

Chapter 6

6.0 INTRODUCTION

What is Critical and effective reading ?

Critical and effective reading are vital part of the writing process. In fact, reading and writing processes are alike. In both, you make meaning by actively engaging a text. As a reader, you are not a passive participant, but an active constructor of meaning. Exhibiting an inquisitive, "critical" attitude towards what you read will make anything you read richer and more useful to you in your classes and your life. This guide is designed to help you to understand and engage this active reading process more effectively so that you can become a better critical reader.

Your written assignments include projects, essays, reports or a dissertation. A dissertation is an extended form of an essay. The word essay comes from the Latin *exagium*, which means the presentation of a case. In an essay you have to weigh up evidence, or other people's arguments, then present your own case or opinions on the evidence. This also applies to a project report.

The **purpose** of your reading is:

- To provide you with the breadth of understanding of the background issues relating to your specific assignment, and
- To acquire the evidence to present your case so you can write your assignment, drawing on the appropriate literature.

6.1 PLANNING YOUR READING

A formula for approaching reading for a project or dissertation is to:

6.1.1 Key words

Look at the title for the key words, which tell you the type of essay you need to write e.g. discuss, explain, compare and contrast, describe. These words will help you to direct your reading, and your thoughts during reading, to the kind of task you have to undertake when you come to write your essay.

6.1.2 Key concepts

Locate the key concepts in the title. What is the **evidence** you need to collect to present your case on these concepts in your essay? What are the questions to which you need to find the answers in your reading? Write a list of these concepts and questions and make sure all your reading is focused to answer these questions and other **relevant** questions that emerge during your research. Directing your reading in this way will help you to read efficiently.

6.1.3 Reading list

Survey your reading list and relate it to your essay/assignment question. Decide which books are really essential and when you will read them. Establishing the framework for your reading is relative to your knowledge about the given subject. Only you can decide on how descriptive or analytical your initial reading needs to be.

6.1.4 Discuss your reading

Discuss your defined reading area with your tutor, supervisor and fellow students or via an on-line discussion group to generate further areas of research. Initiate a general literature search on line. Explore on-line resources using good browsers. Use on-line library catalogues and literature databases. These have the advantage of immediate access to current topics and new articles and information.

Do not introduce on-line or other sources, which are not written by authoritative academics. Beware that anecdotal input and colloquial English remains a feature of many web sites. Some academics purchase the software package 'Pro-cite' to limit non-academic sites.

6.1.5 Search Programs

Make careful use of search program. Using subject areas and author names directly related to your key concepts as search titles will give you relevant reading and web sites. Remember you are searching for:

- Explanations
- Relationships between ideas/theories/variables
- Comparisons
- Predictions
- Theory
- The answers to your questions

There is not a right answer but a struggle to find an informed response and appropriate questions for further investigation that might arise. Don't accept arguments at face value: be prepared to challenge the author in your own mind, compare with other arguments, make connections, and criticise.

6.2 THE READING PROCESS

We read differently for different tasks:

- **Scan** for key words. This is a 'search-and-recognise' technique. Think of a train timetable: 'What time is the first train after 5pm today?' You are looking for a specific image: 17:00 in this case. In the case of a book look at the index, contents and author's/editor's blurb.
- **Skim** for an overview. This is the technique you use to find out if the article contains the information you need. Think of glancing quickly through a

magazine: 'Is this article going to be interesting?' When looking at a book ask yourself whether a particular chapter is relevant. Skim the introductory chapter for an overview of the contents and author's editor's perspective.

- **Reading to understand**, or analytical reading. This is best done after skimming.
- **Word by word** reading. This is very slow and is seldom necessary, unless you are working with a highly technical text with very unfamiliar vocabulary, or in a language in which you are not fluent.

It may come as a new idea to you that experienced readers (this includes you!), working in a language in which they are fluent, do not need to look directly at every single word.

6.3 ANALYTICAL READING

6.3.1 Locate

Find the book or web site. First, **scan** the contents index, and introductory sections, to ensure that the text is relevant. Next, **skim** through the relevant sections to give yourself an overview of the content. **Only read the relevant parts**. At this stage read for understanding. Now move on to a more analytical approach.

6.3.2 Question

Ask the following questions of the text:

- What evidence is offered?
- What point is being made?
- Does this evidence prove the point?
- How does this link with what I already know?
- Do I agree/disagree?

