

**Argument Essay Notes**  
**AP Lang**

**THESIS**

Example:

High school graduates should be required to take a year off to pursue community service projects before entering college in order to increase their maturity and global awareness.

**Thesis Statement Guide Development Tool**

Follow the steps below to formulate a thesis statement:

**1. State your topic.**

**2. State your opinion/main idea about this topic.**

This will form the heart of your thesis. An effective statement will

- express one major idea.
- name the topic and assert something specific about it.
- be a more specific statement than the topic statement above.
- take a stance on an issue about which reasonable people might disagree.
- state your position on or opinion about the issue.

**3. Give the strongest reason or assertion that supports your opinion/main idea.**

**4. Give another strong reason or assertion that supports your opinion/main idea.**

**5. Give one more strong reason or assertion that supports your opinion/main idea.**

**6. Include an opposing viewpoint to your opinion/main idea, if applicable. This should be an argument for the opposing view that you admit has some merit, even if you do not agree with the overall viewpoint.**

After reading your thesis statement, the reader should think, "This essay is going to try to convince me of something. I'm not convinced yet, but I'm interested to see how I might be."

A good thesis has two parts. It should tell **what you plan to argue**, and it should **"telegraph" how you plan to argue**—that is, what particular support for your claim is going where in your essay.

"While cultural forces contributed to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of economies played the key role in driving its decline" is an effective thesis sentence that "telegraphs," so that the reader expects the essay to have a section about cultural forces and another about the disintegration of economies.

This thesis makes a definite, arguable claim: that the disintegration of economies played a more important role than cultural forces in defeating communism in Eastern Europe. The reader would react to this statement by thinking, "Perhaps what the author says is true, but I am not convinced. I want to read further to see how the author argues this claim."

## **INTRODUCTION**

Your beginning should introduce the essay, focus it, and orient readers.

**Introduce the Essay.** The beginning lets your readers know what the essay is about, the *topic*. The essay's topic does not exist in a vacuum, however; part of letting readers know what your essay is about means establishing the essay's *context*, the frame within which you will approach your topic. For instance, in an essay about the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech, the context may be a particular legal theory about the speech right; it may be historical information concerning the writing of the amendment; it may be a contemporary dispute over flag burning; or it may be a question raised by the text itself. The point here is that, in establishing the essay's context, you are also limiting your topic. That is, you are framing an approach to your topic that necessarily eliminates other approaches. Thus, when you determine your context, you simultaneously narrow your topic and take a big step toward focusing your essay. Here's an example.

*When Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* was published in 1899, critics condemned the book as immoral. One typical critic, writing in the *Providence Journal*, feared that the novel might "fall into the hands of youth, leading them to dwell on things that only matured persons can understand, and promoting unholy imaginations and unclean desires" (150). A reviewer in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote that "there is much that is very improper in it, not to say positively unseemly."*

The paragraph goes on. But as you can see, Chopin's novel (the topic) is introduced in the context of the critical and moral controversy its publication engendered.

**Focus the Essay.** Beyond introducing your topic, your beginning must also let readers know what the central issue is. What question or problem will you be thinking about? You can pose a question that will lead to your idea (in which case, your idea will be the answer to your question), or you can make a thesis statement. Or you can do both: you can ask a question and immediately suggest the answer that your essay will argue. Here's an example from an essay about Memorial Hall.

*Further analysis of Memorial Hall, and of the archival sources that describe the process of building it, suggests that the past may not be the central subject of the hall but only a medium. What message, then, does the building convey, and why are the fallen soldiers of*

*such importance to the alumni who built it? Part of the answer, it seems, is that Memorial Hall is an educational tool, an attempt by the Harvard community of the 1870s to influence the future by shaping our memory of their times. The commemoration of those students and graduates who died for the Union during the Civil War is one aspect of this alumni message to the future, but it may not be the central idea.*

The fullness of your idea will not emerge until your conclusion, but your beginning must clearly indicate the direction your idea will take, must set your essay on that road. And whether you focus your essay by posing a question, stating a thesis, or combining these approaches, by the end of your beginning, readers should know what you're writing about, and *why*—and why they might want to read on.

