

## IDEA AND MOTIVE

As a student, your primary motive for writing essays is usually mercenary: you write to fulfill an assignment by a given deadline. Desire for success may motivate you to write, but your reader must also be motivated to read. Your essay, if it is to be interesting to others, needs a reason to be written. Establish a shared context with your readers, something you all have in common beyond this class. Then you can state why we should all care your topic.

The **motive** is the situation that you define for your **thesis**—your central organizing idea. The motive establishes why your readers should care. If your thesis statement is the sum of your original thinking on a topic, then your **statement of motive** is your reason for thinking that others will be interested. The **motive** is your reason for raising a question; it explains why that question needs answering. The **thesis** is your answer to that question.

An essay lacking a motive will often sound like an exercise you've been commanded to write. An essay with a motive addresses the intellectual community at large. The motive is the writer's guarantee that the essay is worth reading. Typically, writers return to the motive in the conclusion of the essay to impress on the readers what the significance of the essay's idea has been.

Why should your idea interest a reader? Why won't it seem obvious to anyone who looks at the same text (poem, story, film, painting, advertisement, etc.)? Perhaps:

1. The truth isn't what one would expect, or what it might appear to be on first reading.
2. There is an interesting wrinkle in the matter, a complexity that appears on closer examination.
3. Something that seems simple or common or obvious has more implications or explains more than it may seem.
4. There is a contradiction, mystery, or tension that needs investigation.
5. There is an ambiguity, something unclear that could mean two or more things.
6. We can learn about a larger phenomenon by studying this smaller one.
7. A seemingly tangential or insignificant matter is actually important or interesting.
8. There is something implicit that needs to be made explicit.

Motivations for a research paper could also include:

9. The standard opinion of a text or a certain published view needs challenging or qualifying.
10. Published views of the matter conflict.

Now that you understand the importance of motive and how it relates to thesis, take a moment to reflect on your own work:

What question does your essay raise? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What is the shared context between you and your readers that suggests your question should interest them? We all have in common: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your thesis statement (your answer to the question you raise): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your statement of motive (your answer to the question, "Why should your readers care?"):

\_\_\_\_\_

Credit: Adapted from "Thesis and Motive," *UWS Instructors Resources*, Brandeis University

See also: Williams & Bizup. *Style, Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 7: "Motivation."

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