

Good Theses, Fruit Papers, and Other Crucial Issues

A fruit paper is my term for an essay whose thesis is so simplistic that the body paragraphs could be rearranged in any order without damage to the argument as a whole. For example:

Thesis: "Throughout human history, there have been many kinds of fruit."

Body paragraph 1: "Apples are a kind of fruit."

Body paragraph 2: "Bananas are also a kind of fruit."

Body paragraph 3: "In addition, we can see that cherries are a kind of fruit."

Conclusion: "In conclusion, there are many kinds of fruit."

We could obviously rearrange the three body paragraphs, or substitute a different, comparable one ("durian is yet another fruit") without in the least altering the overall effect or argument. Student essays naturally discuss much more complex *subject matter* than this example does, but often do so in comparably simplistic *ways*. If you find that you can rearrange your body paragraphs substantially with minimal loss of sense, as you could with this example, or that each body paragraph is simply one interchangeable part of a single overarching catalogue, then your thesis isn't strong or interesting enough. This of course raises that other crucial issue: what constitutes a strong thesis?

Please note that I do not use the term "thesis statement." The thesis of an essay does not need to be contained wholly within a single sentence. Indeed, strong theses often cannot be so contained. That is because they will often involve **both** an element of *contrast* (i.e., while X is superficially the case, upon closer inspection we find Y instead; early on, the sea is a frighteningly alien presence, but over the course of the poem, it increasingly serves as a refuge; while fear was generally impugned by the Anglo-Saxon heroic ethos, fear of God exists in a separate and laudable category); **and** a gesture toward the larger significance of this contrast. Indeed, while good theses *can* take nearly any form, it may be helpful to think about yours in the following terms to see if you are arguing with enough complexity:

"Although X is usually (or superficially) true, it is sometimes (or actually) the case that Y. This contrast suggests Z about Text(s)/Author(s)/Character(s)/Images(s) A (and B)." These specific words need not necessarily arise, but you should check to see if their structural function is being filled. For example:

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, represents himself participating enthusiastically in the sexual debauchery of his period; both his exploits and the graphic vulgarity with which he depicts them are superlative. Yet below the surface lurks a paradox, for his most stunning successes occur only when he is emotionally uninvolved; on the rare and thus significant instances when his heart is involved, he often falls short of his goals. Taken as a whole, then, his corpus suggests that the preening machismo that he himself cultivates is a cruel hoax, setting him up for sexual failure and emotional distress at precisely the moments that he most earnestly desires the fulfillment of both.

Elements of Close Reading

Diction: also known as “word choice,” diction involves the decision to use one word or phrase – what’s actually on the page – as opposed to any of the nearly infinite other ways of saying roughly the same thing. “Vengeance” (for example) is not the same word as “retribution,” “payback,” “punishment,” or even “revenge,” and close attention to diction asks what effects an author achieves by picking that word as opposed to those others.

Tone: diction (among other things) helps to create tone, our ability to describe a passage or speech as “bitter,” “heroic,” “wily,” or any of the other wonderful adjectives with which English is blessed. Sometimes tone is obvious (and correspondingly less interesting to focus on), other times much less so, and often it hovers or shifts between different or even opposed adjectives; always look at the cumulative effect of diction and issues below before arriving at a conclusion.

Syntax: broadly defined as “sentence structure,” namely how complex or simple, neatly parallel or wildly expansive, the sentences, clauses, and phrases of a given passage are. Complex sentences can enmesh and entrap the reader, which could be a deliberate strategy (e.g., the wiles of Odysseus) or the mark of an incompetent speaker; similarly, simple sentence structures might suggest noble clarity of character or dim-witted single-mindedness.

Sound (including alliteration and assonance): simply that, what the language sounds like; always read passages you’re working on out loud. Alliteration involves multiple words in the same sentence or phrase beginning with the same sound; assonance consists of internal rhyme or off-rhyme, as in “the *consonants*’ *assonance* affected their *sense*” (an extreme example). Think too about the potential effect of vowel- or consonant-heavy patches of language, and that of monosyllabic or polysyllabic ones.

Rhythm and cadence: especially crucial in poetry, but not to be overlooked in prose; again, read out loud and take note of where the words flow especially smoothly, and where they don’t. Stuttering or awkward clusters of words (thickly bunched consonant groups of the str- thw- and -nch variety) or phrases (lots of brief phrases or incomplete, interrupted sentences) might indicate (for example) intensity of ill-controlled emotion.

