

To understand warrants, consider the following simple example:

You should eat your vegetables because they're full of antioxidants.

Claim: You should eat your vegetables.

Reason: Vegetables are full of antioxidants.

Warrant: Food sources high in antioxidants reduce the risk of certain cancers and promote cardiovascular well-being.

Notice, in this example, the warrant is implied rather than stated directly. In critical writing, leaving warrants unstated can be risky business. Readers of academic writing

want to see your thought process spelled out in front of them. Leaving out your warrants will often make your argument weaker because readers won't be able to see clearly how you arrived at your claims; worse yet, they may distrust your claims. As you gain experience as a writer, you will grow more skilled at knowing when to make your warrants explicit and when to leave them implicit in your argument. When in doubt, state your warrants!

Analyzing our warrants provides one useful way of making sure our argumentative logic is sound. Logic is especially important in critical writing since, unlike some other forms of writing, critical writing is meant to persuade a highly skeptical audience. Using logic is an important part of making sure that your argument is rigorous—that it is carefully, even painstakingly, made.

## **VIII. Adding Complexity to Your Argument: Working with Counterarguments**

One way to strengthen your argument and show that you have a deep understanding of the issue you are discussing is to anticipate and address counterarguments or objections. By considering what someone who disagrees with your position might have to say about your argument, you show that you have thought things through, and you dispose of some of the reasons your audience might have for not accepting your argument. Imagine you're writing an argument about student seating in a major university sports stadium. To make the most effective argument possible, you should consider not only what students would say about seating, but also what alumni who have paid a lot to get good seats might say about the issue. You can generate counterarguments by asking yourself what someone who disagrees with you might say about each of the points you've made or about your position as a whole. Consider the conclusion and the premises of your argument, and imagine someone who denies each of them. Then you can see which of these arguments are most worth considering. For example, if you argued "Cats make the best pets. This is because they are clean and independent," you might imagine someone saying "Cats do not make the best pets. They are dirty and needy." Once you have thought up some counterarguments, consider how you will respond to them—will you concede that your opponent has a point but explain why your audience should nonetheless accept your argument? Will you reject the counterargument and explain why it is mistaken? Either way, you will want to leave your reader with a sense that your argument is stronger than opposing arguments.

When you are summarizing opposing arguments, be charitable. Present each argument fairly and objectively, rather than trying to make it look foolish. You want to show that you have seriously considered the many sides of the issue, and that you are not simply attacking or caricaturing your opponents. Also, it is usually better to consider one or two serious counterarguments in some depth, rather than to give a long but superficial list of many different counterarguments and replies. Finally, be sure that your reply is

consistent with your original argument. If considering a counterargument changes your position, you will need to go back and revise your original argument accordingly.

Source: UNC Writing Center, "Effective Academic Writing: The Argument" handout (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/argument.html>)

Here's another example from Maxine Rodburg at Harvard:

Every argument has a counter-argument. If yours doesn't, then it's not an argument—it may be a fact, or an opinion, but it is not an argument. Consider the following statement:

Michael Dukakis lost the 1988 presidential election because he failed to campaign vigorously after the Democratic National Convention.

This statement is on its way to being a thesis. However, it is too easy to imagine possible counter-arguments. For example, a political observer might believe that Dukakis lost because he suffered from a "soft-on-crime" image. If you complicate your thesis by anticipating the counter-argument, you'll strengthen your argument, as shown in the sentence below:

While Dukakis' "soft-on-crime" image hurt his chances in the 1988 election, his failure to campaign vigorously after the Democratic National Convention bore a greater responsibility for his defeat.

Source: Writing Center at Harvard  
(<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/Thesis.html>)

## **IX. Using Logic to Strengthen Your Critical Argument: Understanding and Avoiding Fallacies**

Like warrants and counterarguments, logical fallacies are useful to think about when making arguments. Understanding a few of the most common logical fallacies is part of building a foundation in strong logic that will serve you well as a writer.

Fallacies are defects that weaken arguments. By learning to look for them in your own and others' writing, you can strengthen your ability to evaluate the arguments you make, read, and hear. It is important to realize two things about fallacies: first, fallacious arguments are very, very common and can be quite persuasive, at least to the causal reader or listener. You can find dozens of examples of fallacious reasoning in newspapers, advertisements, and other sources. Second, it is sometimes hard to evaluate whether an argument is fallacious. An argument might be very weak, somewhat weak, somewhat strong, or very strong. An argument that has several stages or parts might have some strong sections and some weak ones. The goal is to look critically at your own arguments and move them away from the "weak" and toward the "strong" end of the continuum.



So what do fallacies look like?

Here are a few of the most common—they show up in student papers all the time.

### **A. Hasty generalization**

Definition: Making assumptions about a whole group or range of cases based on a sample that is inadequate (usually because it is atypical or just too small). Stereotypes about people ("frat boys are drunkards," "grad students are nerdy," etc.) are a common example of the principle underlying hasty generalization.

Example: "My roommate said her philosophy class was hard, and the one I'm in is hard, too. All philosophy classes must be hard!"

Two people's experiences are, in this case, not enough on which to base a conclusion.

