

## Samples of Student Writing

### 1. John, Political Science course:

In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville made two claims. The first, that “[e]ach individual is isolated and weak, but society is active, provident, and strong,” described the salient characteristics of American individuals and society; and the second, that “private persons achieve insignificant things, but the state immense ones,” described the level of achievement of the individual and society. What caused these four situations? I will attempt to answer that question, and the question of whether Tocqueville was pleased or saddened by his conclusion.

### 2. Mike, History-based writing seminar:

On Saturday, February 14, 1779, a group of Hawaiians slew Captain James Cook somewhere on the northern shores of Kealahou Bay, Hawaii. Cook was, in his native England, well-respected for his colonial ambitions and achievements.... Reputedly magnanimous and just, Cook epitomized the civilizer. Yet to the stone-age Hawaiians, Cook and his crew surely appeared daunting and awful, perhaps even divine. American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has argued, in fact, that Cook came to be regarded as a Hawaiian deity in the course of his visits to the islands. Conversely, the Sri Lankan scholar Gananath Obeyesekere maintains ... that it was English historians—not Hawaiian islanders—who apotheosized the navigator.... I will contend that *both* Sahlins’ and Obeyesekere’s interpretations of Cook’s death rest upon overly crude canons for understanding human action. Both writers depict Hawaiian society as united and free from faction, and this, I believe, betrays a poor grasp of the political situation that Cook confronted. Despite the dearth of Hawaiian primary sources, it would be historically naïve to preclude the possibility that Cook became the victim of civil unrest.

### 3. Ananya Chakravarti '05, Cultural Studies-based writing seminar:

President George W. Bush, in the April 9th 2001 proclamation announcing that the week of April 22nd to 29th be marked Jewish Heritage Week in American calendars, noted that “Americans have long cherished our identity as a Nation of immigrants,” even as he singled out one such immigrant community to honor. The Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust (MJH) certainly professes, in a similar vein, to celebrate the Jewish heritage, within and without the context of its contribution to American society. Yet the museum displays all the ideological tension one would expect of an institution seeking to celebrate the uniqueness of the Jewish community and hence detach it from the larger diaspora of American immigrant populations,

even as it tries to affirm the Jewish commitment to the American melting pot. As Jeffrey Shandler puts it in his essay “Heritage and Holocaust on Display.”

[The MJH] hangs in an uneasy balance with freedom in the museum’s presentation of the United States, which is conceived as both providing a haven without equal for Jews and, at the same time, posing an unrivalled challenge to Jews by offering them the freedom to abandon their Jewishness. (84)

This sense of an “uneasy balance” seems to invest every aspect of the museum. Even the physical structure of the museum exhibits this tension—the temple-like building, the epitome of Jewish identity and even conservatism, faces Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, those famed symbols of immigrant innovation and assimilation. Yet, in light of the obvious ideological complexities of the museum’s discourse, the MJH curiously shows no such dissonance in its representation of marriage, to which a sizeable portion of the exhibits are dedicated. Jewish marriage is depicted entirely as a tool for the perpetuation and propagation of Jewish culture and identity, rather than a means for Jewish integration in a multicultural and multi-faith society like America. Evolutions in marriage that directly impact the Jewish community, such as the issue of changing gender roles, same-sex unions and, most importantly, interfaith marriages, are avoided altogether. Indeed, the museum’s overtly traditional representation of marriage sacrifices the accuracy with which Jewish heritage and renewal are treated, and creates a didactic, unilateral discourse on the role of marriage in building and maintaining a pure Jewish community.

#### **4. Barb, History-based writing course:**

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, America experienced a heavy migration/immigration. The majority of the immigrants during this mass influx were Europeans, blacks, and Asians. This inundation of immigrants entering into the United States made many “native” Americans uneasy. Many of these newly arrived immigrant groups experienced some general feelings and uniform situations stemming from the discomfort and animosity felt by many “native” Americans. The feeling that arose from these different immigrant groups varied from subjects of the workplace to subjects involving racism and discrimination. Each immigrant group experienced a different “twist” due to their own personal situation.

## Motive

### Gordon Harvey on *Motive*

The intellectual context that you establish for your topic and thesis at the start of your essay, in order to suggest why someone, besides your instructor, might want to read an essay on this topic or need to hear your particular thesis argued—why your thesis isn't just obvious to all, why other people might hold *other* theses (that you think are wrong).

Your motive should be aimed at your audience: it won't necessarily be the reason you first got interested in the topic (which could be private and idiosyncratic) or the personal motivation behind your engagement with the topic. Indeed it's where you suggest that your argument *isn't* idiosyncratic, but rather is generally interesting.

The motive you set up should be genuine: a misapprehension or puzzle that an intelligent reader (not a straw dummy) would really have, a point that such a reader would really overlook. Defining motive should be the main business of your introductory paragraphs, where it is usually introduced by a form of the complicating word "But."

# Motivating Moves

**Match the “motivating moves” at right  
with writing samples from the disciplines at left.**

**Please note that each writing sample makes more than one motivating move.**

**Good news: There are no wrong answers!**

## Published Writing from the Disciplines

Sociology: How does one explain the seeming inconsistency between the responses by the Hispanic community to the 1992 poll, on the one hand, and the general pride that most Americans express about their immigrant roots, on the other?

History: New York’s American Art-Union offers an opportunity to examine, in one significant context, the struggle that defined the social role of art and artists in the antebellum North.

Environmental Science: Although the origin of these sources [of oxygenated organic compounds] is still unclear, we suggest that oxygenated species could be formed via the oxidation of hydrocarbons in the atmosphere, the photochemical degradation of organic matter in the oceans, and direct emissions from terrestrial vegetation.

Psychology (Freud, in fact!): The play is built on Hamlet’s hesitations over fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him; but its text offers no reasons or motivations for these hesitations, and an immense variety of attempts at interpreting them have failed to produce a result.

## Some Motivating Moves

1. The truth isn’t what one would expect, or what it might appear to be on first reading.
2. The knowledge on the topic has heretofore been limited.
3. There’s a mystery or puzzle or question here that needs answering.
4. Published views of the matter conflict.
5. We can learn about a larger phenomenon by studying this smaller one.
6. This seemingly tangential or insignificant matter is actually important or interesting.
7. There’s an inconsistency, contradiction, or tension here that needs explaining.
8. The standard opinion(s) need challenging or qualifying.