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Tips for Writing an Effective Position Paper

The following material explains how to produce a position paper (sometimes called a point of view paper). A template is provided that outlines the major parts of a good position paper. Keep in mind, however, **that this is just a guide. Talk to your professor about their individual expectations. Your professor may want you to include some criteria that do not appear in this outline. Make sure you check with them.**

Like a debate, a position paper presents one side of an arguable opinion about an issue. The goal of a position paper is to convince the audience that your opinion is valid and defensible. Ideas that you are considering need to be carefully examined in choosing a topic, developing your argument, and organizing your paper. It is very important to ensure that you are addressing all sides of the issue and presenting it in a manner that is easy for your audience to understand. Your job is to take one side of the argument and persuade your audience that you have well-founded knowledge of the topic being presented. It is important to support your argument with evidence to ensure the validity of your claims, as well as to refute the counterclaims to show that you are well informed about both sides.

Issue Criteria

To take a side on a subject, you should first establish the credibility of the argument of a topic that interests you. Ask yourself the following questions to ensure that you will be able to present a strong argument:

- Is it a real issue, with genuine controversy and uncertainty?
- Can you identify at least two distinctive positions?
- Are you personally interested in advocating one of these positions?
- Is the scope of the issue narrow enough to be manageable?

Analyzing an Issue and Developing an Argument

Once your topic is selected, you should do some research on the subject matter. While you may already have an opinion on your topic and an idea about which side of the argument you want to take, **you need to ensure that your position is well supported.** Listing the pro and con sides of the topic will help you examine your ability to support your counterclaims, along with a list of supporting evidence for both sides. Supporting evidence includes the following:

| Type of Information | Type of Source | How to find these sources |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|
| introductory information and overviews | directories, encyclopedias, handbooks | Use the Library catalogue |
| in-depth studies | books, government reports | Library catalogue, Canadian Research Index, Government web sites |
| scholarly articles | academic journals | Article indexes |
| current issues | newspapers, magazines | Article indexes |
| statistics | government agencies and associations | Statistics Canada, Canadian Research Index, journal articles |
| position papers and analyses | association and institute reports | Library catalogue, web sites |

Many of these sources can be located online through the library catalogue and electronic databases, or on the Web. You may be able to retrieve the actual information electronically or you may have to visit a library to find the information in print.

** You do not have to use all of the above supporting evidence in your papers. This is simply a list of the various options available to you. Consult your separate assignment sheet/rubric to clarify the number and type of sources expected.

Considering Your Audience and Determining your Viewpoint

Once you have made your pro and con lists, compare the information side by side. Considering your audience, as well as your own viewpoint, choose the position you will take.

Considering your audience does *not* mean playing up to the professor. To convince a particular person that your own views are sound, you have to consider his or her way of thinking. If you are writing a paper for a public health audience your analysis would be different from what it would be if you were writing for an economics, history, or communications audience. You will have to make specific decisions about the terms you should explain, the background information you should supply, and the details you need to convince that particular reader.

In determining your viewpoint, ask yourself the following:

- Is your topic interesting? Remember that originality counts. Be aware that your professor will probably read a number of essays on the same topic(s), so any paper that is inventive and original will not only stand out but will also be appreciated.
- Can you manage the material within the specifications set by the instructor?
- Does your topic assert something specific, prove it, and where applicable, propose a plan of action?
- Do you have enough material or proof to support your opinion?

Organization

Sample Outline

I. Introduction

- ___A. Introduce the topic
- ___B. Provide background on the topic to explain why it is important
- ___C. Assert the thesis (your view of the issue). More on thesis statements can be found below.

Your introduction has a dual purpose: to indicate both the topic and your approach to it (your thesis statement), and to arouse your reader's interest in what you have to say. One effective way of introducing a topic is to place it in context – to supply a kind of backdrop that will put it in perspective. You should discuss the area into which your topic fits, and then gradually lead into your specific field of discussion (re: your thesis statement).

II. Counter Argument

- ___A. Summarize the counterclaims
- ___B. Provide supporting information for counterclaims
- ___C. Refute the counterclaims
- ___D. Give evidence for argument

You can generate counterarguments by asking yourself what someone who disagrees with you might say about each of the points you've made or about your position as a whole. Once you have thought up some counterarguments, consider how you will respond to them--will you concede that your opponent has a point but explain why your audience should nonetheless accept your argument? Will you reject the counterargument and explain why it is mistaken? Either way, you will want to leave your reader with a sense that your argument is stronger than opposing arguments.

