

# **BEGINNING YOUR WRITING PROCESS**

## **THE WRITING CENTER**

The Writing Center welcomes all St. Norbert students during their writing process. Even though the Writing Center is here to help, it is not a miracle worker. If you don't make an effort to revise and improve your writing, then the Writing Center cannot help you improve your essay. Moreover, we can't predict what grade your paper will receive. Grading is subjective, and it depends on the professor. The Writing Center may say your essay is good, or does not need any more improvements, but that does not mean you will receive an A. The Writing Center staff can assist you with improving your essay, but they cannot guarantee you a "good grade" on your assignment. After you visit the Writing Center, no matter what the person working with you says, you should read through your essay and make any additional revisions after you have revised what the Writing Center staff suggests. Clarity in defending your thesis is your objective.

## **THESIS-MAIN CLAIM**

The idea that your paper conveys is your thesis. You can only defend and support your claim, or opinion, with as much evidence and clarity as possible. To check if your thesis is a debatable claim, make a statement against your claim. If this new statement is debatable and defensible, then the original thesis is debatable. For example,

Define which claims are debatable.

1. Joe is going to the prom with Karen.
2. Suzy implies that Joe will not be attending the prom with her.
3. Suzy wishes to attend the prom with Joe, but does not find a dress in time because she knows Joe is going with Karen.

None of these sentences are debatable because the sentences only state a fact and not a claim.

When developing a "good" thesis, keep in mind how many pages the writer is allowed. The writer should develop a thesis that can be debated within that page limit.

There are five questions the writer can ask when thinking of a thesis.

## The Five Questions of Argument<sup>1</sup>

### *Two Encouraging, Friendly Questions*

#### Question 1: What do you think?

Every argument is based on some **claim**--a statement that readers do not already accept and that they will not accept without good reason.

#### Question 2: Why do you think that?

You cannot expect readers to accept your claim just because you say so. They look for you to support it with **reasons**--statements that, taken together, give readers a basis for accepting your claim.

### *Three Increasingly Challenging Questions*

#### Question 3: How do you know your reasons are true?

Readers may not accept your reasons unless you support them with **evidence**-- statements, numbers, photographs, or other representations of states of affairs that your readers accept without questions, at least for the purposes of the argument.

#### Question 4: Why do you think your reasons/evidence really support your claim?

Readers may not see why your reasons and evidence support your Claim. They may want to know what general principle **warrants** you to base your claim on your support.

#### Question 5: But what about this alternative view? this contrary evidence? this objection?

Readers are almost certain to see some part of your argument differently. They may have alternative views; they may know of evidence that contradicts or complicates your argument; or they may draw a different conclusion from the evidence you present. They will expect you to **acknowledge** any alternatives or objections and **respond** to them.

Once you have asked yourself these questions, you should begin writing a sentence that combines the answers. After you have written a few different sentences, check to see which ones are **precise, supportable, significant, and debatable**.

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<sup>1</sup> Writing principles originally from Joseph M. Williams & Gregory G. Colomb, *The Craft of Argument*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed, Longman, 2007. Modified by and taken from Karlyn Crowley, *Argument and Writing Handout*, "The Five Questions of Argument." Page 2.

## The Four Qualities of a Good Question in the Humanities<sup>2</sup>

- It is **Precise**

Use precise language to describe scenes, characters, or formal qualities of the text more accurately.

Precise questions are usually specific; they are like when one pulls on a tiny dangling thread in a piece of cloth, the most provocative issues of the text are revealed. Precise questions avoid vague language; move away from impressionistic responses ("I liked it." or "It seems"). Instead, name the textual feature which elicits your response.

Questions which are not precise: Is *The Scarlet Letter* about faith? Why is the end of the book so gloomy?

- It is **Significant**

Do you care about your question? Are you interested in the possible answers? If you care about it and can make other people care about it, then it's significant. When you can prove that something is at stake for your audience, it's significant.

Questions which are not significant: What is the significance behind the sun in *The Scarlet Letter*? What kind of rose is represented in *The Scarlet Letter*?

- It is **Supportable**

There needs to be the promise that a question can be answered or argued over by making reference to relevant scenes, characters, and events in the text. If it's a difficult or debatable question, you won't be able to answer it right away, but can you imagine answering it using the resources you have? Furthermore, a good question should not simply give an "interesting angle" on a text; it should instigate a conversation in which competing claims are compared, brought into dialogue and finally adjudicated.

Questions which are not supportable: Is *The Scarlet Letter* entirely autobiographical? Do the different colors of red in *The Scarlet Letter* mean something?

- It is **Debatable**

When a question is debatable, it is possible to conceive of several (at least two!) reasonable answers. When you ask a good question, the process of inquiry is not over when you locate relevant evidence—multiple interpretations of that evidence arise and discussion ensues. Good questions can't be answered by simply looking in the text and pointing to a single fact.

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<sup>2</sup> Writing principles originally from Joseph M. Williams & Gregory G. Colomb, *The Craft of Argument*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed, Longman, 2007. Modified by and taken from Karlyn Crowley, *Argument and Writing Handout*, "The Four Qualities of a good Question in the Humanities." Page 3.

Questions which are not debatable: What are the symbols in *The Scarlet Letter*? Does Hester Prynne change over the course of *The Scarlet Letter*?

### **Exercise: Creating a Thesis**

Directions: Examine each assignment and the thesis statement presented for it. Is the statement **DEBATABLE, SIGNIFICANT, SUPPORTABLE, PRECISE**<sup>3</sup>? If not, in part b explain why this thesis is not strong. In addition, in part c write a statement that better expresses the elements of a strong thesis. Then, in part d, write a counterclaim to your new argument.

1. Assignment: Compare and Contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the civil war.
  - a. The North and South fought the Civil war for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.<sup>4</sup>
  - b. Answer:
  - c. Statement:
  - d. Counterclaim:
  
2. Assignment: Write on some aspect in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.
  - a. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.
  - b. Answer:
  - c. Statement:
  - d. Counterclaim:

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<sup>3</sup> Writing principles originally from Joseph M. Williams & Gregory G. Colomb, *The Craft of Argument*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed, Longman, 2007. Modified by and taken from Karlyn Crowley, *Argument and Writing Handout*, "The Four Qualities of a good Question in the Humanities." Page 3.

<sup>4</sup> Thesis statements one and two are taken from <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/thesis.html>

3. Assignment: Contrast the lifestyle of teens living in the Middle Ages to those in modern America.

a. A young person in the Middle Ages had fewer options for marriage, family, and personal privacy and freedom than do young adults today.<sup>5</sup>

b. Answer:

c. Statement:

d. Counterclaim:

4. Assignment: Make a claim for why it is important, especially for college students, to eat breakfast.

a. Thesis:

b. Answer:

c. Counterclaim:

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<sup>5</sup> Thesis statement three is taken from <http://www.english.upenn.edu/Grad/Teachweb/scthesis.html>