

Preparing to Write

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the individual elements of the pre-writing process, including preparation, outlining, and thesis statements. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Preparing to Write

Before you sit down and write anything, it's best to fully understand what you are being asked to do. Different assignments call for different kinds of writing, and different kinds of writing involve different kinds of thinking and work.

You might be tasked with writing an essay, which, broadly defined, is a short piece of writing on a single subject. The description of your assignment may also include other terms that clarify the purpose of your essay.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The goal of an expository essay is to explain your subject, usually in a fairly neutral way, whereas the goal of a persuasive essay is just as it sounds—to persuade, meaning you are required to take a single position on a particular issue and argue (persuasively) in favor of that position.

Another thing you need to know about your writing assignment is whether it requires research—that is, whether you are meant to write from your current knowledge base or whether you are meant to find and engage with facts and opinions in the writings of experts in your subject. Research will be discussed at length in future tutorials.



THINK ABOUT IT

Sometimes you will be assigned a topic to write about, but often you will be responsible for choosing a topic for your writing assignment yourself. Choosing the right topic is crucial to the success of your writing.

First, you want to make sure that you are choosing an appropriate topic—one that fits the purpose and the scope of the assignment. For instance, if your essay is supposed to be three pages long, you want a topic that is specific and focused enough to cover at that length and not one that would require many more pages to properly address. It's also important to select a topic that at least somewhat interests you; if you are not interested in your topic, you are more likely to write an uninteresting paper.

2. Creating an Outline

The steps that you can take to organize your ideas before you begin to write your paper are often called pre-writing. One of the most popular and effective types of pre-writing is creating an outline. An outline helps you by mapping out the structure of your paper, identifying main ideas and supporting points that will become the basis for paragraphs and sentences, and putting them in sequence.

In a typical essay, the following are included in the basic structure of the paper:

- **Introduction:** This builds toward the statement of your thesis, which is the central point you are trying to make in your paper.
- **Body:** The paragraphs that follow, called the body of your essay, include the individual points that support your thesis.
- **Conclusion:** This demonstrates you have successfully made the argument established in your introduction and is found at the end of your paper.

Once you have outlined your ideas, the blank screen in front of you becomes less intimidating—you have a plan in place! Your outline gives you a sense of what each paragraph of your essay needs to accomplish and where you are headed in the next paragraph.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The conventional form of outline used in pre-writing for higher education is called the alphanumeric outline. The alphanumeric outline starts with items marked by Roman numerals (e.g. I, II, III, IV, V), then capital letters, Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3), and lowercase letters. Let's say you are writing a research paper on a topic of your choice and you choose the history of baseball. Here's what the first part of your outline might look like:

- I. Introduction and Thesis: *The popular origin story of the game of baseball is a myth*
- II. The Origin Myth
 - A. Abner Doubleday, Civil War Hero
 1. Cooperstown, New York, 1839
 - a. Drawing the diamond in the dirt and coining the name "baseball"
 - B. Albert Spalding, sporting goods entrepreneur
 2. The Mills Commission's findings, 1907
- III. The Real Story
 - A. Derivation from the British game "Rounders"
 1. The Jane Austen novel *Northanger Abbey* written in 1803, mentions baseball
 - B. Evolution of the game in America
 1. The "Knickerbocker Rules"

3. Writing a Thesis Statement

A lot of the writing you will be assigned in college is going to require a thesis statement. **A thesis** is a clear and concise statement of the argument you are making, generally boiled down to one or two sentences and included at the end of your introductory paragraph. If your writing assignment needs a thesis, making sure you

have a strong one is absolutely essential. Though you can always adjust and hone your thesis as you are in the process of thinking through and writing your paper, it is definitely a good idea to have a good sense upfront of what you are setting out to do.

A strong thesis statement is as follows:

- **Focused:** If your thesis is too vague, you need to clarify precisely what you mean to say.
- **Specific:** If your thesis is too broad, you might be taking on an argument that is too big to reasonably prove within the scope of your assignment.
- **Debatable:** If your thesis is just a statement of fact, you don't really have an argument to make.
- **Original:** If your thesis is cliché or obvious, you want to do your best to distinguish your particular position from what's been said about your topic.

Students often find that coming up with an original thesis is the most challenging part of writing papers in college. After all, how are you supposed to come up with something new that hasn't already been said by experts in the field? While this can be a challenge, it is challenging for a reason—higher education is distinguished by demanding your engagement with the scholarly conversations and debates on a certain topic, and you can ideally contribute to those conversations and debates.

IN CONTEXT

Your composition instructor has assigned you a four-page persuasive essay about a contemporary social issue. You decide you want to write about the election process. You start with the idea, "In a democracy, elections should be fair."

Is this a strong thesis? No, it isn't. While it does take a stance, the stance is fairly obvious and difficult to debate, as it would be tough to argue the opposite—that democratic elections should be unfair. Furthermore, although this thesis does inform the reader that the essay will discuss fairness and elections, for a shorter paper it would be a good idea to narrow the focus to a specific aspect of elections.

So how can you improve this thesis? You might decide that the most important element of fair elections is access and the best way to maximize access is to allow online voting. So your new thesis is, "Elections will only truly be democratic when everyone who wants to vote can vote, and the best way to ensure that is to allow online voting."

Now your argument is more specific—you've narrowed the scope to the merits of online voting—and more debatable, as potential issues of cyber-security could provide the basis for a reasonable counter-argument.



BIG IDEA

Rhetoric is the art of using language, in speech or in writing, to persuade an audience. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle identified three distinct modes of persuasion or rhetorical appeals: ethos, pathos, and logos. The ethos mode emphasizes the author's credibility and trustworthiness. Pathos appeals to the audience's emotions. Logos is the persuasive mode that centers the argument itself, relying on a sound logical structure (evidence) to make its case. In your college courses, logos is typically going to be the

most appropriate mode of persuasion to employ, but depending on the assignment, elements of ethos and pathos may be of use to you as well.



TERM TO KNOW

Thesis Statement

The main argument or idea that you are trying to communicate when writing a paper. All of the material that you include in a paper should provide evidence to support the thesis.

4. Supporting a Thesis Statement with Evidence

Once you've settled on the main point you want to make in your paper and articulated it concisely in a thesis statement, the next step is to go about proving that point. Just like a lawyer, the way that you successfully make your case is by supplying relevant evidence in support of your thesis.

Your evidence fills out your essay's body paragraphs—everything in between the introduction and conclusion. It's important that your body paragraphs flow well from one to another and that your essay as a whole is cohesive—that is, that all of your sentences and paragraphs fit together.

One way to ensure cohesiveness is to take care that everything you write is ultimately in service of the thesis and to avoid digressions that are not directly relevant to your main point.



SUMMARY

Prepare to write by reading your assignment carefully before you actually begin to write. **Create an outline** that includes **writing a thesis statement** and the **supporting evidence for your thesis statement**.



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