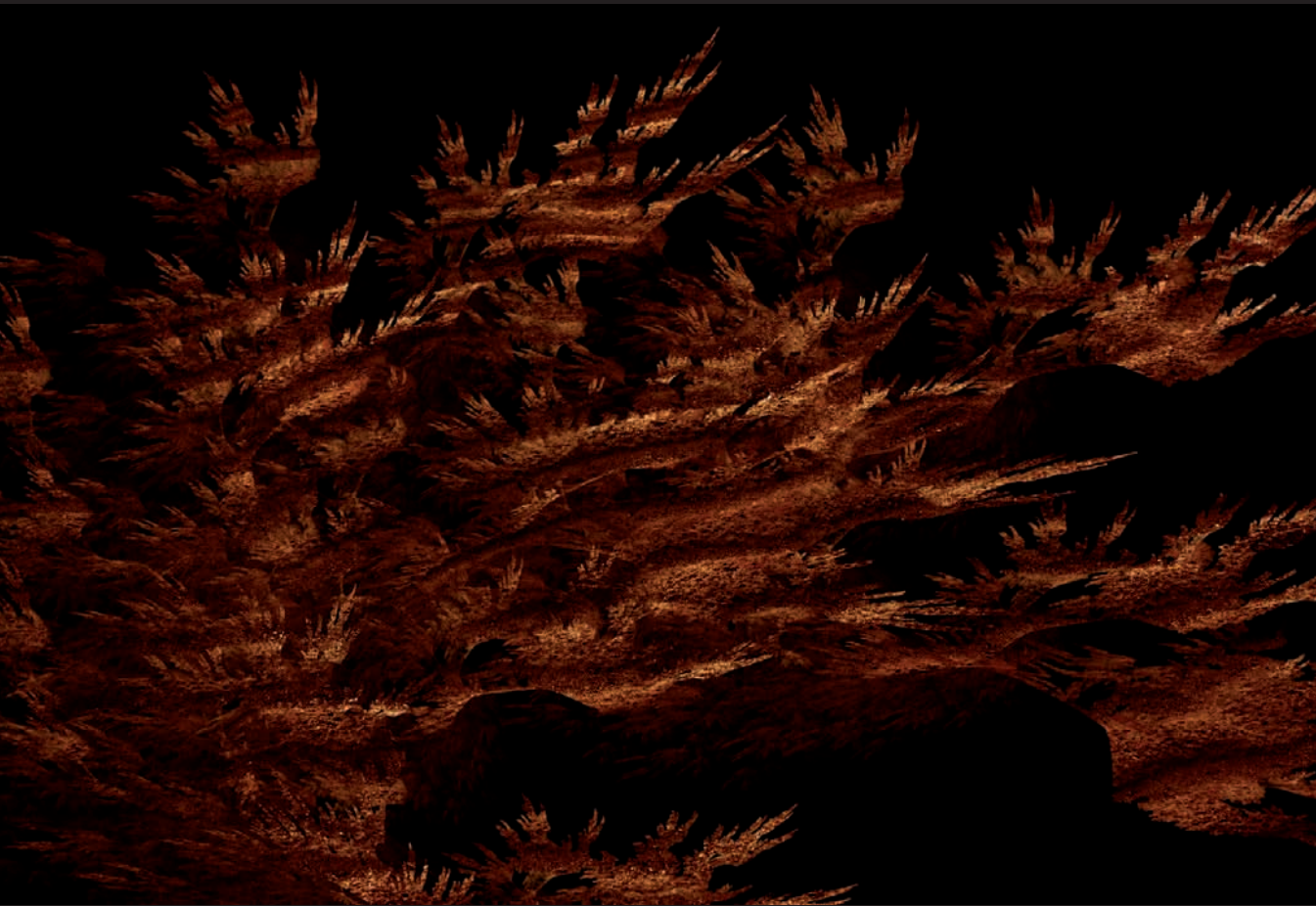


REASON TO WRITE



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SECTION I

CRITICAL QUESTION

CONTEXT

DEFINITION



CHAPTER 1

A REASON TO WRITE

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1 BLINKING CURSOR SYNDROME

“Writing is easy: all you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.”

—Gene Fowler

If this book were to begin with one suggestion regarding how to begin writing an essay, it would be this: Find common ground with your reader. In other words, it is often helpful to open with a series of simple statements that a typical reader would find reasonable and fair.

