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Art History.

Many students do not get a chance to study art history until they take a university course, so art history may be a new field of study for you. Even though you are new to analyzing the visual arts, the skills you have learned in other fields will serve you well in this discipline. If you have ever analyzed a poem or developed an understanding of a historical period, you are prepared to think and write like an art historian. You must still make an argument about something, but in this case you will use art instead of, say, dialogue from a play, or literature, to build and defend your argument.

Although art historians vary in their approaches to art, there are a few common approaches that form the backbone of the field. This document describes these approaches briefly and attempts to create a few categories.

It lets you know what you might need to do to tackle a paper assignment in this field. Remember this key point: there is more than one way of dealing with art history. Understanding *your* instructor's approach to art will help you meet his or her expectations in your writing.

Professors in introductory classes will often start with at least one of the following assignments at the beginning of the semester, which is given in order to get you thinking like an art historian.

1) Formal analysis

This assignment requires a detailed description of the formal qualities of the art object. *Formal* as in "related to the form," and not other definitions of the word. Put simply, you're looking at the individual design elements, such as composition, the arrangement of parts of, or in, the work, color, line, texture, scale, proportion, balance, contrast, and rhythm.

The primary concern of this type of assignment is to attempt to explain how the artist arranges and uses these various elements. Individually, and as a whole you must contextualize these ideas within the given medium too, be it sculpture, photography, or painting.

Usually you have to go and look at the object for a long time and then write down what you see. As you will quickly see from the page length of the assignment, your instructor expects a *highly detailed* description of the object. It may seem impossible at first, and you might struggle with this assignment because it is hard to translate what you see into words—don't give up, and take more notes than you might think you need.

Why would your instructor ask you to do this assignment? First, translating something from a visual language to a textual language is one of the most vital tasks of the art historian. In fact, most art historians at some point describe fully and accurately their objects of study in order to communicate their ideas about them. Think about how this textual description of visual art has already probably helped you understand art history, while reading your textbook or other assigned readings.

Second, your instructors realize that you are not accustomed to scrutinizing objects in this way and know that you need practice doing so, and that is the point of the exercise. Instructors who assign formal analyses want you to look—and look again, and look carefully. Think of the object as a series of decisions that an artist made, and try to get in that position yourself. Think of the physical act of making the thing, and if you can't understand how it was fabricated you need to arrive there by looking, and examining the object. Your job is to figure out and describe, explain, and interpret those decisions by the artist.

Ideally, if you were to give your written formal analysis to a friend who had never seen the object, s/he would be able to describe or draw the object for you, or at least pick it out of a lineup.

In writing a formal analysis, focus on creating a logical order so that your reader doesn't get lost. Don't ever assume that because your instructor has seen the work, he or she knows what you are talking about. Here are a couple of options:

1. Summarize. What is the object's overall appearance? Then describe the details of the object in the context of its medium.
2. Describe the composition of the object, based on form, and then move on to a description of the materials used, such as acrylic, watercolor, or plaster.
3. It can help to begin discussing one side of the work and then move across the object to the other side, and find narrative structure in the form, or the way as a viewer you "read" the object itself.
4. It is key to describe things in the order in which they draw your eye around the object. Is there a way that you view this, and do you necessarily move to activate your engagement, as in a Jackson Pollock painting. Scale is part of this element of description.

Some instructors want your formal analysis to consist of pure description with little or no interpretation. In this case, you should just describe the given object. Others will expect you to go further and comment on the significance of what you have observed.

Neither of these methods is exclusive and as a student it is important to find out which way your instructor wants you to write your formal analysis for a particular assignment. Art historians frequently include formal analysis at some point in their essays on any aspect of the medium, so there are a lot of examples to look at in texts and other readings, even very basic ones, but you will probably have to be more in-depth than they are.

2) Stylistic analysis

Art is often framed narratively through cycles and movements, both geographic, political and based on collectives or groups of artists working together or in opposition to one another. So, if you are asked to look at an object and talk about style, or technique, or a movement it requires a larger understanding of history. Some instructors will want you to

discuss how an object fits into a particular category—for example, **Impressionism, Baroque, or early Macedonian**. Often this sort of analysis is based around having you assess two works in either the same or very different stylistic categories.



Claude Monet



Pablo Picasso

One example would be comparing a Monet to a Picasso, which are radically different. Versus comparing a Monet to a Degas, which allows you to see fissures and variations within a single movement, and the choices of each artist. You should arrive at a conclusion after doing this analysis and be clear on.

1. How does the work fit the movement, or categorization, or how does it not.
2. How two works based on the same content can be totally different from each other, because of the choices made by artists, such as two still life paintings dealing with space totally differently, such as Caravaggio versus Cezanne.

3) Iconography/iconology

This kind of assignment occurs in courses covering art before the Modern period principally. Here you will look for a particular element that occurs in the object, such as an action, gesture, or pose.

Then you should explain either:

1. When that same element occurs in other objects through history and how this object's representation of it is unique, or

2. What that element means generally in art or to art historians—in other words, the traditional association an art historian might make between that depiction and some other thing.

