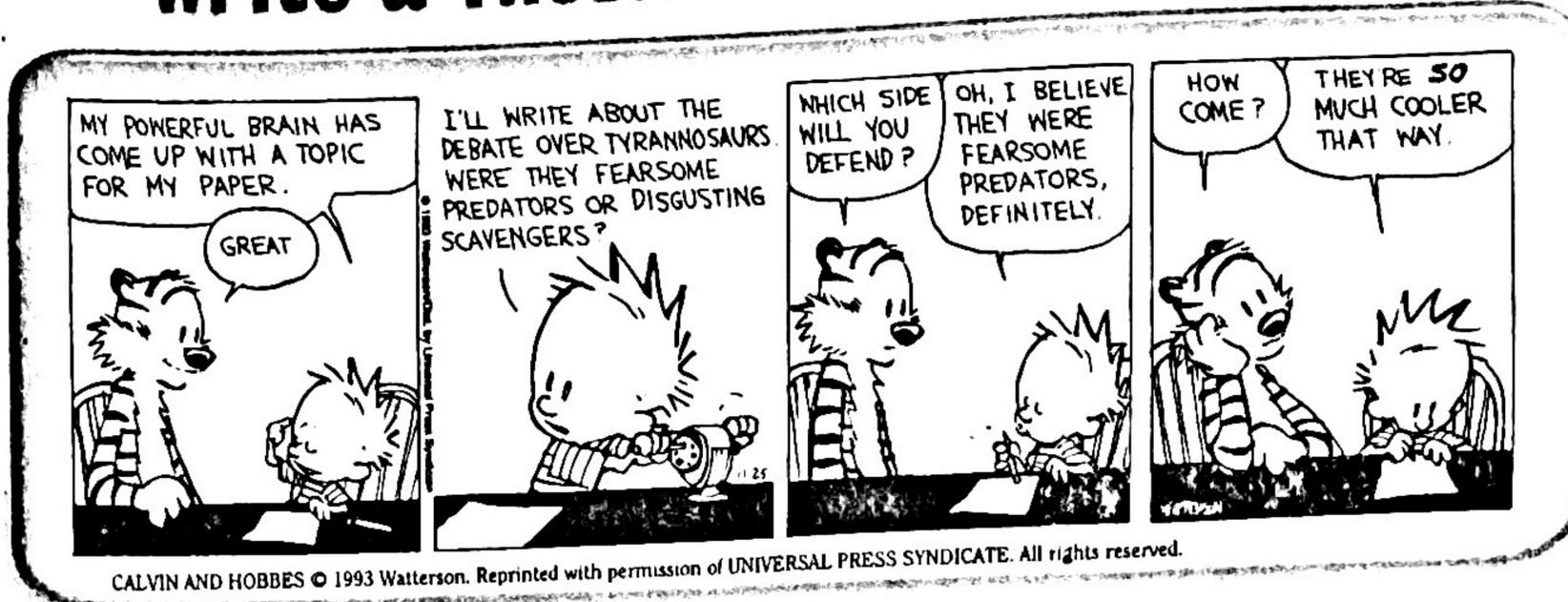


# Write a Thesis Statement and a Title



You have finished—or at least you think you've finished—taking notes. You may have hundreds of notes. What's next? You will be happy to know that the next few tasks are much easier than the ones you have already completed. You are now almost halfway through the job of writing a research paper. Check your progress against the schedule you have set for yourself.

## Organizing and Evaluating Your Notes

Before you write a thesis statement and a title for your paper, you will need to pay some attention to your note cards.

### Sort your note cards into stacks having the same heading.

Some stacks will be short; some may be quite tall. If you have a great many cards under one heading, perhaps you should divide them into two or three more manageable subheadings. Keep stacks in order by bundling them with rubber bands.

Take time to reread each note card. Make sure that you have got the heading right. You may find cards that might better be classified under different headings.

### Evaluate your notes.

If you stopped to read and evaluate information *before* you took notes from your sources, you probably will not have ended up with many unusable note cards. Some students, however, can't resist capturing every scrap of information that might just *possibly* turn out to be useful. Now is the time to get rid of what you are sure you will not use.

