



The Lantern English Co.  
The Growing Writer

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## **Essay Basics – Syllabus**

**Course Description:** Learning to write organized and meaningful essays should be a skill that all students attain. This course teaches essay basics, beginning with a review of the paragraph, the foundation of all essay writing. Students then learn how to develop a topic and thesis, write proper introductions and conclusions, choose the best organizational methods, and plan their essays with the goal of writing a five-paragraph essay. Finally, students spend time learning how to transition well between paragraphs and use examples within the context of practice essay assignments.

### **Course Outline:**

**Week One:** Review of the Paragraph

**Week Two:** Topic Vs. Thesis

**Week Three:** The Introduction

**Week Four:** The Conclusion

**Week Five:** Essay Planning

A. Organizational Methods

B. Submitting First Outline

**Week Six:** The Five-Paragraph Essay

**Week Seven:** Transitions

**Week Eight:** Using Examples

**Grading Information:** All assignments will be graded using *The Growing Writer Rubric* and averaged to receive a final course grade.



## Essay Basics

### Lesson Two: Topic vs. Thesis

#### SAMPLE LESSON

The word *thesis* can sound daunting and so advanced, but the concept is not hard to understand. Simply put, a thesis statement is a **sentence that clearly identifies the topic and main idea of an essay**. Whereas a topic sentence identifies the topic and main idea for a particular paragraph, a thesis statement identifies the topic and main idea of the entire essay. The thesis is like a road map for the essay, telling the reader what to expect from the rest of the essay. Though the structure of a thesis statement can vary slightly depending on the type of essay being written, all essays *must* have a thesis statement.

Developing a strong, compelling thesis statement does require significant practice, so do not imagine that we will overwhelm you with lots of information about thesis development right now. In this lesson, we only want to introduce the concept and its importance in a simple way. A specific and clear thesis sets the tone for a strong, focused, and interesting essay.

Of course, one of the biggest confusions we run into is the difference between a topic and a thesis. It is important to discuss the difference first.

#### TOPIC VS. THESIS –

A topic and a thesis are not the same thing, and they are not interchangeable. A topic can come in several forms: as a single word, as a command, as a simple sentence, or even as a question. **However, the thesis is always a statement sentence.**

Example:

- **Topic:** Cheese
- **Thesis:** Of all kinds of cheese, my favorite is Swiss.

## **BEGINNING STEPS –**

### **1. Define your topic.**

When you begin writing an essay, you must first choose a topic. Perhaps the assignment gives you a topic, or perhaps you are allowed to choose your own. Regardless, you must first define the topic. Did the assignment give an extremely specific topic, or is the topic only somewhat specific, rather general, or completely open to your decision?

- An extremely specific topic: Write about how ice cream is made.
- A somewhat specific topic: Write about ice cream.
- A general topic: Write about your favorite dessert.
- An open topic: Write a descriptive essay on the topic of your choice.

**But how do you choose?** Choosing a topic is one of the very first obstacles that many students must overcome. Even when it comes to writing paragraphs, such as we did last week, many students struggle just to know what to write about in the first place.

1. The best piece of advice we can offer is to write about things that interest you. Do you like building model planes? Write about it. Do you participate in Boy Scouts? Write about it. Do you dance? Do you ski? Do you love to bake or draw or sing? Write about it. Your writing will always be more interesting if you choose topics that you love or that inspire you.
2. Another way to choose a great topic is to write about experiences that are personal to you. Write about the time you met your best friend or a special experience you have had with a friend. Write about a time you were afraid, sad, excited, or inspired. Write about the time you camped in your backyard or the time you skied down a giant hill and felt so proud. Write about the time your grandmother passed away or the time you traveled to China with your family to adopt a new sibling. Writing about personal things will help you more easily think of what to say and connect with your readers.
3. Sometimes, you must choose a topic within a certain realm. Perhaps you must write about a historical character or something you have recently studied in science. Of course, these guidelines may limit your ability to write about a major interest or a personal experience, but you can still use the first two concepts to help you. Is there a person in history that you find very

interesting? Or have you read about someone in history that you relate with? You can apply these same concepts of interest and personal relation to just about any subject.

