

Thesis & Supporting Claims

Analyzing thesis ideas of texts

Questioning the text you're reading is a good place to start. When trying to isolate the thesis, or main idea, of your reading material, consider these questions:

- What is the primary subject of this text?
- Is the author trying to inform me, or persuade me?
- What does the author think I need to know about this subject?
- Why does the author think I need to know about this subject?

Sometimes, the answer to these questions will be very clearly stated in the text itself.

Sometimes, it is less obvious, and in those cases, the following techniques will be useful.

Video: Explicit Versus Implicit Thesis Statements

The following video defines the key terms explicit and implicit, as they relate to thesis statements and other ideas present in what you read. It also introduces the excellent idea of the **reading voice** and the **thinking voice** that strong readers use as they work through a text.

To help keep you on your toes, the author of this video challenges you to find her spelling mistake in one of her cards along the way!



[explicit v implicit \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

[Transcript: Explicit vs Implicit.pdf](#) 

According to author Pavel Zemliansky,

Arguments then, can be explicit and implicit, or implied. Explicit arguments contain noticeable and definable thesis statements and lots of specific proofs. Implicit arguments, on the other hand, work by weaving together facts and narratives, logic and emotion, personal experiences and statistics. Unlike explicit arguments, implicit ones do not have a one-sentence thesis statement. Instead, authors of implicit arguments use evidence of many different kinds in effective and creative ways to build and convey their point of view to their audience. Research is essential for creative effective arguments of both kinds.

Even if what you're reading is an informative text, rather than an argumentative one, it might still rely on an implicit thesis statement. It might ask you to piece together the overall purpose of the text based on a series of content along the way.

Thesis and Topic Sentences

You'll remember that the first step of the reading process, **previewing**, allows you to get a big-picture view of the document you're reading. This way, you can begin to understand the structure of the overall text.

A later step in the reading process, **summarizing**, allows you to encapsulate what a paragraph, section, or the whole document is about. When summarizing individual paragraphs, it's likely that your summary ends up looking like a paraphrase of that paragraph's **topic sentence**.

A paragraph is composed of multiple sentences focused on a single, clearly-defined topic. There should be exactly one main idea per paragraph, so whenever an author moves on to a new idea, he or she will start a new paragraph. For example, this paragraph defines what a paragraph is, and now we will start a new paragraph to deal with a new idea: how a paragraph is structured.

Paragraphs are actually organized much like persuasive papers are. Just like a paper has a **thesis statement** followed by a body of supportive evidence, paragraphs have a topic sentence followed by several sentences of support or explanation. If you look at this paragraph, for example, you will see that it starts with a clear topic sentence letting you know that paragraphs follow a structure similar to that of papers. The next sentence explains how a paragraph is like a paper, and then two more sentences show how this paragraph follows that structure. All of these sentences are clearly connected to the main idea.

The topic sentence of a paragraph serves two purposes: first, it lets readers know what the paragraph is going to be about; second, it highlights the connection between the present paragraph and the one that came before. The topic sentence of this paragraph explains to a reader what a topic sentence does, fulfilling the first function. It also tells you that this paragraph is going to talk about one particular aspect of the previous paragraph's main idea: we are now moving from the general structure of the paragraph to the particular role of the topic sentence.

After the topic sentence introduces the main idea, the remainder of the sentences in a paragraph should support or explain this topic. These additional sentences might detail the author's position on the topic. They might also provide examples, statistics, or other evidence to support that position. At the end of the paragraph, the author may include some sort of conclusion or a transition that sets up the next idea he or she will be discussing (for example, you can see this clearly in the last sentence of the third paragraph).

Analyzing supporting claims of texts

We've examined the relationship between a text's thesis statement and its overall organization, through the idea of topic sentences in body paragraphs. But of course body paragraphs have a lot more "stuff" in them than just topic sentences. This section will examine in more detail what that "stuff" is made of.