For example, there have been thousands of paintings of Hercules choosing between Virtue and Vice. So, if you were given Annibale Carracci's version, as a referent, and you are asked to find out what is unique about it. First, as a critic you would go look at other versions, like Paolo Veronese's, in order to inform your reading of Carracci's. How do they differ in their visual representation showing Hercules making his choice? This sort of art historical writing is not focused on the actual making of the object, but instead on the way the subject is represented:

For Example: Carracci has Virtue and Vice in Ancient clothing, but Veronese shows them in contemporary Venetian costumes. Then, you might have to say what that means: Carracci spent a lot of time in Rome looking at Ancient art. He then was very interested in using Ancient art works as models in his paintings, but Veronese was showing off one of the main industries of Venice at the time, which was textiles. Another possible way of framing it is Veronese wanted his patrons to think about how they might fit into the scenario. He made it about the present day, and a different viewer relationship to the object, instead of keeping the story in the past.

If you are confused, read Erwin Panofsky's essays on iconology and iconography, in which he defines these terms more extensively. Be warned that Panofsky makes a clear distinction between iconography and iconology, but many art historians do not—they often use the word "iconography" when they mean both.

Art historians study iconography and iconology so often that they have compiled reference texts that list many of the famous works that show particular themes—you might use these as a resource, so ask the art librarian about them. One such resource is the *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* by James Hall.

4) Provenance/patronage

Some assignments require you to examine the life of the object itself: the circumstances surrounding its production and/or where and why it has changed hands throughout history. This is the "aura" aspect of the

object given it has survived time and circumstance. A reference for the relevance of some of this sort of discussion or patronage can be framed by reading Walter Benjamin's "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

These assignments focus on:

1. How, when, where, and why the patron, which is the person who orders or buys the object, or generally supports the artist, asked for or acquired the object. It is usually directly from the artist at the initial stage. The assignment may ask you to comment on what the patronage system suggests about how artists made their living at different points in history, or how/why patrons chose the artists they did, or how that influenced the particular fabrication of this work of art.
2. The history of the object passing from artist to patron to museum, and the dialectic of that system. This is focused more on systems of wealth, consumption and often narrative power tied to specific spaces. Such assignments usually only appear in classes oriented toward museum studies.

The assignment may also ask you to comment on the significance of this history, or passing on of objects. For example, why/how a bust of the Goddess Sekhmet from the Temple of Mut could end up as one foot of a British garden bench? This also connotes further questions about patronage, and the owner's attitudes toward the object.

5) Theory/criticism

All four of the previous assignment types focus on the object itself, as a thing, such as a painting, sculpture, drawing, or building. However, in some courses, particularly in Modern Art courses and Postmodern Art courses, you may be asked to look beyond or through the object. Objects are in these eras used as frameworks for ideas, and are representational, but not an end of themselves sometimes. This type of writing examines theoretical, historical, or social contexts of the object, artist, and time period.

Instructors may want you to talk about how the formal or stylistic qualities of the object, and how these qualities reflect or affect the time in which they were made.

Example: The changing landscape of America and Los Angeles as a city, and Ed Ruscha's photographs of gas stations and parking lots in 1960s Los Angeles.

More specifically, you may be asked to look at the object's relationship to ideas about gender, class, artistic creation, culture, or politics.

Contemporary works often embody these ideas, and are associated with that time in a particular way. Additionally, you may be asked to connect artworks with the theories of a particular person, and prevailing historical or cultural ideas which were influencing an era, for example, the connection between Salvador Dali's paintings and Sigmund Freud's dream analyses.

Let's take one popular modern artist and look at how many different ways he has been studied from a theoretical/critical perspective. Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionist paintings have been discussed as all of the following:

- Stemming from and helping to create an American post-war culture of masculinity and superiority.
- A reaction to the "Red Scare" and paranoia forcing a necessary move to a psychological space in painting dealing with non representation, which reflected the prevailing social paranoia of American society.
- Portraying a stylistic progression from illusionistic space to a more abstract representation that emphasizes the flatness of the canvas and the paint over content or narrative.
- Pointing out the cowardice and malleability of wealthy American patrons.



Jackson Pollock

Assignments, such as this, may leave you a fair amount of latitude in finding and pursuing a topic after several different ideas about an artist are presented in the class. So, your research becomes the driving force of framing your argument about these artists, or the reading you focus on. Regardless, of which you choose, be sure that your paper contains a strong argument. Remember to pay attention to what your instructor

does in class—learning to recognize and understand the theories that are being advanced and the supplemental readings to compliment their interpretations of works.

Don't forget, however, that even when you are writing a theory, or criticism, paper, and you get wrapped up in the social context for example, it remains a writing assignment about the art object or objects. The physical things should remain at the forefront of your discussion. The theory or criticism should arise out of the art, or the conceptual practice of it, rather than be superimposed on it.

A good way to keep your focus on the object is to write a formal analysis before getting into the theory; you may not include this analysis in your final paper, but writing it will give you insight into the object or objects you are discussing. You may also wish to keep an image of the object or objects in view as you write.

