

HARVARD WRITING PROJECT BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

A Brief Guide to the Elements of the Academic Essay

by Gordon Harvey

Gordon Harvey’s “Elements of the Academic Essay” provide a possible vocabulary for commenting on student writing. Instructors in Harvard College Writing Program tend to use some version of this vocabulary when talking about and commenting on student writing, so it’s likely that your students will be familiar with some of the terms and concepts below. Using these terms consistently when you comment on student writing will help your students see patterns in their own writing that might otherwise remain elusive to them.

1. **Thesis:** your main insight or idea about a text or topic, and the *main* proposition that your essay demonstrates. It should be true but arguable (not obviously or patently true, but one alternative among several), be limited enough in scope to be argued in a short composition and with available evidence, and get to the heart of the text or topic being analyzed (not be peripheral). It should be stated early in some form and at some point recast sharply (not just be implied), and it should govern the whole essay (not disappear in places).
2. **Motive:** the reason, which you give at the start of your essay, why someone might want or need to read an essay on this topic, and to hear your particular thesis argued— why that thesis isn’t just obvious to all, why other people might hold *other* theses on your topic (that you think are wrong or insufficient) or be puzzled or unclear about it. This won’t necessarily be the reason you got interested in the topic (which could be private and idiosyncratic) or the personal motivation behind your engagement with it. It’s the reason why

your argument *isn’t* idiosyncratic, but rather is interesting to the general reader. The motive you set up should be genuine: a misapprehension or puzzle that an intelligent reader (not a straw dummy) would really have, a point that such a reader would really overlook. Defining motive should be the main business of your introductory paragraphs, where it is often introduced by a form of the complicating word “but.”

3. **Keyterms:** the handful of recurring concepts or basic oppositions upon which your argument rests, usually literal but sometimes a ruling metaphor. An essay’s keyterms should be clear in their meaning and appear throughout (not be abandoned half-way); they should be appropriate for the subject at hand (not unfair or too simple—a false or constraining opposition); and they should not be inert clichés or abstractions (e.g. “the evils of society”).

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4. **Evidence:** the data—facts, examples, details—that you refer to, quote, or summarize in order to support your thesis. There needs to be *enough* evidence to be persuasive; it needs to be the right *kind* of evidence to support the thesis (with no obvious pieces of evidence overlooked); it needs to be sufficiently *concrete* for the reader to trust it (e.g. in textual analysis, it often helps to find one or two key or representative passages to quote and focus on); and if summarized, it needs to be summarized *accurately* and fairly.
5. **Analysis:** the work of breaking down, interpreting, and commenting upon the data, of saying what can be inferred from the data such that it is *evidence* for a thesis. Analysis is what you do with data when you go beyond observing or summarizing it: you show how its parts contribute to a whole or how causes contribute to an effect; you draw out the significance or implication or assumption not apparent to a superficial view. Analysis is what most makes the writer feel present, as a reasoning individual; so your essay should do more analyzing than summarizing or quoting.

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A key aspect of analysis is **logic**: the reasoning—explicit or implied—that connects your evidence to your thesis, that determines how it is relevant evidence for that thesis, how a claim follows or can be inferred from the evidence. This includes the unstated beliefs or **assumptions** that your argument makes about life, history, literature, reasoning, etc., which you don't argue for but simply assume to be true. These should bear rational inspection, and if arguable should be unpacked and explicitly acknowledged.

6. **Structure:** the sequence of main sections or sub-topics, and the turning points between them. The sections should be perceptible and follow a logical order, and the links in that order should be apparent to the reader (but not heavy-handed: see “stitching”). But it should also be a progressive order—there should have a continuous direction of **development** or **complication**, not be simply a list or a series of restatements of or takes on the thesis (“Macbeth is ambitious: he’s ambitious *here*; and he’s ambitious *here*; and he’s ambitions *here*, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious”) or list of elements found in the text. And the order should be supple enough to allow the writer to explore the topic, not just hammer home a thesis. (If the essay is complex or long, its structure may be briefly announced or hinted at after the thesis, in a road-map or plan sentence—or even *in* the thesis statement itself, if you’re clever enough.)
7. **Stitching:** words that tie together the parts of an argument, most commonly (a) by using *transition* (linking or turning) words as signposts to indicate how a new section, paragraph, or sentence follows from the one immediately previous; but also (b) by *recollection* of an earlier idea or part of the essay, referring back to it either by explicit statement or by echoing key words or resonant phrases quoted or stated earlier. The repeating of key or thesis concepts is especially helpful at points of transition from one section to another, to show how the new section fits in.
8. **Sources:** persons or documents, referred to, summarized, or quoted, that help a writer demonstrate the truth of his or her argument. They are typically sources of (a) factual information or data, (b) opinions or interpretation on your topic, (c) comparable versions of the thing you are discussing, or (d) applicable general concepts. Your sources need to be efficiently integrated and fairly acknowledged by citation—see *Writing with Sources*.
9. **Reflecting:** a general name for places where you pause in your demonstration to reflect on it, to raise or answer a question about it—as when you (1) consider a **counter-argument**—a possible objection, alternative, or problem that a skeptical or resistant reader might raise; (2) *define your terms or assumptions* (what do I

mean by this term? or, what am I assuming here?); (3) handle a newly emergent concern (but if this is so, then how can X be?); (4) draw out an *implication* (so what? what might be the wider significance of the argument I have made? what might it lead to if I'm right? or, what does my argument about a single aspect of this suggest about the whole thing? or about the way people live and think?), and (5) consider a possible *explanation* for the phenomenon that has been demonstrated (why might this be so? what might cause or have caused it?); (6) offer a *qualification* or limitation to the case you have made (what you're *not* saying). The first of these kinds of reflection can come anywhere in an essay; the second is usually comes early; the last four often come late (they're common moves of conclusion). Most good essays have some of the first kind, and often several of the others besides.

10. **Orienting:** bits of information, explanation, and summary that orient the reader who isn't expert in the subject, enabling such a reader to follow the argument. The orienting question is, what does my reader need here? The answer can take many forms: necessary information about the text, author, or event (e.g. given

in your introduction); a summary of a text or passage about to be analyzed; pieces of information given along the way about passages, people, or events mentioned (including announcing or "set-up" phrases for quotations and sources—see *Writing with Sources*). The trick is to orient briefly and gracefully—and not to orient when your audience doesn't need it: e.g. "writer William Shakespeare."

11. **Stance:** the implied relationship of you, the writer, to your readers and subject: how and where you implicitly position yourself as an analyst. Stance is defined by such features as style and tone (e.g. familiar or formal); the presence or absence of specialized language and knowledge; the amount of time spent orienting a general, non-expert reader; the use of scholarly conventions of form and style. Your stance should be established within the first few paragraphs of your essay, and it should remain consistent.
12. **Style:** the choices you make of words and sentence structure. Your style should be exact and clear (should bring out main idea and action of each sentence, not bury it) and plain without being flat (should be graceful and a little interesting, not stuffy).

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