This analytical process **takes everyone some time to do**, but it is time well spent if it is done well. If done properly it will save you having to return to this text again at a later date.

6.3.3 Record your sources

Re-read the text and **note down** the answers to your questions, deciding on the information you require for your task. Always note for each article the **Author, Title, Publisher, Date**. If you find brief sections of the text to use as quotes, copy exactly the text in inverted commas and note the page number. Develop good habits in noting the source of your information. This good practice will save you time; otherwise you will find yourself checking repeatedly.

6.3.4 Review

Review your notes. Are they well organised and succinct? Do they answer the questions you posed and provide the evidence you need?

6.3.5 Organize your notes

Only read until you have enough material to write your assignment. Keep your notes in good order, making sure that you have sufficient material to address each of your developing arguments. Colour coding the different sections might help.

6.3.6 Write

Do not use reading as an excuse to delay the writing. You need sufficient time to complete this task properly and to capitalise fully on the time you have spent, reading and gathering the evidence.

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6.3.7 Learning by reading

Reading is an opportunity not only to note quotations and to gather information but to examine language, and to learn about writing. How are you as a reader guided by the writer? How is language used to signal a change in direction, or to indicate a summary?

To broaden your vocabulary, read as widely as possible at the same level of difficulty as the degree programme, but on different topics (newspapers, journals and so on). Reading is an art that improves with practice.

Don't stop to check every word with which you are unfamiliar. Try to get the sense of the meaning from the context. Keep a separate notebook and allow time for some sessions with a subject-specialist dictionary, your course notes and other source material. Create a glossary of terms for use in your own work.

Observe the style of writing promoted in academic texts. You will need to emulate this style when writing your own assignment. However, if you need to constantly translate the text into plain words it may be the fault of the particular author. Remember communication is a two way process. One of your aims in undertaking this assignment is to progress the development of your own communication skills.

6.3.8 Faster Reading

Reading academic text is slower than reading text of a more general nature. You will need to respond to the academic text and to think as you read. This all takes time! Slow reading can be improved, but often it is a question of effective reading, not faster reading. If you are concerned about the speed of your reading, try the approaches to reading outlined in this advice page. For example, reading with questions in mind (see above) results in faster reading, because you are reading with a clear purpose. Reading speed can be measured. You will need a calculator and a watch or clock with a second hand.

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Activity:

1. Choose a piece of text - perhaps a journal article you consider to be well written, where you are comfortable with the vocabulary.
2. Count the number of words. How many?
3. Then note down the time and read the article. Write down how long it has taken to read.
4. Divide the number of words, by the number of minutes taken to read the piece. This results in a reading speed expressed as words per minute. that is your wpm?
1st reading: time taken..... wpm.....
5. Try the whole process again, two more times:
2nd reading: time taken..... wpm.....
3rd reading: time taken..... wpm.....
Average wpm.....
6. Calculate the average. This is your average reading speed for text at this level of difficulty: in the context of your current level of knowledge, tiredness, and alertness.

Note: This is not a precise art. Your speed will vary according to the text, your level of understanding and your general well-being.

The average speed of reading is 250 w.p.m. If your reading speed is much lower, don't panic! First, stop to take in the sentence above: testing reading speed "is not a precise art. Your speed will vary according to the text, your level of understanding and your general well-being". Reading speed can be improved: read on for practical advice.

6.4 TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE READING

- Duration of reading is important, do take regular short breaks as this aids reflection. Do not read for more than 3 hours without a 20 minute break. Breaking your reading up into shorter sections, each followed by a break may prove helpful. Exhaustion leads to confusion and misinterpretation. If you feel sleepy when reading, take a break, and get some fresh air or exercise before returning to the task.
- If reading causes problems with your vision, check the light by which you are reading. It may be advisable to check the status of your vision at the opticians. Reading from a computer screen can be tiring. An anti-glare device for the screen may prove helpful. You may also wish to try altering the background colour of your computer screen for greater comfort in continuous reading.
- If you feel you have a serious reading difficulty, which is not addressed by the above remedies, it may be worthwhile contacting a dyslexia specialist. If dyslexia is the problem you should contact your tutor. Help may be available.
- If reading and noting information is a problem you may wish to experiment with other means of providing yourself with the information. Many people prefer to learn by listening. Reading into a tape recorder during your first reading of the material, and then listening to the re-played text, may prove useful when trying to take notes on the information. Listening can help in the selection of useful points from the text.

