

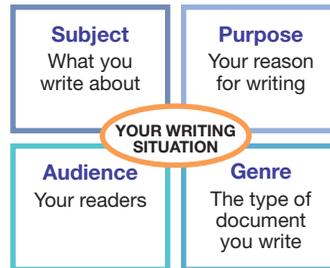
Welcome to *A Writer's Reference* — your guide to college writing. One of the pleasures of college writing is exploring ideas and discovering what you think about a subject. You may find that the writing process leads you in unexpected directions. The more you learn, the more questions you form. It's in the process of writing and thinking about ideas that you discover what's interesting in a subject and why you care about it.

C1 Planning

- Checklist for assessing your writing situation 5
- How to solve five common problems with thesis statements 10
- Sample formal outline 12

C1-a Assess your writing situation.

Before writing a first draft, spend time asking questions about your writing situation. Each situation presents you with choices to make about your subject, purpose, audience, and genre. (See the checklist at the end of this section.)



Subject

Often your subject, or what you will be writing about, will be assigned to you.

When you are free to choose what to write about, select subjects that interest or puzzle you. Start with your curiosity: What problems or issues intrigue you? What subject needs to be explored? Writing is much more interesting when you explore questions you don't have answers to.

Keep in mind that a broad subject such as advertising can be a good starting point, but choosing one aspect of that subject — in other words, narrowing to a smaller topic — will make the writing more manageable. For example, you might narrow the subject of advertising to *the use of pop songs in advertising* or to *the influence of ads on body image*.

Purpose

In many writing situations, part of your challenge will be determining your purpose, or reason for writing. If you are given an assignment, look closely at

its wording to see whether it might suggest its purpose. If no guidelines are given, you may need to ask yourself, “What do I want to accomplish?” and “What do I want to communicate to my audience?” Identify which one or more of the following aims you hope to accomplish.

COMMON PURPOSES FOR WRITING

to inform

to explain

to summarize

to persuade/argue

to evaluate

to analyze

to synthesize

to propose

to call readers to action

to reflect

Audience

You are always writing to readers, so take time to consider their interests and expectations. Ask questions such as these: Who are your readers? What kind of information will they need to understand your ideas? What is your relationship to them? What kind of response do you want?

For some writing situations, you will be able to analyze the interests of your readers, but for other situations, such as social media posts, you might never know your readers. The more your post travels and your words stay in motion, the larger your online audience grows. Whatever you write, whether for digital or print delivery, consider the words you choose and the tone you take so that you accomplish your purpose for communicating.

Writing for an audience: Email messages

Keep your audience in mind when writing an email message:

- Use a concise, specific subject line.
- State your main point at the beginning of the message.
- Keep paragraphs brief and focused.
- Avoid writing anything that you wouldn't say directly to your reader(s).
- If you include someone else's words, let your reader(s) know the source.
- Proofread for typos and errors.

Genre

Pay attention to the genre, or type of writing, assigned. Each genre is a category of writing meant for a specific purpose and audience and with its own set of agreed-upon expectations and conventions for style, structure, and format. Genres include essays, lab reports, business memos, research proposals, letters, position papers, and so on. Often the genre is assigned, but sometimes the genre is yours to choose. If you're choosing your genre, consider how and why a specific genre helps you achieve your purpose and reach your audience.

NOTE TO SELF

How can I make sure I understand a writing assignment?

- * Read the assignment carefully.
- * Look for words like explain, analyze, persuade, or synthesize to help me understand what I've been asked to do.
- * Look for expectations about style and format. Do I need to use MLA style? What is the length requirement?

Checklist for assessing your writing situation

Subject

- Has the subject been assigned, or are you free to choose your own?
- Why is your subject worth writing about?
- What questions would you like to explore?
- Do you need to narrow your subject to a more specific topic?

Purpose

- Why are you writing: To inform readers? To persuade them? To call them to action? For some combination of purposes?
- What is your message?

Audience

- Who are your readers? How well informed are they about the subject? What are their interests and motivations?
- What information do readers need to understand your ideas?
- Will your readers resist any of your ideas? What objections will you need to anticipate and counter?



Checklist for assessing your writing situation, *continued*

Genre

- What genre or type of writing is required: Essay? Report? Analysis? Argument? Something else?
- What are the expectations for your genre? For example, what type of evidence is typically used?
- Does the genre require a specific organization or set of design features?

Length and format

- Are there length requirements? Format requirements?
- What documentation style is required: MLA, APA, CMS, or something else?
- Do you have guidelines or examples to consult?

Deadlines

- Do you know the rough draft due date? The final due date?
- How should you submit your writing — by printing, posting, emailing, or sharing?

C1-b Explore your subject.

Academic writing is a process of figuring out what you think about a subject — and exploring questions to which you don't have answers. You might find it useful to explore your subject with sentence starters; in the examples below, "X" is the subject you're interested in:

Here's something I would like to understand about X: _____.

What doesn't make sense about X is _____.

What if we looked at X this way: _____?

Why hasn't anyone asked this question about X: _____?