When you are summarizing opposing arguments, be charitable. Present each argument fairly and objectively, rather than trying to make it look foolish. You want to show that you have seriously considered the many sides of the issue, and that you are not simply attacking or mocking your opponents.

It is usually better to consider one or two serious counterarguments in some depth, rather than to give a long but superficial list of many different counterarguments and replies.

Be sure that your reply is consistent with your original argument. If considering a counterargument changes your position, you will need to go back and revise your original argument accordingly.

III. Your Argument

- ___A. Assert point #1 of your claims
 - _____1. Give your educated and informed opinion
 - _____2. Provide support/proof using more than one source (preferably three)
- ___B. Assert point #2 of your claims
 - _____1. Give your educated and informed opinion
 - _____2. Provide support/proof using more than one source (preferably three)
- ___C. Assert point #3 of your claims
 - _____1. Give your educated and informed opinion
 - _____2. Provide support/proof using more than one source (preferably three)

You may have more than 3 overall points to your argument, but you should not have fewer.

IV. Conclusion

- ___A. Restate your argument
- ___B. Provide a plan of action but do not introduce new information

The simplest and most basic conclusion is one that restates the thesis *in different words* and then discusses its implications.

Stating Your Thesis

A *thesis* is a one-sentence statement about your topic. It's an assertion about your topic, something you claim to be true. **Notice that a topic alone makes no such claim; it merely defines an area to be covered.** To make your topic into a *thesis statement*, you need to make a claim about it, make it into a sentence. Look back over your materials--brainstorms, investigative notes, etc.--and think about what you believe to be true. Think about what your readers want or need to know. Then write a sentence, preferably at this point, a simple one, stating what will be the central idea of your paper. The result should look something like this:

Original Subject: an important issue in my major field

Focused Topic: ethical conduct in practice for social work majors

Thesis: Theories of ethical practice deserve a more prominent place in this College's Social Work Program.

Or if your investigations led you to a different belief:

Thesis: Social Work Majors at this College receive a solid background in theories of ethical practice.

It's always good to have a thesis you can believe in.

Notice, though, that a sentence stating an obvious and indisputable truth won't work as a thesis:

Thesis: This College has a Social Work Major.

That's a complete sentence, and it asserts something to be true, but as a thesis it's a dead end. It's a statement of fact, pure and simple, and requires little or nothing added. **A good thesis asks to have more said about it. It demands some proof.** Your job is to show your reader that your thesis is true.

Remember, you can't just pluck a thesis out of thin air. Even if you have remarkable insight concerning a topic, it won't be worth much unless you can logically and persuasively support it in the body of your essay. A thesis is the evolutionary result of a thinking process, not a miraculous creation. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading the essay assignment.

Deciding on a thesis does not come first. Before you can come up with an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the beneath-the-surface significance of these relationships. After this initial exploration of the question at hand, you can formulate a "working thesis," an argument that you think will make sense of the evidence but that may need adjustment along the way.

In other words, do not show up at your professor's office hours expecting them to help you figure out your thesis statement and/or help organize your paper unless you have already done some research.

Writing with Style and Clarity

Many students make the mistake of thinking that the content of their paper is all that matters. Although the content is important, it will not mean much if the reader can't understand what you are trying to say. You may have some great ideas in your paper but if you cannot effectively communicate them, you will not receive a very good grade. Keep the following in mind when writing your paper:

Diction

Diction refers to the choice of words for the expression of ideas; the construction, disposition, and application of words in your essay, with regard to clearness, accuracy, variety, etc.; mode of expression; and language. There is often a tendency for students to use fancy words and extravagant images in hopes that it will make them sound more intelligent when in fact the result is a confusing mess (more icing than cake [more flowery language than substance]). Although this approach can sometimes be effective, it is advisable that you choose clear words and be as precise in the expression of your ideas as possible.

Point of View and Narration

Most formal writing, including APA papers, uses the third person point of view. Third person makes ideas sound less subjective since it removes direct reference to the writer. It also creates a more generalized statement. For example, "Researchers first need to determine participants" (written in the third person) conveys a more formal, objective tone than "You first need to determine participants" (second person) and "I first needed to determine participants" (first person). Instructors, institutions and publishers generally require writing in the third person to maintain a more formal tone.

