

HUMAN SITUATION WRITING HANDBOOK 2016

1. CLOSE READING
2. THESIS STATEMENTS
3. INTRODUCTIONS + CONCLUSIONS
4. STRUCTURE
5. SENTENCES + VERBS
6. GRAMMAR

Love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

CLOSE READING

Close Reading is central to all of the interpretive work you will do in *The Human Situation*—both in discussion and in writing. Paper writing begins with this kind of engaged reading of the text. Close Reading is about asking questions as you move through particular passages that seem illuminating or puzzling to you somehow. A Close Reading is a slow and careful analysis of the deeper implications and meaning of these given passages. It is a process of interpretive unpacking. You should not be summarizing when you are engaged in Close Reading. You should not be giving your reader “the gist”. Instead, we want you to advance our understanding of the whole text through that one passage.

As you move line by line, word by word even, there are different levels of questions that you can ask yourself:

- What *exactly* is being said or what is happening in this passage? If it involves exposition or argument, then quickly try to map out that argument for yourself. If it involves a scene or dialogue then reconstruct it in detail in your imagination. Check if you are “seeing” it in a way others are. Besides making great material for Discussion Section, this can alert you to a unique interpretation you might have found—or a problem with your vision that you need to refine.
- How does the passage in front of you answer some of those big questions about the book that are being asked in Lecture and Discussion?
- Does any key word or line or idea or image resonate with anything from elsewhere in the text? Does it mean the same thing across the different passages? Does this passage reinforce that meaning? Or does something shift here to give new meaning?
- What do the imagery, word-choice and metaphor of the passage suggest?

This kind of interpretive unpacking that you are doing as you Close Read certain passages can help initiate the writing process. Build your thesis out of this work. Let it grow organically from your careful attention to the specifics of the text itself and to the questions that you bring to those particular moments.

THESIS STATEMENTS

In short, this is the heart and soul of a paper. If you don't offer an isolatable, arguable and interesting thesis then you risk sending your reader into the rest of your paper without a clear idea of its main goal.

One way to begin to determine the precise nature and strength of your thesis is to pair up with someone and try to **articulate the major claim or thesis of your paper in your own words** without reading from the paper, and then work to refine this oral statement until it is concise and clear. If you are struggling to talk about your paper without reading from it, this suggests that you don't really understand what you are trying to accomplish in the paper. Often, though, what you articulate verbally will actually be superior to what you have written in your draft. Now your job is to write with that same level of lucidity.

Questions to help guide this process of honing your thinking into a clear claim:

- Is there a distinct, **Isolatable** claim?
If you realize that your opening paragraph does not have clearly delineated thesis, try the following:
 - a) Separate out each of the distinct ideas you have brought up in the introduction.
 - b) Ask yourself how these distinct ideas are related to each other.
 - c) Since the thesis should be the conclusion that follows from a series of foundational claims, can you order your ideas so that your conclusion is clearly separated out as such?

- Is this an **Arguable** claim?
This can be measured by asking yourself questions along at least two lines:
 - a) What does the text say and how is your claim an interpretation of this? If you are having trouble articulating the space between these two things then you might not have an arguable claim.
 - b) Could a reasonable person disagree with your claim? What would his or her best case involve? How is your evidence better? How can you use this counter-argument to strengthen your own?

- Is this a **Compelling** claim worth investigating?
This overlaps with the question of arguability. But even though all compelling claims are arguable, it is not also true that all arguable claims are compelling. Ask yourself, *Does the claim merit 3-5 pages of argumentation and elaboration? Is it worth that level of consideration?* If it's not rising to that level yet, here are some ideas for pushing yourself in that direction:
 - a) Ask yourself how your claim throws interpretive light on the book. What would your audience know now about the text that they didn't before reading your essay?
 - b) If you cannot satisfactorily answer this, return to your thesis. Try to deepen it by pressing it with questions. For example: *why* do you think Homer presents Achilles as an "overgrown child"? Is he undermining the idea of a hero? Do you see that elsewhere in the poem?
 - c) Try asking of an arguable but uninteresting claim, "So what?": *So what if Achilles is an overgrown child?" "So what if Penelope is crafty like Odysseus?" "So what if Agamemnon is a bully?"*

INTRODUCTIONS + CONCLUSIONS

Introductions

In a three-page paper the introductory paragraph should be roughly half a page to three quarters of a page and it should contain at least three components:

- A Set-Up for your Thesis. A set-up lays out a few sentences that orient the reader toward a particular part or action or character in the book, and then poses some compelling question or problem, or points to some interpretive difficulty. This is the context for the thesis.
- The Thesis. This is a clear statement (which could be more than one sentence) of the conclusion of the argument that will be made, the solution to the compelling problem, the answer to the question.
- The Roadmap. For some professors, this involves forecasting to your reader the steps that will be taken to make the case. It should help to orient the reader, to prepare the reader to encounter the evidence and navigate the argument to come. For some, this roadmap is more implicit in the Set-Up and Thesis.

An Introduction should NOT contain platitudes and generalizations that are irrelevant to the main claim of the paper (“Human beings have always put great passions before reason, and will always do so.”), but should from the very beginning be focused on the text itself and on focusing the reader’s attention towards one particular problem or question that the writer is interested in pursuing.

An Introduction should NOT focus on the importance of a text in the abstract or make the case for the value of reading a particular text (“Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* is widely considered a classic by many scholars. In this paper, I will argue...”). This is a “given” in Human Sit. Instead, it should make the case for reading the student’s paper about the text. The question in the Introduction is not whether Shakespeare has something to say, but whether the student has something to say about Shakespeare.

An Introduction should NOT summarize the paper. It should not make the argument, but it should instead lay the groundwork for a successful unfolding of the argument in the body of the paper.

Conclusions

Professors have different approaches to conclusions. In general, though, your job is to conclude your paper in a way that serves the thesis and the inherent structure that this thesis implies. When you arrive at the conclusion of the paper—whatever form that takes—you should be asking yourself, *have I satisfactorily proved the original claim?*

Here are some ideas for making sure you have a coherent strategy for concluding your paper:

- If your paper has successfully asserted a thesis and then moved through the body paragraphs point by point to prove that thesis, a separate concluding paragraph may not be necessary. The paper ends when the thesis has been proven. By way of example, take the syllogism:
All men are mortal.
Socrates is a man.
Therefore, Socrates is mortal.
Once you reach that conclusion, you don't then have to say, "In this syllogism, I demonstrated that..." The conclusion is the last part of the argument, not something that stands for the argument.
- Although you will want to avoid formulaic repetition of the points already made, you can still sum up these crucial points before drawing the reader's attention to important implications of your claim or perhaps leaving off with some last new idea that has emerged from the thinking in the paper. But be sure to ask: Does the conclusion avoid clichés and generalizations about human nature or human life or human existence? Does it stay close to the ideas presented and to the text itself?
- A paper might conclude by returning to the beginning to retrieve some element from the introduction—an idea or image or framing quote from the text—and then repeat but vary it. This element, repeated, will hopefully read more deeply and affectingly now—if the claim has been sound and the structure tight.

STRUCTURE

The structure of a paper should be tightly organized, with each sentence hinged to the one before it, and each paragraph hinged to the one before it, and everything hinged to the thesis, the guiding star.

Paper Structure

A paper with a strong organizing claim often contains within that claim an inherent structure—points which must be proved step by step for the whole claim to cohere. Once your claim in the introduction has been isolated and deemed arguable and interesting, see if you can project from it the separate points that will be necessary to prove the claim. These points will be the focus of each of the subsequent body paragraphs that structure the paper.

As you are organizing and outlining your paper, here are some useful questions to ask yourself to determine the success of your paper's structure:

- Is each body paragraph attempting to establish **one** of the points necessary for the thesis as a whole to be proven?
- Is each body paragraph **pushing the argument forward** instead of merely repeating the same simple point again and again? (If the latter is happening, it should indicate to you a weakness in the thesis, at which point you should return to the thesis and keep pressing to deepen it.)
- Is each body paragraph **building on what came before**? Is there a clear logic to the order you've laid out, or, on second thought, does it seem that a later point must actually be established earlier?
- One approach to creating this kind of logical, overarching structure is to devote the first section of the paper to a discussion of the way the text introduces the issue being explored; the second section to the way the text develops the full meaning and implications of the issue; and the final section to the way the text resolves the issue—which often involves some turning point, reversal, or new implication of the issue.
- Try this:
 - If you're in the outlining stage, write out your main idea for each paragraph on a single sheet of paper and then read the sentences in order.
 - Or, if you have a draft, underline the topic sentence/"mini-thesis" of each paragraph and then read these out loud in order.
 - Either way, the main point of each paragraph can't be merely inferred—it must be a sentence **that is making a claim** in the paragraph itself, at or near the beginning of the paragraph.
 - Does the flow of one idea into the next make sense? Is the argument clear and complete?