Experiment with the following strategies to help you generate ideas for your writing.

Asking questions

Questions are the engines of writing. They propel you forward, one question leading to another, sparking ideas and possibilities. Asking questions and

answering them focuses your attention and helps you discover and generate ideas. Start with your curiosity, posing questions about what puzzles you or doesn't make sense about a subject you are exploring or a text you are reading. Try asking *why* and *how* questions that are not easily answered and that push you beyond simple yes or no answers. And use questions to test your assumptions and gather multiple perspectives to deepen your understanding of an issue.

Talking and listening

Talking about your ideas will help you develop your thoughts and discover what your listeners find interesting, what they are curious about, and where they disagree with you. If you are writing an argument, you can try it out on listeners with other points of view to hear their ideas.

Reading and annotating texts

Reading is an important way to deepen your understanding of a topic, learn from the insights and research of others, and expand your perspective. Annotating (making notes) on a text encourages you to read actively — to highlight key concepts, to note possible contradictions in an argument, or to raise questions for further research and investigation.

Brainstorming and freewriting

Brainstorming and freewriting are good ways to figure out what you know and what questions you have. Write quickly and freely, without pausing to think about word choice, to discover what questions are on your mind and what directions you might pursue.

Keeping a journal

A journal is a collection of informal or exploratory writing. You might pose questions, comment on an interesting idea from one of your classes, or keep a list of observations that occur to you while reading. You might imagine a conversation between yourself and your readers or stage a debate to understand opposing positions.

Blogging

Although a blog is a type of journal, it is a public rather than a private writing space. In a blog, you can explore an idea for a paper by writing posts from different angles. Since most blogs allow commenting, you can start a conversation by inviting readers to give you feedback in the form of questions, counterarguments, or links to other sources on a topic.

C1-c Draft and revise a working thesis statement.

For many types of writing, you will be able to assert your central idea in a sentence or two. Such a statement, which ordinarily appears at the end of your introduction, is called a *thesis statement* or, sometimes, simply a *thesis*.

Understanding what makes an effective thesis statement

An effective thesis statement is a central idea that conveys your purpose, or reason for writing, and that requires support. It is often an answer to a question you have asked or a solution to a problem you have identified.

Drafting a working thesis

As you explore your topic, you will begin to see possible ways to focus your material. You might try stating your topic as a question and then turning your question into a position. You'll find that the process of answering a question or taking a position on a debatable topic will focus your thinking and lead you to develop a working thesis.

Here, for example, are one student's efforts to pose a question and draft a working thesis for an essay in his ethics course.

QUESTION

Should athletes who enhance their performance through biotechnology be banned from athletic competition?

WORKING THESIS

Athletes who boost their performance through biotechnology should be banned from athletic competition.

This working thesis offers a useful place to start writing, a way to limit the topic and focus a first draft, but it doesn't respond to readers who will wonder why this topic matters or why these athletes should be banned.

An effective thesis

States a debatable position that needs to be explained and supported

Uses concrete language

Passes the "So what?" test (p. 9)

Is the right scope and appropriate for the length requirement of the assignment (not too broad or too narrow)

Debatable position	✓
Concrete language	✓
Right scope	✓
"So what?" test	✗

To fully answer his own question, the student might push his thinking with the word *because*.

STRONGER WORKING THESIS

Athletes who boost their performance through biotechnology should be banned from competition because biotechnology gives athletes an unfair advantage and disrupts the sense of fair play.

Revising a working thesis

As you move toward a clearer and more specific position you want to take, you'll start to see ways to revise your working thesis. As your ideas develop, your working thesis will change, too. You may find that the evidence you have collected supports a different thesis, or that your position has changed as you have learned more about your topic. Or you may find that your position isn't clear and needs to become more specific.

NOTE TO SELF

How can I revise my working thesis?

- * Ask a question and then turn my question into a statement of my position.
- * Imagine a conversation with a friend.

FRIEND: What's your position? Why does it matter?

ME: My position is _____, and it matters because _____.

Putting your working thesis to the "So what?" test

Use the following questions to help you revise your working thesis statement.

- Why would readers want to read an essay with this thesis?
- How would you respond to a reader who hears your thesis and asks "So what?" or "Why does it matter?"
- Is your thesis debatable? Can you anticipate counterarguments (objections) to your thesis?
- How will you establish common ground with readers who may not agree with your argument?

Solve five common problems with thesis statements

Revising a working thesis is easier if you have a method or an approach. The following problem/solution approach can help you recognize and solve common thesis problems.

1 Common problem: **The thesis is a statement of fact.**

Solution: **Enter a debate** by posing a question about your topic that has more than one possible answer. For example: Should the polygraph be used by private employers? Your thesis should be your answer to the question.

Working thesis: *The first polygraph was developed by Dr. John Larson in 1921.*

Revised: *Because the polygraph has not been proved reliable, even under controlled conditions, its use by private employers should be banned.*

2 Common problem: **The thesis is a question.**

Solution: **Take a position** on your topic by answering the question you have posed. Your thesis statement should be your answer to the question.

