

How to Write a Paper for Contemporary Civilization

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While a graduate student at Columbia, I taught Contemporary Civilization (CC), a year-long survey of philosophical and political texts from antiquity to the modern era. Although CC is a content-driven course that aims to introduce students to various approaches to perennial philosophical questions, it is also (if not primarily) a writing class. Like many humanities courses, it asks students to grapple with complex texts through argumentative essays. As you might expect, these essays are enormously challenging, and many students struggle with them over the entire year. Since I often found myself explaining to students how to write these essays and since I no longer teach at Columbia, I decided to write up some of these tips for future students. **Although I wrote these suggestions with CC in mind, they may apply to many disciplines in the humanities, including classics, philosophy, history, and even literature.**

Preparing Your Topic

You must keep in mind that you are writing an argument about **the ideas you find in your readings**, not about ideas that are independent of those readings. A good essay will make an analytical argument, and your analysis must take as its focus the source material from your class.

With that approach in mind, the best place to begin hunting for a topic is to return to your books: find chapters, paragraphs, or even sentences that struck you during your first reading. (It is of course helpful to have marked up your text.) Try to figure out what interests you in a particular passage. Does the author use a word in a strange way? Do you think the author makes a logical jump or fallacy? Does the author take something for granted that you wouldn't?

As you consider these questions, make note of **problems of terminology** (Does Aristotle use the term "aristocracy" consistently throughout his works?), **unintended or undiscussed implications** (Why does Plato's metaphor of the Divided Line, which categorizes different kinds of knowledge, omit intuition and emotional sensitivity? What does this omission say about Plato's epistemological/psychological views?), and **unexamined premises or necessary axioms** (Does Luther's understanding of freedom require a particular view of the physical nature/structure of the universe, such as an Epicurean or Stoic view?). As you consider these questions, try to concentrate on **what might happen, what could happen, or what should happen, rather than what simply does happen** in your texts.

Writing Your Thesis Statement

Once you've settled on a general topic or question (perhaps in the vein of the examples above), you'll want to think about your **thesis statement**, the statement that encapsulates the **overall argument** that you're trying to make in your paper. I emphasize here that your thesis statement must be an **argument** and **cannot be merely descriptive**. Again, think about what might/could/should happen, not what does happen.

When writing your thesis statement, you should consider the following:

1. Your thesis statement/argument should be quite narrow.
 - If you're writing a seven-page paper, you simply don't have the space to make a grand argument about human nature or the meaning of justice. Instead, you need to keep your paper focused on a couple of authors and their writings.

- For example, you cannot write a seven-page paper using this thesis statement: “Stoics and Epicureans have the same understanding of the good life.” Are you really going to cover all Stoic and Epicurean thought in a couple thousand words? Can you address all components of “the good life” in a few pages?
 - Similarly, you should avoid beginning your paper with blanket statements about humanity or history, such as “Throughout Western civilization, humans have tried to organize cities for the benefit of their citizens.” Again, you can’t cover all of Western history in your paper, so don’t bring it up.
 - A good way to think about this problem of scope is to keep the following advice in mind: **You should write about authors, not about ideas themselves.** Grappling with an idea itself (justice, for example) is a great topic for an 800-page book. If you only have a few pages, you should stick to what Aristotle says about justice in a certain passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and why his explanation is important, provocative, or incorrect.
2. Your thesis statement must be arguable.
 - In brief, your thesis statement should be unintuitive enough that someone might reasonably doubt your claim or disagree with you. If your argument is that “Plato and Aristotle have different models for the degradation of the *polis*,” your claim isn’t really arguable since it is obviously correct to anyone who has read Aristotle’s *Politics* and Plato’s *Republic*. (Notice, too, that this thesis is more or less descriptive. It has little in the way of analysis or evaluation. It is also very broad.)
 - Instead, you might write something about *why* these models differ: Because of Plato’s idiosyncratic view of the role of women in society? His commitment to the forms? Be specific.
 - I often find it difficult to check that a thesis of my own is arguable, but that’s not entirely unexpected: ideas often seem obvious or trivial to us while to others they are unintuitive and complex. And vice versa. Your best bet is to run your thesis statement by a thoughtful friend or classmate for a second opinion. Better still, discuss your idea with your instructor.
 3. There are no formulas for a good thesis statement.
 - Students will sometimes ask if a thesis statement must have three sub-arguments (like a five-paragraph essay) or if it can incorporate two authors who are not obviously paired (e.g., Epicurus and Du Bois). **There are no such blanket rules for writing essays.** Your thesis can have two sub-arguments, or it can have four. You can write about whichever authors you’d like (within any guidelines your instructor provides). Writing an essay should feel like painting a blank canvas, not like completing a color-by-number.