Using Quotations

Used effectively, quotations can provide important pieces of evidence and lend fresh voices and perspectives to your narrative. Used ineffectively, however, quotations can clutter your text and interrupt the flow of your argument.

Use quotations at strategically selected moments. You have probably been told by professors to provide as much evidence as possible in support of your thesis. But packing your paper with quotations will not necessarily strengthen your argument. The majority of your paper should still be your original ideas in your own words (after all, it's your paper). And quotations are only one type of evidence: well-balanced papers may also make use of paraphrases, data,

and statistics. The types of evidence you use will depend in part on the conventions of the discipline or audience for which you are writing. For example, papers analyzing literature may rely heavily on direct quotations of the text, while papers in the social sciences (public health) may have more paraphrasing, data, and statistics than quotations.

Paragraphs

Creating clear paragraphs is essential. Paragraphs come in so many sizes and patterns that no single formula could possibly cover them all. The two basic principles to remember are these:

- 1) A paragraph is a means of developing and framing an idea or impression. As a general rule, you should address only one major idea per paragraph.
- 2) The divisions between paragraphs aren't random, but indicate a shift in focus. In other words, you must carefully and clearly organize the order of your paragraphs so that they are logically positioned throughout your paper. Transitions will help you with this.

Transitions

In academic writing your goal is to convey information clearly and concisely, if not to convert the reader to your way of thinking. Transitions help you to achieve these goals by establishing logical connections between sentences, paragraphs, and sections of your papers. In other words, transitions tell readers what to do with the information you present them. Whether single words, quick phrases or full sentences, they function as signs for readers that tell them how to think about, organize, and react to old and new ideas as they read through what you have written.

Transitions signal relationships between ideas. Basically, transitions provide the reader with directions for how to piece together your ideas into a logically coherent argument. They are words with particular meanings that tell the reader to think and react in a particular way to your ideas. In providing the reader with these important cues, transitions help readers understand the logic of how your ideas fit together.

| LOGICAL RELATIONSHIP | TRANSITIONAL EXPRESSION |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Similarity | also, in the same way, just as ... so too, likewise, similarly |
| Exception/Contrast | but, however, in spite of, on the one hand ... on the other hand, nevertheless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, in contrast, on the contrary, still, yet |
| Sequence/Order | first, second, third, ... next, then, finally |
| Time | after, afterward, at last, before, currently, during, earlier, immediately, later, meanwhile, now, recently, simultaneously, subsequently, then |
| Example | for example, for instance, namely, specifically, to illustrate |
| Emphasis | even, indeed, in fact, of course, truly |
| Place/Position | above, adjacent, below, beyond, here, in front, in back, nearby, there |
| Cause and Effect | accordingly, consequently, hence, so, therefore, thus |
| Additional Support or Evidence | additionally, again, also, and, as well, besides, equally important, further, furthermore, in addition, moreover, then |
| Conclusion/Summary | finally, in a word, in brief, in conclusion, in the end, in the final analysis, on the whole, thus, to conclude, to summarize, in sum, in summary |

Grammar and Spelling

You must make certain that your paper is free from grammar and spelling mistakes. Mechanical errors are usually the main reason for lack of clarity in essays, so be sure to thoroughly proof read your paper before handing it in. For help with common errors in grammar and usage consult the following websites:

<https://www.york.cuny.edu/academics/collaborative-learning-center>

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

Plagiarism is a form of stealing; as with other offences against the law, **ignorance is no excuse**. The way to avoid plagiarism is to give credit where credit is due. If you are using someone else's idea, acknowledge it, even if you have changed the wording or just summarized the main points.

To avoid plagiarism, you must give credit whenever you use:

- another person's idea, opinion, or theory;
- any facts, statistics, graphs, drawings--any pieces of information--that are not common knowledge;
- quotations of another person's actual spoken or written words; or
- paraphrase of another person's spoken or written words.

In addition to plagiarism, CUNY has policies regarding other forms of academic integrity. For more information on CUNY's policies regarding academic honesty consult <http://web.cuny.edu/academics/info-central/policies/academic-integrity.pdf>. If any of the University's policies are not clear you must ask your professor for clarification.

Again, **ignorance is no excuse**.

SOURCES

The information included in the document "Tips for Writing an Effective Position Paper" was adapted from the following sources:

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