Tip: Ask yourself what kind of "sample" you're using: Are you relying on the opinions or experiences of just a few people, or your own experience in just a few situations? If so, consider whether you need more evidence, or perhaps a less sweeping conclusion. (Notice that in the example, the more modest conclusion "Some philosophy classes are hard for some students" would not be a hasty generalization.)

### **B. Slippery slope**

Definition: The arguer claims that a sort of chain reaction, usually ending in some dire consequence, will take place, but there's really not enough evidence for that assumption. The arguer asserts that if we take even one step onto the "slippery slope," we will end up sliding all the way to the bottom; he or she assumes we can't stop halfway down the hill.

Example: "Animal experimentation reduces our respect for life. If we don't respect life, we are likely to be more and more tolerant of violent acts like war and murder. Soon our society will become a battlefield in which everyone constantly fears for their lives. It will be the end of civilization. To prevent this terrible consequence, we should make animal experimentation illegal right now."

Since animal experimentation has been legal for some time and civilization has not yet ended, it seems particularly clear that this chain of events won't necessarily take place. Even if we believe that experimenting on animals reduces respect for life, and loss of respect for life makes us more tolerant of violence, that may be the spot on the hillside at which things stop—we may not slide all the way down to the end of civilization. And so we have not yet been given sufficient reason to accept the arguer's conclusion that we must make animal experimentation illegal right now.

Slippery slope can be a tricky fallacy to identify, since sometimes a chain of events really can be predicted to follow from a certain action. Here's an example that doesn't seem fallacious: "If I fail my swim test, I won't be able to graduate. If I don't graduate, I probably won't be able to get a good job, and I may very well end up doing temp work or flipping burgers for the next year."

Tip: Check your argument for chains of consequences, where you say "if A, then B, and if B, then C," and so forth. Make sure these chains are reasonable.

### **C. Weak analogy**

Definition: Many arguments rely on an analogy between two or more objects, ideas, or situations. If the two things that are being compared aren't really alike in the relevant respects, the analogy is a weak one, and the argument that relies on it commits the fallacy of weak analogy.

Example: "Guns are like hammers—they're both tools with metal parts that could be used to kill someone. And yet it would be ridiculous to restrict the purchase of hammers—so restrictions on purchasing guns are equally ridiculous."

While guns and hammers do share certain features, these features (having metal parts, being tools, and being potentially useful for violence) are not the ones at stake in deciding whether to restrict guns. Rather, we restrict guns because they can easily be used to kill large numbers of people at a distance. This is a feature hammers do not share—it'd be hard to kill a crowd with a hammer. Thus, the analogy is weak, and so is the argument based on it.

If you think about it, you can make an analogy of some kind between almost any two things in the world: "My paper is like a mud puddle because they both get bigger when it rains (I work more when I'm stuck inside) and they're both kind of murky." So the mere fact that you draw an analogy between two things doesn't prove much, by itself.

Arguments by analogy are often used in discussing abortion—arguers frequently compare fetuses with adult human beings, and then argue that treatment that would violate the rights of an adult human being also violates the rights of fetuses. Whether these arguments are good or not depends on the strength of the analogy: Do adult humans and fetuses share the property that gives adult humans rights? If the property that matters is having a human genetic code or the potential for a life full of human experiences, adult humans and fetuses do share that property, so the argument and the analogy are strong; if the property is being self-aware, rational, or able to survive on one's own, adult humans and fetuses don't share it, and the analogy is weak.

Tip: Identify what properties are important to the claim you're making, and see whether the two things you're comparing both share those properties.

## D. Appeal to authority

Definition: Often we add strength to our arguments by referring to respected sources or authorities and explaining their positions on the issues we're discussing. If, however, we try to get readers to agree with us simply by impressing them with a famous name or by appealing to a supposed authority who really isn't much of an expert, we commit the fallacy of appeal to authority.

Example: "We should abolish the death penalty. Many respected people, such as actor Guy Handsome, have publicly stated their opposition to it."

While Guy Handsome may be an authority on matters having to do with acting, there's no particular reason why anyone should be moved by his political opinions—he is probably no more of an authority on the death penalty than the person writing the paper.

Tip: There are two easy ways to avoid committing appeal to authority: first, make sure that the authorities you cite are experts on the subject you're discussing. Second, rather than just saying "Dr. Authority believes x, so we should believe it, too," try to explain the reasoning or evidence that the authority used to arrive at his or her opinion. That way, your readers have more to go on than a person's reputation. It also helps to choose authorities who are perceived as fairly neutral or reasonable, rather than people who will be perceived as biased.

## E. *Ad populum*

Definition: The Latin name of this fallacy means "to the people." There are several versions of the *ad populum* fallacy, but what they all have in common is that in them, the arguer takes advantage of the desire most people have to be liked and to fit in with others and uses that desire to try to get the audience to accept his or her argument. One of the most common versions is the bandwagon fallacy, in which the arguer tries to convince the audience to do or believe something because everyone else (supposedly) does.

Example: "Gay marriages are just immoral. 70% of Americans think so!" While the opinion of most Americans might be relevant in determining what laws we should have, it certainly doesn't determine what is moral or immoral: there was a time where a substantial number of Americans were in favor of segregation, but their opinion was not evidence that segregation was moral. The arguer is trying to get us to agree with the conclusion by appealing to our desire to fit in with other Americans.