Tracking down the resources

After you analyze what type of assignment you have been given, you will need to review resources that will help you to answer that type of question. You may have to find any or all of the following books or materials:

- A. The object itself or a book that talks about it at length
- B. Standard art-historical reference texts; if your instructor hasn't let you know what these might be, inquire, or seek out additional support from libraries, or readings lists.
- C. Theory or analysis that has already been written, which is usually in the form of articles or books rather than survey texts..

The more theoretical the assignment, the more time it requires. It will result in you reading journal articles and sometimes indirectly related books. These links can be formed by your reading of the assignment as you seek to tease out a nuanced argument. Even when writing a more theoretical paper, don't ever forget the object—it is the reason for your paper and your primary referent.

Academic Writing.

Introductions and conclusions can be the most difficult parts of academic papers to write. Usually when you sit down to respond to an assignment,

you have at least some sense of what you want to say in the body of your paper.

It is best if you have chosen a few examples, which you specifically want to use or have an idea that will help you answer the question: these sections, therefore, are not as hard to write. However, don't get lazy, as these middle parts of the paper can't just come out of thin air; they need to be introduced and concluded in a way that makes sense to your reader.

It all has to be integrated and flow.

It's worth writing a good introduction because..

- 1. You never get a second chance to make a first impression.** That cliché means something here. In fact, the opening paragraph of your paper will provide your readers with their initial impressions of your argument, your writing style, and the overall quality of your work. A vague, disorganized, error-filled, off-the-wall, or boring introduction will probably create a negative impression. On the other hand, a concise, engaging, and well-written introduction will start your readers off thinking highly of you, your analytical skills, your writing, and your paper. It's about being convincing in the way you'd want someone to be presenting academic information or an argument to you. This impression is especially important when the audience you are trying to reach (i.e. the instructor) will be grading your work.
- 2. Your introduction is an important road map for the rest of your paper.** Your introduction conveys a lot of information, in a brief way, to your readers. You can let them know what your topic is, why it is important, and how you plan to proceed with your discussion. It's a framework for the larger body. It should contain a thesis that will assert your main argument. This is vital. It will also, ideally, give the reader a sense of the kinds of information you will use to make that argument and the general organization of the paragraphs and pages that will follow. After reading your introduction, your readers should not have any major surprises in store when they read the main body of your paper.
- 3. Ideally, your introduction will make your readers want to read your paper.** The introduction should capture your readers' interest, making them want to read the rest of your paper. Opening

with a compelling story, a fascinating quotation, an interesting question, or a stirring example is one approach. Anything of consequence being used early on can get your readers to see why this topic matters. It must matter right? You spent a lot of time researching it? So, this effectively serves, as an invitation for readers to join you for an interesting intellectual conversation.

How to write a decent introduction

1. Think about the question(s) given to you by the instructor.

Your entire essay will be a response to the assigned question, or an argument based on the ideas contained in that question. The first step to addressing that is your introduction. A direct answer to the assigned question will be your thesis, and this is the framework for constructing further discussion or arguments about the material. It is a good idea to use the question as a jumping off point. Imagine that you are assigned the following question:

- *Education has long been considered a major force for American social change, righting the wrongs of our society. Drawing on *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, discuss the relationship between education and slavery in 19th-century America. Consider the following: How did white control of education reinforce slavery? How did Douglass and other enslaved African Americans view education while they endured slavery? And what role did education play in the acquisition of freedom? Most importantly, consider the degree to which education was or was not a major force for social change with regard to slavery.*
- You will probably refer back to this question extensively as you prepare your complete essay, and the question itself can also give you some clues about how to approach the introduction. Notice that the question starts with a broad statement, that education has been considered a major force for social change, and then narrows to focus on specific questions from the book. One strategy might be to use a similar model in your own introduction —start off with a big picture sentence or two about the power of education as a force for change as a way of getting your reader interested and then focus in on the details of your argument about Douglass. Of course, a different approach could also be very successful, but looking at

the way the professor set up the question can sometimes give you some ideas for how you might answer it. Keep in mind, though, that even a "big picture" opening needs to be clearly related to your topic; an opening sentence that said "Human beings, more than any other creatures on earth, are capable of learning" would be too broad.

2. Do the introduction for your paper last.

You may think that you have to write your introduction first, but that isn't necessarily true, and it isn't always the most effective way to craft a good introduction. You may find that you don't know what you are going to argue at the beginning of the writing process, and only through the experience of writing your paper do you discover your main argument. It is perfectly fine to start out thinking that you want to argue a particular point, but wind up arguing something slightly or even dramatically different by the time you've written most of the paper. The writing process can be an important way to organize your ideas, think through complicated issues, refine your thoughts, and develop a sophisticated argument. However, an introduction written at the beginning of that discovery process will not necessarily reflect what you wind up with at the end. You will need to revise your paper to make sure that the introduction, all of the evidence, and the conclusion reflect the argument you intend. Sometimes it helps to write up all of your evidence first and then write the introduction—that way you can be sure that the introduction matches the body of the paper.

3. Don't be afraid to write a tentative introduction first and then change it later.

Some people find that they need to write some kind of introduction, as it gets the ball rolling, in order to get the writing process started. That's fine, but if you are one of those people, be sure to return to your initial introduction later and rewrite if necessary.