**Orient Readers.** Orienting readers, locating them in your discussion, means providing information and explanations wherever necessary for your readers' understanding. Orienting is important throughout your essay, but it is crucial in the beginning. Readers who don't have the information they need to follow your discussion will get lost and quit reading. (Your teachers, of course, will trudge on.) Supplying the necessary information to orient your readers may be as simple as answering the journalist's questions of who, what, where, when, how, and why. It may mean providing a brief overview of events or a summary of the text you'll be analyzing. If the source text is brief, such as the First Amendment, you might just quote it. If the text is well known, your summary, for most audiences, won't need to be more than an identifying phrase or two:

*In Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare's tragedy of 'star-crossed lovers' destroyed by the blood feud between their two families, the minor characters . . .*

Often, however, you will want to summarize your source more fully so that readers can follow your analysis of it.

## **Where to Put a Counterargument**

Counterargument can appear anywhere in the essay, but it most commonly appears

- as part of your introduction—before you propose your thesis—where the existence of a different view is the motive for your essay, the reason it needs writing;
- as a section or paragraph just after your introduction, in which you lay out the expected reaction or standard position before turning away to develop your own;
- as a quick move within a paragraph, where you imagine a counterargument not to your main idea but to the sub-idea that the paragraph is arguing or is about to argue;
- as a section or paragraph just before the conclusion of your essay, in which you imagine what someone might object to what you have argued.

## **TOPIC SENTENCES AND SIGNPOSTING**

Topic sentences and signposts make an essay's claims clear to a reader. Good essays contain both. *Topic sentences* reveal the main point of a paragraph. They show the relationship of each paragraph to the essay's thesis, telegraph the point of a paragraph, and tell your reader what to expect in the paragraph that follows. Topic sentences also establish their relevance right away, making clear why the points they're making are important to the essay's main ideas. They argue rather than report. *Signposts*, as their name suggests, prepare the reader for a change in the argument's direction. They show how far the essay's argument has progressed vis-<sup>^</sup>-vis the claims of the thesis.

Topic sentences and signposts occupy a middle ground in the writing process. They are neither the first thing a writer needs to address (thesis and the broad strokes of an essay's structure are); nor are they the last (that's when you attend to sentence-level editing and polishing). Topic sentences and signposts deliver an essay's structure and meaning to a reader, so they are useful diagnostic tools to the writer—they let you know if your thesis is arguable—and essential guides to the reader

### **Forms of Topic Sentences**

Sometimes topic sentences are actually two or even three sentences long. If the first makes a claim, the second might reflect on that claim, explaining it further. Think of these sentences as asking and answering two critical questions: How does the phenomenon you're discussing operate? Why does it operate as it does?

There's no set formula for writing a topic sentence. Rather, you should work to vary the form your topic sentences take. Repeated too often, any method grows wearisome. Here are a few approaches.

**Complex sentences.** Topic sentences at the beginning of a paragraph frequently combine with a transition from the previous paragraph. This might be done by writing a sentence that contains both subordinate and independent clauses, as in the example below.

*Although Young Woman with a Water Pitcher depicts an unknown, middle-class woman at an ordinary task, the image is more than "realistic"; the painter [Vermeer] has imposed his own order upon it to strengthen it.*

This sentence employs a useful principle of transitions: always move from old to new information. The subordinate clause (from "although" to "task") recaps information from

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previous paragraphs; the independent clauses (starting with "the image" and "the painter") introduce the new information—a claim about how the image works ("more than *Ôrealistic*") and why it works as it does (Vermeer "strengthens" the image by "imposing order").

**Questions.** Questions, sometimes in pairs, also make good topic sentences (and signposts). Consider the following: "Does the promise of stability justify this unchanging hierarchy?" We may fairly assume that the paragraph or section that follows will answer the question. Questions are by definition a form of inquiry, and thus demand an answer. Good essays strive for this forward momentum.

**Bridge sentences.** Like questions, "bridge sentences" (the term is John Trimble's) make an excellent substitute for more formal topic sentences. Bridge sentences indicate both what came before and what comes next (they "bridge" paragraphs) without the formal trappings of multiple clauses: "But there is a clue to this puzzle."

