

A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO

# Writing in East Asian Studies





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# Writing in East Asian Studies

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# What Is East Asian Studies?

**T**o talk about how to write in East Asian Studies, we should understand that East Asian Studies is not a discipline; it is a field of study. Of course, the distinction we are drawing here between a “discipline” and a “field” is somewhat arbitrary, but entertaining that distinction for the sake of argument helps point up certain important features of the field of East Asian Studies. What, then, do we mean by this distinction?

An academic *discipline* can be thought of as united by a core of common assumptions, questions, definitions, concepts, methods, or theories, so that these common features affect the way more or less anyone in that discipline studies more or less anything. For example, economics is a discipline in which scholars study human economic activity and the factors that bear on that activity. In doing so, these scholars draw on common definitions of what constitutes such activity; they have recourse to assumptions about human nature and the way it conditions economic activities; and they use common, accepted theories, concepts and methods (such as certain equations). Sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history, philology, linguistics and literary studies are arguably examples of a “discipline” in this sense.

Obviously, people in disciplines like economics argue all the time over the assumptions, questions, definitions, concepts, methods, and theories that they consider proper to their discipline, and there is probably no aspect of any discipline that is not contested by at least some of its respected professional practitioners. The defining characteristics of a discipline are also always in flux, and over time can shift radically enough that a discipline might become unrecogniz-

able to practitioners of previous generations. No discipline, then, has such a cut-and-dried orthodoxy as the description above might suggest. Even where they disagree, however, practitioners of a single discipline tend to be united in wanting to convince others in the discipline that their way is the right way for the discipline as a whole to do things.

Loose as it is, this picture of a coherent entity called a “discipline” has some value as a foil in understanding what East Asian Studies is not. East Asian Studies differs in important respects from a “discipline” so defined. As a *field*, it is “unified”

only by the *object* of study—East Asia. Scholars in the field might study aspects of this object of study using the assumptions, questions, definitions, methods, and theories of any one of a number of the disciplines listed above (history, philosophy, philology, etc.). It is because scholars draw on the tools and perspectives of a number of various disciplines that East Asian Studies is often justly referred to as an *interdisciplinary field*.

What, then, are the implications of the interdisciplinary nature of East Asian

Studies for students and scholars who research and write in that field? For writing in particular, it means that even more than in individual disciplines, there is no single, standard way of writing that is adhered to across the field. Rather, it is usual in East Asian Studies to encounter all of the various types of writing that characterize the disciplinary approaches comprising the field. By contrast, in fields that we might call “disciplines,” according to the description above, it is often the case that certain styles of writing and other disciplinary conventions are reasonably well-established. Usually, anyone who wishes to achieve

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competence in such a field must learn and conform to those conventions.

For our purposes, these conventions fall into two broad types. First, we have citation style, that is, the technical rules for how one cites sources in that field. These rules govern the format and punctuation of citations, including the order of such details as author, book or article title, year of publication, page number, and so on. Below are some examples of the same information formatted according to various common disciplinary norms:

Hecht, Anthony. *Jiggery-pokery: A Compendium of Double Dactyls*. New York: Atheneum, 1983.

Hecht, Anthony, *Jiggery-pokery: A Compendium of Double Dactyls* (New York: Atheneum, 1983).

Hecht, Anthony (1983). *Jiggery-pokery: A Compendium of Double Dactyls*. New York: Atheneum.

We will come back to these citation conventions later in this handbook, in the appendix entitled “Style Conventions for East Asian Studies.”

The second, less codifiable aspect of writing conventions can be broadly called “the way people write,” that is, the conventions of general writing style. For example, should we use first person pronouns in writing or avoid them? (This question is examined in more detail in the section on “Authorial Self-Reference.”)

If I want to say what I intend to do in an essay, I can do it in a number of ways. On the one hand, I can say something like this:

“In this essay, I will examine the reasons that China achieved reunification in the medieval period (under the Sui and Tang), whereas India and the Mediterranean, the other two great Eurasian civilizations, did not.”

On the other hand, I can say something like this:

“In this essay, the reasons will be examined for China’s achievement of ,reunification...”

or, without a passive:

“This essay will examine the reasons that China achieved...”

Many people have strong opinions as to which of these styles is better suited to academic writing. It is generally the case, however, that the impersonal style is favored in the natural sciences, and the personal, openly subjective style, using first-person pronouns, is favored in the humanities (especially, for instance, in literature). It gets tricky when we consider the social sciences, which fall between these two poles. Social scientists who think of their work as being more scientific in orientation may express that fact by adopting an impersonal, “scientific” writing style, among other things; other social scientists might equally favor the use of a personal, first-person style.