4. Get people's attention.

Sometimes, especially if the topic of your paper is somewhat

dry or technical, opening with something catchy can help. Consider these options:

- A. An intriguing example (for example, the mistress who initially teaches Douglass but then ceases her instruction as she learns more about slavery)
- B. A provocative quotation (Douglass writes that "education and slavery were incompatible with each other")
- C. A puzzling scenario (Frederick Douglass says of slaves that "[N]othing has been left undone to cripple their intellects, darken their minds, debase their moral nature, obliterate all traces of their relationship to mankind; and yet how wonderfully they have sustained the mighty load of a most frightful bondage, under which they have been groaning for centuries!" Douglass clearly asserts that slave owners went to great lengths to destroy the mental capacities of slaves, yet his own life story proves that these efforts could be unsuccessful.)
- D. a vivid and perhaps unexpected anecdote (for example, "Learning about slavery in the American history course at Frederick Douglass High School, students studied the work slaves did, the impact of slavery on their families, and the rules that governed their lives. We didn't discuss education, however, until one student, Mary, raised her hand and asked, 'But when did they go to school?' That modern high school students could not conceive of an American childhood devoid of formal education speaks volumes about the centrality of education to American youth today and also suggests the significance of the deprivation of education in past generations.")
- E. A thought-provoking question (given all of the freedoms that were denied enslaved individuals in the American South, why does Frederick Douglass focus his attentions so squarely on education and literacy?)

5. Pay special attention to your first sentence.

Start off on the right foot with your readers by making sure that the first sentence actually says something useful and that it does so in an interesting and error-free way. Never say nothing in your first sentence, or spout gibberish.

6. Be straightforward and confident.

Avoid statements like "In this paper, I will argue that Frederick Douglass valued education." While this sentence points toward your main argument, it isn't especially interesting. It might be more effective to say what you mean in a declarative sentence. It is much more convincing to tell us that "Frederick Douglass valued education" than to tell us that you are going to say that he did. Assert your main argument confidently. After all, you can't expect your reader to believe it if it doesn't sound like you believe it!

Five kinds of less effective introductions

1. The place holder introduction. When you don't have much to say on a given topic, it is easy to create this kind of introduction. This is the default introduction, which is vague and useless. Essentially, this kind of weaker introduction contains a series of sentences that don't really say much. They exist just to take up the "introduction space" in your paper. If you had something more effective to say, you would probably say it, but in the meantime this paragraph is just a place holder.

Example: Slavery was one of the greatest tragedies in American history. There were many different aspects of slavery. Each created different kinds of problems for enslaved people.

This is boring and shows no idea of knowledge, and know learning or reflection on the topic. Anybody could write this statement.

2. The restated question introduction. Restating the question can be an effective strategy, but it can be easy to stop at JUST restating the question instead of offering a more effective, interesting introduction to your paper. Don't simply repeat things, react to them as a writer. The professor or teaching assistant wrote your questions and will be reading ten to seventy essays in response to them—he or she does not need to read a whole paragraph that simply restates the question. Try to do something more interesting.

Example: Indeed, education has long been considered a major force for American social change, righting the wrongs of our society. The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass discusses the relationship between education and slavery in 19th century America, showing how white control of education reinforced slavery and how Douglass and

other enslaved African Americans viewed education while they endured. Moreover, the book discusses the role that education played in the acquisition of freedom. Education was a major force for social change with regard to slavery.

3. The Webster's Dictionary introduction. This introduction begins by giving the dictionary definition of one or more of the words in the assigned question. It's not always bad, but it depends heavily on the thrust of your argument. This introduction strategy is on the right track—if you write one of these, you may be trying to establish the important terms of the discussion, and this move builds a bridge to the reader by offering a common, agreed-upon definition for a key idea. That is acceptable and more of a semantic argument. You may also be looking for an authority that will lend credibility to your paper. However, anyone can look a word up in the dictionary and copy down what Webster says—it may be far more interesting for you (and your reader) if you develop your own definition of the term in the specific context of your class and assignment. Also recognize that the dictionary is also not a particularly authoritative work—it doesn't take into account the context of your course. The course will surely provide a more robust and layered definition of terms in a given academic field than can be given in a dictionary. It doesn't offer particularly detailed information. If you feel that you must seek out an authority, try to find one that is very relevant and specific. Perhaps a quotation from a source reading might prove better? Dictionary introductions are also ineffective simply because they are so overused. Many graders will see twenty or more papers that begin in this way, greatly decreasing the dramatic impact that any one of those papers will have.

Example: Webster's dictionary defines slavery as "the state of being a slave," as "the practice of owning slaves," and as "a condition of hard work and subjection."

4. The "dawn of man" introduction. This kind of introduction generally makes broad, sweeping statements about the relevance of this topic since the beginning of time. It is usually very general (similar to the place holder introduction) and fails to connect to the thesis. It is a default and not acceptable beginning. You may write this kind of introduction when you don't have much to say—which is precisely why it is ineffective. It means you have not complex relation to the topic, or ideas to present about it.