Paragraph Structure

A body paragraph is like a condensed essay: it's organized around one point—a kind of **mini-thesis**—that the paragraph works to prove. This mini-thesis, like the thesis as a whole, should appear at the beginning of the paragraph, not the end: it should be “front-loaded” not “back-loaded” (see **note** below). It should be proved with hard **evidence** from the text that you have **explicated and interpreted**. And by the conclusion of each paragraph, the mini-thesis, perhaps reiterated, should be entirely clear to your reader.

For each of your body paragraphs, ask yourself these questions:

- What is the **mini-thesis** of this paragraph? Is this claim clearly connected to the over-arching thesis? Is it a bridge from the point made in the paragraph above into the new material? Has it been “front-loaded”?
- Am I offering **textual evidence** in the form of quotes to try to prove this mini-thesis (rather than vague references to a scene or to an idea)? If not, think about where, exactly, in the text this claim is coming from. If you can't answer, then return to the text. This may be an indication that you are summarizing rather than interpreting. Or it may be an indication that you are trying to write from memory. Neither is acceptable.
- If there are quotes, are they supporting your claim or do they seem to be irrelevant?
- Think about the **interpretive** work you are doing. Are you close-reading the quotes, doing that kind of interpretive unpacking, or are you merely stringing quotes together without explication? Do you see yourself thinking on the page and working to explain to the reader how this quote proves the mini-thesis (which in turn helps prove the thesis as a whole)?
- Overall, are you not merely *illustrating* your idea, but instead *developing* it? Are you explaining the implications and significance of the idea as well as supporting it with evidence?

Note: Inexperienced writers tend to work up to the main point of a paragraph, which they then “backload” near the end of the paragraph. Experienced writers tend to “frontload” their claims near the beginning of their paragraphs and then provide evidence and argumentation. The problem with “back-loaded” paragraphs is that they are confusing to readers. The reader of the “back-loaded” paragraph encounters evidence and arguments without knowing the claim(s) they are intended to support, and experiences the evidence and arguments as an unfocused, disconnected stream of information. “Back-loading” forces a reader to treat each paragraph like a detective novel, which is both frustrating and exhausting. It asks the reader to work through each paragraph twice in order to experience its effect. Only at the end of the paragraph does he or she find out where it was going. If instead a claim has been put on the table at the outset of the paragraph, the reader is prepared to absorb supporting evidence in real time, and to weigh supporting arguments by recalling the claim made at the outset. Frontloading relieves the reader of the work of guessing about the relevance of the parts of the paragraph.

SENTENCES + VERBS

Good prose is direct and precise and vivid. Weak prose is roundabout and vague. Good prose usually comes from clear thinking. When a writer feels confident, he or she asserts ideas straight out. But when a writer feels insecure or uncertain or unclear, the language reflects this. So your first order of business is to try to clarify your claim (whether for a paragraph or for a paper). With this clarity in thinking, clarity in writing will, hopefully, follow.

Still, if you think that the ideas in your paper are fairly clear, but you know that the prose is still a mess, try focusing your attention on the **structure of sentences** and the **verbs** at the heart of those sentences.

Sentence Structure

Much of the strength or weakness of a writer's prose depends on the structure of sentences. In good, clear prose, the most important concepts (an agent that is capable of acting, a meaningful and consequential action) appear in the most prominent positions in the sentence: the main subject and verb. If you can locate the main subjects and verbs, and if these are the central agents and actions, you are probably writing clearly and well. If you can't:

- Try reading your paper out loud so you can hear where the sentences don't sound right. If the writing doesn't sound right, it probably is not.
- When you stumble, ask yourself, "What am I really trying to say?" And then just say it.
- Ask yourself, "Did I put the most important words in the most important positions?"