You will see from the various aspects of style covered in this booklet that there are many stylistic questions, like this one, where more than one possible solution exists. Because East Asian Studies is an interdisciplinary field, it is even less the case than for single disciplines that there is one solution typical for the whole field. As one reads literature in the field, one usually encounters a variety of writing styles and conventions, all of which are valid and acceptable to the field as a whole.

It is therefore important to be aware of the interdisciplinary nature of the field from the outset, even when considering something as apparently down-to-earth as writing. A booklet like this, and indeed the East Asian Studies concentration as a whole, therefore, will not be your sole source of models and guidelines for writing practice. Many students in East Asian Studies are co-concentrators, and especially if you are co-concentrating in a “discipline” as defined above, you will learn a great deal about standards of acceptable writing from that field. Even if you are not a co-concentrator, you will still have particular interests in one or another aspect of East Asia, and there will be appropriate disciplinary tools that you can bring to bear upon the object of that interest.

In an interdisciplinary field like East Asian Studies, the most important thing is not that everyone adopt any *particular* set of conventions to the exclusion of all others—indeed, such a requirement would

be impossible to enforce across the field. Rather, each writer must adopt *some* acceptable and consistent set of stylistic standards. To return to our example of the way we cite sources, it is acceptable to use one or the other of the competing standards out there, but it is not acceptable to chop and change from one standard to another in the course of a single piece of work. The same goes for less technical stylistic issues like whether to use the first-person authorial voice, or whether to avoid passives: you can do as you like, but you should think carefully about your reasons for making your choice, and you should stick to whatever choice you make.

Note also that though you will be asked to try your hand at a variety of disciplinary approaches in the course of your studies for the concentration in East Asian Studies, it is *not* necessary that you change your style for each disciplinary approach. Thus, we do not expect that you will observe one set of citation practices and writing conventions for a week of material on literature, and that you will then learn and use an entirely new set of conventions for a module on political science. Rather, we expect that you will master and consistently apply a well thought-through set of conventions appropriate to the discipline(s) where your own long-term interests lie. It is perfectly fine, then, for a student whose strongest interests lie in history to continue to develop their voice as a historian, and to practice the citation conventions used in history, even as they study materials in religious studies, anthropology, and economics.







# The Tutorial in East Asian Studies

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**T**he tutorial in East Asian Studies as a whole serves two broad purposes. First, it aims to give students a general introduction to the field of East Asian studies, and in the junior and senior years, to a more specific (though still broad) area of interest within that field. Second, it aims to teach students to undertake independent, original research in that field. Both of these goals are pursued throughout the program, but the emphasis falls at first on acquiring a broad acquaintance with the field, and later shifts towards greater focus on research. This trajectory of study can be seen clearly if we take a brief look at each year of the tutorial program in turn.

The Sophomore Tutorial is intended as a general introduction to the field of East Asian Studies, and the various disciplines and objects of study that are found within that field. Students thus spend the year sampling the field in what is intended to be a representative selection of typical topics and approaches. The course does include material from across the whole broad sweep of East Asian history, but it is not a survey course, and coverage is selective rather than comprehensive. We will return to the Sophomore Tutorial in greater detail below.

In the Junior Tutorial, students are separated into groups according to country studied, and also according to the division between humanities and social sciences. Thus, there is a “China Social Sciences” track and a “China Humanities” track, and so on for Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

In the Senior Tutorial students who are writing honors theses work in individual tutorials with a faculty advisor and a tutor.

The overall direction of the tutorial program, then, is from general to specific, and specialization increases as students continue through the program. As the concentration progresses, there is also an increasing expectation that students will engage in ever-larger pieces of original research. The program is specifically designed to gradually teach the skills necessary to engage in this research. Now, writing is one of the most important skills required in research, and this handbook itself is among the means the department uses to try to impart research skills to its concentrators.

# Sophomore Tutorial

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As this brief outline makes clear, after the sophomore year, the tutorial program in East Asian Studies splits into increasingly specialized and individualized experiences. For this reason, the only part of the program that is part of the experience of all concentrators is the Sophomore Tutorial. We will therefore now consider the Sophomore Tutorial in a little more detail. For more information about the tutorial program, see the handbook “East Asian Studies, Harvard University: The Concentration in East Asian Studies in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations: A Guide for Undergraduates,” available from the East Asian Studies office at 9 Kirkland Place.

