

# **Writing to be Read: A Rhetoric For Writing in the Post-Digital Era**

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*The Proven Method for Writing Interpretive, Analytical, and Argumentative Papers*

## **About this Guide**

### **What**

This is a guide for advanced students and research writers who want to master the protocols and structure of a successful, researched, analytical, or interpretive paper, article, or book chapter.

Each written genre has some specific conventions that need to be followed, and this guide presents the top-level structures that must be completed for any professional or intellectual genre of writing to succeed.

### **Why**

This guide explains the structure of this genre, but it also shows why it is to be used, that is, the rhetoric of the form of writing you are using. The only point of writing is to convey an intended effect on our readers or audience, and thus minimize unintended effects. The time-tested way to do this is knowing the rules of the genre you are using, which are generally shared by your readers. You have to meet the expectations of the genre so that your ideas can come through persuasively.

Scholarly, researched, and professional writing depends on the credibility and authority of the person writing. We communicate this authority mainly by following the protocols of this form of writing. An essential protocol is showing how we are entering an intellectual or professional discussion already in progress; that is, showing how we are engaging in a dialogue and making a contribution to it. Following the protocols of the form enhances your authority by showing that you know what you are doing. The way you use the form itself has rhetorical power.

Rhetorical theory shows us the two side of the communication act: from the point of view of writers themselves, it provides a model to be filled in and a set of discovery techniques (heuristics) for organizing the writing and finding what needs to be said. It gives you the tools to establish your credibility and authority and to speak persuasively about your topic. For readers in your intellectual or professional community, the structure provides the cues and underlying form for stating your ideas and engagement in the community's work.

### **How**

If you follow these steps each time you begin any type of explanatory, argumentative, or professional writing project, you'll have a form that will succeed in getting your ideas across. This is not an arbitrary procedure; it works! All successful writers follow this model; you should too.

It's also important to read good examples of the form you are writing. Find articles in journals or professional magazines that fit your discipline category of writing and use them as models.

### **Written Genres that Don't Follow This Structure**

In general, journalistic news articles, feature articles for magazines, and all kinds of everyday business and scientific writing follow different rules and meet other expectations. But any

form of writing that requires an argument or claims to be made and supported will benefit by following the overall structure outlined here.

*The Top-level Structure:*

### **A Top-Level Mental Map**

As you develop your writing project, map out in your mind the following structure. At the core, it's a logical and rhetorical beginning, middle, and end.

*Introduce and position your main point(s).*

#### **1. The Introduction**

Here's where you set up your main point and state why it is important in the context of the discipline and research question you are treating. The introductory paragraphs must contain an assertion, your point about something, not a description of facts. (See below on developing your *thesis*).

*Show how your work participates in an ongoing dialogue or debate about the topic*

#### **2. Entering the dialogue on the topic: the state of the question or literature review**

You are making a case for your approach or new data in the context of an intellectual discussion already in progress. What is this context? Depending on the type of paper or project you are writing, this section is known as the "state of the question" or "literature review." Showing where your approach is positioned in the context of work already done is essential to establishing your credibility as a writer on your topic.

Document with footnotes or works cited what the relevant context is, including factual and interpretive or theoretical contexts. A formal "literature review" section should cover relevant prior research, data, or arguments and can be mapped out with appropriate headings in your paper.

Whether your writing project calls for a shorter "state of the question" (with references) or a formal "literature review" section, the rhetorical function is the same. Here you plant your stake and show that your work takes a position in the context of prior and contemporary work. You are now contributing to a dialogue.

*Use well-documented examples, cases, evidence in the main body of the paper.*

#### **3. The main section of your argument**

The main body of your paper or article is built around the data, information, examples, or works you are interpreting. Each paragraph supports the main point and supporting claims made in your introduction.

Some papers work best by building your analysis around case studies, examples, and/or explicit references to the material you are interpreting.

Document all sources in footnotes and/or a Works Cited or Works Consulted bibliography at the end.

*Make a conclusion that shows the significance of your work and answers the "so what?" question.*

#### **4. Conclusion**

This is often the section neglected or thrown away by many - especially novice - writers. A conclusion is an essential part of the logical and rhetorical structure of your writing. Here you

answer the all-important "so what" question. You can expand on your main point, show how your approach contributes to the ongoing intellectual dialogue on your topic, and/or show how it leads to further thought, questions, and additional needed research. (See below on the *conclusion*).

