

WRITING AN ESSAY—PLANNING

Many people think that writing is a mysterious process that requires an almost mystical experience to accomplish. The fact is, good writing involves executing and planning; good writing requires clear thinking and logical ordering. Writing begins with ideas as well as words. If you think and plan in an orderly way, you can probably write a fine university paper.

Some of the most important work in writing is done before you ever write. This paper shall examine the process of composition from the perspective of thinking and planning in order to provide writers and their tutors with a systematic means of beginning an essay.

I. Is there a clearly stated thesis in the first paragraph? Is it significant and relevant to the assigned topic and the intention of the instructor?

A. What is the thesis?

In general, a thesis is a statement telling what the paper is going to do. Having read the first paragraph of your essay, the reader should have a definite idea of what the thesis is about. More specifically, the thesis will

- appear in the first paragraph (the introductory paragraph) of the paper (usually the last sentence or two of the paragraph);
- indicate the plan of the paper;
- clearly indicate a non-trivial and manageable opinion that will be defended, attacked, discussed, etc. in the remainder of the paper.

The following paragraph is the first paragraph (introductory paragraph) of an English 1310 type essay:

Television programs regularly entertain, pacify, educate, frighten, and baby sit the majority of American children from the time they are one or two years old. Most children are allowed to watch whatever program is on, with little thought on the parents' part of the effect that particular show will have on a child. Most programs can be classed as beneficial, mediocre, or harmful according to what effect the program might have on a child.

Some of the sentences of this paragraph are introductory; they get the paper started by trying to get the reader interested in the topic. This is one element of the introductory paragraph. (The thesis of the paper may be either one or two sentences at the end of the introductory paragraph.) The method used here is to make a provocative or startling generalization about TV: what functions TV serves and how much time people devote to watching it. This "sets the scene" for the thesis.

Such introductory material is a plus for any paper. Ask your tutor and/or instructor to show you some papers written in your area of concern to see what introductory material will suit a particular subject.

B. What is a good thesis?

The thesis statement of the TV paper has been underlined. Notice how it meets the criteria for what a thesis should be. It appears in the first paragraph. It indicates a plan that the paper will follow: first beneficial, then mediocre, and, finally, harmful programs will be discussed. These three units will constitute the major blocks of the paper. No other major aspect of the subject (TV) should be included in the paper because it has not been indicated in the thesis.

Finally, the thesis is a comment or opinion about the subject that is manageable and non-trivial. "The effects of TV programs on children" is not a comment or an opinion; it is a subject. It is nothing that can be proven or disproved because nothing has been said about it yet. A definite opinion is that TV programs generally have one of three kinds of effects on children. This is something that can be proven or disproved by evidence, by fact. "I like TV" is not such a statement (unless we could somehow show that the person who said it doesn't know his or her own mind). So a thesis is a subject plus a comment about the subject and depends on evidence (usually facts) so that it can be proven or explained. Every good thesis will strongly imply that evidence will follow to support it.

"Manageable" simply means that the thesis can be adequately explained or defended within the length of the paper. The example thesis about TV is definitely general, but it won't be impossible to briefly list and discuss the three groups of programs that the thesis indicates. Remember that this theme was intended for English 1310. If it were to be a technical paper for an upper division, communications class, you would probably say that it was too general and didn't have enough hard evidence (psycho-social studies, statistics, etc.) or theoretical support for its conclusions. Thus, the thesis would have to be more specific and definite. So "manageable" can be a relative term, but the important thing is that by knowing precisely what the thesis is, you can tell pretty well what the paper will have to do to finish the job it took on. Common sense and a good knowledge of the subject you're writing about are usually good guides as to how manageable a thesis is.

It is sometimes harder to judge when a thesis is trivial and commonplace or not. A thesis about TV that says, "TV is an important form of entertainment," is ordinary and superficial as well as vague. An extreme example of a trivial thesis is one that says, "The works of Shakespeare can be divided into comedies, tragedies, and romances." This is trivial because no one really disagrees with the idea, and anyone who knows the slightest bit about the work of Shakespeare knows that he wrote things that can be called comedies, tragedies, and romances. This thesis, then, is totally trivial; it hasn't justified the existence of the paper. Who needs a paper that says so little?