The Sophomore Tutorial has a number of goals. As we have already mentioned, the Sophomore Tutorial aims to introduce students to the field of East Asian Studies as a whole. Now, we saw in the preceding section of this handbook (“What Is East Asian Studies?”) that East Asian Studies is an interdisciplinary field. If the Sophomore Tutorial is going to introduce its students to the field of East Asian Studies, then, one aim must be to do justice to the interdisciplinary nature of the field. The interdisciplinary character of our field presents certain problems, however, as well as certain exciting challenges.

To put it simply, if we consider the disciplinary approaches that can be legitimately applied in the field of East Asian Studies, we end up with a list that includes most of the departments of a modern university, with the possible exception of the natural sciences: geography, philosophy, political science, literary studies, art history, linguistics, anthropology, archaeology, economics, history, and sociology, for example (though this list is by no means exhaustive).

This open-endedness (among other things, like

difficulty of languages) makes any Area Studies paradigm very demanding to work in, as we are required to have at least a passing acquaintance with such a broad range of disciplinary approaches. On the other hand, in an era of increasing specialization, such interdisciplinary fields provide an important antidote to the balkanization of the departments of knowledge; and for those whose curiosity or sheer willfulness will not brook the sometimes claustrophobic confines of a single traditional discipline, they provide a welcome refuge, where it is still possible to make a viable career as a kind of generalist. In many respects, then, the unruliness of East Asian Studies is a blessing in disguise, and may account for the intense attraction the field can exercise over us.

In the meantime, however, this interdisciplinary richness presents the Sophomore Tutorial with a tall order. To introduce students to the disciplinary approaches characteristic of the East Asian Studies, faculty must introduce them, in effect, to the entire range of the humanities and the social sciences—a good half of the modern university as a whole!

A second important aim of the Sophomore Tutorial is to introduce students to the object of study—East Asia. Again, this is a tall order. At Harvard, East Asia is defined primarily as comprising China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. Obviously, each of these modern countries is the heritor of a long history and civilization. These histories and civilizations, moreover, have for the best part of history been relatively remote from the Western civilization with which most students will be most familiar, and even today remain relatively poorly known among the general public in Western countries. All of these characteristics of East Asian civilizations clearly make them very exciting things to study, but at the same



time, they present the Sophomore Tutorial, whose aim it is to introduce students to them, with a great challenge.

The Sophomore Tutorial also has a third central aim: to inculcate in students the reading, writing and research skills they will need to begin independent and original work in the field. Obviously, this aim is the central focus of this handbook, and we will be addressing it in a great deal more detail. For now, we should note that no less than the other aims listed above, this is a very demanding task. The skills involved in writing and research are many, and mastering each requires a long process of apprenticeship that is, strictly speaking, endless. Even renowned scholars can and do profitably work to improve their writing and research skills.

It is clear even from this brief survey of the aims of the Sophomore Tutorial that the tutorial is pulled in a number of different directions by the nature of the field to which it introduces its students. It is perhaps as well to note that in past years students have felt that the tutorial has had mixed success in meeting these various goals and ideals, and that a certain level of frustration seems to be inherent in the nature of the course. Indeed, it is difficult to see how any course, meeting twice a week over twenty-five weeks or so, could meet all the goals listed above perfectly; nonetheless, the department puts a great deal of effort into ensuring that the tutorial comes as close as possible to meeting these aims.

It is also worth noting that the various aims of the tutorial are not simply in conflict; they are also mutually reinforcing in a very significant sense. The various disciplinary perspectives are so many lenses through which we view East Asia as the object of our study, and to the extent that we acquire those perspectives, we come to know that object better. On the other hand, East Asia as an object of study provides us with a constant testing-ground upon which to hone our mastery of the disciplinary perspectives we are in the process of acquiring.

Similarly, writing and research are not “mere” tools that we use to present the results of study;

rather, the processes involved in writing and research are themselves means by which we grow in our understanding of both disciplinary perspectives and objects of study. Conversely, the better we understand objects of study, and the better our mastery of disciplinary perspectives and theoretical toolkits, the more effectively we will write and research.

In the bigger picture, then, the various arms of study pursued in the Sophomore Tutorial are ultimately linked, and advance in harmonious parallel, even if at times it feels more like they are wrestling with one another!

This, then, is the overall structure within which this booklet seeks to help students in the East Asian Studies tutorial program better their writing skills. The handbook was originally developed for close use in the structured writing assignments of the Sophomore Tutorial syllabus. The skills it teaches and the points it addresses, however, are equally applicable to writing at any stage of the undergraduate process, and indeed beyond. And although it might seem that writing and research skills are less important at the beginning of the tutorial program, it is vital that both students and teaching staff begin to work hard to foster writing skills right from the beginning of the sophomore year.