## 2. Narrow your topic.

Unless the assignment gives you an extremely specific topic, you will likely need to narrow it to be more specific. For example, if the assignment asks you to write an essay about ice cream, your topic is still a bit too general to start writing. There are a lot of things about ice cream on which you could write.

You need to narrow the topic. Will you write about the history of ice cream? Will you write about the first time you ate ice cream? Will you write about how your family always makes homemade ice cream for birthdays? Will you write about the ice cream disaster you had at the beach last weekend? Will you write about your decision-making processes when choosing ice cream flavors?

Essentially, when we are creating a thesis, we are narrowing the topic down to a **very specific statement of purpose or opinion**. The thesis is built from our core ideas and beliefs. The reality is, because we all have individual worldviews, experiences, and ideas, everyone's thesis should be slightly different.

## 3. Understand The Difference.

In basic terms, there are two types of thesis statements: **expository and persuasive**.

The expository thesis presents the topic and main idea to the reader, **without providing an argument or opinion. The expository thesis should be factual.** In this class, we will use *only* the expository thesis, as this is what you will use for all of your beginning essays, whether expository, narrative, or descriptive.

The persuasive thesis, on the other hand, presents not only the topic **but also an arguable perspective about the topic**. This type of thesis presents an idea for which there is argument or opposition, which you then must *defend* and *prove* based on reliable evidence.

### Expository Thesis Statements:

- Students can become more effective writers by employing three strategies.
- Wolves are often pictured in fairy tales as ferocious animals, but they are very social and unique animals who do not deserve their scary reputation.

- George Washington was an excellent leader, because he was a man of courage, perseverance, and desire to help our country succeed.
- The rewarding process of photographing a lunar eclipse requires careful preparation and sound equipment.

### **Persuasive Thesis Statements:**

- Although many of us love taking hot showers, taking cold showers is actually the better choice because of the countless health benefits associated with cool temperatures.
- A longer school day does not guarantee that students will be productive in classes, reminding us that young people must find learning meaningful in order to do well.
- Free public transportation should be implemented as a key step in reducing unemployment rates.
- Our family should get a dog because of the opportunity it will provide us children for learning responsibility.

### **HOW TO CREATE AN EXPOSITORY THESIS –**

We will focus now only on the expository thesis, as that is all you will need for a while. Follow these steps to develop an expository thesis:

1. **Identify the topic.**
2. **Make a statement of fact.** Remember, an expository thesis is always factual. “Dogs are popular pets because they are loyal, useful, and excellent companions” = fact. With this statement, I am merely explaining three key reasons why dogs are popular pets. On the other hand, if I say, “Dogs are better than cats because they are loyal, useful, and excellent companies,” I have now made an opinion-based claim, which is persuasive, not expository. With this statement, I am challenging the reader to see these three reasons as proof for liking dogs better than cats, when in fact, cats have their own traits which make them wonderful pets as well. An expository thesis should focus on explaining, not proving a point.

**NOTE:** This is also a good place to discuss personal fact vs. personal opinion. A statement such as “My favorite holiday is Christmas” is considered personal *fact*. It may not be a scientific fact or a world-wide fact, but it is a fact of who YOU ARE. With this statement, you are not trying to prove why Christmas is the best holiday, nor are you trying to convince others to like Christmas as well. You are merely explaining why Christmas is your favorite holiday. Personal facts are acceptable for use when writing expository thesis statements. On the other hand, personal opinion is reserved

strictly for persuasive writing. For example, if you write that “Christmas is the best holiday,” you are now stating a personal *opinion* and making a *claim*, suggesting that Christmas is better than any other holiday. Personal opinion is not acceptable for use when writing expository thesis statements.

3. **If useful, qualify the topic.** For expository thesis statements, a common and simple qualifying word is *because*. “Spring is my favorite season because I love planting the garden with my mom, visiting the local Lilac Festival, and celebrating all of the birthdays in my immediate family.”
4. **Write just a sentence, not a paragraph.** A lot of students get confused with this one. A thesis is not a group of sentences, not a paragraph, and not the complete introduction (more on this next week). A thesis should be one sentence.

### **STRONG VS. WEAK –**

There is really quite a lot to get into when it comes to writing strong, compelling thesis statements, but there are two key errors we will focus on right now. These are the errors we see most frequently in the early stages of essay writing.