**BE SELECTIVE.** Do you have too much information on one subject? Use only the best—the most interesting, the most pertinent, the most persuasive. But do not destroy or throw away the weaker note cards; you may need them yet. Instead, place

them at the bottom of the piles, and mark them in some way (maybe a small red X) so that when you start writing, you will recognize these cards as weaker than the others.

**FILL IN THE GAPS.** Is there not enough information in some stacks? Go back to the library, find more sources, and take additional notes.

**REVISE YOUR OUTLINE.** Revise your working outline to fit the information you have found. Consider eliminating any heading or subheading for which you have not been able to find enough information.

**ASK, "WHAT'S THIS DOING HERE?"** If you have no idea why a note card made it into a particular pile, move it to a more suitable pile, or drop it altogether. You might make a separate pile of possible discards.

### **Exercise 1** Evaluating Your Notes

Ask yourself these questions about your notes:

- Can I read what I wrote on each card?
- Does each card have a source number and a page number?
- Is every card directly related to a heading or subheading in my working outline?
- Do I have too little information for some headings?
- Do I have too much information for some headings?
- Does the information on the note card really fit the heading I have put it under? Do I need to move the card to a different heading or maybe discard it entirely?

On a separate sheet of paper or in a new file on your computer, write a brief progress report. Mention any problems you have discovered as you evaluated your notes and what work still needs to be done.

### **e-writing**

If you have taken your notes on your computer, you should also have printed out a hard copy to work with. Always back up or keep a hard copy of your work. You can space out your computer notes so that three "note cards" fit on a page. Experiment until you get the spacing right. Then print all of your notes, and cut each page into thirds so that you can sort each note into stacks having the same heading. You may end up with some combination of handwritten note cards and computer-printed notes. No problem. But there is still nothing like handling physical pieces of paper or note cards when you are trying to organize and evaluate your notes.

## **Hint!**

You should end up with a stack of note cards or printouts for each heading and subheading in your working outline. If you don't have at least two notes for each section of the outline, you may not have enough information.

## Unity

### Make sure that all your information fits the scope of your paper.

Think of the paper's **scope** as a big umbrella that covers all of the paper's main ideas and supporting details. Information that strays outside the paper's scope distracts the reader and destroys the paper's **unity**. As you reread and evaluate your notes, you will develop an even clearer idea of exactly what you are writing about. If you suspect that a note card does not belong under the umbrella, pull it out and set it aside.

For example, if you are writing a research paper on the effects of day care on children under two years old, which of the following studies fit the paper's scope?

1. A study of children under the age of two who spend at least 20 hours a week in day-care centers in Houston, Texas
2. A recent study of the training, qualifications, and experience of day-care workers in New York City
3. A study of the personalities, development, and sleeping habits of 3,000 babies aged two or under who spend more than 10 hours a week in day care
4. A study of the personality differences in one-year-old identical twins in southern California

The first and third studies fit the paper's stated scope. The second and fourth studies do not. Study 2 is about day-care workers, not children in day care. Although study 4 deals with one-year-olds, it does not specify that these children are in day care.

### Exercise 2

#### What Fits and What Doesn't?

Put a check mark in the blank for the items of information that fit the research paper described. Write an X for the items that do not fit and will hurt the paper's unity.

For a research paper on the photographs of the Civil War taken by Mathew B. Brady and his assistants:

- 1. Brady's assistants took most Civil War photos; Brady almost blind
- 2. History of development of photography
- 3. Brady authorized to accompany Union troops and document war
- 4. Brady quote about going to Bull Run battlefield: "A spirit in my feet said 'Go' and I went."
- 5. Walt Whitman's poems about the Civil War
- 6. Brady's portrait photographs of Abraham Lincoln
- 7. Causes of the Civil War

## Chocolate

- I. Growing cacao trees
  - A. A tropical tree
- II. Some great recipes
  1. My mother's recipes
  2. Others
- III. Different types of chocolate
- IV. Milk and dark chocolate
- V. White chocolate
- VI. Unsweetened chocolate for baking
- VII. History of chocolate
- VIII. How chocolate is made

## Audience and Purpose

### Identify your audience and your purpose.

**AUDIENCE.** The manner in which you express your thesis statement and the way that you focus your paper depend in part on your intended audience. Imagine how a paper on the latest techniques for growing orchids might be tailored for each of the following audiences: members of an orchid club, a group of middle school students, a group of senior citizens who have no gardening experience, and a group of biology teachers.