We have also seen that within the Sophomore Tutorial, the development of writing is only one of several goals that are pursued in parallel. This is equally true of the Tutorial program as a whole, and these various goals can place conflicting demands on students and the syllabus. Having recognized the other goals and aspects of the tutorial syllabus, however, we must now, for the purposes of this booklet, put them aside somewhat, and concentrate on writing and research.

# What Is Good Writing?

**I**t is worth our while to make a few general preliminary comments about writing, and learning about writing. While some of these points are basic, and you will doubtless have thought of them yourself, it may be useful to remind ourselves of them before we begin discussing specifics.

Throughout this handbook, we will repeatedly return to the following watchword: “Good writing is writing that serves its purpose.” This is an intentionally flexible definition. There are no hard and fast guidelines for how to write well, and there is no single model of “correct” or perfect writing that applies to all writers and all their ends. This point is easily illustrated by taking an extreme example.

Obviously, there are many different purposes for which people write, and there are at least as many different types of good writing. This is very obvious in contemporary poetry, some types of which could almost be defined as writing used for purposes to which writing is not usually put, or writing that poses the puzzle of what its purpose might be:

A custom which is necessary when a box is used and taken is that a large part of the time there are three which have different connections. The one is on the table. The two are on the table. The three are on the table. The one, one is the same length as is shown by the cover being longer. The other is different there is more cover that shows it. The other is different and that makes the corners have the same shade the eight are in singular arrangement to make four necessary.

(Gertrude Stein,  
“A Box,” from *Tender Buttons*, 1914)

Whatever Gertrude Stein’s purpose may have been in writing these lines, you are unlikely to find yourself writing for a similar purpose in scholarly work! And this means in turn that while Stein is widely regarded as one of the most brilliant writers ever to work in

English, your professor or TF is unlikely to think you brilliant if you follow in her footsteps for your first response paper.

While this example is admittedly extreme, the same principle applies in more subtle ways to the range of possible styles available to you as models *within* the field of East Asian studies. A way of writing that is useful for a close reading of a poem will probably not be as well suited to a sustained political scientific argument about, for instance, the effects of free-market reforms on the ideological identity of the Chinese Communist Party. It is important to keep this basic point in mind as you appraise and absorb different writing techniques from the materials you read in the field.

This point is important also because of its implications for this handbook—what it can offer you, and how you should use it. In the field of East Asian Studies, there are at least as many viable ways of writing as there are conceivable purposes for writing. All that this booklet can offer, then, is ideas and pointers for some relatively general aspects of writing, and suggestions for ways to improve your own writing style. You should find this booklet more useful if you use it as a source of ideas and starting points, rather than trying to follow its suggestions to the letter. Pay close attention to the context-specific feedback you get from your professor and your TFs, too; they will be a valuable source of point-by-point advice on matching writing technique to purpose, in ways that this booklet cannot hope to match.

If there is more than one way to write well in our field, learning to write well is also, therefore, an open-ended process, an ongoing exploration of possibilities that any one person is (thankfully) unlikely to exhaust in a single lifetime. For some students, realiz-

ing this fact might entail a new understanding of where they are supposed to stand upon completing Expos. It needs to be said loud and clear: **Expos is a beginning, not an end!**

Your Expos course, if it went well for you and if you worked at it, should have given you some ideas about some sorts of writing that work for certain ends—and some that don't. It should have given you some familiarity with the fundamentals of academic argumentation and some experience with the process of writing, and also, importantly, of rewriting. You may have left the course with some useful strategies for different steps in the writing process.

Even in the best-case scenario, however, Expos is certainly not the be-all and end-all of how to write. There are many things about writing in specific fields and disciplines that simply cannot be taught in a general course. There are also many things about writing for various purposes—an extended close reading of an artistic work, for instance, or a technical analysis of statistical data, or a lengthy argument based on ethnographic fieldwork—that will not be touched upon in exercises of relatively limited scope.

You should therefore expect to continue learning about and working at better writing for so long as you continue to develop intellectually. At the least, it is certainly true that as a professional scholar develops from term papers to larger independent projects, to a senior thesis, and then through graduate seminar papers, a masters dissertation, a PhD dissertation, first scholarly articles, and a first scholarly book, she will face new challenges and learn more about writing at every step of the way, and will often seek advice and mentorship specifically about how to write.