6.5 ON-LINE DISCUSSION GROUPS - WORKING AS A TEAM

Here are some benefits and strategies relating to the exploration of reading as part of an on-line discussion group. These are just a few ideas - collaborative learning has many benefits, but here are three objectives for students that can be met by being part of a learning set.

6.5.1 Team ethos (Culture)

- Distance learners feel they belong to a group by working with others on-line.
- Members of the group learn how to learn from each other.
- Working together helps with the promotion and dissemination of ideas and allows for the development of learning styles and a common academic and subject specific language.

6.5.2 Division of labor

- Members decide on the allocation of reading tasks according to decisions made as to the information required.
- Each learning set member produces a summary of a selected article. The summaries are pinned up on the electronic notice board.
- The information given is accessed by all members who can quickly and uniformly digest the information.
- The group all contribute feedback and discussion on the material.
- All members benefit from the joint approach to information retrieval.

6.5.3 Enhancement of learning

- Producing summaries of articles improves analytical skills.
- Peer group discussion promotes the development of ideas.
- Critical writing and responding to discussion develops communication skills.

6.5.4 Further Information and recommended reading

For more study skills guidance try these advice pages:

- Concentration
- Procrastination and Motivation
- Effective note taking
- Finding and using library resources
- Finding and using journal articles (LINKS)

6.5.5 How does critical reading apply to academic reading?

In reading academic texts you need to develop a personal (but nevertheless **academic** and **rational**) response to the article/ theory/ chapter through:

- developing an understanding of the content
- evaluating and critiquing the article

Before reading a text closely, you should read the introduction or abstract and skim read the text (Reading and Remembering for information about skim reading), to give you a preliminary idea of what it is about. Then read it closely and critically.

6.5.6 Some questions to help you read critically

- What are the main points of this text?
- Can you put them in your own words?
- What sorts of examples are used? Are they useful? Can you think of others?
- What factors (ideas, people, things) have been included? Can you think of anything that has been missed out?
- Is a particular bias or framework apparent? Can you tell what 'school of thought' the author belongs to?
- Can you work out the steps of the argument being presented? Do all the steps follow logically?
- Could a different conclusion be drawn from the argument being presented?
- Are the main ideas in the text supported by reliable evidence (well researched, non-emotive, logical)?
- Do you agree or disagree with the author? Why?
- What connections do you see between this and other texts?
- Where does it differ from other texts on the same subject?
- What are the wider implications—for you, for the discipline?

6.5.7 Some techniques to help you read critically

- When you take notes, divide your notepad into two columns. Jot down the main ideas in the left hand column, and the supporting comments in the right hand column. Add your own comments in another colour, or in brackets.
- Talk to other people (anyone who is interested!) about what you have read.
- Relate this text to others by looking for similar or contrasting themes.
- Think of how you might explain what the text means to, say, a high school student. What would you have to add to make it intelligible? (This will help you to see the underlying, instated assumptions.)
- Ask yourself: 'Is it possible to disagree with any of this?'
- Ask yourself: 'How can I convince my peers/teachers that I understand what this is about?'

6.5.8 How can I add quality to my writing?

Your writing needs to be critical in the broadest sense: categorising the factors involved, establishing cause-effect chains, making comparisons and contrasts, pointing out problems and suggesting solutions, evaluating theories and relating them to practice, and so on.

Your writing must also be rational, balanced, well-argued, and based on evidence and wide reading.

However, really excellent writing is distinguished because it says something substantial. Excellent writing is insightful and thought-provoking; it gives many relevant and

interesting examples and other supporting details; and it shows evidence of deep thinking.

Your conclusion is particularly important in this regard. Use the conclusion to:

- say why this topic is particularly important
- make a prediction about the future (based on what you have written)
- make an evaluation (make sure it is not too extreme and is well supported by the body of your text)
- suggest a solution to the problems you have described
- restate your central argument in convincing terms (make sure you have supported the argument rigorously through the body of your text).

A conclusion should never say ‘Everything is fine and beautiful’ because nothing is ever perfect. Even the best theory has flaws and is open to criticism. Your writing will be judged as simplistic if you look only at the good points (or only at the bad points, for that matter).

Exercise for Reading Critically. (Choose any articles more than 500 words and answer the following questions.

