



29 Guiding Your Reader

Traffic lights, street signs, and lines on the road help drivers find their way. Readers need similar guidance—to know, for example, whether they’re reading a report or an argument, an evaluation or a proposal. They also need to know what to expect: What will the report be about? What perspective will it offer? What will this paragraph cover? What about the next one? How do the two paragraphs relate to each other? When you write, you need to provide cues to help your readers navigate your text and understand the points you’re trying to make. This chapter offers advice on guiding your reader and, specifically, on using *titles*, *thesis statements*, *topic sentences*, and *transitions*.

Titles

A title serves various purposes, naming a text and providing clues to the content. It also helps readers decide whether they want to read further, so it’s worth your while to come up with a title that attracts interest. Some titles include subtitles. You generally have considerable freedom in choosing a title but always you’ll want to consider the **RHETORICAL SITUATION** to be sure your title serves your purpose and appeals to the audience you want to reach.

Some titles simply announce the subject of the text:

“Black Men and Public Space”

“Ain’t I a Woman?”

“Why Colleges Shower Their Students with A’s”

Nickel and Dimed

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Some titles provoke readers or otherwise entice them to read:

“Kill ‘Em! Crush ‘Em! Eat ‘Em Raw!”

“Thank God for the Atom Bomb”

“What Are Homosexuals For?”

Sometimes writers add a subtitle to explain or illuminate the title:

Aria: Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood

“Health and Behavioral Consequences of Binge Drinking in College: A National Survey of Students at 140 Campuses”

“From Realism to Virtual Reality: Images of America’s Wars”

Sometimes when you’re starting to write, you’ll think of a title that helps you generate ideas and write. More often, though, a title is one of the last things you’ll write, when you know what you’ve written and can craft a suitable name for your text.

Thesis Statements

A thesis identifies the topic of your text along with the claim you are making about it. A good thesis helps readers understand an essay. Working to create a sharp thesis can help you focus both your thinking and your writing. Here are three steps for moving from a topic to a thesis statement:

1. State your topic as a question. You may have an idea for a topic, such as “famine,” “gas prices,” or “the effects of creatine on athletes.” Those may be good topics, but they’re not thesis statements, primarily because none of them actually makes a statement. A good way to begin moving from topic to thesis statement is to style your topic as a question:

What can be done to prevent famine in Africa?

What causes fluctuations in gasoline prices?

What are the effects of creatine on athletes?



2. Then turn your question into a position. A thesis statement is an assertion—it takes a stand or makes a claim. Whether you're writing a report or an argument, you are saying, “This is the way I see . . .” or “This is what I believe about . . .” Your thesis statement announces your position on the question you are raising about your topic, so a relatively easy way of establishing a thesis is to answer your own question:

The most recent famine in Eritrea could have been avoided if certain measures had been taken.

Gasoline prices fluctuate for several reasons.

There are positive as well as negative effects of using creatine to enhance athletic performance.

3. Narrow your thesis. A good thesis is specific, guiding you as you write and showing your audience exactly what your essay will cover. The preceding thesis statements need to be qualified and focused—they need to be made more specific. For example:

The 1984 famine in Eritrea could have been avoided if farmers had received training in more effective methods and had had access to certain technology and if Western nations had provided more aid more quickly.

Gasoline prices fluctuate because of production procedures, consumer demand, international politics, and oil companies' policies.

When adult athletes use creatine, they become stronger and larger—with no known serious side effects.

Thesis statements are typically positioned at or near the end of the introduction of a text, to let readers know at the outset what you're claiming and what your text will be aiming to prove.

Topic Sentences

Just as a thesis announces your topic and your position, a topic sentence states the subject and focus of a paragraph. Good paragraphs focus on a single point, which is summarized in a topic sentence. Usually, but not always, the topic sentence begins the paragraph:

rhetorical
situations

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strategies

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Graduating from high school or college is an exciting, occasionally even traumatic event. Your identity changes as you move from being a high school teenager to a university student or a worker; your connection to home loosens as you attend school elsewhere, move to a place of your own, or simply exercise your right to stay out later. You suddenly find yourself doing different things, thinking different thoughts, fretting about different matters. As recent high school graduate T. J. Devoe puts it, "I wasn't really scared, but having this vast range of opportunity made me uneasy. I didn't know *what* was gonna happen." Jenny Petrow, in describing her first year out of college, observes, "It's a tough year. It was for all my friends."

—Sydney Lewis, *Help Wanted: Tales from the First Job Front*

Sometimes the topic sentence may come at the end of the paragraph or even at the end of the preceding paragraph, depending on the way the paragraphs relate to one another. Other times a topic sentence will summarize or restate a point made in the previous paragraph, helping readers understand what they've just read as they move on to the next point. See how the linguist Deborah Tannen does this in the first paragraphs of an article on differences in men's and women's conversational styles:

I was addressing a small gathering in a suburban Virginia living room—a women's group that had invited men to join them. Throughout the evening, one man had been particularly talkative, frequently offering ideas and anecdotes, while his wife sat silently beside him on the couch. Toward the end of the evening, I commented that women frequently complain that their husbands don't talk to them. This man quickly concurred. He gestured toward his wife and said, "She's the talker in our family." The room burst into laughter; the man looked puzzled and hurt. "It's true," he explained. "When I come home from work I have nothing to say. If she didn't keep the conversation going, we'd spend the whole evening in silence."

This episode crystallizes the irony that although American men tend to talk more than women in public situations, they often talk less at home. And this pattern is wreaking havoc with marriage.

—Deborah Tannen, "Sex, Lies, and Conversation: Why Is It So Hard for Men and Women to Talk to Each Other?"



Transitions

Transitions help readers move from thought to thought—from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph. You are likely to use a number of transitions as you draft; when you're **EDITING**, you should make a point of checking transitions. Here are some common ones:

- **To show causes and effects:** accordingly, as a result, because, consequently, hence, so, then, therefore, thus
- **To show comparisons:** also, in the same way, like, likewise, similarly
- **To show contrasts or exceptions:** although, but, even though, however, in contrast, instead, nevertheless, nonetheless, on the contrary, on the one hand . . . on the other hand, still, yet
- **To show examples:** even, for example, for instance, indeed, in fact, of course, such as
- **To show place or position:** above, adjacent to, below, beyond, elsewhere, here, inside, near, outside, there
- **To show sequence:** again, also, and, and then, besides, finally, furthermore, last, moreover, next, too
- **To show time:** after, as soon as, at first, at the same time, before, eventually, finally, immediately, later, meanwhile, next, simultaneously, so far, soon, then, thereafter
- **To signal a summary or conclusion:** as a result, as we have seen, finally, in a word, in any event, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in short, in the end, in the final analysis, on the whole, therefore, thus, to summarize


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See also Chapter 47 on **PRINT TEXT** for ways of creating visual signals for your readers.

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