So much is writing a constant work in progress that even the pros regularly get it wrong. In your time at Harvard you will be required to read a good deal, and you could safely bet that in every course you will be required to read some bad writing! Writing well is simply not an easy matter. Be aware of this, because as apprentices to various fields, we naturally take published work in those fields as guides to good practice. We must bring a critical eye to our reading,

however, and choose our models carefully.

One way to improve your own writing is to critique what you read from the point of view of writing technique. If you are reading something and find it difficult to understand, ask yourself: Why? How could it be improved? If it were you, how would you write to convey the same point more effectively? Such mental habits will often lead in short order to a more critical attitude towards your own writing, even as you produce it, and help you to write more self-consciously and artfully.

In sum, you can expect the task of learning to write better to engage your attention beyond your sophomore year, throughout your undergraduate degree and well into whatever professional career you choose. At least while you remain at Harvard, you should know that there are many resources available to help you in that task. This handbook is one such resource; any feedback you receive from teachers about written work is another. You can also make such a resource out of your peers; establish a habit of reciprocally reading and critiquing work with a classmate you respect and trust. There are also many resources at Harvard that have been set up specifically to help the entire community, from freshmen to senior faculty, with their writing.

For a list of such resources, see the Appendix to this handbook entitled “Writing Resources at Harvard.”

# Reading to Write

**W**riting well begins with reading well. But what is good reading?

We can paraphrase our own watchword about good writing, and say: Good reading is reading that serves its purpose. This naturally means that there are many good ways to read. If you are reading a magazine to relax on a Sunday morning, you will read differently than if you are reading a question on a mathematics exam. If you are reading a poem to write an analysis paper about it, you will read very differently than if you are reading a 500-page history survey text for background information on a particular aspect of the period that text covers.

When you are reading to write, therefore—as when you are analyzing materials for a paper, or when you are looking for information required for an argument—think about your goals in reading and adjust the way you read accordingly. This point is very clearly illustrated by a situation regularly encountered by Harvard students.

You have a class approaching rapidly, and you are required to read a large amount of material beforehand—enough that it will not be possible for you to read word for word. We all know from experience that it is fruitless to simply begin reading at the beginning of the material, and read passively and without direction. Time will be eaten up rapidly, and it is likely that when it runs out the reader will still not have met his or her goals.

Things improve greatly if the reader takes charge of the reading process. Ask yourself: What am I required to do with this reading? What is the teacher likely to have hoped to achieve when he or she assigned this reading? What are my own particular

goals with it? For example: Are you required to write a response paper? If so, you will need to isolate the main argument and its component parts, and evaluate them. If you are under pressure for time, it will be important that you recognize when you have read enough to do this, and stop! Another example: Are you required to generate questions for discussion? If so, you will need to be on the lookout for things that puzzle you, or places where you feel you are short on background information, or potential flaws and unargued assumptions in the author's argument. Again: Were you assigned the text to help you gain background information about some aspect of East Asian society, history or culture? If so, what key points should you understand and retain?

In each of these cases, once you have fulfilled your goal, move on immediately to other tasks.

A second great gain is made when a reader not only reads with purpose and direction, but reads with a pen or computer keyboard to hand, and starts creating something of their own in response to the reading. She thereby immediately begins to fulfill her reading goal. The end-product of this process can be as simple as a sketch of the author's argument scribbled on a scrap of paper, or as involved as several pages of notes. Regardless of scope, taking some kind of notes will almost certainly expedite progress towards your final aim.

Right from the Sophomore Tutorial, EAS students will encounter this pressure to read efficiently very quickly when they crack open their course packs and sit down to write the weekly response papers. Frankly, EAS Tutorial courses are heavy, with bulky and demanding readings. Right from the beginning,

**When you are reading to write, think about your goals in reading and adjust the way you read accordingly.**

then, direct your reading and note-taking towards the various goals the material is supposed to serve.

Harvard offers resources to help the community develop more effective reading habits and strategies. Particularly well known in this regard is the Bureau of Study Counsel's "Harvard Course in Reading and Study Strategies." You can find out more about it from the BSC or by visiting <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~bsc/rc.html>. See also the Appendix for a list of other such resources at Harvard.

# What We Want You to Do: How Writing Is Graded in the Tutorial

**A** key step towards satisfying your teachers' expectations is to know what they expect, and to work accordingly. What do we look for, then, when we grade your writing in the Tutorial in East Asian Studies? In other words, what exactly do we hope you will do when we assign a writing task?