The Trajectory of Your Argument

The most important word to keep in mind as you write your paper (whether you write an outline first or just begin writing paragraphs) is *trajectory*. After laying out some fundamental premises or starting points, your essay should progress by presenting evidence until it reaches its goal, most often the conclusion you’ve already set out in your thesis statement. In other words, the paper should have a clear beginning, middle, and end, and every paragraph should move your paper along that trajectory.

Students often understand this trajectory better when I show them a visual model like **Figure 1** below.

On the macroscopic level, your essay consists of two major sections: the introduction and the body paragraphs. In this model, you’ll notice that both these sections are represented by inverted triangles, where the broad top narrows into a point at its bottom. Your paper should begin at the top of the model and end at the bottom, where you should write a brief conclusion. You may want to consider the following advice as you structure these fundamental components.

1. Introduction

- The purpose of your introduction is to lay out some preliminary points of interest that build up to your thesis statement. It should be one robust paragraph (perhaps even a full page) or maybe even two paragraphs for a longer paper.
- Notice that the introduction begins with some “broad” ideas (although not as broad as “Throughout human history...”) and quickly narrows the focus of your paper to the “point,” both literally and figuratively here, of your thesis statement.

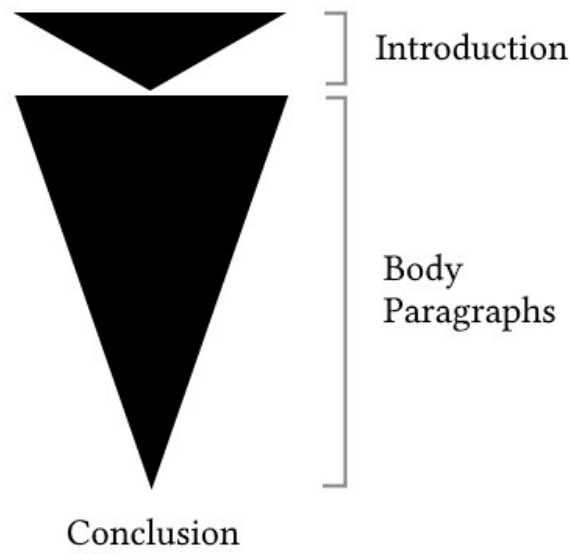


Figure 1: Trajectory of An Essay

- While the introduction should not attempt to summarize your paper completely, you should at least give a sketch of how the trajectory of your argument will proceed: which authors you'll discuss, which ideas will get attention, and where you'd like to end up at the conclusion. The thesis statement should serve as the end point of your introduction, placed at the end of the paragraph and serving as its argumentative culmination. **You are trying to prove your thesis statement.**
2. Body Paragraphs
 - Notice how the triangle that represents the body paragraphs in this model is similar to the triangle that represents the introduction. (Not properly similar as in geometry class, but you get the idea.) This correspondence is intentional.
 - The body paragraphs, which afford the space to draw out the skeletal argument from your introduction, should follow the same general trajectory of that introductory sketch. You should begin with broad premises or preliminary (and likely uncontroversial) observations, progressing through your evidence until you reach the "point" or conclusion of your paper, your thesis statement.
 - Your body paragraphs should serve as argumentative steps toward the conclusion. As you begin a new paragraph, ask yourself how this new paragraph proceeds toward the end of the argument (your thesis statement). You **must** make this direction and purpose clear to your reader, preferably in the first sentence or two of each paragraph.
 3. Conclusion
 - After you write your final body paragraph, in which you reach the thesis statement or the argumentative culmination of your evidence, you should write an additional paragraph as a conclusion of your discussion.
 - **This conclusion should not merely summarize your argument.** Rather, you should offer some further points for consideration. Does your conclusion force us to reconsider, say, Augustine's notion of free will? Does your thesis statement only hold true for a people living under a sovereign, or does it apply to all individuals by nature? Does the author unintentionally support a position that seems contrary to his original premises? There are no hard rules about what this conclusion should say, but you should **aim to make your reader think more about the consequences of your essay.** If I'm still pondering your essay's conclusions during my lunch break, that's a good sign.

Caveat Scriptor

I've given the advice in this document to many students over several years, and it has generally proven helpful for them. Of course, those students were enrolled in my classes, and I was in charge of evaluating their work. Before following the suggestions that I have laid out above, you should talk with your instructor about any particular expectations for your written work. That being said, I imagine almost all the advice I've written here is non-controversial and applicable to many kinds of humanities coursework.¹

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