Here are some suggestions about how to avoid a trivial thesis:

- Give yourself as much time as possible to think about the topic. It is one of Volland's Laws

of Composition that, when a writer is rushed, what gets written down first is what is commonplace and unoriginal.

- Get feedback from the instructor/TA/tutor for your class. These are invaluable sources of knowledge about what is considered significant or trivial in the field of study you're writing on. There is nothing in your genetic material that allows you to know automatically what is considered trivial or important in the study of post WWII Latvian history. That is why there are teachers: to help you figure out such things.
- Make sure you don't say what is perfectly obvious to anyone who has the slightest knowledge of the material you're writing about or simply repeat an argument presented in class or in the texts (unless of course that is the assignment).

II. Is there a plan for the paper, and is it clear to the reader throughout the discussion?

A plan is something that should be decided on before you begin writing. Unless the assignment has a built-in plan, you must decide yourself what is the best order of the discussion. The first step is to know exactly what is the thesis. When you know this—as the last section pointed out—you already have a generally good idea about what the major units of the discussion will be and what kind of evidence you will need. When you are aware of all this, you can begin to think of the best way to order the units of discussion and think more about specific pieces of evidence to defend or support the main ideas. An outline is a useful tool to help accomplish this.

An outline serves three main purposes.

- It clearly establishes the order in which points will be discussed.
- It provides an opportunity for the writer to decide definitely about what evidence is best and available to support a point.
- Similarly, it often indicates that a writer has less good evidence than he or she thought,
- and thus it may signal the need to make important changes in the thesis or even the subject of the paper.

Remember: all of this work can be done before you commit a lot of time to writing the paper out. Several long and possibly discouraging hours or work might be saved as a result.

Recall the thesis example given in the previous section:

Most programs can be classed as beneficial, mediocre, or harmful according to what effect the program might have on a child.

Assuming that the writer had something definite to begin with, the next step would be to choose the relevant evidence for each of the three major points. Immediately after this, he or she can begin to think about what should be discussed first, second, and so on. Thinking about these two things produces an outline. One possible outline of the TV theme might be the following:

Introduction: prevalence of TV and parents' disregard for program selection

I. Beneficial programs

- A. Nature specials
 - 1. Are realistic
 - 2. Teach appreciation of all life
- B. "Sesame Street" and similar programs
 - 1. Develop interest in school
 - 2. Encourage creativity
- C. Christmas programs
- D. Some commercials

II. Mediocre programs

- A. Unrealistic situation comedies
- B. Saturday morning children's shows
- C. "Super hero" programs

III. Harmful programs

- A. Many commercials
- B. Adult programs containing violence or sex
 - 1. Confuse the child
 - 2. Harden children to violence
 - 3. Frighten children
 - 4. Warp children's attitudes
- C. Many cartoons

Conclusion: parental control and guidance in children's selection of programs is necessary

The really useful thing about this or any outline is that it indicates the relationships between ideas that are similar and between those that are different. It is a record of the writer's clear thinking about the paper that can be returned to, changed if necessary with little writing, and it can guide the writing of the paper. What you learn from this outline is that the paper will contain three major units of discussion and all of these units will discuss effects that television programs have on children. In section II three kinds of harmful programs will be discussed, and the writer has four things to say about the effects of one kind. The use of different letters and numbers helps to make clear what things are related to what other things.

The important thing all this accomplishes is that the discussion is not confused because the separate parts of the discussion are not mixed up by ideas that don't belong in them. An outline

can't guarantee that confusion won't occur, but it helps to make the relationships between ideas more visible and thus easier to think about. For example, examine the following section of an outline dealing with the same topic as the one above:

III. Harmful programs

- A. Many commercials
- B. Adult programs containing violence or sex
- C. Parents should boycott TV to reduce violence in shows

Notice that C is out of place even though it is related in a general sense to the idea of harmful TV shows. It is out of place because the purpose of the section it appears in is to identify harmful shows, not to say what the public is supposed to do about them. In fact, a point like III C has no place in any of the major sections (I, II, III) of this theme.

In short, an outline doesn't necessarily make it easier to think of things to say; instead, it is a working plan that can save you the sweat, bother, and discouragement of writing many sentences only to find that they have nothing to do with the subject you began with.

Source: "A Brief Guide to Composition for Tutors and Tutees" by Phill Volland, UCLA, 1977.

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Revised: Spring 2008

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