One basic way of thinking about what a grade means, and how it is assigned, is to think of the paper as a combination of "What?" and "How?" First: What does it argue? When teachers read a student's work, they are looking for an original argument. Second: How does the paper argue? Teachers also look at the mechanics of the paper. These include whether the paper is clearly structured, whether language is used correctly and well, whether evidence is given, whether that evidence is accurately interpreted and does indeed support the points being drawn from it, and so on.

In terms of this "Why?" and "How," then, grades can be understood roughly as follows: in an "A" paper, both are strong; in a "B" paper, one is strong but the other is wanting (or perhaps both are present but simply adequate rather than really well done); in a "C" paper, both are somehow wanting. The finer gradations within each letter grade (B+, B-, etc.) represent shades of merit within these basic categories.

This is, of course, a very simplistic description of what we look for. The following is a more detailed grading guide that we use. It was developed by staff at the Writing Center, and expresses very well the questions a teacher has in mind when they assess student writing. This same rubric is also included in the Syllabus for the Spring semester of the Sophomore Tutorial for students' reference.

Note that these criteria fall into two sections. The first gives a set of aspects of a paper that teachers look for. The second relates those various aspects to letter grades.

## CRITERIA FOR GRADING

**THESIS:** Is there one main argument in the paper? Does it fulfill the assignment? Is the thesis clearly stated at the beginning of the paper? Is it interesting, complex? Is it argued throughout?

**STRUCTURE.** Is the paper clearly organized? Is it easy to understand the main point of each paragraph? Does the order of the overall argument make sense, and is it easy to follow?

**EVIDENCE and ANALYSIS:** Does the paper offer supporting evidence for each of its points? Does the evidence suggest the writer's knowledge of the subject matter? Has the paper overlooked any obvious or important pieces of evidence? Is there enough analysis of evidence? Is the evidence, properly attributed, and is the bibliographical information correct?

**SOURCES:** If appropriate or required, are sources besides the main text(s) under consideration used? Are they introduced in an understandable way? Is their purpose in the argument clear? Do they do more than affirm the writer's viewpoint or represent a "straw person" for knocking down? Are responsible inferences drawn from them? Are they properly attributed, and is the bibliographical information correct?

**STYLE:** Is the style appropriate for its audience? Is the paper concise and to the point? Are sentences clear and grammatically correct? Are there spelling or proofreading errors?



## CRITERIA FOR GRADING

- A** Excellent in every way (this is not the same as perfect). This is an ambitious, perceptive essay that grapples with interesting, complex ideas; responds discerningly to counterarguments; and explores well chosen evidence revealingly. The discussion enhances, rather than underscores, the reader's and writer's knowledge (it doesn't simply repeat what has been taught). There is a context for all the ideas; someone outside the class would be enriched, not confused, by reading the essay. Its beginning opens up, rather than flatly announces, its thesis. Its end is something more than a summary. The language is clean, precise, often elegant. As a reader I feel surprised, delighted, changed. There's something new here for me, something only the essay's writer could have written and explored in this particular way. The writer's stake in the material is obvious.
- 
- B** A piece of writing that reaches high and achieves many of its aims. The ideas are solid and progressively explored, but some thin patches require more analysis and/or some stray thoughts don't fit in. The language is generally clear and precise but occasionally not. The evidence is relevant, but there may be too little; the context for the evidence may not be sufficiently explored, so that I have to make some of the connections that the writer should have made clear for me. OR A piece of writing that reaches less high than an A essay but thoroughly achieves its aims. This is a solid essay whose reasoning and argument may nonetheless be rather routine. (In this case the limitation is conceptual.)
- 
- C** A piece of writing that has real problems in one of these areas: conception (there's at least one main idea but it's fuzzy and hard to get to); structure (confusing); use of evidence (weak or nonexistent the connections among the ideas and the evidence are not made and/or are presented without context, or add up to platitudes or generalizations); language (the sentences are often awkward, dependent on unexplained abstractions, sometimes contradict each other). The essay may not move forward but rather may repeat its main points, or it may touch upon many (and apparently unrelated) ideas without exploring any of them in sufficient depth. Punctuation, spelling, grammar, paragraphing, and transitions may be a problem. OR An essay that is largely plot summary or interpretive summary of the text, but is written without major problems. OR An essay that is chiefly a personal reaction to something. Well written, but scant intellectual content mostly opinion.
- 
- D and E** These are efforts that are wildly shorter than they ought to be to grapple seriously with ideas. OR Those that are extremely problematic in many of the areas mentioned above: aims, structure, use of evidence, language, etc.; OR Those that do not come close to addressing the expectations of the assignment.