Audiences vary in what they need to know and want to know. Some of the audiences mentioned would know a lot about growing orchids; some would know nothing. For audiences that know little, you would have to define terms and provide background information. For those who already know a lot about orchids and other plants, you could skip the background and discuss technical details.

Clearly, the primary audience for your research paper is your teacher and your classmates. But can you find a special audience, too? If you are writing about legislation and advertising designed to prevent teenagers from smoking cigarettes, for instance, you might make your paper available to the school's science club or to a local group of advertising professionals.

**PURPOSE.** If you have not already decided on the purpose of your research paper, now is the time to pin it down. Your purpose will affect which details you choose to include and the way you express your ideas. Are you trying to explain? Are you comparing and contrasting, analyzing causes and effects, or proposing a solution to a problem? Perhaps your purpose is to interpret or evaluate a literary work or works. Whatever your purpose, you will better maintain the focus of your paper if you always keep in mind the way in which you are trying to affect your audience.

## Exercise 5 Identifying Your Audience and Purpose

Stop to think about your research paper's audience and purpose. Answer each of the following questions in a complete sentence.

1. Who is the audience for my research paper?

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2. What does my audience already know about the topic I am writing about? What might they need to know or want to know?

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3. What other groups of people might be interested in this topic? How can I arrange to share my paper with them?

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4. What is the purpose of my paper? (If possible, use one of the purposes mentioned on the preceding page, such as "analyze," "interpret," or "explain.")

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## Thesis Statement

Draft a working thesis statement that tells what you will cover in your paper.

A thesis statement is a single declarative sentence that states the controlling idea of your research paper. It identifies both your topic and your limited focus and suggests what the body of your paper will cover. Usually, the thesis statement is either the first or the last sentence in the introductory paragraph.

Keep the following guidelines in mind as you draft your thesis statement.

- A thesis statement should not be expressed as a question. If you have phrased your limited topic as a research question, your thesis statement provides a one-sentence answer to that question.
- A thesis statement is a preview of what the paper is about. It states the topic and the writer's specific focus on the topic. (Do not begin with "The purpose of my paper is . . ." or "In this paper, I will write about . . .")

- A thesis statement controls the paper's content. Everything in the paper provides support for the thesis statement.
- A thesis statement may suggest—but should not state—your conclusions. Save your conclusions for the end of your paper.
- A thesis statement should have a confident tone. Sound as if you're sure of what you're saying. Avoid using hedge words and phrases such as *probably*, *might*, *I think*, *seems*, *apparently*, and *it seems to me*.

Here are several examples of faulty thesis statements. Note how each has been revised and improved.

## EXAMPLE

### Wordy and Tentative

It seems to me that probably one of the seriously important decisions almost all teenagers face today is deciding what jobs they might have sometime in the future.

### Vague

In this community, crime is a problem that people can work together to overcome.

### States Topic but Does Not Limit Focus

Dogs can be trained to help disabled people.

### Question

How can high school students start a school radio station?

### Confident

The most important dilemma today's teenagers face is making informed career decisions: choosing a type of work that will sustain them and preparing adequately for that career.

### Specific

Crime Watch, a community-based resident patrol, is a practical, effective way for citizens of all ages to cooperate in protecting themselves and their community from crime.

### States Topic and Limits Focus

For thousands of disabled Americans, "service dogs" improve the emotional, social, and economic quality of life.

### Statement

With as little as \$500, high school students can create and staff a "drive-by" radio station, benefiting both the students and the school in significant ways.

## **Exercise 6** Revising Thesis Statements

Read each of the faulty thesis statements that follow. Revise each thesis statement so that it meets the requirements stated in the guidelines on pages 70–71. You may make up details if you wish.

1. The purpose of my paper is to write about how strikes in sports have affected fans.

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2. How do the amount and the kind of television that teenagers watch influence their achievements in school?