#### **ERROR 1: Your thesis is too general.**

- I like herbal tea.
- I am going to write about George Washington.
- This paper will cover three reasons why good sleep habits are important.

What makes your essay important to read is a thesis that is interesting and compelling, a statement that contains not just the topic but the main idea about it.

#### **Strong:**

- Because of its medicinal qualities and ability to improve focus, herbal tea is often my drink of choice.
- George Washington was an excellent leader, because he was a man of courage, perseverance, and desire to help our country succeed.
- Many people view sleep as an inconvenience, but plenty of quality sleep on a regular basis is necessary for our bodies to heal and stay healthy.

## **ERROR 2: Factual, but overly obvious:**

- Exercise is good for you.
- Education is important.
- Traveling the world is exciting.

While it is fine to use factual statements when writing expository, narrative, and descriptive essays, they still must contain some interest. Your audience doesn't want to read another essay about the basic facts about the importance of exercise or education. They want you to inform them of something they perhaps do not already know or fully understand.

## **Strong:**

- Exercise doesn't mean you have to join a gym, register for a marathon, or start lifting weights; moving your body is always the goal, and there are several really fun ways to accomplish this!
- As education has always been considered a crucial part of any society, there are several major educational methods promoted today.
- Traveling the world has given me the opportunity to grow in empathy for people of many different cultures.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Remember that there are two types of theses – expository and persuasive. Expository thesis statements will always present fact, whereas persuasive thesis statements will present opinion. However, both types of statements are capable of being strong, because they are needed for different types of papers. When assessing whether or not a thesis statement is strong, do not base your assessment solely on seeing a fact or on your agreement/disagreement with the statement. Look instead for statements that are both specific and thought-provoking.

## **FINAL NOTES –**

One method of thesis writing is often taught and used for writing five-paragraph essays. This type of thesis identifies the topic and the three main ideas that will be covered within the essay.

- Example: “Dogs are loyal, useful, and excellent companions.”

This method is really straightforward and easy to use. However, please know that you can also write a thesis statement without listing main ideas; a thesis statement can be more open-ended while still being specific, as you might see in many of the examples above.

We encourage you to try writing a variety of interesting thesis statements, because eventually you will need more room for explaining and expanding on your ideas once you are writing more than five paragraphs.

Writing a thesis is not a method. While the thesis should clearly identify the topic and main idea of the essay and provide direction for the contents of the essay, it should still be interesting.

**Assignment 2A:** Write whether each thesis statement below is strong or weak. Then, briefly explain why.

(NOTE: Some of the thesis statements below are opinion-based [persuasive]; remember, absence of fact or the use of opinion does not make a statement weak. Remember that a strong thesis statement may be either expository OR persuasive, as long as it is both specific and thought-provoking.)

1. Edgar Allen Poe is a good author.
2. Normally heroes are imagined as fictional people like Wonder Woman and Superman, but in reality heroes can be real human beings who are not extraordinarily fast, strong, or fearless.
3. Over the last 20 years, changes in technology have made a profound difference in the way American college students communicate.
4. Playing sports has many benefits.
5. Participating in volunteer work is essential to the development of strong character.
6. It is difficult to write about topics you find boring.
7. The rise of Starbucks created a market that allowed small, independent coffeehouses to thrive.
8. Not having confidence hurts your life.
9. This paper will examine the similarities and differences between two articles.
10. Tourists are often out of place in other cultures.



**Assignment 2B:** Write a strong expository thesis statement for each of the following topics.

(NOTE: For this assignment, please stay away from opinion-based [persuasive] theses. We will be writing expository essays for the remainder of this class, so we want your practice to focus primarily on expository thesis statements.)

If you are having trouble with this assignment, try to make each topic as personal as possible. Avoid merely writing something like, “An invention is a device created to benefit society.” INSTEAD, write a statement about an invention that you find particularly useful. For the topic of traveling, write a statement about a recent trip you took. Write a statement about *your* favorite book or what *you* think is a delicious meal. Etc.

### TOPICS -

- An Invention
- Reading
- Traveling
- The Best Weekend
- Family
- Freedom
- Your Favorite Book
- A Delicious Meal
- Fear
- Learning