Example: Since the dawn of man, slavery has been a problem in human history.

5. The book report introduction. This introduction is what you had to do for your fifth-grade book reports. It gives the name and author of the book you are writing about, tells what the book is about, and offers other basic facts about the book. You might resort to this sort of introduction when you are trying to fill space because it's a familiar, comfortable format. It is ineffective because it offers details that your reader already knows and that are irrelevant to the thesis. NEVER do this.

Example: Frederick Douglass wrote his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, in the 1840s. It was published in 1986 by Penguin Books. He tells the story of his life.

Preparing an effective conclusion.

One or more of the following strategies may help you write an effective conclusion.

- Play the "So What" Game. If you're stuck and feel like your conclusion isn't saying anything new or interesting, ask a friend to read it with you. Whenever you make a statement from your conclusion, ask the friend to say, "So what?" or "Why should anybody care?" Then ponder that question and answer it. Here's how it might go:
- You: *Basically, I'm just saying that education was important to Douglass.*
- Friend: *So what?*
- You: *Well, it was important because it was a key to him feeling like a free and equal citizen.*
- Friend: *Why should anybody care?*
- You: *That's important because plantation owners tried to keep slaves from being educated so that they could maintain control. When Douglass obtained an education, he undermined that control personally.*
- You can also use this strategy on your own, asking yourself "So What?" as you develop your ideas or your draft.

- Return to the theme or themes in the introduction. This strategy brings the reader full circle. For example, if you begin by describing a scenario, you can end with the same scenario as proof that your essay is helpful in creating a new understanding. You may also refer to the introductory paragraph by using key words or parallel concepts and images that you also used in the introduction.
- Synthesize, don't summarize: Include a brief summary of the paper's main points, but don't simply repeat things that were in your paper. Instead, show your reader how the points you made and the support and examples you used fit together. Pull it all together.
- Include a provocative insight or quotation from the research or reading you did for your paper.
- Propose a course of action, a solution to an issue, or questions for further study. This can redirect your reader's thought process and help her to apply your info and ideas to her own life or to see the broader implications.
- Point to broader implications. For example, if your paper examines the Greensboro sit-ins or another event in the Civil Rights Movement, you could point out its impact on the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. A paper about the style of writer Virginia Woolf could point to her influence on other writers or on later feminists.

Strategies to avoid

- Beginning with an unnecessary, overused phrase such as "in conclusion," "in summary," or "in closing." This is not effective in academic writing. Although these phrases can work in speeches, they come across as wooden and trite in writing.
- Stating the thesis for the very first time in the conclusion.
- Introducing a new idea or subtopic in your conclusion. Stick to what you've said, never throw a curve ball at the end.
- Ending with a rephrased thesis statement without any substantive changes.

- Making sentimental, emotional appeals that are out of character with the rest of an analytical paper.
- Including evidence (quotations, statistics, etc.) that should be in the body of the paper. Evidence is in the middle not the end.

Four kinds of ineffective conclusions

1. The "That's My Story and I'm Sticking to It" Conclusion. This conclusion just restates the thesis and is usually painfully short. It does not push the ideas forward. A conclusion hammers home the validity of the arguments you've made in the paper. People write this kind of conclusion when they can't think of anything else to say.

Example: In conclusion, Frederick Douglass was, as we have seen, a pioneer in American education, proving that education was a major force for social change with regard to slavery.

2. The "Sherlock Holmes" Conclusion. Sometimes writers will state the thesis for the very first time in the conclusion. You might be tempted to use this strategy if you don't want to give everything away too early in your paper. Building drama is not the goal of analysis. You may think it would be more dramatic to keep the reader in the dark until the end and then shock him with your main idea, or solution, as in a Sherlock Holmes mystery. The reader, however, does not expect a mystery, but an analytical discussion of your topic in an academic style, with the main argument (thesis) stated up front.

Example: (After a paper that lists numerous incidents from the book but never says what these incidents reveal about Douglass and his views on education): So, as the evidence above demonstrates, Douglass saw education as a way to undermine the slaveholders' power and also an important step toward freedom.

3. The "America the Beautiful"/"I Am Woman"/"We Shall Overcome" Conclusion. If your not familiar with these themes in history you should be, and google them. They are emotional appeals. Any kind of conclusion usually draws on emotion to make its

appeal, but while this emotion and even sentimentality may be very heartfelt, it is usually out of character with the rest of an analytical paper. A more sophisticated commentary, rather than emotional praise, would be a more fitting tribute to the topic.

Example: Because of the efforts of fine Americans like Frederick Douglass, countless others have seen the shining beacon of light that is education. His example was a torch that lit the way for others. Frederick Douglass was truly an American hero.

4. The "Grab Bag" Conclusion. This kind of conclusion includes extra information, which was uncovered somewhere in the research after the key arguments were already framed in the analysis. It is a shame to not be able to use great information, but it will hurt you if you force it into the main paper. Adding random facts and bits of evidence at the end of an otherwise-well-organized essay will create confusion.