Metaphor, Simile, and Image: if a character is said to be “like” or do something “as” something else, pay close attention to what that is, especially in Homer, who invented the so-called “heroic simile,” a long, detailed comparison of a character’s actions or thoughts to those of a raging lion, boundless ocean, tranquil sunset, or whatever. And always, always look for images or image-clusters (animals, weather phenomena, whatever) that particularly catch your eye or recur at various points.

Repetition: Look for repeated words, phrases, and even entire passages. Sometimes these will be purely formulaic (e.g., “daughter of Zeus whose shield is thunder”), but don’t be afraid to argue for their significance if you feel it exists; think too about the effect of one character repeating nearly verbatim what another said earlier.

Techniques of Close Reading

The first and most important technique of close reading is to think actively about all the elements of close reading on the sheet and the many I doubtless left out (enjambment, for example, or the prevalence of active vs. passive voice) as you read, closely, the text. Read it several times; read it out loud (several times); take notes on anything and everything that catches your eye as you read. Do not try to make the pieces add up to a coherent argument or even picture just yet; instead try to notice everything that is potentially interesting about *how* the text conveys meaning. This is the time to be capacious, not discriminating.

Now that you've noticed a lot of stuff, go back and take notes on what significance you think it has: that is, how does it affect our understanding of a character, the plot, whatever. Remember close reading is about using the *how* of narrative to come to a more in-depth understanding of *what* it narrates and *why* it does so in the way it does. Some of what you've noticed may have no broader significance, or none that you can come up with. That's fine; don't try to wrench meaning out of a moment you genuinely believe has none. At the same time, don't be shy about speculating on a textual moment's significance, especially if it corroborates what a different textual moment suggests. For example, if the diction in a given line seems to suggest X, and the syntax seems to as well, you might more readily trust an instinct that the rhythm and cadence of the lines further strengthens the reading. But at this stage don't worry too much about how plausible your thoughts on significance are; think broadly and fearlessly, as there will be plenty of time to self-censor later.

Now leave it alone. Go away, think about something else, eat, get some exercise, whatever. When you come back, read closely again, both the text and your own notes, and this time also think critically about all the stuff you noticed the first time, and the significance that you ascribed to it. Which of your points seem the most convincing, which seem the most interesting (these may not be the same), and which seem like a stretch? Which points reinforce one another along lines described above, and which seem to be at odds with one another? Now is when you subject your earlier enthusiasm to hard analytic rigor. What objections do you think I or other informed readers might have to your speculations? How would you respond? Putting the pieces together, what does the big picture of your close reading suggest, what larger argument can you see the outlines of? Where else in the text would you go to find evidence to support his larger argument? What objections to it would you have to deal with, and how would you envision doing so?

This – in very general terms – is how to use close reading in the service of literary analysis. Your close reading exercise will ask you to put these abstract guidelines into practice.

Observation vs. Analysis

The best essays begin with lots and lots of interesting observations made while brainstorming; in that stage, here that you first notice the passages, words, and images that seem especially important, odd, or surprising. To make it into your essay, however, those observations need to become analytic; you need to commit to an argument about their significance. When writing, pay close and skeptical attention to any places you use words like important, interesting, surprising, significant, or ironic. Almost all of these words mean the same thing: “I know that I think this piece of text is meaningful, but I haven’t yet figured out or committed to what meaning I think it has.” *Any* time you claim that “it is interesting/important/surprising that . . .” make sure you explain as soon as possible the significance of that observation is; otherwise you haven’t arrived at analysis.

Even excellent observations are worth little without analysis; consider the following:

1. “Heaney’s description of the sword is *surprisingly* organic in his choice of the word ‘wilt’ (p. 111). Generally a plant wilts and dies, not a sword. . . .”

This is a great observation (note the classic “observation word” in italics), but it’s not yet analysis: what does the author make of this allusion to plants? Why should she or her reader care? Here’s one possible addition that would turn this into analysis:

2. “Generally a plant wilts and dies, not a sword. By linking the sword to the natural world of growing things, Heaney implies that battle is as integral a part of nature as plants are. Describing a previously valuable sword as ‘wilting,’ moreover, suggests that just as all living things must die, so too must any given man’s prowess in battle. Beowulf emerges from this fight victorious, but the image of the melting sword looks forward to the time that he, like the sword, will fall and die.”

