



# Academic Center

Tutoring and Testing at UHV.

## Define the Purpose, Consider the Audience, and Develop the Thesis

By now you most likely have a topic for your research paper in mind. (If you don't yet have a topic, pick up a copy of the handout titled "Generate Ideas.") You may even have begun to refine your topic, but an important part of refining your topic involves considering your purpose and audience and understanding how your purpose and audience relate. Once you clearly understand your purpose and audience, you can begin to develop a tentative thesis.

### Purpose

Think about the different kinds of writing that you have experiences with every day. Consider the newspaper that's delivered to your door or that you read online. Its different parts do different things—they have different purposes. Its news articles and bulletin boards generally inform you about world, state, or local events; its opinion columns and advertisements try to persuade you either to a point of view or to buy something; its humor columns and comics attempt to entertain you. Since writing can have so many purposes, you have to decide exactly *what you want your writing to do*. What you want your writing to do will be tempered by your audience, but, for now, let's consider purpose by itself.

Since you have a topic, you already know what you want to write **about**. But, your writing also needs **to do** or **to accomplish** something.

Another way of thinking about purpose is to think about your topic as a noun and your purpose as a verb. Let's consider an example: your topic is the rise in the sea level of Long Beach Island due to the green house effect. This noun phrase reflects the topic for your paper, but it doesn't tell anything about what you want **to accomplish** in your paper. So, to have a purpose, *you* have to answer the question, "what do I want to accomplish in my research paper?"

If we return to our example, you'll notice you need a verb or verb phrase to accomplish something in your paper about the rise in the sea level of Long Beach Island due to the green house effect. More than one verb phrase is possible that would relate to this topic. For example, you may want to

- Describe the affects of the rise in the sea level of Long Beach Island on the Long Beach Island community
- Persuade readers to prevent the rise in the sea level by raising the island.



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**You may have more than one purpose in your paper, but typically you will be driven by a primary aim.** For example, you may have to inform readers of the dangers of the rise in sea level to persuade readers to raise the island, but your main aim is still persuasive because your ultimate goal is to persuade, informing your readers is just one of the techniques you are using to attain your goal.

Now, let's get back to the research paper you're working on. Before you begin to draft your research paper, you'll want to ask yourself the question that we asked above, the question of purpose: What do I want to accomplish in my research paper?

It's a simple, but tough, question. Ann Raimes, in *Key for Writers: A Brief Handbook*, suggests several other questions you can ask yourself to help you clarify your purpose. The first three of her questions relate well to college-level writing:

- “1. Is your main purpose to explain an idea or provide information?
2. Is your main purpose to persuade readers to see things your way or to move readers to action?
3. Is your main purpose to describe an experiment or a detailed process or to report on laboratory results?”(7)

Raimes also indicates what the “answers” to each of the questions means. If you answered number one with a ‘yes,’ then your purpose most likely involves informative writing; if you answered number two with a ‘yes,’ then your purpose most likely involves persuasive writing; if you answered number three with a ‘yes,’ then your purpose most likely involves scientific or technical writing.

Again, the question of purpose is a tough question. Before you begin writing you will need to consider your primary purpose in the context of your audience.

## **Audience**

Whatever your purpose, you will be writing to a specific audience. You not only must understand your audience but also keep this audience in mind at all times as you draft your paper. Many times your audience will be dictated to you by your instructor or workplace situation; other times you will get to choose an audience. In either case, you'll have to understand and then adapt your writing to that audience.

Understanding the audience can be fairly easy or rather difficult depending on what you already know about them. Indeed, you may have to do some primary or secondary research to learn more about your audience. The best way to see what you know and what you need to know about your audience is to ask yourself some questions about your relationship to the audience and the audience's relationship to your topic.

### Me & My Audience

- ◆ Does my audience know me personally? Would they identify me as a “type” of person (i.e., college student)?
- ◆ Can I identify my audience as a “type”?
- ◆ How large is my audience?
- ◆ Can I claim any shared experiences, characteristics, attitudes, values, or prejudices with my audience? (i.e., nationality, culture, gender)
- ◆ Do my audience and I have any differences that would present barriers to communication?



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## My Audience & Its Relationship to My Topic

- ◆ What does my audience know about my topic?
- ◆ What does my audience need (or not need) to know about my topic?
- ◆ How “close” is my audience to my topic? (emotionally, geographically, culturally)
- ◆ Does my audience have any expectations concerning formality of language?
- ◆ What does my audience expect as far as the format of the final document?
- ◆ How will my audience use the final document?

Essentially, as you think about audience, ask yourself, “how will reading my paper change or affect how my audience thinks, feels, or understands my topic?” The answers to these questions will condition your approach to your audience.