Working thesis: *Would President John F. Kennedy have continued to escalate the war in Vietnam if he had lived?*

Revised: *Although President John F. Kennedy sent the first American troops to Vietnam before he died, an analysis of his foreign policy suggests that he would not have escalated the war if he had lived.*

3 Common problem: **The thesis is too broad.**

Solution: **Focus on a subtopic** of your original topic. Once you have chosen a subtopic, take a position in an ongoing debate and pose a question that has more than one answer. For example: Should people be tested for genetic diseases? Your thesis should be your answer to the question.

Working thesis: *Mapping the human genome has many implications for health and science.*

Revised: *Now that scientists can detect genetic predisposition for specific diseases, policymakers should establish clear guidelines about whom to test and under what circumstances.*

4 Common problem: The thesis is too narrow.

Solution: **Identify challenging questions** that readers might ask about your topic. Then pose a question that has more than one answer. For example: Do the risks of genetic testing outweigh its usefulness? Your thesis should be your answer to the question.

Working thesis: *A person who carries a genetic mutation linked to diabetes might develop diabetes.*

Revised: *Avoiding genetic testing is a smart course of action because of both its emotional risks and its medical limitations.*

5 Common problem: The thesis is vague.

Solution: **Focus your thesis** with concrete language and clues about where the essay is headed. Pose a question about the topic that has more than one answer. For example: How does the physical structure of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial shape the experience of the visitors? Your thesis, which is your answer to the question, should use specific language.

Working thesis: *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is an interesting structure.*

Revised: *By inviting visitors to see their own reflections in the wall, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial creates a link between the present and the past.*

C1-d Draft a plan.

To help you develop your thesis and focus your thinking, try listing and organizing supporting ideas, whether informally or formally, to group and order your ideas.

When to use an informal outline

An informal outline can be drafted and revised quickly to help you figure out a tentative structure. Informal outlines can take many forms. Perhaps the most common is simply the thesis followed by a list of major ideas.

Here is one student's informal outline.

INFORMAL OUTLINE

Working thesis: Animal testing should be banned because it is bad science and doesn't contribute to biomedical advances.

- Most animals don't serve as good models for the human body.
- Drug therapies can have vastly different effects on different species—92 percent of all drugs shown to be effective in animal tests fail in human trials.
- Some of the largest biomedical discoveries were made without the use of animal testing.
- The most effective biomedical research methods—tissue engineering and computer modeling—don't use animals.
- Animal studies are not scientifically necessary.

When to use a formal outline

Early in the writing process, rough outlines have certain advantages: They can be produced quickly, and they can be revised easily. However, a formal outline may be useful later in the writing process, after you have written a rough draft, to see whether the parts of your essay work together and whether your essay's structure is logical.

The following formal outline is the basis for the research paper that appears in MLA-5b. The student's thesis is an important part of the outline. Everything else in the outline supports the thesis, directly or indirectly.

FORMAL OUTLINE

Thesis: In the name of public health and safety, state governments have the responsibility to shape health policies and to regulate healthy eating choices, especially since doing so offers a potentially large social benefit for a relatively small cost.

- I. Debates surrounding food regulation have a long history in the United States.
 - A. The 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act guarantees inspection of meat and dairy products.

- B. Such regulations are considered reasonable because consumers are protected from harm with little cost.
- C. Consumers consider reasonable regulations to be an important government function to stop harmful items from entering the marketplace.
- II. Even though most foods meet safety standards, there is a need for further regulation.
 - A. The typical American diet—processed sugars, fats, and refined flours—is damaging over time.
 - B. Related health risks are diabetes, cancer, and heart problems.
 - C. Passing chronic-disease-related legislation is our single most important public health challenge.
- III. Food legislation is not a popular solution for most Americans.
 - A. A proposed New York City regulation banning the sale of soft drinks greater than twelve ounces failed in 2012, and in California a proposed soda tax failed in 2011.
 - B. Many consumers find such laws to be unreasonable restrictions on freedom of choice.
 - C. Opposition to food and beverage regulation is similar to the opposition to early tobacco legislation; the public views the issue as one of personal responsibility.
 - D. Counterpoint: Freedom of “choice” is a myth; our choices are heavily influenced by marketing.
- IV. The United States has a history of regulations to discourage unhealthy behaviors.
 - A. Tobacco-related restrictions faced opposition.
 - B. Seat belt laws are a useful analogy.
 - C. The public seems to support laws that have a good cost-benefit ratio; the cost of food/beverage regulations is low, and most people agree that the benefits would be high.
- V. Americans believe that personal choice is lost when regulations such as taxes and bans are instituted.
 - A. Regulations open up the door to excessive control and interfere with cultural and religious traditions.
 - B. Counterpoint: Burdens on individual liberty are a reasonable price to pay for large social health benefits.
- VI. Public opposition continues to stand in the way of food regulation to promote healthier eating. We must consider whether to allow the costly trend of rising chronic disease to continue in the name of personal choice, or whether we are willing to support the legal changes and public health policies that will reverse that trend.