

Writing: The First Draft

As you prepare to write the first draft of a paper, you should already know what your instructor is asking you to do and what topic you're exploring. (See #1 Getting Started above.) You also need to assess your audience for the paper. Once you know the purpose of your essay and the audience for whom you're writing, you can create a workable thesis statement and begin building an argument that supports it.

Assessing Your Audience

In general, you can assume that your audience for any given paper is your instructor as well as your classmates. In other words, you're writing for people who know the material that you're discussing. Thus, you should avoid providing unnecessary or irrelevant information on your topic. If you're writing a paper on Jane Austen's *Emma* for a literature class, you don't need to spend time providing a plot summary or a biographical sketch of Austen herself. Your instructor and your classmates have already read the novel and know something about Austen. Your paper should assert a conclusion or an insight about the novel that you prove through your analysis of the text.

There are times, however, when your instructor will ask you to write to a specific imagined audience. You may be required to write a grant proposal, a newspaper editorial, or a legal brief. You still need to assess the purpose of your writing and the audience to whom you're directing it, because you need to make sure your writing doesn't include information your audience already knows or exclude information they may need.

Creating a Thesis

In the simplest terms, a thesis statement is a conclusion that you've reached about your topic. You must prove your claim using sound arguments throughout your paper. When you create a thesis, you need to choose one that is appropriate for the length and scope of your paper. Your thesis should also be somewhat contentious; in other words, you need to avoid self-evident statements. The following thesis statement is undeniably true, but a poor thesis for a paper because it is self-evident:

Pol Pot was one of the most monstrous leaders of the twentieth century.

Such a statement gives you nothing to argue, no facts to analyze; no one would offer a counter-argument. The following statement would work more effectively:

American intervention in Cambodian politics during the Vietnam War played a significant role in bringing the Khmer Rouge to power.

You could analyze and discuss the existing facts to prove this claim. There are certainly counter-arguments to this position that you'd have to address and refute.

Developing Arguments

A logical argument depends on sound evidence. Depending on the subject matter, you'll gather your evidence from appropriate outside sources (books, periodicals, the internet), or base it on your own research and analysis. (See Below #12—*Using Sources*.) Suppose you want to make the following argument:

The current emphasis on lowering cholesterol to prevent heart disease is misplaced. Recent research shows that specific vitamin deficiencies are far more accurate as predictors of heart disease than is high cholesterol.

An effective argument would involve your presentation of the case for lowering cholesterol and then your refutation of that case based on your presentation and analysis of the new research documenting the connection between vitamin deficiencies and heart attacks. The evidence for this paper could not be your own opinion: the evidence would have to be reputable, tested science.

When you argue for your point of view about literary or religious works, a piece of music, or other subjects in the humanities, you may at times gather scholarly evidence in support of your opinion. However, the majority of your paper should be based on your own analysis of textual evidence. Suppose you want to assert that the imagery in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* intensifies a reader's understanding of the insidious effects of racism. To prove this thesis, you'll need to examine a specific image or images and argue why and how Morrison's use of imagery helps readers understand the way racism affects a family member or members:

In analyzing several images of eyes and seeing in *The Bluest Eye*, the reader comes to understand how Pecola's obsession with blue eyes reveals her own internalized racism.

In summary, the first draft of any paper should contain a thesis statement that you develop by means of a sound argument. Although arguments often appeal to a reader's emotions or ethics, academic arguments must be logical and well-reasoned to be sound and, therefore, persuasive to a reader.

Copyright 2000, the Jacobson Center for Writing, Teaching and Learning at Smith College.