

Three Rules of Writing
Richard W. Maass

Rule #1: Answer the question.

- If the assignment asks a question (as all assignments in this course do), then not answering that question is the equivalent of not completing that assignment, so make sure you do!
- Declare your answer clearly at the beginning of the paper. Your answer is your thesis, the main argument you are making in the paper; you want the reader to understand it as soon as possible.

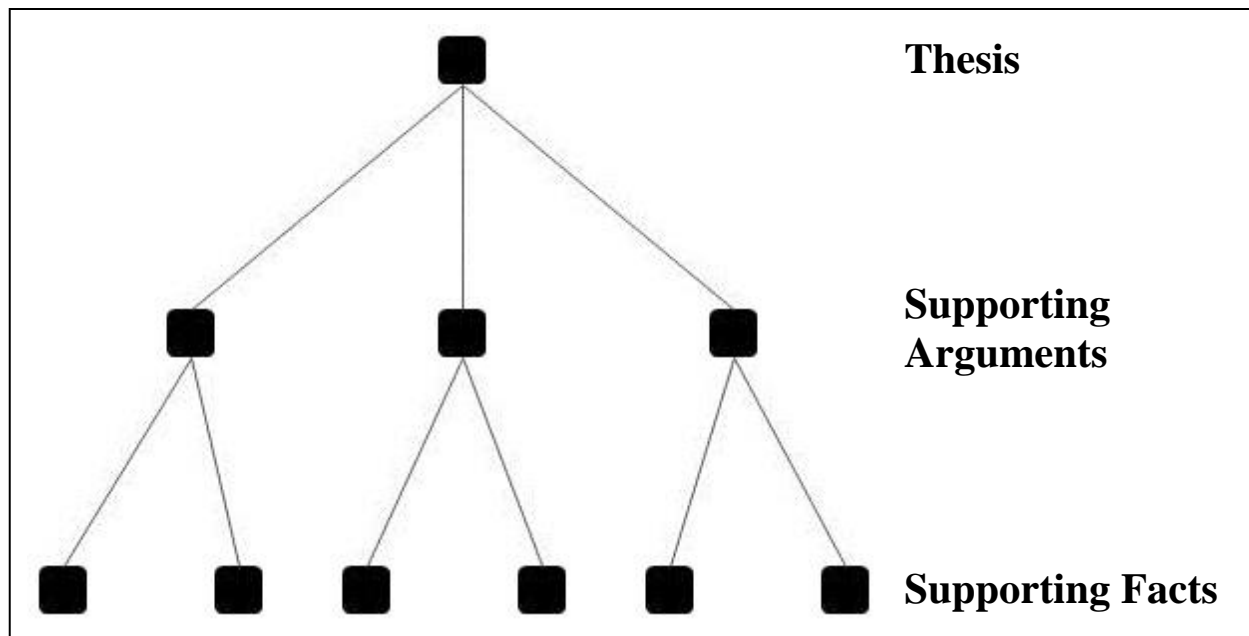
Rule #2: Stay focused.

- Every new argument that appears later in your paper should directly support your thesis. Every fact, quote, and statistic that you reference should support an argument that supports your thesis. Thus, if you convert your paper into an outline, every single paragraph—indeed, every single sentence—should have a clear connection leading back to your thesis.

Rule #3: Support your arguments.

- An argument without anything to support it is simply an assertion; it claims that something is true, but why should we believe it? Strengthen your arguments by providing factual evidence consistent with their claims.

Figure 1. The Structure of Argument



Example:

Thesis: The United States did not try to annex Canada in the War of 1812.

Supporting Argument: President James Madison did not want to annex Canada.

Supporting Fact: Madison pursued a peace agreement from the very moment war was declared.¹

¹ Roger H. Brown, *Republic in Peril: 1812* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), p. 34.

Other Thoughts on Writing

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Why do I assign short papers?

- Time is money. Most likely, your boss in your future career will ask you for short memos rather than dissertations about your work. Distilling a vast amount of information into a few key points and making those points convincingly is a skill that will serve you for the rest of your life. Just think about the intelligence advisors who have to pack everything important going on in the world into a couple of pages for the president to read each morning.
- It's a greater challenge to write a very sharp short paper than it is to write a good paper of ten pages or more. Greater challenge = better practice = more growth for you as a writer.

Why do I identify one key comment on each short paper?

- The object of having multiple short papers during the semester is to improve your writing. Focusing feedback into one major comment allows you to focus sharply on improving your writing in one significant way, maximizing the chances of you actually doing so. Providing a long list of comments tends to confuse rather than enlighten by mixing the important with the tangential.

Why do I assign a reaction paragraph after rereading your paper in the context of my comments?

- It makes sure that you (a) read my comments, (b) think about how my comments reflect a particular area for improvement of your paper, and (c) think about ways to improve this paper that you will keep in mind when writing your next one.

Why do typos matter?

- Be professional. Everyone makes mistakes, so one or two typos should never be considered a big deal. That said, typos are the easiest things in the world to correct once you notice them. As a result, the presence of many typos signifies a lack of effort which reflects poorly on the author. This is especially true if the typos are of the overly obvious variety, such as misspelling simple words or people's names (especially if those names appear in course readings).
- Take the extra few minutes to read through your paper one more time after you finish writing it. This allows you to fix any stray typos, and it also allows you to delete or rewrite any sentences that are redundant or contribute nothing to your argument.

Remember, you are not writing a...

- *Poem*: Since you have limited space, do not begin with a long, flowery introduction that shows how much you learned in your creative writing class last semester.
- *Mystery novel*: Analytical essays should not keep the thesis a secret until the end.
- *Suspense thriller*: Once you have declared your thesis at the beginning, there should be no major plot twists later in the paper that end up changing that thesis.
- *History book*: When you include historical examples, statistics, quotations, etc. do so only in a focused way that brings the evidence to bear on your argument and then moves on without including extraneous or tangential details.
- *Autobiography*: Omit personal stories or details except in the very rare case when you have personal experience that bears directly on the question.

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Plagiarism:

What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism is the presentation of another author's ideas as your own.

Plagiarism is a form of cheating, and it is a violation of honesty and academic integrity.

When you wish to use in your writing a quote from someone else's work or a specific fact not commonly known, include a footnote identifying the original location where you found that quote or fact.

Specific examples:

Submitting a paper as your own work that was written by someone else: **Plagiarism**

Submitting a paper as your own work in which portions of the text are copied from an article without quotations distinguishing the copied material from your own writing or references to the original source: **Plagiarism**

Submitting a paper in which portions of the text are copied from an article without referencing the original source, but including the footnotes used in that original source: **Plagiarism**

Submitting a paper that includes several small quotations from books or articles that are enclosed in quotation marks and accompanied by footnotes containing the bibliographic information of their original sources: **Not Plagiarism**

Submitting a paper referencing specific statistics or facts not widely known without reference to the source in which you discovered them (e.g., that Napoleon's wife Josephine bought up to 900 dresses per year): **Plagiarism**

Submitting a paper that references commonly-known facts (e.g., that the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776, or that Napoleon launched a disastrous invasion of Russia): **Not Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is wrong regardless of your intent.

Plagiarism is defined by the act, not the intent behind the act. In other words, even if you don't *mean* to plagiarize, someone else's work represented as your own remains plagiarism.

Honestly referencing other research makes your writing better.

Science is a collaborative enterprise, so you should be encouraged to cite the work of others as often as it is productive to do so.

As Isaac Newton famously said, we see further by standing on the shoulders of giants.