**Pivots.** Topic sentences don't always appear at the beginning of a paragraph. When they come in the middle, they indicate that the paragraph will change direction, or "pivot." This strategy is particularly useful for dealing with counter-evidence: a paragraph starts out conceding a point or stating a fact ("Psychologist Sharon Hymer uses the term *Ônarcissistic friendship*' to describe the early stage of a friendship like the one between Celie and Shug"); after following up on this initial statement with evidence, it then reverses direction and establishes a claim ("Yet ... this narcissistic stage of Celie and Shug's relationship is merely a transitory one. Hymer herself concedes . . . "). The pivot always needs a signal, a word like "but," "yet," or "however," or a longer phrase or sentence that indicates an about-face. It often needs more than one sentence to make its point.

## Signposts

Signposts operate as topic sentences for whole sections in an essay. (In longer essays, sections often contain more than a single paragraph.) They inform a reader that the essay is taking a turn in its argument: delving into a related topic such as a counter-argument, stepping up its claims with a complication, or pausing to give essential historical or scholarly background. Because they reveal the architecture of the essay itself, signposts remind readers of what the essay's stakes are: what it's about, and why it's being written.

Signposting can be accomplished in a sentence or two at the beginning of a paragraph or in whole paragraphs that serve as transitions between one part of the argument and the next. The following example comes from an essay examining how a painting by Monet, *The Gare*

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*Saint-Lazare: Arrival of a Train*, challenges Zola's declarations about Impressionist art. The student writer wonders whether Monet's Impressionism is really as devoted to avoiding "ideas" in favor of direct sense impressions as Zola's claims would seem to suggest. This is the start of the essay's third section:

*It is evident in this painting that Monet found his Gare Saint-Lazare motif fascinating at the most fundamental level of the play of light as well as the loftiest level of social relevance. Arrival of a Train explores both extremes of expression. At the fundamental extreme, Monet satisfies the Impressionist objective of capturing the full-spectrum effects of light on a scene.*

The writer signposts this section in the first sentence, reminding readers of the stakes of the essay itself with the simultaneous references to sense impression ("play of light") and intellectual content ("social relevance"). The second sentence follows up on this idea, while the third serves as a topic sentence for the paragraph. The paragraph after that starts off with a topic sentence about the "cultural message" of the painting, something that the signposting sentence predicts by not only reminding readers of the essay's stakes but also, and quite clearly, indicating what the section itself will contain.



## TRANSITIONING

As the writer of an essay, imagine yourself crossing a river, guiding a troop of avid readers. You bring an armful of stones to lay down and step on as you go; each stone is a sentence or paragraph that speaks to and develops the essay's thesis, or central question. If you find yourself in the middle of the river with another mile to shore but only a few more stones, you can't finesse such a situation. You can't ask your readers to follow you and jump too broad a span.

In such a case, stop. Ask yourself if you need more stones—more sentences or paragraphs—or if perhaps you have already used ones that more properly belong ahead. On a second look, you may decide that the distance between stones is not that great, after all; perhaps your reader only needs a hand of assistance to get from one stone, or paragraph, to the next. In an essay, such assistance can be offered in the form of a "furthermore" or "in addition to" or "therefore." These are called transitional *words and phrases*.

Transitional words or phrases sometimes will be precisely what you need to underscore for your readers the intellectual relationship between sentences or paragraphs—to help them navigate your essay. Very often, such transitions

- address an essential similarity or dissimilarity (*likewise, in the same way, on the other hand, despite, in contrast*);
- suggest a meaningful ordering, often temporal (*first, second, at the same time, later, finally*) or causal (*thus, therefore, accordingly, because*);
- in a longer paper, remind the reader of what has earlier been argued (*in short, as has been said, on the whole*).

Keep in mind that although transitional words and phrases can be useful, even gracious, they never should be applied to force a vagrant paragraph into a place where it does not, structurally, belong. No reader will be fooled by such shoddy craft, which is designed to help the writer finesse the essay's flaws, rather than to illuminate for the reader the connections among the essay's ideas and textual evidence. A strip of Velcro on a cracked wall will not fool us into thinking we are standing somewhere safe; neither will a Velcro transition persuade an essay's readers that they are in the hands of a serious writer with

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something serious to say. In the absence of genuine intellectual connection, such efforts at transition all sound manufactured. The human voice has been drained off, and what's left is hollow language.