*Rhetoric is a **learned technique** for making an intended effect on an audience or reader.*

### **Rhetoric 101a: What It Is and Why it Holds**

Rhetoric is a learned technique for making an intended effect on an audience or readers. Writers, of course, want to maximize intended effects and minimize unintended ones. The way to do this is to use shared structures and procedures for organizing ideas; this is rhetoric.

Semiotics shows us that meaning and social significance circulate beyond a writer's/producer's intentions, and that meaning or value is ultimately determined by an audience's reception of a discourse as it resonates in a larger context of similar messages, genres, styles, and prior discourses.

Writers work by inhabiting this same social space and sharing expectations about language, discourse, and genres of writing. This is why learning the structure and rules of the genre are essential to making a positive impression on your readers.

*Rhetorical Principles Still Hold for Cross-Media Information Sources*

Today we write with cross-media sources that need to be cited and documented. The more information sources you can document, the greater your credibility in entering the discussion or debate surrounding your topic.

*Shared Expectations:*

### **Rhetoric 101b: Meeting the Expectations of Your Readers and Audience**

Some of the rules for this genre of writing are part of our cultural expectations for any kind of discourse or communicative act: a coherent discourse has a beginning (intro, setting up the idea), middle (the argument itself with examples, support of claims, support of prior research, and/or close analysis of material), and an end (a conclusion that ties up the argument and/or suggests broader implications or wider significance of the "middle".)

*Write to be read by using the structure.*

So, to be a good writer of a researched or interpretive paper, or any other genre, you need to keep these rules foremost in mind:

1. Write to be read, not to "express yourself" or "get your ideas out." Use the rhetorical structure of explanatory or interpretive writing, and provide a sense of entering a shared dialogue on your topic.

*Meet the expectations of the form.*

2. Meet your reader's/audience's expectations for the genre you are writing. Know the structure and rules of the genre you are writing.

*Develop your own authoritative voice.*

3. Develop your "voice" as reliable and authoritative by providing the standard signs of this reliability and authority: documentation of evidence and references to other research that allows a reader to locate your argument in a context of information (shows that you've done your homework and background research), clear examples for illustrating your points, logical transitions between points.

*Finding your main point, your thesis, your argumentative edge.*

#### STEP ONE: BEFORE THE WRITING

##### 1. Writing Comes from Reading, then Beginning with Trial Ideas of Your Own

The first step is finding your focus, your approach, your main point. This often comes by developing a hypothesis - an idea about a problem or question that you want to test and validate. In any kind of writing that seeks to explain something, finding and focusing on a subject is the first, and sometimes hardest, step.

"Pre-writing" can become very important as you try out a hypothesis and validate it with all the possible information sources we have. Begin by writing down notes to yourself, as thoughts come to you, in the order they come to you. The important thing is just to begin writing; you will organize and revise your notes later.

Important heuristic rule: you will discover all kinds of things by just beginning to write; writing about something leads to ideas you'd never have thought up unless you were already writing.

##### 2. Finding what drives your argument: your thesis

The goal of interpretive, analytical, and argumentative writing is explanation, interpretation, and/or evaluation. To accomplish this logically and rhetorically, you need a thought engine, a motivating idea, a major point--in short, what is known as a thesis.

After getting down some notes and ideas from reading over the materials you will write about, you may find that your earlier hunch or idea--the hypothesis--works and you can develop it into the driving point of your writing. The thesis in the introductory paragraphs (no more than 2 or 3) is what a reader encounters first, but it may only be clarified for you as the writer after a lot of reworking and rewriting.

Develop your main point and begin thinking about ways to talk about it, explain it, support it, argue for or against it (using evidence from your notes). Experiment with a trial thesis: a statement of the main idea or point of your essay. A thesis is an assertion: try to set forth, in one clear statement, what you want to say. Your thesis should reflect what drives your whole project.

##### 3. The Rhetorical and Logical Necessity of the Thesis

How the thesis works for you, the writer: the thesis clarifies and focuses what is to be said (it helps the writer discover what can be said about the subject).

How the thesis works for your reader(s): the thesis signals what the paper or article is about, what point the writer will try to make. A general rule to memorize: "I don't have a paper until I have a thesis."