As these more detailed criteria make clear, many aspects must be considered in assessing any writing project, and you will therefore need to consider many things to produce a good piece of writing. This section of our handbook, therefore, only offers a very broad outline of what we look for in grading papers, and in fact, the entire handbook is about our grading criteria—about what it means to write well in East Asian Studies. Everything in this handbook is something that your teachers will be looking for when they read your work. We thus invite you to refer to the rest of this handbook for more detail on the topic of “What We Want You to Do”!

Now we get down to the nutty-gritty: how to write.

The next large section of this handbook deals with specific aspects of writing. It falls into two large parts. In this first section, we will survey aspects of writing that are generally applicable to any writing project you might engage in, from a one-page response paper to a dissertation. In the following section, we will consider factors that play in to specific types of writing task, including the response paper, and the long independent research project. First, we turn to writing in general.



# Strategies to Make Successful Writing Happen

One of the first things we should consider is what kind of process we might follow to produce the best writing we can, as efficiently and painlessly as possible.

It might help to lay to rest a myth before we start. If someone writes in the movies, they are generally shown scribbling furiously, or pounding away at a keyboard. For a “true” writer, we infer, writing is almost an out-of-body experience, in which you get swept away on a flood of spontaneous words. This image has deep and hoary roots in notions of divine inspiration, and artistic production as something akin to spirit-possession, with the artist as “medium.” The narrative logic of Hollywood seems to demand that if someone creates, art must flow out of them in a single, unpremeditated burst of sheer life.

True enough, sometimes the on-screen writer will rip a page from the typewriter, screw it up, and throw it away; one cloche, in fact, is to show someone surrounded by such balls of paper. There is some concession, then, to the notion of writing as a difficult process that sometimes only succeeds after several attempts. Nonetheless, we are given to understand that such frustrations are mere preamble, as if a fisherman is sitting patiently with his hook in the water. Once the fisherman gets a bite (i.e. once “it comes”), writing is supposedly an exciting, invigorating process, like fighting a big-game fish, and for those to whom the gift is given, words flow out like spring-water, all unbidden.

Even worse, when film-makers do choose to portray someone writing, they collapse the whole process into a quick montage of a few impressionistic scenes, and cut to the chase—the result, that is: the writer gleefully ripping the final page from the typewriter in a crescendo of creation, or triumphantly waving wads of close-typed pages. We are not shown hours of

drudgery and tedium, which make for poor cinema.

This is a powerful image, and Hollywood cannot be held solely to blame. After all, didn’t Laozi dash off the “five thousand characters” of the *Dao de jing* in a single sitting on his way out through Jiayuguan to the Western Regions, when bidden to do so by the gatekeeper? And perhaps, indeed, this is how it works for some people: Joseph Conrad, for instance, is said to have done much of his writing in furious insomniac bursts, as if in the grip of a mad passion.

For many, however, including many successful professionals for whom writing is a huge part of working life, writing is a much more prosaic and workaday process. Most importantly, much of writing is in fact “pre-writing” (reading, note-taking, drafts, and false starts) and re-writing (revision, editing and polishing). It is important that a writer acknowledge that all of these things are vital aspects of the process—not signs of failure, or lack of “inspiration”! It is entirely possible to construct a successful piece of writing deliberately and painstakingly by a much more artificial process than divine inspiration; the process is often rather more like crafting a piece of furniture than improvising a note-perfect jazz solo at 220 beats a minute.

The myth of the natural writer is unhelpful because it creates the impression that real writing is not learned, and can therefore discourage people from trying to learn to write even before they get started. Even if we dispose of this myth, however, the problem still remains: If writing is often actually achieved by a deliberate process, what is that process?

The truth is that there is no single, uniform process that works for everyone. It can be useful to know this. Some writing guides, or teachers, almost give the impression that there is a single infallible process, which often goes something like this: first



you make an outline; then you write a draft that joins the dots; then you polish the draft (maybe twiddle with the wording in a few places, cut out extraneous adjectives, change a few sentences), and *Abracadabra!* You have a paper. Now, there is nothing wrong with this model if it works for you, and certainly there is nothing wrong with the steps in the process outlined. Creating an outline can be very useful; one usually does write drafts; it is very useful to polish. The process can be messier than this, however, and more time consuming, and still have a perfectly happy result.

