

# UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

## TERMINOLOGY: ELEMENTS OF THE ACADEMIC ESSAY

### **Thesis:**

Your main insight or idea about a text or topic, and the main proposition that your essay demonstrates. It should be true but arguable (not obviously or patently true, but one alternative among several), be limited enough in scope to be argued in a short composition and with available evidence, and get to the heart of the text or topic being analyzed (not be peripheral). It should be stated early in some form and at some point recast sharply (not just be implied), and it should govern the whole essay (not disappear in places).

### **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."

### **Evidence:**

The data—facts, examples, or details—that you refer to, quote, or summarize to support your thesis. There needs to be enough evidence to be persuasive; it needs to be the right kind of evidence to support the thesis (with no obvious pieces of evidence overlooked); it needs to be sufficiently concrete for the reader to trust it (e.g. in textual analysis, it often helps to find one or two key or representative passages to quote and focus on); and if summarized, it needs to be summarized accurately and fairly.

### **Analysis:**

The work of breaking down, interpreting, and commenting upon the data, of saying what can be inferred from the data such that it supports a thesis (is evidence for something). Analysis is what

you do with data when you go beyond observing or summarizing it: you show how its parts contribute to a whole or how causes contribute to an effect; you draw out the significance or implication not apparent to a superficial view. Analysis is what makes the writer feel present, as a reasoning individual; so your essay should do more analyzing than summarizing or quoting.

**Key Terms:**

The recurring terms or basic oppositions that an argument rests upon, usually literal but sometimes a ruling metaphor. These terms usually imply certain assumptions—unstated beliefs about life, history, literature, reasoning, etc. that the essayist doesn't argue for but simply assumes to be true. An essay's keyterms should be clear in their meaning and appear throughout (not be abandoned half-way); they should be appropriate for the subject at hand (not unfair or too simple—a false or constraining opposition); and they should not be inert clichés or abstractions (e.g. “the evils of society”). The attendant assumptions should bear logical inspection, and if arguable they should be explicitly acknowledged.

**Structure:**

The sequence of main sections or sub-topics, and the turning points between them. The sections should be perceptible and follow a logical order, and the links in that order should be apparent to the reader (but not heavy-handed: see “stitching”). But it should also be a progressive order—it should have a continuous direction of development or complication, not be simply a list or a series of restatements of or takes on the thesis (“Macbeth is ambitious: he's ambitious here; and he's ambitious here; and he's ambitions here, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious”) or list of elements found in the text. And the order should be supple enough to allow the writer to explore the topic, not just hammer home a thesis. (If the essay is complex or long, its structure may be briefly announced or hinted at after the thesis, in a road-map or plan sentence—or even in the thesis statement itself, if you're clever enough.)

**Stitching:**

Words that tie together the parts of an argument, most commonly (a) by using transition (linking or turning) words as signposts to indicate how a new section, paragraph, or sentence follows from the one immediately previous; but also (b) by recollection of an earlier idea or part of the essay, referring back to it either by explicit statement or by echoing key words or resonant phrases quoted or stated earlier. The repeating of key or thesis concepts is especially helpful at points of transition from one section to another, to show how the new section fits in.

**Sources:**

Persons or documents, referred to, summarized, or quoted, that help a writer demonstrate the truth of his or her argument. They are typically sources of (a) factual information or data, (b) opinions or interpretation on your topic, (c) comparable versions of the thing you are discussing, or (d) applicable general concepts. Your sources need to be efficiently integrated and fairly acknowledged by citation.

**Reflecting:**

When you pause in your demonstration to reflect on it, to raise or answer a question about it—as when you (1) consider a counter-argument—a possible objection, alternative, or problem that a skeptical or resistant reader might raise; (2) define your terms or assumptions (what do I mean by this term? or, what am I assuming here?); (3) handle a newly emergent concern (but if this is so, then how can X be?); (4) draw out an implication (so what? what might be the wider significance of the argument I have made? what might it lead to if I’m right? or, what does my argument about a single aspect of this suggest about the whole thing? or about the way people live and think?), and (5) consider a possible explanation for the phenomenon that has been demonstrated (why might this be so? what might cause or have caused it?); (6) offer a qualification or limitation to the case you have made (what you’re not saying). The first of these kinds of reflections can come anywhere in an essay; the second usually comes early; the last four often come late (they’re common moves of conclusion). Most good essays have some of the first kind, and often several of the others besides.

**Orienting:**

Bits of information, explanation, and summary that orient the reader who isn’t expert in the subject, enabling such a reader to follow the argument. The orienting question is, what does my reader need here? The answer can take many forms: necessary information about the text, author, or event (e.g. given in your introduction); a summary of a text or passage about to be analyzed; pieces of information given along the way about passages, people, or events mentioned (including announcing or “set-up” phrases for quotations and sources). The trick is to orient briefly and gracefully—and not to orient when your audience doesn’t need it: e.g. “writer William Shakespeare.”

**Stance:**

The implied relationship of you, the writer, to your readers and subject: how and where you implicitly position yourself as an analyst. Stance is defined by such features as style and tone (e.g. familiar or formal); the presence or absence of specialized language and knowledge; the amount of

time spent orienting a general, non-expert reader; the use of scholarly conventions of form and style. Your stance should be established within the first few paragraphs of your essay, and it should remain consistent.

**Style:**

The choices you make of words and sentence structure. Your style should be exact and clear (should bring out main idea and action of each sentence, not bury it) and plain without being flat (should be graceful and a little interesting, not stuffy).

**Title:**

It should both interest and inform. To inform—i.e. inform a general reader who might be browsing in an essay collection or bibliography—your title should give the subject and focus of the essay. To interest, your title might include a linguistic twist, paradox, sound pattern, or striking phrase taken from one of your sources (the aptness of which phrase the reader comes gradually to see). You can combine the interesting and informing functions in a single title or split them into title and subtitle. The interesting element shouldn't be too cute; the informing element shouldn't go so far as to state a thesis. Don't underline your own title, except where it contains the title of another text.

Credit: Adapted from Gordon Harvey, *The Elements of the Academic Essay*, 2009.

The Brandeis University Writing Program, including the Writing Center, First-Year Writing, and Writing in the Majors, offers support for writing throughout the community, including undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and staff.

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