Of course, many students have been taught to summarize—and therefore compress—all of an essay’s argument into the opening paragraph. This is why one of the more common complaints about the whole business of starting to write an essay is something that one could call *Blinking Cursor Syndrome*. You sit down to write an essay. You call up a new document in a word processing program. Within the frame, the page is empty except for a single cursor that blinks with mechanical indifference. It blinks for as long as it takes you to muster something to say. There you sit. There it blinks.

Writers can experience this moment as a kind of pre-defeat. In part, this is because the first thing that many students have often been taught is that they should begin writing an essay with a strong, original idea, often called a “thesis statement.” The second thing that students have often been taught is that it is their task, upon the spontaneous arrival of this strong, original statement, to spend the rest of the essay arguing for that statement until it has been proved to a reasonable reader’s satisfaction.

EVER WONDERED?

A hyphen is used when two or more words are brought together to describe another word, as in “star-crossed lovers” or “plant-covered yard.” The hyphen is NOT necessary if the descriptive word is an adverb, as in “lovely night” or “slippery walk.” There is a difference between a *hyphen* and a *dash*.

Yet our hypothetical writer may be a bit confused: From what tree of inspiration, exactly, is one supposed to pluck this strong, original statement? Is one supposed to have an arsenal of such statements at hand? A writer may even begin to suspect, having checked his or her internal thesis-statement stockpile, and found it to be rattling about with a few fairly interesting, but *half-formed* speculations, that a clever person would have had a few good ones stashed away, for just such an occasion.

In this case, *Blinking Cursor Syndrome* can sometimes turn into a source of self-judgment, like: “I don’t really have anything important to say,” or “I’m just not good at this kind of writing.” This often leads to the student to conclude: “If I must perform this task, it is probably best to find a thesis statement that is easily defensible. I will, therefore, pick one that is not too boring or difficult.”

One of the things covered in this text is that while academic writing may be hard work, it is actually quite a logical process. If something about writing an essay doesn’t make sense, there’s probably a reason. Critical thinking is designed to help writers to recognize the way in which writing follows from thinking, not by memorizing a formula, but by understanding that relationship. Critical thinking is a series of strategies designed to help you to pay attention to the way you think through a given idea.

Most people, when faced with a problem to be solved, will employ what is called a *heuristic*. People have commonsensical ways in which to go about puzzling through a problem. This is because people are thinking, rational beings. Critical thinking takes this a step further. Critical thinking offers specific and sophisticated tools for paying attention to the way we think through a question.

To illustrate, one could pose the question:

Why do so many students find it difficult, in beginning to write, to spontaneously produce a thesis statement?

DEFINITION

A *heuristic* is a word for the informal ways in which most people go about thinking when they solve problems or answer questions. Some are more effective than others.

An example would be trial-and-error.

As an aside, one treats an “h” as a vowel (hence *a* heuristic) if the “h” sound is not aspirated (if you do not hear the “h” sound in the word). Thus, it would be *an* hour, and *a* hat.

2 QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

“How do I know what I think until I see what I say?”

—Graham Wallace

The thesis, although not always a single “statement,” is an essential part of an academic essay. One helpful general critical thinking tool is to carefully define what one means by a given word or phrase. In this case, the question becomes: What is a thesis statement?

Although students are taught to use a thesis, it is often not clearly defined. Without looking it up, write a short, precise definition of a thesis statement:

A thesis statement is _____

Many students will use the phrase “thesis statement” synonymously with “topic” or “argument,” or “opinion.”

DEFINITION

A *Negative Definition* is a way of defining a word or a phrase by comparing it to what it is *not*.

Example: “An apple is *not* an orange, a peach, or a banana.”

Starting from what you might have written, here, it is helpful to understand that there are many ways to define a word or phrase. One could go to a dictionary. One could use examples. One could offer synonyms. Each way of defining a word can serve a specific purpose. One of ways to define a word is called a ***Negative Definition***.

A Negative Definition can help to clear up confusion when a word has an ambiguous meaning, or is routinely misunderstood. Following is an example of negative definition, and how it can be useful.

- A Thesis is *not* the topic of an essay

A thesis is not the topic of an essay, because a topic refers to the paper’s area of inquiry, or what the essay “is about.”

One could say: “The topic of the essay is global warming.”

One would not say: “The thesis of the essay is global warming.”

DEFINITION

Logic is a systematic method for establishing what is valid and true based upon inference from premises.

