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## Standard Elements of an Academic Paper

Writing a paper usually involves reading, interrogating, ruminating, analyzing, and explicating, among other things. Academic assignments often ask you to synthesize ideas from texts and class discussions. The first step to writing a successful paper is understanding what each part of the assignment is asking you to do. The following explanations provide descriptions of the most commonly used parts of writing assignments, as well as suggestions for how to approach each part.

### **Definition of Terms**

#### Reading

Reading for college courses requires intense concentration—more than what is usually required to read a popular novel or magazine. You are expected to read course texts critically, to interpret and question the text as you read. Therefore, it's a good idea to read with pen in hand and a notebook nearby so that you can write your interpretation of what you are reading alongside the original text and jot questions in your notebook. Some questions to think about as you are reading include:

Why is this information important?

What does this information have to do with what we are talking about in class?

How does this information connect to other things we've studied in this class?

What within this reading interests me?

Can I make a connection between what I'm reading and my life outside of class?

#### Analyzing

Though analyzing often applies to research, in that you have to make sense out of a large amount of information, a good analysis often begins while you are reading the text. Frequently, this happens through comparing one text to another, classmate reactions to lectures or texts, and how you can see it all making a cohesive whole. Specifically applied to research, it's a good idea to start with questions about what you're interested in. That way, your ideas can develop naturally from the research. The point of analysis is to see what develops from the information gathered.

#### Interrogating

To interrogate means to simply ask intelligent questions early in the process of writing a paper, such as: why should I care? Why should my readers care? What's my ultimate purpose in exploring my question? Is my question thoughtful, concise, expansive, or clear enough? If I had to sum up the main thrust of my paper in three sentences, could I? Why or why not?

Explicating Though explication (explaining and making the meaning clear) most often happens in relation to quotes or poems, a paper writer can also explicate her or his own ideas. In using a quote, the explication would consist of answers to these questions: why this particular quote above all others? What about this statement is so important to what I'm saying? Explications can complete this phrase: "In other words," (or a variation of it). A good rule of thumb for explication is that for every sentence of quote or paraphrase that you use, you need to have two to three sentences of explication.

Ruminating To ruminate is to let yourself think about what you've read, listened to, and taken down, without self-censorship or criticism. Just letting all the information and questions stew for a while may yield some surprising conclusions, or provide ways to break through what may be a blockage in your analysis. Engaging in physical activity such as exercising or housekeeping may help this process. Allowing your mind to drift while you ride the bus, wait for an appointment, or look out the window can help too.

## **Parts of the Paper**

*Title:* the title of your paper should do nothing but indicate what the gist of the paper is in an interesting way.

*Introduction:* consider your introduction as a sort of road map that will guide your readers through your information and analysis. The four basic points on that map are: 1) here's something interesting. 2) this is why. 3) here's what I think about that. 4) this is how I'm going to prove it. Of course, on a road map, there are more than four stops; use whatever you need to as you guide your reader.

*Thesis:* a thesis is simply your statement of belief, **\*\*number 3 from above example\*\*** without saying things like "I believe that," or "In my opinion," or "I have come to the conclusion that..." Because of the fact that YOU are writing the paper, your readers know that you believe what you've written, that it is YOUR opinion.

*Body:* The body of the paper is the main part; it's where you are going to offer proof for your argument. The body of the paper consists of examples, evidence, quotes, and sometimes, statistics. It's where the discussion happens.

*Transition:* In order to get your readers to follow your line of reasoning, you need to help them along. An easy way to do this is to make sure that you have transitions, which can be thought of as bridges from one idea to the next. Transitions usually occur in between paragraphs, linking the ideas of the last sentence of a paragraph to the idea of the first sentence of the following paragraph.

*Body Paragraph:* A body paragraph is a paragraph within the body of your paper. Ideally, all of the body paragraphs should work together to form a cohesive and flowing discussion that delineates your argument. An additional way to think about your body paragraphs is that their shape mimics the shape of the paper, in that the paragraphs have their own theses, discussions, and conclusions.

*Topic Sentences:* In the same way that transitions help readers move on to progressing parts of your discussion, topic sentences (usually the first sentences of a paragraph) help your readers move from small topic to topic as they go through the bigger topic of your discussion. In reference to the above term, topic sentences can be thought of as the theses of paragraphs.

*Conclusion:* Conclusions can be tricky: they are neither simple restatements of your thesis, nor simple cut-off points. Ideally, the conclusion to your paper should develop organically as you engage in writing the paper. In other words, the conclusion can be thought of as what you as the paper writer have learned in the process of writing the paper. Two of the most common ways that conclusions happen are these: 1) your conclusion can complete the cyclical movement your paper began, and 2) your conclusion can serve to "open out" your discussion and give a springboard to the next paper in the ongoing dialogue that is academia. These are only two of the many ways in which a conclusion can form; ultimately, how your conclusion develops depends on the development of your paper.