What is the general topic?	
What is the main issue or problem?	
What is the conclusion reached?	
What reason for it would the author give?	
Is it based on fact, theory or faith?	
Type of words used :	Type is six important words select which type they are :

	Neural	Emotional
1.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

a) Characteristics of Critical Thinkers

- They are honest with themselves
- They resist manipulation
- They overcome confusion
- They ask questions
- They base judgments on evidence
- They look for connections between subjects
- They are intellectually independent

b) Ask yourself the following questions as you read:

- What is the topic of the book or reading?
- What issues are addressed?
- What conclusion does the author reach about the issue(s)?
- What are the author's reasons for his or her statements or belief?
- Is the author using facts, theory, or faith?

Facts can be proven

Theory is to be proved and should not be confused with fact

Opinions may or may not be based on sound reasoning

Faith is not subject to proof by its nature

- Has the author used neutral words or emotional words?
Critical readers look beyond the language to see if the reasons are clear
- Be aware of why you do, or do not, accept arguments of the author

What is Critical and effective writing ?

Jacques Derrida tells of a dream in which he appears to abandon responsibility for his writing.

I always dream of a pen that would be a syringe, a suction point rather than that very hard weapon with which one must inscribe, incise, choose, calculate, take ink before filtering the inscribable, playing the keyboard on the screen, whereas here, once the vein has been found, no more toil, no responsibility, no risk of bad taste or violence, the blood delivers itself all alone, the inside gives itself up and you can do as you like with it, it's me but I'm no longer there, for nothing, for nobody, diagnose the worst...

Derrida 2003

And yet, Derrida repeatedly insists on the need for responsible scholarship.

Writing, he urges, should be informed by a principle of reason, to which:

we have a duty [...] through research, questioning, inquiry that seeks the "true,"

analysis, presentation of what "is" or exposition of the "facts,

" historical narrative, discussion, evaluation, interpretation, and putting

all these propositions together thanks to what is called language, communication,

information, pedagogy, and so forth.

It sounds as if as writers we are caught up in a double bind. On the one hand, we are being asked to surrender to writing; to allow ourselves to be sucked into it, while on the other hand, we are informed that we must take full responsibility for what we write: to be scholarly.

Are these two practices distinct? Can we be critical and creative? If so, how do we do both? In this section, we hope to show you how to take scholarly responsibility for your writing. In doing so, we hope you will be encouraged to give up something of yourself as you write - to write with the syringe as well as the nib.

- What is Critical Writing?
- Why is Critical Writing Important?
- How to Write with Clarity
- How to Write Critical Essays
- Presentation
- Referencing
- Quotation
- Proofreading
- Plagiarism

6.5.10 What is critical writing and what does critical writing mean to you ?

- Rob Pope identifies four basic meanings of criticism:
- finding fault and pulling to pieces [the text] in a negative sense;
- analysing and pulling to pieces [the text] in the neutral sense of taking apart;
- interpreting [the text] with a view to establishing [its] meaning and understanding;
- evaluating [the text] with a view to establishing [its] relative or absolute worth.

(Pope: 2002 43)

Criticism is something we *do* to a text. Literary criticism is what we *do* to a literary text, and it involves the last three practices in Pope's list: analysis, interpretation and evaluation. As you can see, critical writing always has another text for its subject.

Take, for instance, Amelia Opie's novel *Adeline Mowbray* (1805). This creative and original piece of writing is published alongside a critical essay written by Shelley King and John B. Pierce. These critics have analysed, interpreted and evaluated Opie's novel, and presented their writing as an introduction to *Adeline Mowbray*.

On one hand, King and Pierce's critical writing is subordinate to Opie's novel. And yet on the other hand, the essay introduces Opie's novel in a way that suggests that creative writing is incomplete without its supplementary piece of critical writing telling us how to read it. Do you read the critical introductions to literary texts? If so, which do you read first: the critical introduction or the main writing? Why do you think publishers include introductions and notes? What do you think it means to introduce a piece of literature? Does it stop at telling us what the writing is about, or does it explain what the text is trying to say? Is critical writing, then, about explaining creative writing? If it is, is it possible for literary criticism to have the final word? And if critical writing isn't about explaining a text, what is its purpose?

The literary critic F.R. Leavis was particularly alarmed at the prospect of final words. In his essay 'Valuation in Criticism', he claims that:

What we call analysis is a creative or re-creative process. It is a more deliberate following-through of that process of creation in response to the poet's words

(a poem being in question) which any serious reading is. It is a recreation in which, by a considering attentiveness, we ensure a more than ordinary faithfulness and fullness.