- A *Thesis* is *not* an argument

A *thesis* is only one part of an argument. The idea of “argumentation” goes back to formal ***logic***, and formal logic offers several parts to an argument, each of which serves a purpose.

The most formal system of logical argumentation uses something called the Logical Syllogism.

It may be surprising to learn that formal logic is not very helpful in composing academic writing. Formal logic is useful for evaluating existing arguments, but is too rigid to use as a writing strategy. Logic is very precise; mathematics, for example, is a subset of logic.

The following example of a logical syllogism should be familiar to you. All logical syllogisms must be “True” (the premises are true) and “Valid” (the conclusion follows the premises).

Major Premise:	All Men (A) are Mortal (B)	A = B
Minor Premise:	Socrates (C) is a Man (A)	C = A
Conclusion:	Socrates (C) is Mortal (B)*	C = B

✓ True (The Premises are True)

✓ Valid (The Conclusion follows from the Premises)

* Sadly, in fact, it is true: Socrates is dead.

In logic, a true conclusion follows from true premises. The conclusion is not, by itself, the argument. It is the logical result of the inferences drawn from those premises. The combination of all of these elements is, in total, an argument.

The conclusion of a syllogism is designed to answer a question. In this example, the obvious (although unstated) question is: “Is Socrates Mortal?” The conclusion, or answer, to this question, is supported by the premises, and could be written in the following way: “Socrates is mortal because he is a man, and all men are mortal.” This is classical formal argumentation.

Real-life questions are not always so straightforward. However, it is true that, because academic writing is logical in nature, there are certain similarities. The essay serves the same purpose as a syllogism: it answers a question that has been posed, based upon valid conclusions that are derived from true premises, and results in an answer. That answer serves as the thesis of the essay.

By coming to reasoned conclusions, academic writing answers questions, solves problems, and resolves issues. A *Thesis*, then, is an answer to a question that the

writer poses. In syllogistic form, the question “What is a thesis?” would be answered in the following way:

Major Premise:	An Answer is the Result of a Question	A = B
Minor Premise:	A Thesis is an Answer	C = A
Conclusion:	A Thesis is the Result of a Question	C = B

What all this means is that, in academic writing, or in any system of inquiry that seeks to further knowledge, answers usually follow from questions, and not the other way around. While this statement seems obvious, many students have been taught to begin to write the academic essay with an answer. In other words, one cannot

EVER WONDERED?

Only *italics* are used for emphasis within an essay. **Bold** or underline are never used to emphasize a word or sentence in an essay.

produce a thesis without first having a question, and then working through that question in a reasoned manner. This is because it is commonly understood that ***all academic writing is specifically designed to answer a question, solve a problem, or resolve an issue.***

3 THE CASE AGAINST THE FIVE-PARAGRAPH FORM

“The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in shock-proof shit-detector.”

—Ernest Hemmingway

HERE IS A FORMULA WITH WHICH MANY OF YOU WILL BE FAMILIAR

Paragraph 1	<i>Opening</i> <i>Thesis Statement</i>	Introduce the thesis statement A single, original statement to be proved in the paper
Paragraph 2	<i>Point 1</i> <i>example 1</i>	The “strongest” point that supports the thesis statement A single example of Point 1
Paragraph 3	<i>Point 2</i> <i>example 2</i>	The next point that supports the thesis statement A single example of Point 2

Paragraph 4	<i>Point 3</i>	The next point that supports the thesis statement
	<i>example 3</i>	A single example of Point 3
Paragraph 5	<i>Conclusion</i>	Restate the thesis statement with the three main points included

HERE IS AN EXAMPLE ESSAY WRITTEN ACCORDING TO THAT FORMULA

Dogs Should Be Leashed

<i>Opening</i>	Every year, thousands of people are bitten, pets are lost, and people are exposed to health risks because
<i>Thesis</i>	pet owners do not leash their dogs. <u>All dogs should be on a leash.</u>
Point 1	Dogs that are unleashed are a danger to people.
<i>example 1</i>	Last year my neighbor’s dog bit my cousin. He had to get stitches, and my aunt had to pay \$300 for the hospital bill.
Point 2	Without a leash to restrain them, dogs will run away, causing heartbroken owners who want them back.
<i>example 2</i>	You can hardly pass a street without seeing a “lost dog” sign.
Point 3	Dogs that are allowed to wander can be a health hazard to people. Wandering dogs can eliminate in public parks. Dogs can carry some diseases, like rabies.
<i>example 3</i>	A child coming into contact with animal waste can become very ill.
<i>Conclusion</i>	In conclusion, all dogs should be on a leash. If not, they are a danger to people, they can get lost, and they can be a health hazard.