Verbs

Verbs are the power centers of the sentence. Sentences structured in the way we are suggesting tend to use active verbs rather than the passive voice. Sentences written in the passive voice put the subject of the sentence in a state of "patiency" rather than "agency." To be a patient is to have something happen to you. To be an agent is to do something. It is almost always preferable to have the subject of a sentence be an agent and not a patient. If the writing feels lifeless and circuitous, the problem might be the verbs. Try this:

- Because passive constructions rely on "be" verbs plus a past participle (Telemachus *is abused* by the suitors), and because these verbs are over-used and often imprecise or lazy choices, go through the paper and circle all of these verbs (be, am, is, are, was, were, been). "Have" verbs are similarly over-used, though not part of a passive construction.
- Try to eliminate some of these verbs by choosing fresher and more precise *active* alternatives.

GRAMMAR

If you have severe grammar issues, you will need to address these intensively on your own or through the Writing Center or, perhaps, with your professor. But in general, we want you to focus on two specific areas: **pronoun/antecedent agreement** and **subject/verb agreement**. We believe this approach could help in two ways. First, we see a lot of mistakes in these areas and we think you can make a real difference in the clarity of your sentences by focusing in on them. Second, we hope that if you develop an eye for grammatical agreement, perhaps this will lead you to pay closer attention to other grammatical issues and thus to more global improvements in your writing.

Subject/Verb Agreement

- When the subject of a sentence is composed of two or more nouns or pronouns connected by *and*, use a plural verb:

Odysseus and his men are sailing home.

- When two or more singular nouns or pronouns are connected by *or* or *nor*, use a singular verb.

The father or the son is favored by Athena.

- When a compound subject contains both a singular and a plural noun or pronoun joined by *or* or *nor*, the verb should agree with the part of the subject that is nearer the verb.

Telemachus or the suitors order Penelope around.

The suitors or Telemachus orders Penelope around.

- Do not be misled by a phrase that comes between the subject and the verb. The verb agrees with the subject, not with a noun or pronoun in the phrase.

Achilles, as well as the warriors, is disillusioned.

- The words each, each one, either, neither, everyone, everybody, anybody, anyone, nobody, somebody, someone, and no one are singular and require a singular verb.

Each of these women prays to Athena.

- In sentences beginning with “there is” or “there are,” the subject follows the verb. Since “there” is not the subject, the verb agrees with what follows.

There are many gods.

There is a goddess.

- Collective nouns are words that imply more than one person but that are considered singular and take a singular verb, such as group, team, committee, class, and family.

The family of Achilles includes both mortals and immortals.

- Expressions such as *with*, *together with*, *including*, *accompanied by*, *in addition to*, or *as well* do not change the number of the subject. If the subject is singular, the verb is too.

Athena, together with Hera, supports the Achaeans.
All immortals, including Aphrodite, do not care.

Pronoun/Antecedent Agreement

Because a pronoun refers to a noun or takes the place of that noun, you have to use the correct pronoun so that your reader clearly understands which noun your pronoun is referring to. Therefore, pronouns should:

- **Agree in number**

If the pronoun takes the place of a singular noun, you have to use a singular pronoun:

If an immortal is injured on the battlefield, he or she can be healed.
(INCORRECT: If an immortal is injured on the battlefield, they can be healed.)

NOTE: If you find the construction “his or her wordy, you can try to use a plural noun as your antecedent and thus use “they” as your pronoun. If you do use a singular noun and the context makes the gender clear, then just use “his” or “her” rather than “his or her.”

Remember: the words *everybody*, *anybody*, *anyone*, *each*, *neither*, *nobody*, *someone*, *a person*, etc. are singular and take singular pronouns:

Everybody ought to do his or her best to bear the gifts the gods bring.
(INCORRECT: their best)

(note: these last two rules may be loosening)

- **Agree in person**

If you are writing in the first person (I), don’t confuse your reader by switching to the second person (you) or third person (he, she, they, it, etc.). Similarly, if you are using the second person, don’t switch to first or third:

When a person feasts, he or she should give the best to guests.
(INCORRECT: When a person feasts, you should give the best to guests.)

- **Refer clearly to a specific noun.**

INCORRECT: Although the spear hit the shield, it was not damaged.
(Is “it” the spear or the shield?)

INCORRECT: Vengeance is coming soon for Odysseus, which is nice.
(What is nice, vengeance or the fact that it is coming soon?)

INCORRECT: Helen weaves tapestries of the warriors in blood-red thread. This may be her form of storytelling.
(What word does “this” refer to?)