Example: In addition to being an educational pioneer, Frederick Douglass provides an interesting case study for masculinity in the American South. He also offers historians an interesting glimpse into slave resistance when he confronts Covey, the overseer. His relationships with female relatives reveal the importance of family in the slave community.

Arguments are everywhere

It may come as a shock to hear that the word "argument" does not have to be written anywhere in your assignment for it to be an important part of your task. It is your job, and in fact, making an argument—expressing a point of view on a subject and supporting it with evidence—is the aim of most academic writing. Instructors may assume that you know this and thus may not explain the importance of arguments to you in class. Nevertheless, if your writing assignment asks you to respond to readings and class discussion, your instructor expects you to produce an argument in your paper.

Most material you learn in college is or has been debated by someone, somewhere, at some time. Even when the material you read or hear is

presented as simple fact, it behooves any critic to think about the nature of facts. Is it something irrefutable, or is it actually one person's interpretation of a set of information? In your writing, instructors may call on you to question that interpretation and defend it, refute it, or offer some new view of your own. This requires analysis and research to support the claims your making. Evidence. In writing assignments, you will always need to do more than just present information that you have gathered or regurgitate facts that were discussed in class. It is not enough to do that, and you will need to select a point of view and provide evidence for your argument, in order to shape the material and offer your interpretation of the material.

If you think that facts, not arguments, rule intelligent thinking, then think again. Consider these examples: At one point, the great minds of Western Europe firmly believed the Earth was flat. They assumed this was simply an uncontroversial fact. You are able to disagree now because people who saw that argument as faulty set out to make a better argument and proved it.

Differences of opinion are how human knowledge develops, and scholars like your instructors spend their lives engaged in debate over what may be counted as "true," "real," or "right" in their fields. In their courses, they want you to engage in similar kinds of critical thinking and debate.

Argumentation is not just what your instructors do. We all use argumentation on a daily basis, it's a way on presenting a claim, an idea or convincing someone of something. You probably already have some skill at crafting an argument. The more you improve your skills in this area, the better you will be at thinking critically, reasoning, making choices, and weighing evidence.

Making a claim

What is an argument? In academic writing, an argument is usually a main idea, often called a "claim" or "thesis statement," backed up with evidence that supports the idea. In the majority of university papers, you will need to make some sort of claim and use evidence to support it, and your ability to gather this support and use it well will separate your papers from those of students who see assignments as mere accumulations of fact and detail.

In other words, gone are your prior assignments where you are given a "topic" about which you can write anything. In academic writing one

must stake out a position and prove why it is a good position for a thinking person to hold.

Claims can be as simple as "Protons are positively charged and electrons are negatively charged," with evidence such as, "In this experiment, protons and electrons acted in such and such a way." Claims can also be as complex as "The end of the South African system of apartheid was inevitable," using reasoning and evidence such as, "Every successful revolution in the modern era has come about after the government in power has given and then removed small concessions to the uprising group." In either case, the rest of your paper will detail the reasoning and evidence that have led you to believe that your position is best.

When starting to write any paper, ask yourself, "What is my point?" For example, the point of the document you are reading now is to help you become a better writer, correct? So, the text as it is written argues that an important step in the process of writing effective arguments is understanding the concept of argumentation.

So, if your papers do not have a main point, they cannot be arguing for anything, and are simply recitals of other ideas, or regurgitation. Nobody likes to read or look at regurgitation. Asking yourself what your point is can help you avoid coughing up bland and recycled ideas. Consider this: your instructors probably know a lot more than you do about your subject matter. Why, then, would you want to provide them with material they already know? Instructors are usually looking for two things:

- 1. Proof that you understand the material, AND**
- 2. A demonstration of your ability to use or apply the material in ways that go beyond what you have read or heard.**

This second part can be done in many ways: you can critique the material, apply it to something else, or even just explain it in a different way. In order to succeed at this second step, though, you must have a particular point to argue.

Arguments in academic writing are usually complex and take time to develop. Your argument will need to be more than a simple or obvious statement such as "Frank Lloyd Wright was a great architect." Such a statement might capture your initial impressions of Wright as you have studied him in class; however, you need to look deeper and express

specifically what caused that greatness, and how can you justify that statement. Your instructor will probably expect something more complicated, such as "Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture combines elements of European modernism, Asian aesthetic form, and locally found materials to create a unique new style," or "There are many strong similarities between Wright's building designs and those of his mother, which suggests that he may have borrowed some of her ideas." These are convincing details to point to why he might be considered great in your PERSONAL estimation, which is not relevant to analysis. To develop your argument, however, you would then define your terms and prove your claim with evidence from Wright's drawings and buildings and those of the other architects you mentioned.

Evidence

Do not stop with having a point, as a point is not enough. You have to back up your point with evidence. The strength of your evidence, and your use of it, can make or break your argument. Flimsy evidence and poor resources will not convince anyone of anything, will they? You already have the natural inclination for this type of thinking, if not in an academic setting.

Think about how you talked your parents into letting you borrow the family car. Did you present them with lots of instances of your past trustworthiness? Did you make them feel guilty because your friends' parents all let them drive? Did you whine until they just wanted you to shut up? Did you look up statistics on teen driving and use them to show how you didn't fit the dangerous-driver profile? These are all types of argumentation, and they exist in academia in similar forms.