Contrast the original example above (#1) with the following:

3. “Heaney translates ‘eases the fetters off the frost’ . . . while Donalson’s [translation is] ‘loosens the frost’s fetters.’ . . . ‘Eases’ has a softer, gentler connotation than ‘loosens,’ making God sound more benevolent and kind in Heaney, which is apt, since God just saved Beowulf’s life from a murderous force.”

Here the author performs analysis, noting a difference between two specific words in the two different translations and arguing that one is more effective than the other because it reinforces another local element of the poem – here, the fact that God has helped Beowulf and thus demonstrated himself a “benevolent and kind” deity.

Constructing Introductions

An introduction must not just concisely express not just your argument, but also provide a kind of structural map of how you intend to make that argument. This is hard enough, but even harder when we realize that one's argument often changes over the course of writing. This example of an essay on *Emma* illustrates some issues that we'll discuss more.

As written: *Emma* by Jane Austen opens a window on a group of young and social men and women. While enjoying life and each other's friendship they endure hardships, disappointment, and much controversy.¹ Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley, the two main characters of the novel, grow from their experiences both together and independently. Ironically, however, their development forces them to lose their individualism as it induces changes that cause their once unique and coveted characters to transform into nothing more than a clone of society.²

[intervening body paragraph on the admirable traits of Emma and Knightley]

Conversely, other characters in *Emma* are innately flawed, lacking some combination of traits portrayed by Emma and Knightley. Characters like Harriet, Mr. Elton, and Jane Fairfax (among others) are overeager, emotional, malleable, and embody a number of undesirable character traits throughout the novel.

[intervening body paragraphs on Harriet, Elton, and Jane]

In the final analysis, not even our heroine or Knightley is able to ward off such imperfections. Gradually, changes in Emma and Knightley's character become evident in the latter portion of volume two and entirely in volume three. Their actions and conversations begin to project unfavorable characteristics in the same ways other characters in the novel perform as mentioned above.

[intervening body paragraphs on how Emma and Knightley become less "themselves," more like each other and the less admirable characters]

Therefore by drawing this connection between those less desirable traits and marriage, it is possible to deduce that Austen views marriage negatively. [rest of conclusion follows]
N.B. *This is a different and broader argument than that expressed in the introduction, which must now be revised to accommodate it.*

One Possible Rewrite: The two protagonists of Jane Austen's *Emma*, the eponymous heroine and Mr. Knightley, grow from their experiences both together and independently. Ironically, however, their development robs them of their individualism, reducing them to mere clones of society.³ From their initial status as undisputed champions of their sex within Highbury, Emma and Knightley gradually come to resemble less admirable

¹ The first two sentences of the introduction as written are needless fluff that should be eliminated.

² This thesis is a strong (i.e., controversial and interesting) argument. Good start.

³ These first two sentences are drawn from the original introduction.

characters like Harriet Smith, Mr. Elton, and Jane Fairfax in their speech patterns and actions. They also lose the independence that characterized them earlier, eventually adopting the same view of the chief characters about whom they once disagreed, Frank Churchill and Harriet.⁴ While establishing the requisite happy ending, this dual transformation casts serious doubt on Austen's belief in marriage as a social ideal by correlating Emma and Knightley's matrimonial tendencies and their subtle yet unmistakable personal degradation.⁵

Note that by now, the essay's thesis has become complex enough that it takes up nearly the entire introduction. (Indeed, the paragraph above could serve as the introduction, full stop.) This is a Good Thing.

Roles of Sentences in Body Paragraphs

Generally speaking, every sentence in each of your body paragraphs should clearly serve at least one of the following functions:

1. argument: a statement of the main contention of the paragraph as a whole; with rare exceptions, each paragraph should make only one substantive argument, though multiple pieces of analysis/close reading (#4 below) may be adduced to support it
2. transition: explanation of how this paragraph builds on/flows logically from the previous one; this will typically be either the first sentence of the new paragraph, or an initial dependent clause within it, and be immediately followed by the argument (#1 above)
3. evidence/quotation: in support of the argument (#1 above), but quoting only as much as is necessary for the argument or as will be used for close reading (#4, below)
4. analysis/close reading: examination of the significance of textual features like diction, sentence structure, imagery, etc., so as to give greater specificity and depth to your evidence, and thus allow for more nuanced forms of argument
5. signpost: an explanation of the how the argument (#1 above) relates to the overall thesis of the essay; this will often involve restating the specific terms of the argument in terms of the broader thesis, and generally comes at the end of a given body paragraph

Because writing is an art rather than a science, I am not prepared to claim that this list is exhaustive; moreover, a single sentence may serve more than one of the listed functions.