Your thesis may only emerge after doing some extended writing and note taking on the subject you want to discuss. For this reason, you should plan to write your introductory paragraph last or after doing a rough draft. The introduction is vital for the success of your essay; revise it several times. The important thing is to remember that you need to develop a

thesis or main point, and this can happen by working out several trial theses as you look over the notes you take down as you begin writing.

*A discovery technique for finding a way to state your main point.*

A Writer's Discovery Technique:

Try using this aid to focus your ideas for a thesis: "The purpose of this [paper | project] is to [choose a verb: point out, show, explain, demonstrate] that \_\_\_\_\_." Fill in the blank: what you put there will be a thesis. When you have a clear statement in the blank place-holder, you can cut away the introductory phrase if you wish and just go with your clear assertion.

*How to Develop your Opening Paragraph(s)*

STEP TWO: THE WRITING

### 1. The Opening Paragraph: The Introduction (Write this Last)

After working on the ideas for the essay, your main point and supporting Middle points will take shape for you. Write a draft introduction but revise it and write (the final version) last.

Important Rule: Although the Introduction comes first logically and rhetorically, and it's what your reader reads first, it should be written last, when the whole shape of the essay is clear to you.

In your Intro, lead in to your specific subject. You can't talk about everything under the sun that's relevant. After an introductory sentence or two, get right to the point: no BS, no padding.

Your main point or thesis should be stated last in your introductory paragraph. Remember: a thesis is a statement about something. It can be a claim, an assertion, an idea you want to demonstrate, an interpretation or point of view you can back up with examples and evidence. It tells your readers where the essay is going, what it is about.

You must meet this reader's expectation in the intro: if you don't, your discourse will fail as an instance of its genre, and you will not have the effect you intend to have on your readers.

*How to Develop the Main Section of your Argument*

### 2. Middle Paragraphs, Main Body (Explanation, Interpretation, Evidence, Examples)

This is the main body of the essay, where the work of the essay is done. In the main section of your paper you show that your main point or thesis is valid and can be documented with specific evidence from other sources.

Establish your authority and credibility by showing that you know the issues and the background from the relevant literature or sources of information on your topic.

Use references to recognized, authoritative sources, whether from print sources, film or video, or the Web. Document the sources to enhance your credibility. Write paragraphs that center around specific details you want to talk about, using examples and evidence.

Document your sources in a Works Cited or Works Consulted bibliography at the end of your paper. Each discipline has a standard format for this section of the paper. Use one and be consistent.

*Using Your Sources: Importance of Documentation and Interpreting Source Validity*

You must use care when documenting sources from the Web and online databases. Interpret the validity and authority of the source, and provide a context for its value. A blog comment, a news article from The New York Times, a recognized online journal, and data from a professionally accepted database are all different kinds and levels of information. Your job is

to evaluate and interpret all relevant sources and use them to support your own authority.

Avoid generalizations like a virus! Don't write in generalities: make specific points and find good supporting evidence or examples to quote or cite.

### *Wrapping it Up: Making a Strong Conclusion*

#### 3. The Conclusion (Final Paragraph[s])

Don't mindlessly repeat what you've said in your Intro or anywhere else. Show what logically follows from the Middle part of your essay. The Middle should show that your main point or thesis is valid, and in the Conclusion you draw a conclusion from the Middle.

Your thesis is your conclusion:

In case you haven't noticed already, your thesis has been the conclusion all along--the main point you can show is true or worth considering based on sources or evidence that you interpret for your readers.

Don't just end or say "In conclusion..." Make a conclusion.

*Answer the "so what?" question.*

The concluding paragraph is your clincher: ask yourself questions like "o.k., so what? in the final analysis, what does all this mean? what have I shown here? what are the further implications of all this? Why is this significant? What contribution does this make to the ongoing conversation or debate that I am engaged with?"

Possible rhetorical lead-ins or transitions for a conclusion: "Therefore, it is clear that..." "It is clear, then, that..." "We have seen, then, that..." "These examples show that..." "The evidence indicates that..." Words that signal a conclusion are "then" and "therefore." (But don't use these expressions mechanically.)

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*"I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars." - Jorge Luis Borges, from "The Garden of Forking Paths"*

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**Dr. Irvine** is also the President and Director of Irvine Contemporary, a leading art gallery in Washington, DC.

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