Tip: Make sure that you aren't recommending that your audience believe your conclusion because everyone else believes it, all the cool people believe it, people will like you better if you believe it, and so forth. Keep in mind that the popular opinion is not always the right one!

## F. *Ad hominem and tu quoque*

Definitions: Like the appeal to authority and *ad populum* fallacies, the *ad hominem* ("against the person") and *tu quoque* ("you, too!") fallacies focus our attention on people rather than on arguments or evidence. In both of these arguments, the conclusion is usually "You shouldn't believe So-and-So's argument." The reason for not believing So-and-So is that So-and-So is either a bad person (*ad hominem*) or a hypocrite (*tu quoque*). In an *ad hominem* argument, the arguer attacks his or her opponent instead of the opponent's argument.

Example: "Andrea Dworkin has written several books arguing that pornography harms women. But Dworkin is an ugly, bitter person, so you shouldn't listen to her."

Dworkin's appearance and character, which the arguer has characterized so ungenerously, have nothing to do with the strength of her V argument, so using them as evidence is fallacious.

In a *tu quoque* argument, the arguer points out that the opponent has actually done the thing he or she is arguing against, and so the opponent's argument shouldn't be listened to.

Example: Imagine that your parents have explained to you why you shouldn't smoke, and they've given a lot of good reasons—the damage to your health, the cost, and so forth. You reply, "I won't accept your argument, because you used to smoke when you were my age. You did it, too!" The fact that your parents have done the thing they are condemning has no bearing on the premises they put forward in their argument (smoking harms your health and is very expensive), so your response is fallacious.

Tip: Be sure to stay focused on your opponents' reasoning, rather than on their personal character. (The exception to this is, of course, if you are making an argument about someone's character—if your conclusion is "The President is an untrustworthy person," premises about his untrustworthy acts are relevant, not fallacious.)

## **G. Appeal to ignorance**

Definition: In the appeal to ignorance, the arguer basically says, "Look, there's no conclusive evidence on the issue at hand. Therefore, you should accept my conclusion on this issue."

Example: "People have been trying for centuries to prove that God exists. But no one has yet been able to prove it. Therefore, God does not exist." Here's an opposing argument that commits the same fallacy: "People have been trying for years to prove that God does not exist. But no one has yet been able to prove it. Therefore, God exists." In each case, the arguer tries to use the lack of evidence as support for a positive claim about the truth of a conclusion. There is one situation in which doing this is not fallacious: if qualified researchers have used well-thought-out methods to search for something for a long time,

they haven't found it, and it's the kind of thing people ought to be able to find, then the fact that they haven't found it constitutes some evidence that it doesn't exist.

Tip: Look closely at arguments where you point out a lack of evidence and then draw a conclusion from that lack of evidence.

## **H. Straw man**

Definition: One way of making our own arguments stronger is to anticipate and respond in advance to the arguments that an opponent might make. In the straw man fallacy, the arguer sets up a wimpy version of the opponent's position and tries to score points by knocking it down. But just as being able to knock down a straw man, or a scarecrow, isn't very impressive, defeating a watered-down version of your opponents' argument isn't very impressive either.

Example: "Feminists want to ban all pornography and punish everyone who reads it! But such harsh measures are surely inappropriate, so the feminists are wrong: porn and its readers should be left in peace." The feminist argument is made weak by being overstated—in fact, most feminists do not propose an outright "ban" on porn or any punishment for those who merely read it; often, they propose some restrictions on things like child porn, or propose to allow people who are hurt by porn to sue publishers and producers, not readers, for damages. So the arguer hasn't really scored any points; he or she has just committed a fallacy.

Tip: Be charitable to your opponents. State their arguments as strongly, accurately, and sympathetically as possible. If you can knock down even the best version of an opponent's argument, then you've really accomplished something.

## **I. Red herring**

Definition: Partway through an argument, the arguer goes off on a tangent, raising a side issue that distracts the audience from what's really at stake. Often, the arguer never returns to the original issue.

Example: "Grading this exam on a curve would be the most fair thing to do. After all, classes go more smoothly when the students and the professor are getting along well."

Let's try premise-conclusion outlining to see what's wrong with this argument:

Premise: Classes go more smoothly when the students and the professor are getting along well.

Conclusion: Grading this exam on a curve would be the most fair thing to do.

When we lay it out this way, it's pretty obvious that the arguer went off on a tangent—the fact that something helps people get along doesn't necessarily make it more fair; fairness

and justice sometimes require us to do things that cause conflict. But the audience may feel like the issue of teachers and students agreeing is important and be distracted from the fact that the arguer has not given any evidence as to why a curve would be fair.

Tip: Try laying your premises and conclusion out in an outline-like form. How many issues do you see being raised in your argument? Can you explain how each premise supports the conclusion?

## **J. False dichotomy**

Definition: In false dichotomy, the arguer sets up the situation so it looks like there are only two choices. The arguer then eliminates one of the choices, so it seems that we are left with only one option: the one the arguer wanted us to pick in the first place. But often there are really many different options, not just two—and if we thought about them all, we might not be so quick to pick the one the arguer recommends!