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3. The purpose of my paper is to write about some of the many young-adult novels that deal with important issues that are helpful to their readers, who most likely never see counselors.

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4. How do weather forecasters make their predictions?

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5. I really think that something needs to be done about elections in the United States because too few people register to vote and usually only a small percentage of registered voters actually casts ballots in local and state elections and even in the years when there are presidential elections.

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## **Exercise 7** Drafting a Thesis Statement for Your Paper

Before you do this exercise, review your working outline and your stacks of note cards. Make sure you have a clear sense of the scope of your paper. Then on a separate sheet of paper or on your computer, write at least three significantly different versions of a thesis statement for your research paper. Choose the thesis statement you like best. Share all your thesis statements with a partner or writing group. Do your own preferences match? Try to explain why the one you have chosen is the best.

## Writing a Title

### Draft a working title that reveals your topic and your narrowed focus.

Your title is the first chance you have to communicate your topic and your focus (the limited part of the topic you're tackling) to your reader. A good title should mention both.

Although you are far from having to finalize your title, a working title and thesis statement will help clarify your thinking and keep you on track as you prepare your final outline (Step 5) and write the first draft of your paper (Step 6).

Keep the following guidelines in mind as you draft your working title.

- A straightforward title is better than one that is cute or too clever. The title should not leave your reader wondering, "What's that about?"
- A colon is helpful. You might write the topic first, followed by a colon, followed by your limited focus. The first word following the colon should be capitalized.
- The title should not be stated as a complete sentence, although it might suggest a question.

Here are some examples of faulty titles. Note how each has been improved.

### EXAMPLE

#### Too Vague

Credit Card Problems

#### Specific

Using Credit Cards: How to Keep from Going Under

#### Statement

Too Many Children Don't Know What to Do in a Fire

#### Revised

Teaching Children What to Do in a Fire

#### Too General

Mystery Novels and Movies

#### Specific

Making a Mystery Novel into a Movie: Successes and Failures

#### Unclear

Feeding the Diet Industry

#### Clear

The Diet Industry in America: Big Money

#### Too Cute

Escaping with the Wizard of Oz

#### Straightforward

Ballooning as a Sport: Advantages and Disadvantages

## **Exercise 8** Revising Titles

This exercise will give you some practice before you tackle your own title. Clearly, it is difficult to write a good title for a paper you know nothing about, but see what you can do with these titles. Make up whatever you need (usually a focus) to improve the title. Then get together with a small group to compare and discuss your revisions.

### EXAMPLE

Playing the Drums

Different Drums Around the World

1. The United Nations

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2. Creativity Should Be Encouraged

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3. TV's Greatest Hits

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4. Special Effects

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5. Edgar Allan Poe

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6. Diets for Staying Alive

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7. Teenagers and Cars

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8. Popular Music

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9. Freedom of Speech

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10. Buying Online

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**Exercise 9** Drafting a Title for Your Research Paper

On a separate sheet of paper or on your computer, write some titles (at least four) for your paper. Discuss them with a partner or writing group. Choose the one you like best. This can be your working title, and you can change it up until the day you turn your paper in.

**Exercise 10** Checking Your Progress

Answer each of the following questions about the work you've done so far.

1. What general headings have you used to stack or group your note cards?

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2. Do you have too much or too little information in any of your stacks of note cards? What will you do to solve this problem?

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3. Which note cards have you discarded? Why?

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4. What is your working thesis statement?

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5. What is your working title? Why did you choose that title?

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## Checklist Review



Are you on schedule?  
Check the Timetables on page 10.

- Sort your note cards into stacks having the same heading.
- Evaluate your notes.
  - If you have too much information under a heading, discard the notes that contribute the least to your paper.
  - If there's not enough information under a heading, find more sources and take notes.
- Revise your working outline to fit the information you have found.
- Make sure that all your information fits the scope of your paper.
- Arrange the information in an order that readers will easily understand.
- Identify your audience and your purpose.
- Draft a working thesis statement that tells what you will cover in your paper.
- Draft a working title that reveals your topic and your narrowed focus.