First, watch this video that details the relationship between a topic sentence and supporting details, using the metaphor of a house. The video establishes the difference between major and minor details, which will be useful to apply in coming discussions.



[Supporting Details \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

The following image shows the visual relationship between the overall thesis, topic sentences, and supporting ideas:

While this image shows where a topic sentence might reside in the paragraph, in relation to the rest of the supporting details:

In #5 of the sequence above, the topic sentence is rephrased between the opening and closing of the paragraph, to reinforce the concept more strongly.

What exactly these supporting details consist of will be examined in more detail as we move into this section.

What You Will Learn to Do

- analyze various forms of support that can be used in a text to validate a thesis
- analyze use of personal forms of support (narrative, anecdote)
- analyze use of research-based forms of support (facts, statistics, outside authority)
- analyze relationship between the rhetorical context of a text, and the effectiveness of the types of support used

Point, Illustration, Explanation

How does the structure of a body paragraph support a thesis?

Many authors use the PIE format to structure their essays.

PIE = point, illustration, explanation

The point furthers a thesis or claim, the illustration provides support for the point, and the explanation tells the audience why the evidence provided furthers the point and/or the thesis.

For example, in his argument against the +/- grading system at Radford, student-writer Tareq Hajj makes the **Point** that “Without the A+, students with high grades in the class would be less motivated to work even harder in order to increase their grades.”

He **Illustrates** with a quote from a professor who argues, ““(students) have less incentive to try”” (Fesheraki, 2013).

Hajj then **Explains** that “not providing [the most motivated students] with additional motivation of a higher grade ... is inequitable.”

Through his explanation, Hajj links back to his claim that “A plus-minus grading scale ... should not be used at Radford University” because, as he explains, it is “inequitable.” The PIE structure of his paragraph has served to support his thesis.

ALL CLAIMS NEED EVIDENCE

Ever heard the phrase “everyone is entitled to his opinion”? It is indeed true that people are free to believe whatever they wish. However, the mere fact that a person believes something is not an argument in support of a position. If a text’s goal is to communicate effectively, it must provide valid explanations and sufficient and relevant evidence to convince its audience to accept that position. In other words, “every author is entitled to his opinion, but no author is entitled to have his opinion go unchallenged.”

What are the types of evidence?

Any text should provide illustrations for each of its points, but it is especially important to provide reliable evidence in an academic argument. This evidence can be based on **primary source material or data** (the author’s own experience and/or interviews, surveys, polls, experiments, that she may have created and administered). Evidence can also stem from **secondary source material or data** (books, journals, newspapers, magazines, websites or surveys, experiments, statistics, polls, and other data collected by others).

Let’s say, for example, that you are reading an argument that college instructors should let students use cell phones in class. Primary source material might include a survey the author administered that asks students if policies forbidding cell phone usage actually stop them from using their phones in class. Secondary sources might include articles about the issue from *Faculty Focus* or *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Logos, Ethos, Pathos

What kinds of support do authors use?

Writers are generally most successful with their audiences when they can skillfully and appropriately balance the three core types of appeals. These appeals are referred to by their Greek names: **logos** (the appeal to logic), **pathos** (the appeal to emotion), and **ethos** (the appeal to authority).

Logical Appeals

Authors using logic to support their claims will include a combination of different types of evidence. These include the following:

- established facts
- case studies
- statistics
- experiments
- analogies and logical reasoning
- citation of recognized experts on the issue

Authoritative Appeals

Authors using authority to support their claims can also draw from a variety of techniques. These include the following:

- personal anecdotes
- illustration of deep knowledge on the issue
- citation of recognized experts on the issue
- testimony of those involved first-hand on the issue

Emotional Appeals

Authors using emotion to support their claims again have a deep well of options to do so. These include the following:

- personal anecdotes
- narratives
- impact studies
- testimony of those involved first-hand on the issue

As you can see, there is some overlap on these lists. One technique might work simultaneously on multiple levels.

Most texts rely on one of the three as the primary method of support, but may also draw upon one or two others at the same time.