Velcro transitions insult and bore the reader by pointing out the obvious, generally in a canned and pompous way. Here are some examples:

*It is also important to note that ... Thus, it can be said that ... Another important aspect to realize is that ... Also, this shows that ...*

This is not to say that such phrases never can be used in an essay. Of course they can, mostly for summary. Just don't use them indiscriminately. Be careful, and be honest. Don't talk down to the reader. If you tell a reader that something "is important to note," make sure there's a very good chance the reader would not have realized this if you hadn't pointed it out. And never overdo such phrases; after all\*, *everything* in your essay ought to be important to note. In other words, be aware that, in a well-crafted essay, *every sentence is a transitional sentence*.

This shouldn't be as intimidating as it might at first sound. Rather, this is another way of saying that transitions are important not simply between paragraphs. Instead, the necessity to transition occurs among the sentences within a paragraph, and from paragraph to paragraph. A paragraph ought to follow logically from the one preceding, and move the argument towards the paragraph that follows. Again, this is no cause for alarm on the part of the writer. It's simply another way of saying that, just as the sentence itself has internal logic and coherence, so does the paragraph; and so does the essay as a whole.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

So much is at stake in writing a conclusion. This is, after all, your last chance to persuade your readers to your point of view, to impress yourself upon them as a writer and thinker. And the impression you create in your conclusion will shape the impression that stays with your readers after they've finished the essay.

The end of an essay should therefore convey a sense of completeness and closure as well as a sense of the lingering possibilities of the topic, its larger meaning, its implications: the final paragraph should close the discussion without closing it off.

***To establish a sense of closure, you might do one or more of the following:***

- Conclude by linking the last paragraph to the first, perhaps by reiterating a word or phrase you used at the beginning.
- Conclude with a sentence composed mainly of one-syllable words. Simple language can help create an effect of understated drama.
- Conclude with a sentence that's compound or parallel in structure; such sentences can establish a sense of balance or order that may feel just right at the end of a complex discussion.

***To close the discussion without closing it off, you might do one or more of the following:***

- Conclude with a quotation from or reference to a primary or secondary source, one that amplifies your main point or puts it in a different perspective. A quotation from, say, the novel or poem you're writing about can add texture and specificity to your discussion; a critic or scholar can help confirm or complicate your final point. For example, you might conclude an essay on the idea of home in James Joyce's short story collection, *Dubliners*, with information about Joyce's own complex feelings towards Dublin, his home. Or you might end with a biographer's statement about Joyce's attitude toward Dublin, which could illuminate his characters' responses to the city. Just be cautious, especially about using secondary material: make sure that you get the last word.

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- Conclude by setting your discussion into a different, perhaps larger, context. For example, you might end an essay on nineteenth-century muckraking journalism by linking it to a current news magazine program like *60 Minutes*.
- Conclude by redefining one of the key terms of your argument. For example, an essay on Marx's treatment of the conflict between wage labor and capital might begin with Marx's claim that the "capitalist economy is . . . a gigantic enterprise of *dehumanization*"; the essay might end by suggesting that Marxist analysis is itself dehumanizing because it construes everything in economic -- rather than moral or ethical-- terms.
- Conclude by considering the implications of your argument (or analysis or discussion). What does your argument imply, or involve, or suggest? For example, an essay on the novel *Ambiguous Adventure*, by the Senegalese writer Cheikh Hamidou Kane, might open with the idea that the protagonist's development suggests Kane's belief in the need to integrate Western materialism and Sufi spirituality in modern Senegal. The conclusion might make the new but related point that the novel on the whole suggests that such an integration is (or isn't) possible.

***Finally, some advice on how not to end an essay:***

- Don't simply summarize your essay. A brief summary of your argument may be useful, especially if your essay is long--more than ten pages or so. But shorter essays tend not to require a restatement of your main ideas.
- Avoid phrases like "in conclusion," "to conclude," "in summary," and "to sum up." These phrases can be useful--even welcome--in oral presentations. But readers can see, by the tell-tale compression of the pages, when an essay is about to end. You'll irritate your audience if you belabor the obvious.
- Resist the urge to apologize. If you've immersed yourself in your subject, you now know a good deal more about it than you can possibly include in a five- or ten- or 20-page essay. As a result, by the time you've finished writing, you may be having some doubts about what you've produced. (And if you haven't immersed yourself in your subject, you may be feeling even more doubtful about your essay as you approach the conclusion.) Repress those doubts. Don't undercut your authority by saying things like, "this is just one approach to the subject; there may be other, better approaches. . ."

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