Example: "Caldwell Hall is in bad shape. Either we tear it down and put up a new building, or we continue to risk students' safety. Obviously we shouldn't risk anyone's safety, so we must tear the building down." The argument neglects to mention the possibility that we might repair the building or find some way to protect students from the risks in question—for example, if only a few rooms are in bad shape, perhaps we shouldn't hold classes in those rooms.

Tip: Examine your own arguments: If you're saying that we have to choose between just two options, is that really so? Or are there other alternatives you haven't mentioned? If there are other alternatives, don't just ignore them—explain why they, too, should be ruled out. Although there's no formal name for it, assuming that there are only three options, four options, etc. when really there are more is similar to false dichotomy and should also be avoided.

## **K. Begging the question**

Definition: A complicated fallacy; it comes in several forms and can be harder to detect than many of the other fallacies we've discussed. Basically, an argument that begs the question asks the reader to simply accept the conclusion without providing real evidence; the argument either relies on a premise that says the same thing as the conclusion (which you might hear referred to as "being circular" or "circular reasoning"), or simply ignores an important (but questionable) assumption that the argument rests on. Sometimes people use the phrase "beg the question" as a sort of general criticism of arguments, to mean that an arguer hasn't given very good reasons for a conclusion, but that's not the meaning we're going to discuss here.

Examples: "Active euthanasia is morally acceptable. It is a decent, ethical thing to help another human being escape suffering through death."

Let's lay this out in premise-conclusion form:

Premise: It is a decent, ethical thing to help another human being escape suffering through death.

Conclusion: Active euthanasia is morally acceptable.

If we "translate" the premise, we'll see that the arguer has really just said the same thing twice: "decent, ethical" means pretty much the same thing as "morally acceptable," and "help another human being escape suffering through death" means "active euthanasia." So the premise basically says, "Active euthanasia is morally acceptable," just like the conclusion does! The arguer hasn't yet given us any real reasons why euthanasia is acceptable; instead, she has left us asking, "Well, really, why do you think active euthanasia is acceptable?" Her argument "begs" (that is, evades) the real question (think of "beg off").

Here's a second example of begging the question, in which a dubious premise which is needed to make the argument valid is completely ignored: "Murder is morally wrong. So active euthanasia is morally wrong." The premise that gets left out is "active euthanasia is murder." And that is a debatable premise—again, the argument "begs" or evades the question of whether active euthanasia is murder by simply not stating the premise. The arguer is hoping we'll just focus on the uncontroversial premise, "Murder is morally wrong," and not notice what is being assumed.

Tip: One way to try to avoid begging the question is to write out your premises and conclusion in a short, outline-like form. See if you notice any gaps, any steps that are required to move from one premise to the next or from the premises to the conclusion. Write down the statements that would fill those gaps. If the statements are controversial and you've just glossed over them, you might be begging the question. Next, check to see whether any of your premises basically says the same thing as the conclusion (but in other words). If so, you're begging the question. The moral of the story: you can't just assume or use as uncontroversial evidence the very thing you're trying to prove.

## **L. Equivocation**

Definition: Equivocation is sliding between two or more different meanings of a single word or phrase that is important to the argument.

Example: "Giving money to charity is the right thing to do. So charities have a right to our money."

The equivocation here is on the word "right": "right" can mean both something that is correct or good (as in "I got the right answers on the test") and something to which someone has a claim (as in "everyone has a right to life"). Sometimes an arguer will deliberately, sneakily equivocate, often on words like "freedom," "justice," "rights," and so forth; other times, the equivocation is a mistake or misunderstanding. Either way, it's important that you use the main terms of your argument consistently.

Tip: Identify the most important words and phrases in your argument and ask yourself whether they could have more than one meaning. If they could, be sure you aren't slipping and sliding between those meanings.

Source: UNC Writing Center, "Fallacies: Mistakes in the Logic of Arguments" handout (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/fallacies.htm>)



## **Part Three: The Mechanics of Critical Writing**

## I. Working with Quotations

Contrary to what you might think, packing your paper with as many quotations as possible will not necessarily lend greater credibility to your argument. Granted, you have probably been told by teachers to provide as much evidence as possible in support of your thesis. But quotations are only one type of evidence. The bulk of your evidence should come from your own words, either in the form of original thoughts, the paraphrased thoughts of others, or, in literature and cultural studies courses, close reading and interpretation of others' use of language. In general, quotations pack more analytical punch if they make brief, but memorable, appearances.

### A. When to use quotations

Here are four situations in which you may wish to quote.

#### 1. Discussing specific arguments or ideas.

Sometimes, in order to debate with clarity and specificity the ideas of others, you need to quote those ideas word for word. So, suppose you want to challenge the following statement made by John Doe, a well-known historian:

“At the beginning of World War Two, almost all Americans assumed the war would end quickly.”

If it is especially important that you formulate a counter-argument to this claim, then you might wish to quote the part of the statement that you find questionable and establish a dialogue between yourself and John Doe:

Historian John Doe has argued that in 1941 "almost all Americans assumed the war would end quickly" (Doe 223). Yet during the first six months of U.S. involvement, the wives and mothers of soldiers often noted in their diaries their fear that the war would drag on for years.