Every field has slightly different requirements for acceptable evidence, so familiarize yourself with some arguments from within that field instead of just applying whatever evidence you like best. Pay attention to your textbooks and your instructor's lectures. What types of argument and evidence are they using? The way they frame a discussion and the texts they use or indications of the academic style of the class, and what is valid evidence in their field.

The type of evidence that sways an English instructor may not work to convince a sociology instructor. Find out what counts as proof that something is true in that field. Is it statistics? A logical development of

points? Something from the object being discussed, such as an art work, text, culture, or atom, the way something works, or some combination of more than one of these things?

Be consistent with your evidence. You can't just throw the kitchen sink at the argument like when you are negotiating for the use of your parents' car. An academic paper is certainly not the place for an all-out blitz of every type of argument.

This does not mean that good analysis does not often use more than one type of evidence, but make sure that within each section you are providing the reader with evidence appropriate to each claim. So, if you start a paragraph or section with a statement like "Putting the student's section closer to the pitch in the football stadium will raise player performance," it would not make sense to support this with evidence on how much more money the university could raise by letting more students go to games for free. The financial aspect is not connected to morale. Information about how fan support raises player morale, which then results in better play, would be a better follow-up.

Your next section could offer clear reasons why undergraduates have as much or more right to attend an undergraduate event as wealthy alumni—but this information would not go in the same section as the fan support stuff. You cannot convince a confused person, so keep things tidy and ordered.

Counterargument

Counterarguments are what people will say to cut down your claims, and prove you wrong. They are also one way to strengthen your argument by anticipating opposition. If you can answer your opposition in the paper and see counterarguments it shows that you have a deep understanding of the issue. By considering what someone who disagrees with your position you are effectively showing that you have thought things through about the subject, and you dispose of some of the reasons your audience might have for not accepting your argument. It shows you to be reasonable, and not someone simply ignoring other information, as you formulated your stance.

You can generate counterarguments by asking yourself how someone who disagrees with you might respond to each of the points you've made

or your position as a whole. If you can't immediately imagine another position, here are some strategies to try:

- Do some research. It may seem to you that no one could possibly disagree with the position you are arguing, but someone probably has. For example, some people argue that the American Civil War never ended. If you are making an argument concerning, for example, the outcomes of the Civil War, you might wish to see what some of these people have to say.
- Talk with a friend or with your teacher. Another person may be able to imagine counterarguments that haven't occurred to you.
- Consider your conclusion or claim and the premises of your argument and imagine someone who denies each of them. For example, if you argued "Cats make the best pets. This is because they are clean and independent," you might imagine someone saying "Cats do not make the best pets. They are dirty and needy."

Once you have thought up some counterarguments, consider how you will respond to them—will you concede that your opponent has a point but explain why your audience should nonetheless accept your argument? Will you reject the counterargument and explain why it is mistaken? Either way, you will want to leave your reader with a sense that your argument is stronger than opposing arguments.

When you are summarizing opposing arguments, be charitable, and not dismissive. Present each argument fairly and objectively, rather than trying to make it look foolish. Ridicule does not win people over at all. You want to show that you have seriously considered the many sides of the issue, and that landed you at your conclusion, which is the best one. It is poor form in writing to simply attack or caricature your opponents.

It is usually better to consider one or two serious counterarguments in some depth, rather than to give a long but superficial list of many different counterarguments and replies. Doing a list lacks depth and thus is unconvincing.

Be sure that your reply is consistent with your original argument. If considering a counterargument changes your position, you will need to go back and revise your original argument accordingly.

What is a thesis statement?

- It tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.
- This claim is a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
- It directly answers the question asked of you. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself.
- Thesis statements make a claim that others might dispute.
- They are usually no more than a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.

If your assignment asks you to take a position or develop a claim about a subject, you may need to convey that position or claim in a thesis statement near the beginning of your draft.

The assignment may not explicitly state that you need a thesis statement because your instructor may assume you will include one. When in doubt, ask your instructor if the assignment requires a thesis statement. When an assignment asks you to analyze, to interpret, to compare and contrast, to demonstrate cause and effect, or to take a stand on an issue, it is likely that you are being asked to develop a thesis and to support it persuasively.

How do I get a thesis?

A thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process it is not the result of simply reading the instructor's question. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment.

Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts, if you feel you know how to write your paper before you've researched anything you've not done your job as a writer. Once you do adequate thinking, you will probably have a "working thesis," a basic or main idea, an argument that you think you can support with evidence but that may need adjustment along the way.

Writers use all kinds of techniques to stimulate their thinking and to help them clarify relationships or comprehend the broader significance of a topic and arrive at a thesis statement.

