

The Portable Editor

Tips for Improving Your Writing

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In this issue, we discuss **argumentative writing**, which is the type of formal writing that is used most often in social work, including in peer-reviewed articles, proposals, case-management notes, and class papers. The central piece of this type of writing is the argument; that is, the **position, proposition, hypothesis, or thesis** that the writer intends to establish.

Thesis Statement

The thesis statement reveals the thrust of the paper and establishes the boundaries for the argument. A thesis **infers** or **implies** that a particular position will be presented with evidence to convince the reader of the truth of that position. In other words, a good thesis statement is **NOT a statement of fact** but a **debatable claim** that must be proven. This statement generally appears in the final paragraph of the paper's introduction.

Weak thesis statement: "This paper presents my research on the use of electronic surveillance in the workplace." (This is a statement of fact.)

Strong thesis statement: "Although employers currently have the legal right to monitor workers' e-mail and voice mail messages, this practice can have serious, negative effects on workplace morale." (This statement makes a claim that the writer will have to prove.)

Weak thesis statement: "Because air pollution is a serious global concern, many countries have implemented a variety of plans to begin solving the problem." (This statement is too broad and encompasses all forms of air pollution, many countries, and a variety of plans. This is far more than what can be covered in a paper or dissertation.)

Strong thesis statement: "Current research has suggested that zero-emission vehicles are not a feasible solution to the problem of increasing levels of air pollution in America's largest cities." (The second statement is a more effective thesis statement because the focus of the argument is narrowed to one potential solution, and the geographical scope is narrowed to America's largest cities.)

Body of the Paper

The body of the paper presents the empirical evidence to support the thesis statement/argument. In this section, each paragraph should focus on a single idea (micro argument) that contributes to the overall macro argument of the paper. The writer then describes the evidence (supporting points) in **further detail** to argue his or her claim, much like an attorney in court would do to argue a defendant's guilt or innocence.

Insufficient: "Souss and Sues (2001) showed that a number of factors affect low birth weight."

Providing evidence: "Souss and Sues (2001) demonstrated that low birth weight resulted from a combination of factors such as poor maternal nutrition, physical and emotional stress, access to prenatal care, and genetics."

Addressing Counterargument

Writers should never avoid addressing upfront any research limitations or problems. Including the counterargument establishes the writer's credibility and helps to mediate the research's weaknesses. Inclusion also disarms the opposition and enables the writer to build a more convincing argument by showing that multiple dimensions of the issue were investigated. Even if some valid points are conceded, the writer should demonstrate how his or her claim is superior.

For example, your paper cites evidence from a pilot study. Rather than avoiding the study's limitations, acknowledge them while emphasizing the strengths of the findings.

"Although only preliminary data from a pilot test is available, these early data support that brain games such as crossword puzzles and Scrabble stave off the effects of Alzheimer's."

Reverse Outline

Is your argument easy to follow? Is the information in your paper presented in a logical order (i.e., the order needed **for the reader** to process the information and follow your train of thought)? Is your writing repetitive? Are there gaps in your reasoning or holes in your argument? The way to answer these questions is with reverse outlining.

It's always a good practice to make an outline for the proposed structure of a paper. However, writers often get off track between their outline and their final draft. Taking a few minutes to make a reverse outline will help to clarify whether your paper has stayed on track and presents a cohesive, cogent argument.

To make a reverse outline, read your draft while jotting down notes on each "chunk" of information in the order presented. Below each chunk or topic, jot a few notes about the main point and the supports you offer for that point. That's your reverse outline.

Review the outline and ask yourself how well the information flows; that is, have you made it clear how one idea connects to the next? Does each paragraph build from the previous one and lead into the next? Does each paragraph have just one main point? Are there gaps in the information? Do you need to rearrange paragraphs? Do you have too many points? If so, which are the most important and have the best evidence? What can you trim to make your writing concise?

For class papers, compare your outline with the assignment and the grading rubric. Have you included all the essential elements of the assignment? Are you missing information? Do you have detailed information to support each point? Or, do you depend on general, broad statements? Does the paper accomplish its purpose? Have you stayed on track with the assignment and expectation for the paper?

Portable Editor Source: Diane Wyant, SSW academic editor and educational specialist, *A Writer's Reference* (5th Edition) by Diana Hacker, and UNC Writing Center Video Demo, *Drafting: Reverse Outlining*, Retrieved from <http://www.unc.edu/tlim/wc/>

Looking for Writing Support?

Check out the resources on <http://sww.unc.edu/students/writing>

Drop-in Support: Tuesdays, Noon — 2 p.m., Office 548e

Contact the Writing Support Team (i.e., Susan White and Diane Wyant) for an appointment or help via e-mail/phone at soswwritingsupport@gmail.com