#### 2. Giving added emphasis to a particularly authoritative source on your topic.

There will be times when you want to highlight the words of a particularly important and authoritative source on your topic. For example, suppose you were writing an essay about the differences between the lives of male and female slaves in the U.S. South. One of your most provocative sources is a narrative written by a former slave, Harriet Jacobs. It would then be appropriate to quote some of Jacobs's words:

Harriet Jacobs, a former slave from North Carolina, published an autobiographical slave narrative in 1861. She exposed the hardships of both male and female slaves but ultimately concluded that "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women."

In this particular example, Jacobs is providing a crucial first-hand perspective on slavery. Thus, her words deserve more exposure than a paraphrase could provide.

Jacobs quoted in Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

### 3. Spicing up your prose.

In order to lend variety to your prose, you may wish to quote a source with particularly vivid language. All quotations, however, must closely relate to your topic and arguments. Do not insert a quotation solely for its literary merits.

One example of a quotation that adds flair:

Calvin Coolidge's tendency to fall asleep became legendary. As H. L. Mencken commented in the *American Mercury* in 1933, "Nero fiddled, but Coolidge only snored."

### 4. Quoting in order to analyze a writer's specific use of language.

In literature and cultural studies courses, we often need to quote a source text in order to get our analysis (close reading) off the ground. You may want to quote a whole passage or sentence, or just a word or two. Here's an example of quoting just one word to get an analysis going:

In his famous poem "Song of Myself," Whitman frequently refers to the "cosmos." What does Whitman mean by this term?

In a paper that begins this way, you would then go on to offer a thesis about the meaning and significance of the "cosmos" in Whitman's poem. You would also need to quote the text again—probably several times—in order to offer evidence of your interpretation of the term's meaning.

## **B. How do I set up and follow up a quotation?**

Once you've carefully selected the quotations that you want to use, your next job is to weave those quotations into your text. The words that precede and follow a quotation are

just as important as the quotation itself. Below are four guidelines for "setting up" and "following up" quotations.

In illustrating these four steps, we'll use as our example Franklin Roosevelt's famous quotation, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

1. Provide a context for each quotation.

Do not rely on quotations to tell your story for you. It is your responsibility to provide your reader with a context for the quotation. The context should set the basic scene for when, possibly where, and under what circumstances the quotation was spoken or written. So, in providing a context for our above example, you might write:

When Franklin Roosevelt gave his inaugural speech on March 4, 1933, he addressed a nation weakened and demoralized by economic depression.

2. Attribute each quotation to its source.

Even if you place an internal citation after a quotation, you must still attribute the quotation within the text. What is attribution? Simply tell your reader who is speaking. A good rule of thumb is this: Try reading your text aloud. Could your reader determine without looking at your paper where your quotations begin? If not, your paper probably contains "hanging quotations," which leave your reader hanging because they lack attribution.

Avoid the attribution rut! There are many ways to attribute quotes besides the common "he/she said" construction. Here are a few alternative verbs: add; remark; exclaim; announce; reply; state; comment; respond; estimate; write; retort; predict; argue; opine; propose; declare; criticize; proclaim; note; complain; observe; question. (If you're unfamiliar with the meanings of any of these words, consult a dictionary before using them!)

3. Explain the significance of the quotation.

Once you've inserted your quotation, along with its context and attribution, don't stop! Your reader still needs your assessment of why the quotation holds significance for your paper. Using our Roosevelt example, if you were writing a paper on the first one-hundred days of FDR's administration, you might follow the quotation by linking it to that topic:

With that message of hope and confidence, the new president set the stage for his next one-hundred days in office and helped restore the faith of the American people in their government.

4. Provide a citation for the quotation.

All quotations, just like all paraphrases, require a formal citation. In literature and cultural studies courses, you are generally required to use MLA (Modern Languages Association) format. If you are not familiar with MLA format, check out the MLA web site at [www.mla.org](http://www.mla.org). Remember, place the parenthetical reference or footnote/endnote number after (not within!) the closed quotation mark.

Roosevelt declared, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself" (Roosevelt, Public Papers 11).

### C. How much should I quote?

As few words as possible. Remember, any paper that you author should primarily contain your own words. So, quote only the most pithy and memorable parts of sources. Here are three guidelines for selecting quoted material judiciously.

#### 1. Excerpt fragments.

Sometimes, you should quote short fragments, rather than whole sentences. Suppose you interviewed "Jane Doe" about her reaction to John F. Kennedy's assassination. She commented:

"I couldn't believe it. It was just unreal and so sad. It was just unbelievable. I had never experienced such denial. I don't know why I felt so strongly. Perhaps it was because JFK was more to me than a president. He represented the hopes of young people everywhere."

You could quote all of Jane's comments, but her first three sentences are fairly redundant. You might instead want to quote Jane when she arrives at the ultimate reason for her strong emotions:

Jane Doe grappled with grief and disbelief. She had viewed JFK, not just as a national figurehead, but as someone who "represented the hopes of young people everywhere."

#### 2. Excerpt those fragments carefully!

Quoting the words of others carries a big responsibility. Misquoting misrepresents the ideas of others. Here's a classic example of a misquote:

John Adams has often been quoted as having said: "This would be the best of all possible worlds if there were no religion in it."