Now that you’re beginning to understand your audience, let’s look at some ways you can adapt your writing to your specific audience. Adapting your writing to your specific audience makes your writing very reader-friendly, since you’ve made careful decisions for your audience about everything from organization to formality in language. Again, you need to answer some questions so you can make decisions on how to best adapt your writing to your audience

- ◆ What organizational strategies is my audience accustomed to? or How can I best organize my paper for my audience? Generally, you will provide clues to the audience to guide them through your discussion. These cues help to reveal your organizational strategy and could be either verbal or visual. Examples of clues may include your introduction, thesis, topic sentences, punctuation, and transitions.
- ◆ What content will be most relevant to my audience? You want to provide material that is the most relevant to your audience. For example, in a paper that persuades early childhood majors to include activities for kinesthetic learners in the classroom, a history of the study of learning styles would not be relevant, but an anecdote about a student whose grades went from F’s to B’s because a teacher included kinesthetic activities might be.
- ◆ How would my audience respond to my argument? Generally, when readers read they “guess” at what you will say next and try to make connections with what you’ve said so far. Your goal is to structure your paper so that your audience will easily understand your points. Additionally, you may need to consider how you will handle a hostile, angry, or emotional audience. What can you say, how should you say it, and what proof can you provide to this audience to make your points understandable to it?

Understanding your purpose and audience will help you write an effective thesis. These two factors get you thinking about what your audience needs to know about your topic and why they need the information you’re going to present.

## Thesis Statement

In the last few pages, you’ve learned about your purpose and audience based on the topic that you’re interested in. The thesis statement is where those three elements come together. Let’s consider what a thesis statement is, why you have to write one, where it goes in the paper, when you should write it, and how you write one.



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So, what exactly is a thesis statement? A thesis statement is the controlling idea for your paper. It may include the main idea you wish to communicate, your attitude toward the idea, and your purpose. Your “attitude toward the idea” is your opinion of the topic. Your thesis cannot be a statement of fact (i.e. husbands and wives assume marital roles), but rather your thesis statement has to be an assertion about that fact. Let’s look at an example.

Audience	Psychology students, especially those who plan to offer marriage counseling,
Purpose	need to be informed
Main Idea and Your Attitude	that marital roles adopted by husbands and wives are determined as much by their individual social networks as by family history or personal values.

In the example above, you can see that the writer identified the audience for her paper. You also may need to identify your audience, depending upon your instructor’s guidelines. But remember, even if you don’t have to directly state your audience, your audience will play a large role in what you’re writing about.


Another way to think about the thesis statement is to think of it as a one or two sentence summary of your paper. As a “summary,” it serves as a preview of the paper for the reader.

Why do you have to write a thesis statement and who is it for? The final goal of the thesis is to clearly inform your reader about the purpose and direction of the paper. Additionally, the thesis can be incredibly useful to you by keeping you on track, or helping you make conscious decisions about changing the direction of your paper. In the above example, you can easily spot “who” the paper is for—psychology students. And, your readers, psychology students, will be able to understand the direction of your paper—informing them about marital roles.

Where does the thesis statement go in the paper? Generally, in short papers, your thesis will appear toward the end of your introduction. This issue is discussed in greater detail in the handout “Begin Your Papers.”

When should you write your thesis? Like your paper itself, you’ll probably have many drafts of your thesis statement. Fairly early in the research or writing process, you may want to draft a working thesis statement that can serve as a focal point for your researching and writing. Remember, that this thesis statement is a “working” thesis statement, and you will most likely have to revise it as you research and draft your paper.

How do I write a thesis statement? No one way or technique exists for writing a thesis statement. Individuals write very differently—some begin with an overall picture of what they want to write about that can be turned into a thesis statement, while others



*Avoid a broken heart . . .*

*Our best advice: don't fall in love with your thesis statement.*

You want to ask yourself throughout the writing process how your purpose and audience relate to your topic as well as how those factors relate to any assignment guidelines. You need to be willing to change or refine your thesis statement as you write, research, and consider your audience and purpose.



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begin with a list of specific items that they want to write about. If you're the kind of writer who begins with an overall picture of what you want to say, you might benefit from listing the specific items within your "overall picture" that you want to discuss in your paper.

On the other hand, if you begin with a list of items that you'd like to discuss. Write down your list and look for ideas that connect the items on your list. If you don't have either an overall picture or a list of specific items to begin drafting a thesis, you might try asking yourself questions. Lester and Lester (2002) discuss several questions you can ask yourself. A few of these questions include "what is the point of my research? What do I want this paper to do? Can I tell my reader anything new or different? and Do I have a solution to the problem?" (149).

Finally, a good thesis statement is a culmination of your consideration of your audience, purpose, and topic. Good thesis statements share several characteristics:

1. The thesis statement is appropriately focused for the purpose, audience, and length of the paper. Another way of putting this characteristic is that the thesis statement is appropriately narrow for the purpose, audience, and length of the paper.
2. The thesis statement asserts a supportable opinion, rather than a fact.
3. The thesis statement is a clear assertion of your supportable opinion.
4. The thesis statement is specific.
5. The thesis statement unifies the ideas within your paper.
6. The thesis statement is a statement and **not** a question.

**Essentially, your goal is to combine the main idea you wish to communicate, your attitude toward the idea, and your purpose into a statement that you will support with the body of the paper.** As you write and complete research, you will be evaluating and reevaluating your thesis statement as you make modifications in topic, audience, or purpose.

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Lester, J. & Lester, J., Jr. (2002) *Writing research papers: A complete guide* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Longman.

Raimes, A. (2002) *Keys for writers: A brief handbook* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

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