And actually when one is engaged in analysis, one is engaged in discussion, even if only implicitly

Leavis rightly acknowledges that critical analysis is about *more* than something we do to a text. It is instead a way in which we enter into a relationship with writing that involves listening and responding to words and to language. Furthermore, it involves other readers.

Critical writing is informed by a sense of discussion. If critical reading is the attention we pay to the relationship we have with language, critical writing is the attention we pay to sharing that relationship with others.

5.6.11 Why is critical writing important ?

We would like to open this section by repeating the statement we make at the end of

What is Critical Reading?:

If critical reading is the attention we pay to the relationship we have with language, critical writing is the attention we pay to sharing that relationship with others.

On one hand, this sounds as if we are describing a process in which we ‘privately’ engage with language before ‘publicly’ recording our response in a piece of critical writing. This transfer between private and public spaces also assumes a chronological activity in which critical reading always precedes critical writing.

To a certain extent, this is true. When you come to read our *10 Step Guide* to essay writing, you will see that we suggest a logical and orderly progression from reading to writing. However, we would like you to bear in mind the following questions:

- Is it possible to read in private?
- Are we alone when we enter into a deep exchange with language, or can we share our response To its secret treasures?
- Might there be a sense in which language implicitly involves others?

If critical reading and critical writing are both informed by a sense of shared language, of discussion, then we could say that criticism is a response to language that is simultaneously responsive and creative.

Why?

Because discussion is dynamic: it involves generation and regeneration. Or, as Leavis says, ‘what we call analysis is a creative or re-creative process’. By analysing, interpreting and evaluating a literary text, critical writing becomes part of a process that is as fluent and fluid as discussion.

How to write clarity ?

If you want to write clearly, you need to take a few moments to think about writing. Too often, writing is overshadowed by a concern with content, and yet, if we fail to express ourselves clearly then the content doesn’t even get read.

A good way of learning how to write clearly is to pretend that you are a film or a stage director. Instead of worrying about your own performance as a writer, you can begin to think about the performance of your words in terms of your audience. The change of emphasis can be surprisingly liberating. By adopting the role of a director, you will enter into a different and better relationship with your writing.

Tips on How to Direct your Writing:

- Words
- Sentences
- Paragraphs
- Punctuation

5.7 CRITICAL ESSAY

The word "critical" has positive as well as negative meanings. You can write a critical essay that agrees entirely with the reading. The word "critical" describes your attitude when you read the article. This attitude is best described as "detached evaluation," meaning that you weigh the coherence of the reading, the completeness of its data, and so on, before you accept or reject it.

A critical essay or review begins with an analysis or exposition of the reading, article-by-article, book by book. Each analysis should include the following points:

1. A summary of the author's point of view, including
 - a brief statement of the author's main idea (i.e., thesis or theme)
 - an outline of the important "facts" and lines of reasoning the author used to support the main idea
 - a summary of the author's explicit or implied values
 - a presentation of the author's conclusion or suggestions for action
2. An evaluation of the author's work, including
 - an assessment of the "facts" presented on the basis of correctness, relevance, and whether or not pertinent facts were omitted
 - an evaluation or judgment of the logical consistency of the author's argument
 - an appraisal of the author's values in terms of how you feel or by an accepted standard

Once the analysis is completed, check your work! Ask yourself, "Have I read all the relevant (or assigned) material?" "Do I have complete citations?" If not, complete the work! The following steps are how this is done.

Now you can start to write the first draft of your expository essay/literature review. Outline the conflicting arguments, if any; this will be part of the body of your expository essay/literature review.

Ask yourself, "Are there other possible positions on this matter?" If so, briefly outline them. Decide on your own position (it may agree with one of the competing arguments) and state explicitly the reason(s) why you hold that position by outlining the consistent facts and showing the relative insignificance of contrary facts. Coherently state your position by integrating your evaluations of the works you read. This becomes your conclusions section.

Briefly state your position, state why the problem you are working on is important, and indicate the important questions that need to be answered; this is your "Introduction." Push quickly through this draft--don't worry about spelling, don't search for exactly the right word, don't hassle yourself with grammar, don't worry overmuch about sequence--that's why this is called a "rough draft." Deal with these during your revisions. The point of a rough draft is to get your ideas on paper. Once they are there, you can deal with the superficial (though very important) problems.