John Adams did, in fact, write the above words. But if you see those words in context, the meaning changes entirely. Here's the rest of the quotation:

Twenty times, in the course of my late reading, have I been on the point of breaking out, 'this would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it!!!!' But in this exclamation, I should have been as fanatical as Bryant or Cleverly. Without religion, this world would be something not fit to be mentioned in public company-I mean hell.

As you can see from this example, context matters!

Example from: Paul F. Boller, Jr. and John George, *They Never Said It: A Book of Fake Quotes, Misquotes, and Misleading Attributions*. Oxford University Press, 1989.

### 3. Use block quotations sparingly.

There may be times when you need to quote long passages. However, you should use block quotations only when you fear that omitting any words will destroy the integrity of the passage. If that passage exceeds four lines (some sources say five), then set it off as a block quotation.

Here are a few general tips for setting off your block quotation:

- Set up a block quotation with your own words followed by a colon.
- Indent. You normally indent 4-5 spaces for the start of a paragraph. When setting up a block quotation, indent the entire paragraph once from the left-hand margin.
- Single space within the block quotation.
- Omit quotation marks.
- Follow up a block quotation with your own words.

So, using the above example from John Adams, here's how you might include a block quotation:

After reading several doctrinally rigid tracts, John Adams recalled the zealous ranting of his former teacher, Joseph Cleverly, and minister, Lemuel Bryant. He expressed his ambivalence toward religion in an 1817 letter to Thomas Jefferson:

Twenty times, in the course of my late reading, have I been on the point of breaking out, 'this would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it!!!!' But in this exclamation, I should have been as fanatical as Bryant or Cleverly. Without religion, this world would be something not fit to be mentioned in public company-I mean hell.

Adams clearly appreciated religion, even if he often questioned its promotion.

## D. How do I combine quotation marks with other punctuation marks?

It can be confusing when you start combining quotation marks with other punctuation marks. You should consult a style manual for complicated situations, but the following two rules apply to most cases:

1) Keep periods and commas within quotation marks. So, for example:

According to Professor Jones, Lincoln "feared the spread of slavery," but many of his aides advised him to "watch and wait."

In the above example, both the comma and period were enclosed in the quotation marks. The main exception to this rule involves the use of internal citations, which always precede the last period of the sentence. For example:

According to Professor Jones, Lincoln "feared the spread of slavery," but many of his aides advised him to "watch and wait" (Jones 143).

Note, however, that the period remains inside the quotation marks when your citation style involves superscript footnotes or endnotes. For example:

According to Professor Jones, Lincoln "feared the spread of slavery," but many of his aides advised him to "watch and wait."<sup>2</sup>

2) Place all other punctuation marks (colons, semicolons, exclamation marks, question marks) outside the quotation marks, except when they were part of the original quotation.

Take a look at the following examples:

The student wrote that the U. S. Civil War "finally ended around 1900"!

The coach yelled, "Run!"

In the first example, the author placed the exclamation point outside the quotation mark because she added it herself to emphasize the absurdity of the student's comment. The student's original comment had not included an exclamation mark. In the second example, the exclamation mark remains within the quotation mark because it is indicating the excited tone in which the coach yelled the command. Thus, the exclamation mark is considered to be part of the original quotation.

## E. How do I indicate quotations within quotations?

If you are quoting a passage that contains a quotation, then you use single quotation marks for the internal quotation. Quite rarely, you quote a passage that has a quotation

within a quotation. In that rare instance, you would use double quotation marks for the second internal quotation.

Here's an example of a quotation within a quotation:

In "The Emperor's New Clothes," Hans Christian Andersen wrote, "But the Emperor has nothing on at all!" cried a little child."

## **F. When do I use those three dots ( . . . )?**

Whenever you want to leave out material from within a quotation, you need to use an ellipsis, which is a series of three periods, each of which should be preceded and followed by a space. So, an ellipsis in this sentence would look like . . . this. There are a few rules to follow when using ellipses:

1. Be sure that you don't fundamentally change the meaning of the quotation by omitting material.

Take a look at the following example:

"The Writing Center is located on the UNC campus and serves the entire UNC community."

"The Writing Center . . . serves the entire UNC community."

The reader's understanding of the Writing Center's mission to serve the UNC community is not affected by omitting the information about its location.

2. Do not use ellipses at the beginning or ending of quotations, unless it's important for the reader to know that the quotation was truncated.

For example, using the above example, you would NOT need an ellipsis in either of these situations:

"The Writing Center is located on the UNC campus . . ."

The Writing Center " . . . serves the entire UNC community."

3. Use punctuation marks in combination with ellipses when removing material from the end of sentences or clauses.

For example, if you take material from the end of a sentence, keep the period in as usual.

"The boys ran to school. Even though they were out of breath, they made it on time."

"The boys ran to school. . . . they made it on time."



Likewise, if you excerpt material at the end of a clause that ends in a comma, retain the comma.

"The red car came to a screeching halt that was heard by nearby pedestrians, but no one was hurt."

"The red car came to a screeching halt . . . , but no one was hurt."

### **G. Is it ever okay to insert my own words or change words in a quotation?**

Sometimes it is necessary for clarity and flow to alter a word or words within a quotation. You should make such changes rarely. In order to alert your reader to the changes you've made, you should always bracket the altered words. Here are a few examples of situations when you might need brackets.