⁴ Sentences three and four anticipate the main arguments of the body paragraphs, offering a road map for the essay as a whole.

⁵ Drawn from the original conclusion, this is now the argument that will govern the essay as a whole.

A few words on Conclusions

What good conclusions do: 1) concede counter-evidence and either try to spin it or simply argue for the original thesis anyway (ends of paragraphs can also be a good place to do this, with more local or minor forms of counter-evidence; you also might conceivably want to spend an entire body paragraph articulating and then demolishing counter-evidence); 2) limit the scope of the argument (or remind readers that you did so earlier, if you did), in an attempt to forestall objections raised from scenes, themes, or characters you didn't cover; 3) anticipate or articulate "where to go next," that is, what new questions you are essay raises, how you would follow up on the current paper if you had more time/space, etc.; 4) some combination of these. The conclusion is often the trickiest (though not the most challenging) part of the essay to write, since there's a fine line between doing too little (merely restating the thesis and body paragraph arguments) and too much (raising counter-evidence so broad that it demolishes the whole argument; proposing a "where to go next" avenue so tangential that it weakens the rhetorical force of your closing).

Prose Issues to Watch for in Analytic Writing

1. Repetition of words, phrases, or clauses that mean nearly or exactly the same thing. In the following examples from your summaries, one of the italicized words or phrases should be cut, or the two combined into one. (Be careful if you see a lot of *and*'s or *or*'s in your prose; they often mean that you've failed to decide which formulation you prefer.)

a. Karma has *always* been a staple in both the religious and superstitious factions of our society *in both the past and the present*. (The opening "always" makes the last phrase superfluous.)

b. To prevent "extreme" revenge, the role of kin *was largely expanded and given responsibilities*. (To expand the role of something *is* to give it responsibilities.)

c. Miller's theory *is well supported with outside information; he backs up his statements with relevant data*. . . . (These two clauses mean very nearly the same thing; the author should either make clearer how they differ, or eliminate one in the name of concision.)

d. This thought process *ruled Ancient Greece and governed how citizens acted towards each other*. (Again, the clauses are so similar in meaning that they should be combined into one.)

e. There are usually negative *consequences that follow*. . . . (Consequences by definition are things that follow; get rid of the last two words.)

2. Vague, baggy phrases that mean so little as to be dispensable. The following italicized examples can be either eliminated or folded into later, more precise phrases.

a. Miller and Blundell each were *in a sense* not concerned at all. . . . ("In a sense" doesn't change the meaning, it just weakens the assertion.)

b. The Icelandic sagas tend to advocate *certain views and beliefs that are dissimilar to contemporary values*. Among these is respect for revenge as a just and moral recourse. (Cf. “The Icelandic sagas tend to respect revenge as a just and moral recourse, a position starkly at odds with contemporary values.”)

3. The solution for 2b involved combining two sentences into one, also an effective process for dealing with short choppy sentences with repeated elements. (This has the secondary benefit of making your prose more complex and interesting to read.) See if you can combine the following sets of sentences into a single one.

3a. The Icelandic method of controlling revenge had its faults, such as allowing revenge in the first place, but regardless it worked. If it hadn’t worked, everybody would be dead. Everyone would have taken revenge for the smallest things.

3b. As hard as it may be to do, at some points Blundell did flood the reader with too many quotes and supportive information. However, it was just that, supportive. Therefore, I had no problem with the amount of citations that she made in her introduction.

3c. The “eye for eye” (29) mentality allows the injured person the pleasure of inflicting pain on their enemy. Moreover, it restores his or her lost honor whilst attempting to keep retribution at a minimum.

4. The wordiness caused by using a clause when a phrase would suffice, or a phrase in lieu of a single word.

a. [I]f a friend entrusts money to a patron expecting nothing in return, that patron would exalt that person publicly and come to his or her aid in a time of need, *even if in doing so the patron must be subject to an undesirable experience*. (How could this clause be rewritten as a shorter phrase?)

b. When people failed to seek revenge for grievous wrongs they were viewed as weak or *they were thought to lack honor*. (Again, turn this clause into a phrase.)

5. Sentences that simply repeat claims or information already put forth.

a. Blundell argues that it is the nature of humans to respect their friends and abhor their enemies, even to the point of justified harm if necessary. *Blundell displays that “natural” and “great” pleasures come from benefiting friends and defeating enemies*. (This second sentence adds no essential new information to the first, so it should be cut entirely.)

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21L.460 Medieval Literature: Legends of Arthur
Fall 2013

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