Consider this while writing:

- The critical essay is informative; it emphasizes the literary work being studied rather than the feelings and opinions of the person writing about the literary work; in this kind of writing, all claims made about the work need to be backed up with evidence.
- The difference between feelings and facts is simple--it does not matter what you believe about a book or play or poem; what matters is what you can prove about it, drawing upon evidence found in the text itself, in biographies of the author, in critical discussions of the literary work, etc.
- Criticism does not mean you have to attack the work or the author; it simply means you are thinking critically about it, exploring it and discussing your findings.
- In many cases, you are teaching your audience something new about the text.
- The literary essay usually employs a serious and objective tone. (Sometimes, depending on your audience, it is all right to use a lighter or even humorous tone, but this is not usually the case).
- Use a "claims and evidence" approach. Be specific about the points you are making about the novel, play, poem, or essay you are discussing and back up those points with evidence that your audience will find credible and appropriate. If you want to say, "The War of the Worlds is a novel about how men and women react in the face of annihilation, and most of them do not behave in a particularly courageous or noble manner," say it, and then find evidence that supports your claim.
- Using evidence from the text itself is often your best option. If you want to argue, "isolation drives Frankenstein's creature to become evil," back it up with events and speeches from the novel itself.
- Another form of evidence you can rely on is criticism, what other writers have claimed about the work of literature you are examining. You may treat these critics as "expert witnesses," whose ideas provide support for claims you are making about the book. In most cases, you should not simply provide a summary of what critics have said about the literary work.
- In fact, one starting point might be to look at what a critic has said about one book or poem or story and then a) ask if the same thing is true of another book or poem or story and 2) ask what it means that it is or is not true.
- Do not try to do everything. Try to do one thing well. And beware of subjects that are too broad; focus your discussion on a particular aspect of a work rather than trying to say everything that could possibly be said about it.
- Be sure your discussion is well organized. Each section should support the main idea. Each section should logically follow and lead into the sections that come before it and after it. Within each paragraph, sentences should be logically connected to one another.
- Remember that in most cases you want to keep your tone serious and objective.

- Be sure your essay is free of mechanical and stylistic errors.
- If you quote or summarize (and you will probably have to do this) be sure you follow an appropriate format (MLA format is the most common one when examining literature) and be sure you provide a properly formatted list of works cited at the end of your essay.

5.8 BASIC NEEDS FOR CRITICAL AND EFFECTIVE WRITING :

5.8.1 Outline

A traditional outline begins by listing all the main ideas of an essay, and then follows by listing all the sub-topics of those ideas and facts, which support the idea or sub-topic. An example follows:

I. Geographic feature 1: Himalayan Mountains

1) Description:

- a) forms an protective arch around India's northern border.
- b) the tallest mountains in the world.
- c) very difficult to cross

2) Effects on civilization or nation

- a) acted as a barrier to invasions
- b) isolates India from cold northern winds

II. Geographic feature 2: Sahara Desert

1) Description:

- a) world's largest desert
- b) stretches from Atlantic Ocean to Ethiopian Highlands

2) Effects on civilization or nation

- a) isolated northern Africa from rest of continent
- b) lack of arable land make food production difficult

III. Geographic feature 3: Yangtze River

1) Description:

- a) China's longest river
- b) runs from East China Sea to mountains of Tibet

2) Effects on civilization or nation

- a) supplies good soil and water for limited arable land
- b) supplies food
- c) provides means of transportation and communication

5.8.2 Why should your essay contain a thesis statement?

- to test your ideas by distilling them into a sentence or two
- to better organize and develop your argument
- to provide your reader with a "guide" to your argument

In general, your thesis statement will accomplish these goals if you think of the thesis as the answer to the question your paper explores.

5.8.3 A strong thesis takes some sort of stand.

Remember that your thesis needs to show your conclusions about a subject. For example, if you are writing a paper for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements:

There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.

This is a weak thesis. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase "negative and positive" aspects" are vague.

Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers.

This is a strong thesis because it takes a stand.

2. A strong thesis justifies discussion.

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

My family is an extended family.

This is a weak thesis because it states an observation. Your reader won't be able to tell the point of the statement, and will probably stop reading.

While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.

This is a strong thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Readers will be interested in reading the rest of the essay to see how you support your point.

3. A strong thesis expresses one main idea.

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.