1. Changing verb tense or pronouns in order to be consistent with the rest of the sentence. Suppose you were quoting a woman who, when asked about her experiences immigrating to the United States, commented "nobody understood me." You might write:

Esther Hansen felt that when she came to the United States, "nobody understood [her]."

In the above example, you've changed "me" to "her" in order to keep the entire passage in third person. However, you could avoid the need for this change by simply rephrasing:

"Nobody understood me," recalled Danish immigrant Esther Hansen.

2. Including supplemental information that your reader needs in order to understand the quotation.

For example, if you were quoting someone's nickname, you might want to let your reader know the full name of that person in brackets.

"The principal of the school told Billy [William Smith] that his contract would be terminated."

Similarly, if a quotation referenced an event with which the reader might be unfamiliar, you could identify that event in brackets.

"We completely revised our political strategies after the strike [of 1934]."

3. Indicating the use of nonstandard grammar or spelling.

In rare situations, you may quote from a text that has nonstandard grammar, spelling, or word choice. In such cases, you may want to insert [*sic*], which means "thus" or "so" in Latin. Using [*sic*] alerts your reader to the fact that this nonstandard language is not the

result of a typo on your part. Always italicize "sic" and enclose it in brackets. There is no need to put a period at the end. Here's an example of when you might use [sic]:

Twelve-year-old Betsy Smith wrote in her diary, "Father is afraid that he will be guilty of beach [sic] of contract."

Here [sic] indicates that the original author wrote "beach of contract," not breach of contract, which is the accepted terminology.

#### 4. Do not overuse brackets!

For example, it is not necessary to bracket capitalization changes that you make at the beginning of sentences. For example, suppose you were going to use part of this quotation:

"We never looked back, but the memory of our army days remained with us the rest of our lives."

If you wanted to begin a sentence with an excerpt from the middle of this quotation, there would be no need to bracket your capitalization changes.

"The memory of our army days remained with us the rest of our lives," commented Joe Brown, a World War II veteran.

Not

"[T]he memory of our army days remained with us the rest of our lives," commented Joe Brown, a World War II veteran.

Source: UNC Writing Center, "How to Quote" handout  
(<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/quotations.htm>)

## II. Word Choice

So you write a paper that makes perfect sense to you, but it comes back with "awkward" scribbled throughout the margins or a mystifying "awk" over every third sentence.

Why are instructors so fond of "awkward"? Mainly because they had difficulty understanding the sentence and rather than rewrite it for you, they provide a shorthand, catchall notation that they hope will alert you to the fact that you are having word choice troubles. (To be fair, professors often don't have time to rewrite literally hundreds of awkward sentences in a batch of student papers. You can always seek help during the professor's office hours and/or at the writing center.)

But how does a sentence get awkward? The short answer is, in a variety of ways, including:

- misused idioms e.g., "I sprayed the ants in their private places."
- unclear pronouns e.g., "Bill Clinton hugged Al Gore, even though he didn't like him very much."
- misused words e.g., "Cree Indians were a monotonous culture until French and British settlers arrived."
- jargon e.g., "The dialectical interface between neo-Platonists and antidisestablishment Catholics suggests an algorithm for deontological thought."
- garbled syntax e.g., "As a woman, he liked her."
- loaded language e.g., "Huck Finn suggests that to recover democratic ideals, one must leave civilized society."
- Colloquialisms e.g., "Moulin Rouge sucked because the singing was way off."

Strategies:

- Look at papers that have already been graded, even in other courses, and see if you can find patterns of errors or confusions in your writing. It is always easier to revise when you know what you're looking for. For example, if instructors have been saying that the word choice in your papers is confusing, try to make sure that you are using the right words in the right context. In this case, try not to use words you are unfamiliar with. If you do use words that you're not entirely familiar with, make sure that both the meaning and the context are appropriate by consulting a dictionary.
- Read your paper out loud. While we do not write the way we speak, your written words should make sense to both you and other listeners when read out loud. If they don't, there's no chance that they make any better sense on paper. So, if you read out loud a sentence that seems confusing to you, even though you wrote it (happens to me all the time), do your best to rewrite it in words, syntax, and/or grammar that make the meaning clear. This is not a guarantee to recognize every unclear meaning or wordy expression, but if you read every word at a relatively slow pace, you can avoid a good number of pitfalls.
- Have someone not familiar with the material or even the academic discipline read the paper (or read it to them to combine with the strategy above). If they are confused by some of the sentences, try not to justify it by assuming they just don't know enough. Instead, try to rewrite the sentences so that your reader can follow along at all times.

- The slash/option technique. Write out two or three or four choices for a questionable word or a confusing sentence. Pick those which seem to most aptly suit and clearly indicate your meaning, or combine different parts to do the same. By literally seeing the choices we often have in our head, we can better evaluate what words and sentences are better than others.

#### Questions to Ask Yourself:

- What word trouble do I usually have on other papers? Are there examples of that trouble here?
- If I had to explain this point to someone out loud, would I use these words? What words would I use?
- What's the easiest way to write these sentences?
- Am I positive this word means what I think it means?
- Have I found the best word, or have I just settled for the most obvious, or the easiest, one?

