

# Evaluation and Grading Criteria for Essays

## Thesis and Thesis Statement

Probably the most important sentence in an essay is the thesis statement, which is a sentence that conveys the thesis—the main point and purpose of the essay. The thesis is what gives an essay a purpose and a point, and, in a well-focused essay, every part of the essay helps the writer develop and support the thesis in some way.

The thesis should be stated in your introduction as one complete sentence that identifies the topic of the essay, states the main points developed in the essay, clarifies how all of the main points are logically related, and conveys the purpose of the essay.

In high school, students often are told to begin an introduction with a thesis statement and then to follow this statement with a series of sentences, each sentence presenting one of the main points or claims of the essay. While this approach probably helps students organize their essays, spreading a thesis statement over several sentences in the introduction usually is not effective. For one thing, it can lead to an essay that develops several points but does not make meaningful or clear connections among the different ideas.

If you can state all of your main points logically in just one sentence, then all of those points should come together logically in just one essay. When I evaluate an essay, I look specifically for a one-sentence statement of the thesis in the introduction that, again, identifies the topic of the essay, states all of the main points, clarifies how those points are logically related, and conveys the purpose of the essay.

If you are used to using the high school model to present the thesis of an essay, you might wonder what you should do with the rest of your introduction once you start presenting a one-sentence statement of your thesis. Well, an introduction should do two important things: (1) present the thesis statement, and (2) get readers interested in the subject of the essay.

Instead of outlining each stage of an essay with separate sentences in the introduction, you could draw readers into your essay by appealing to their interests at the very beginning of your essay. Why should what you discuss in your essay be important to readers? Why should they care? Answering these questions might help you discover a way to draw readers into your essay effectively. Once you appeal to the interests of your readers, you should then present a clear and focused thesis statement. (And thesis statements most often appear at the ends of introductions, not at the beginnings.)

Coming up with a thesis statement during the early stages of the writing process is difficult. You might instead begin by deciding on three or four related claims or ideas that you think you could prove in your essay. Think in terms of paragraphs: choose claims that you think could be supported and developed well in one body paragraph each. Once you have decided on the three or four main claims and how they are logically related, you can bring them together into a one-sentence thesis statement.

## Organization

Effective expository papers generally are well organized and unified, in part because of fairly rigid guidelines that writers follow and that you should try to follow in your papers. Each body paragraph of your paper should begin with a topic sentence, a statement of the main point of the paragraph. Just as a thesis statement conveys the main point of an entire essay, a topic sentence conveys the main point of a single body paragraph. As illustrated above, a clear and logical relationship should exist between the topic sentences of a paper and the thesis statement.

If the purpose of a paragraph is to persuade readers, the topic sentence should present a claim, or something that you can prove with specific evidence. If you begin a body paragraph with a claim, a point to prove, then you know exactly what you will do in the rest of the paragraph: prove the claim. You also know when to end the paragraph: when you think you have convinced readers that your claim is valid and well supported.

If you begin a body paragraph with a fact, though, something that is true by definition, then you have nothing to prove from the beginning of the paragraph, possibly causing you to wander from point to point in the paragraph. The claim at the beginning of a body paragraph is very important: it gives you a point to prove, helping you unify the paragraph and helping you decide when to end one paragraph and begin another.

The length and number of body paragraphs in an essay is another thing to consider. In general, each body paragraph should be at least half of a page long (for a double-spaced essay), and most expository essays have at least three body paragraphs each (for a total of at least five paragraphs, including the introduction and conclusion.)

### **Support and Development of Ideas**

The main difference between a convincing, insightful interpretation or argument and a weak interpretation or argument often is the amount of evidence that the writer uses. "Evidence" refers to specific facts.

Remember this fact: your interpretation or argument will be weak unless it is well supported with specific evidence. This means that, for every claim you present, you need to support it with at least several different pieces of specific evidence. Often, students will present potentially insightful comments, but the comments are not supported or developed with specific evidence. When you come up with an insightful idea, you are most likely basing that idea on some specific facts. To present your interpretation or argument well, you need to state your interpretation and then explain the facts that have led you to this conclusion.

Effective organization is also important here. If you begin each body paragraph with a claim, and if you then stay focused on supporting that claim with several pieces of evidence, you should have a well-supported and well-developed interpretation.

As stated above, each body paragraph generally should be at least half of a page long, so, if you find that your body paragraphs are shorter than this, then you might not be developing your ideas in much depth. Often, when a student has trouble reaching the required minimum length for an essay, the problem is the lack of sufficient supporting evidence.

In an interpretation or argument, you are trying to explain and prove something about your subject, so you need to use plenty of specific evidence as support. A good approach to supporting an interpretation

or argument is dividing your interpretation or argument into a few significant and related claims and then supporting each claim thoroughly in one body paragraph.

### **Insight into Subject**

Sometimes a student will write a well-organized essay, but the essay does not shed much light on the subject. At the same time, I am often amazed at the insightful interpretations and arguments that students come up with. Every semester, students interpret aspects of texts or present arguments that I had never considered.

If you are writing an interpretation, you should reread the text or study your subject thoroughly, doing your best to notice something new each time you examine it. As you come up with a possible interpretation to develop in an essay, you should re-examine your subject with that interpretation in mind, marking passages (if your subject is a literary text) and taking plenty of notes on your subject. Studying your subject in this way will make it easier for you to find supporting evidence for your interpretation as you write your essay.

The insightfulness of an essay often is directly related to the organization and the support and development of the ideas in the essay. If you have well-developed body paragraphs focused on one specific point each, then it is likely that you are going into depth with the ideas you present and are offering an insightful interpretation. If you organize your essay well, and if you use plenty of specific evidence to support your thesis and the individual claims that comprise that thesis, then there is a good possibility that your essay will be insightful.

### **Clarity**

Clarity is always important: if your writing is not clear, your meaning will not reach readers the way you would like it to. According to IVCC's Grading Criteria for Writing Assignments, "A," "B," and "C" essays are clear throughout, meaning that problems with clarity can have a substantial effect on the grade of an essay. If any parts of your essay or any sentences seem just a little unclear to you, you can bet that they will be unclear to readers. Review your essay carefully and change any parts of the essay that could cause confusion for readers. Also, take special note of any passages that your peer critiquers feel are not very clear.

### **Style**

"Style" refers to the kinds of words and sentences that you use, but there are many aspects of style to consider. Aspects of style include conciseness, variety of sentence structure, consistent verb tense,