This is a weak thesis statement because the reader can't decide whether the paper is about marketing on the Internet or web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the two ideas needs to become clearer. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:

Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.

This is a strong thesis because it shows that the two ideas are related. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like "because," "since," "so," "although," "unless," and "however."

4. A strong thesis statement is specific.

A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about, and will help you keep your paper to a manageable topic. For example, if you write a paper on hunger, you might say:

World hunger has many causes and effects.

This is a weak thesis statement for two major reasons. First, "world hunger" can't be discussed thoroughly in five or ten pages. Second, "many causes and effects" is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:

Hunger persists in Appalachia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.

This is a strong thesis because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic and it also identifies the specific causes for the existence of hunger.

5.8.4 Introduction

The introduction should start with a general discussion of your subject and lead to a very specific statement of your main point, or thesis. Sometimes an essay begins with a "grabber," such as a challenging claim, or surprising story to catch a reader's attention. The thesis should tell in one (or at most two) sentence(s), what your overall point or argument is, and briefly, what your main body paragraphs will be about.

For example, in an essay about the importance of airbags in cars, the introduction might start with some information about car accidents and survival rates. It might also have a grabber about someone who survived a terrible accident because of an airbag. The thesis would briefly state the main reasons for recommending airbags, and each reason would be discussed in the main body of the essay.

The introduction should be designed to attract the reader's attention and give him/her an idea of the essay's focus.

1. Begin with an attention grabber. The attention grabber you use is up to you, but here are some ideas:

- **Startling information**

This information must be true and verifiable, and it doesn't need to be totally new to your readers. It could simply be a pertinent fact that explicitly illustrates the point you wish to make. If you use a piece of startling information, follow it with a sentence or two of elaboration.

- **Anecdote**

An anecdote is a story that illustrates a point. Be sure your anecdote is short, to the point, and relevant to your topic. This can be a very effective opener for your essay, but use it carefully.

- **Dialogue**

An appropriate dialogue does not have to identify the speakers, but the reader must understand the point you are trying to convey. Use only two or three exchanges between speakers to make your point.

Follow dialogue with a sentence or two of elaboration.

- **Summary Information**

A few sentences explaining your topic in general terms can lead the reader gently to your thesis. Each sentence should become gradually more specific, until you reach your thesis.

2. If the attention grabber was only a sentence or two, add one or two more sentences that will lead the reader from your opening to your thesis statement.
3. Finish the paragraph with your thesis statement.

5.8.5 Body

The body paragraphs will explain your essay's topic. Each of the main ideas that you listed in your outline will become a paragraph in your essay. If your outline contained three main ideas, you will have three body paragraphs. Start by writing down one of your main ideas, in sentence form.

If your essay topic is a new university in your hometown, one of your main ideas may be "population growth of town" you might say this:

The new university will cause a boom in the population of Fort Myers.

Build on your paragraph by including each of the supporting ideas from your outline. In the body of the essay, all the preparation up to this point comes to fruition. The topic you have chosen must now be explained, described, or argued.

5.8.6 Each body paragraph will have the same basic structure.

1. Start by writing down one of your main ideas, in sentence form. If your main idea is "reduces freeway congestion," you might say this: Public transportation reduces freeway congestion.
2. Next, write down each of your supporting points for that main idea, but leave four or five lines in between each point.
3. In the space under each point, write down some elaboration for that point. Elaboration can be further description or explanation or discussion.

Supporting Point

Commuters appreciate the cost savings of taking public transportation rather than driving.

Elaboration

Less driving time means less maintenance expense, such as oil changes.

Of course, less driving time means savings on gasoline as well. In many cases, these savings amount to more than the cost of riding public transportation.

4. If you wish, include a summary sentence for each paragraph. This is not generally needed, however, and such sentences have a tendency to sound stilted, so be cautious about using them.

Each main body paragraph will focus on a single idea, reason, or example that supports your thesis. Each paragraph will have a clear topic sentence (a mini thesis that states the main idea of the paragraph). You should try to use details and specific examples to make your ideas clear and convincing.

5.8.7 Conclusion

The conclusion serves to give the reader closure, summing up the essay's points or providing a final viewpoint about the topic.

The conclusion should consist of three or four convincing sentences. Clearly review the main points, being careful not to restate them exactly, or briefly describe your opinion about the topic.

Even an anecdote can end your essay in a useful way.