Source: UNC Writing Center, "Word Choice/Wordiness" Handout  
[http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/word\\_choice.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/word_choice.html)

### III. Parallel Structure

Parallel structure means using the same pattern of words to show that two or more ideas have the same level of importance. This can happen at the word, phrase, or clause level. The usual way to join parallel structures is with the use of coordinating conjunctions such as "and" or "or."

#### 1. Words and Phrases

With the -ing form (gerund) of words:

Parallel: Mary likes hiking, swimming, and bicycling.

With infinitive phrases:

Parallel: Mary likes to hike, to swim, and to ride a bicycle.

OR

Mary likes to hike, swim, and ride a bicycle.

(Note: You can use "to" before all the verbs in a sentence or only before the first one.)

Do not mix forms.

Not Parallel: Mary likes hiking, swimming, and to ride a bicycle.

Parallel: Mary likes hiking, swimming, and riding a bicycle.

Not Parallel: The production manager was asked to write his report quickly, accurately, and in a detailed manner.

Parallel: The production manager was asked to write his report quickly, accurately, and thoroughly.

Not Parallel: The teacher said that he was a poor student because he waited until the last minute to study for the exam, completed his lab problems in a careless manner, and his motivation was low.

Parallel: The teacher said that he was a poor student because he waited until the last minute to study for the exam, completed his lab problems in a careless manner, and lacked motivation.

## 2. Clauses

A parallel structure that begins with clauses must keep on with clauses. Changing to another pattern or changing the voice of the verb (from active to passive or vice versa) will break the parallelism.

Not Parallel: The coach told the players that they should get a lot of sleep, that they should not eat too much, and to do some warm-up exercises before the game.

Parallel: The coach told the players that they should get a lot of sleep, that they should not eat too much, and that they should do some warm-up exercises before the game.

— or —

Parallel: The coach told the players that they should get a lot of sleep, not eat too much, and do some warm-up exercises before the game.

Not Parallel: The salesman expected that he would present his product at the meeting, that there would be time for him to show his slide presentation, and that questions would be asked by prospective buyers. (passive)

Parallel: The salesman expected that he would present his product at the meeting, that there would be time for him to show his slide presentation, and that prospective buyers would ask him questions.

## 3. Lists after a colon

Be sure to keep all the elements in a list in the same form.

Not Parallel: The dictionary can be used for these purposes: to find word meanings, pronunciations, correct spellings, and looking up irregular verbs.

Parallel: The dictionary can be used for these purposes: to find word meanings, pronunciations, correct spellings, and irregular verbs.

Proofreading Strategies to try:

- Skim your paper, pausing at the words "and" and "or." Check on each side of these words to see whether the items joined are parallel. If not, make them parallel.
- If you have several items in a list, put them in a column to see if they are parallel. Listen to the sound of the items in a list or the items being compared. Do you hear the same kinds of sounds? For example, is there a series of "-ing" words beginning each item? Or do you hear a rhythm being repeated? If something is breaking that rhythm or repetition of sound, check to see if it needs to be made parallel.

Source: Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL), "Parallel Structure" handout ([http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g\\_parallel.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_parallel.html))

## **Part IV: TEMPLATES FOR INVENTION**

This section contains several blank worksheets that you can use to brainstorm ideas and to arrange your thinking as you are preparing to draft an essay. You can also use these templates to chart and organize portions of existing essays that you are trying to strengthen and revise. By using these templates, you can be sure that your essay has all the desirable components of a strong critical essay—like an argument, evidence, warrants, claims, and significance—and none of the undesirable ones—like rants and personal reflections.

If you're not sure how to use these templates, feel free to ask Professor Tomso for a demonstration.

Essay Working Title: \_\_\_\_\_

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Observations (What interests you or strikes you as worth talking about.)

---

Claim 1 (A concise statement of your interpretation. Someone must be able to disagree with this claim for it to be argumentative.)

---

Evidence 1 (Usually a quotation or other element from a text.)

---

Warrant 1 (A clear and logical statement of how and why your evidence supports your claim. If you can't supply this, you are making up reality.)

---

Close Reading (Notes for extended, methodical interpretations of textual elements. Supporting logic, relevant counterarguments, explanations of text's key terms/ideas, etc..)

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Claim 2

---

Evidence 2

---

Warrant 2

---

Close Reading

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Significance (The big picture. Must answer the "So What" question." This is usually an abstract rather than a literal statement.)

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Personal Reactions (Your own rants and raves, feelings and judgments. Spare your readers!)



Essay Working Title: \_\_\_\_\_

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Observations (What interests you or strikes you as worth talking about.)

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Claim 1 (A concise statement of your interpretation. Someone must be able to disagree with this claim for it to be argumentative.)

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Evidence 1 (Usually a quotation or other element from a text.)

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Warrant 1 (A clear and logical statement of how and why your evidence supports your claim. If you can't supply this, you are making up reality.)

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Close Reading (Notes for extended, methodical interpretations of textual elements. Supporting logic, relevant counterarguments, explanations of text's key terms/ideas, etc..)

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Claim 2

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Evidence 2

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Warrant 2

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Close Reading

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