Unfortunately, such writing formulae do little to advance students as critical thinkers and writers. In fact, because it privileges the structure of the essay over any kind of content, as Rosenwasser and Stephen note, it actually disables critical thinking:

The five-paragraph form has the advantage of providing a mechanical format that will give virtually any subject the appearance of order [but] lops off a writer’s ideas before they have a chance to form...This simplistic scheme blocks writers’ abilities to think deeply or logically, restricting rather than encouraging the development of complex ideas. (111)

EVER WONDERED?

A longer quotation from a source is set off from your text by the indenting the whole quotation five spaces. There are no quotation marks needed. The period goes after the quotation, and before any citation. How long a quotation should be before it must be put in this form depends on the type of formatting that you are using in your essay. For example, in MLA style, it must be over 4 lines before requiring indentation.

Academic writing is a lot like thinking, on paper. When one writes, one employs logic. One groups, categorizes, finds similarities and differences, and makes sure to account for all sides of a given issue.

If an instructor were to assign the example-essay titled: “Dogs Should Be Leashed” as a reading for classroom discussion, students, being reasoning people, would probably immediately challenge the conclusion that is drawn. Students might ask:

Is a leash the only way to control a dog? What about keeping the dog in a fenced yard, or in a house? What about a well-trained dog? Don't wandering dogs also increase the population of unwanted animals? Does a dog need to be leashed on a farm?

In other words, even though this example essay provides the requisite structure for a five-paragraph essay, including thesis statement, main points, and examples, it still fails, logically. If a thesis is always an answer to a question that has been posed, it is easier to understand why such an essay fails to support its thesis statement if one knows the question that it answers.

Any statement can be turned into a question, and any question can be turned into a statement. The statement “The ball is round” could be changed to the question: “Is the ball round?” The question “Is the box square?” could be changed to the statement “The box is square.” Between a question and a statement is the real issue at hand—their “true” relationship to one another.

DEFINITION

If something is *implicit*, it is not stated outright, but offered indirectly. If something is *explicit*, it is stated directly. All academic writing is based upon a question, whether that question is implicit, or explicit.

The statement in the example essay is: “All dogs should be leashed.” It is the thesis of this essay, and therefore it is an answer to a question. The *implicit* question this thesis answers is: “Should all dogs be leashed—yes or no?”

Let's do a reality check. Most people, if asked, and given a moment or two to consider the question, would probably respond by saying that a far more

accurate and fair answer to that question would be: “Many dogs should be leashed, under certain circumstances, but not all dogs.” That’s why this essay fails to prove its thesis—not because it does not have a structure, but because it provides an inadequate answer to the question that it poses.

Yet far more important than the essay’s failure to prove its thesis is the fact that the real answer to this question is obvious: one might as well produce a thesis from a question querying the existence of rocks, or whether a human is a piece of fruit, or if two-plus-two usually turns out to equal four.

In other words, the real flaw of this essay is: What’s the point? Who cares? This is what happens when writers are required to provide an answer before being given the opportunity to formulate a thoughtful question.

4 PROCESS VS. PRODUCT

“We don’t write what we know. We write what we wonder about.”

—Richard Peck

A thesis is an essential part of an academic essay. The thesis is present even if it is implicit. It is present even if it is explicit, no matter where it is placed in the final draft—in the beginning, shortly after the beginning, or at the end of the paper.

So, too, a question always plays an essential part in academic writing. That question is present even if it is implicit. It is present even if it is explicit, and wherever it is placed in the body of the paper, although it usually shows up pretty early in the writing, because the reader needs to know what’s *in* question.

Following are excerpts from three essays taken from a textbook entitled: *Making Sense: Essays on Art, Science, and Culture*. The authors of this anthology included these essays because the

EVER WONDERED?

Double quotation marks (“”) are used to indicate that you are quoting someone else’s words within your prose. Single quotation marks (‘’) are used only to indicate that the person whom you are quoting is quoting someone else, as in “Jane said ‘I like you.’”

In general, all punctuation goes *inside* of single or double quotation marks, like this. The only exception is if there is an interruption between the end of the words in a sentence, and the end of the sentence, as when “one is quoting from a source” (Author 11).