- *Have I answered the questions posed by the instructor?* Re-reading the question prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the question.
- *Have I taken a position that others might disagree with?* If your thesis simply states facts that no one would, or even could, disagree with, it's possible that you are simply providing a summary, rather than making an argument. It must have potential to be opposed
- *Is my thesis specific?* Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words, such as "good" or "interesting," see if you could be more specific *what specifically* makes something "interesting"?
- *Use the "so what?" test?* Could a reader's first response logically be, "So what?" And that's it. If so, then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or make it stronger and about a larger issue.
- *Does my essay only support my thesis and not wander?* If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, at any juncture in the paper, then one of them has to change. Indeed it is ok to change your working thesis to reflect things you have figured out in the course of writing your paper. That's rewriting your introduction and framing your argument. Remember, always reassess and revise your writing as necessary, but don't change your ideas without changing the way you frame them.
- *Use the "how and why?"* If a reader's first response is "how?" or "why?" Then we're in trouble, as your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader. See what you can add to direct the reader, and give them a lucid idea of what your objective is from the beginning.

Suppose you are taking a course on 19th-century America, and the instructor hands out the following essay assignment: Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War. You turn on the computer and type out the following:

The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.

This weak thesis restates the question without providing any additional information. You will expand on this new information in the body of the

essay, but it is important that the reader know where you are heading. A reader of this weak thesis might think, "What reasons? How are they the same? How are they different?" Ask yourself these same questions and begin to compare Northern and Southern attitudes (perhaps you first think, "The South believed slavery was right, and the North thought slavery was wrong"). Now, push your comparison toward an interpretation—why did one side think slavery was right and the other side think it was wrong? You look again at the evidence, and you decide that you are going to argue that the North believed slavery was immoral while the South believed it upheld the Southern way of life. You write:

While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.

Now you have a working thesis! Included in this working thesis is a reason for the war and some idea of how the two sides disagreed over this reason. As you write the essay, you will probably begin to characterize these differences more precisely, and your working thesis may start to seem too vague. Maybe you decide that both sides fought for moral reasons, and that they just focused on different moral issues. You end up revising the working thesis into a final thesis that really captures the argument in your paper:

While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.

Compare this to the original weak thesis. This final thesis presents a way of *interpreting* evidence that illuminates the significance of the question. *Keep in mind that this is one of many possible interpretations of the Civil War—it is not the one and only right answer to the question.* There isn't one right answer; there are only strong and weak thesis statements and strong and weak uses of evidence.

Let's look at another example. Suppose your literature professor hands out the following assignment in a class on the American novel: Write an analysis of some aspect of Mark Twain's novel *Huckleberry Finn*. "This will be easy," you think. "I loved *Huckleberry Finn*!" You grab a pad of paper and write:

Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is a great American novel.

Why is this thesis weak? Think about what the reader would expect from the essay that follows: you will most likely provide a general, appreciative summary of Twain's novel. The question did not ask you to summarize; it asked you to analyze. Your professor is probably not interested in your opinion of the novel; instead, she wants you to think about *why* it's such a great novel—what do Huck's adventures tell us about life, about America, about coming of age, about race relations, etc.? First, the question asks you to pick an aspect of the novel that you think is important to its structure or meaning—for example, the role of storytelling, the contrasting scenes between the shore and the river, or the relationships between adults and children. Now you write:

In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.

Here's a working thesis with potential: you have highlighted an important aspect of the novel for investigation; however, it's still not clear what your analysis will reveal. Your reader is intrigued, but is still thinking, "So what? What's the point of this contrast? What does it signify?" Perhaps you are not sure yet, either. That's fine—begin to work on comparing scenes from the book and see what you discover. Free write, make lists, jot down Huck's actions and reactions. Eventually you will be able to clarify for yourself, and then for the reader, why this contrast matters. After examining the evidence and considering your own insights, you write:

Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain's Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave "civilized" society and go back to nature.

This final thesis statement presents an interpretation of a literary work based on an analysis of its content. Of course, for the essay itself to be successful, you must now present evidence from the novel that will convince the reader of your interpretation.

PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism will be defined as "the deliberate or reckless representation of another's words, thoughts, or ideas as one's own without attribution in connection with submission of academic work, whether graded or otherwise."

All knowledge is built from previous knowledge, and as such it is important to use sources. However, as we read, study, perform experiments, and gather perspectives, we are using other people's ideas, but giving them credit for their ideas.

Building on other people's ideas, we can create our own. When you put your ideas on paper, your instructors want you to clearly give them the ability to distinguish between the building block ideas borrowed from other people and your own newly reasoned perspectives or conclusions.

You make these distinctions in a written paper by citing the sources for the ideas you gathered from others.

In every professional field, experts consider some ideas "common knowledge," but remember that you're not a professional, and this can be dangerous. In fact, you're just learning about many of the concepts introduced in the course you're taking, so the material you are reading may not yet be "common knowledge" to you.

In order to decide if the material you want to use in your paper constitutes "common knowledge," you may find it helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- A. Did I know this information before I took this particular course?
- B. Did this information, or did these idea come from my own brain?

What about paraphrasing?

Paraphrasing means taking another person's ideas and putting those ideas in your own words. Paraphrasing does NOT mean changing a word or two in someone else's sentence, changing the sentence structure while maintaining the original words, or changing a few words to synonyms. If you are tempted to rearrange a sentence in any of these ways, you are writing too close to the original. That's plagiarizing, not paraphrasing.