One problem with this oversimplified model of the writing process is that it seems to assume that a writer knows ahead of time what he wants to say. Sometimes this might luckily be the case, but often, too, writing is actually the process by which we discover what we think. You might quite easily get halfway through a first attempt at a paper and then realize that things are actually different from what you initially thought. At this point, you might have to start all over again, though in many cases at least some of the body of what you have written will be salvageable in one form or another. Even in the worst-case scenario, though, where you *really* have to scrap everything and go back to square one, it will almost never be the case that you have really gotten nowhere with that first, abandoned attempt. At the very least, its “failure” was the means by which you arrived at the ideas for your actual paper; more than that, you will sometimes find that the writing on the second time through flows better, since you have thought through the material once already.

If you find that this happens regularly to you, it may be possible to make a virtue of necessity and embrace it—to use it in a deliberate strategy of writing. It may be that you need to follow the implications of your own ideas through on paper thoroughly to evaluate whether they will work. If so, you are better to start that process early on, and give yourself plenty of time for several “takes.”

It might also turn out that your mind often seems to throw up your ultimate counter-argument first (see “Counter-argument”); you might find, then, that you can work this apparently abortive first attempt back into your final draft as an objection to your ultimate thesis, which you consider, but dispose of for the very reasons you abandoned it as your own thesis!

As this extended example has tried to show, actual writing processes can be very unpredictable, and can at times lead the writer a merry dance before they eventually throw up a workable product. This also brings us back to our earlier point: there is no single, uniform process that can be recommended as infallibly leading to successful writing for all people.

What might some other successful strategies look like, then?

Some writers work by a kind of patchwork method. As they read, they might think of an isolated point. They may not yet know how that point will fit into the final pattern of their argument, or indeed what that pattern will be; yet they might sit down at their computer, or get a piece of paper, and write a more-or-less fully fledged paragraph. They may even start creating such single “patches” almost as soon as they start researching and reading. As they continue working, they might accumulate quite a basketful of these scraps, and periodically look them over to see what sorts of patterns they can make from them. When they sit down to compose the final essay, they will work much like a quilt-maker, stitching together these isolated pieces into a larger whole.

Some people, whose minds tend to multitasking, can work on a kind of cycle of drafting and polishing different sections of the same piece of writing in parallel. One part of their mind may be mulling over the argument as it develops, and as each next step takes place, they may draft a rough paragraph to capture it. As this process goes on, however, there might be downtime as the next section brews in the writer’s mind, and they may occupy another, more surface part of their brain by scrolling back in their docu-

**Often, writing is actually the process by which we discover what we think.**

ment and flicking through earlier paragraphs to reread and polish. When they have a concrete idea of where they want to go next, they turn back to the advancing forward edge of the essay. On the other hand, as they are drafting a given paragraph, the kernel of one or several subsequent paragraphs may occur to them, and they might jot down a disjointed phrase or two for each to remind them of the idea when they reach that point in the argument.

Some writers may prefer to concentrate on a single phase of the process at a time. For example, they may brood over their material until they feel it is almost fully-fledged within them, and then sit down and hammer out a draft in a single burst, without even so much as an outline. They might then turn around a day or so later and radically rewrite that first draft, cannibalizing it for the good bits and scrapping the rest in favor of entirely new draft. It could even take five or six repetitions of this process to reach the final draft, and they might turn around and spend time polishing that draft further. For such a writer, a written outline might have a place quite late in the process, when they are editing their writing and trying to ensure that it has a strong and lucid structure.

In presenting these examples of different working methods, we are not recommending *any* given method to every reader of this book. Other working methods are certainly conceivable, and these may not suit everybody; other writers may work by a combination of these methods, or use one or the other of them at different times. The point is that successful writing methods vary widely, and writing can be quite an ad hoc process. This means that writers need to gradually develop their own writing procedure as much as their own style and voice. In doing so, it helps to be attentive to what works for you, and to experiment freely with different ways of working.

That said, we would like to recommend one, very broad strategy as a way of getting going: just jump in the deep end. If you want to write, write! Sit down and write *something*, even if you are certain that your ideas are still very raw and that the result will be far from a finished product. You can write in any form—

random jottings; disjointed phrases; a kind of intellectual diary entry; an email to yourself, your TF, or a friend. It may also help to talk your ideas through, rather than write them down, especially if you have a friend who is willing to be a sounding board.

At the end of such an exercise, you should have ideas you didn't have before (or didn't know you had). This sort of writing or talk is like a seed culture from which you might grow the yeast to raise your bread—like produces like, and words, especially your own words, are often the ground from which more words spring.

You will also find implicit suggestions about strategies and working methods in many of the other sections of this handbook. We have included sections on “Rewriting” and “Editing,” for example, and the section on “Reading to Write” above could also be viewed in this light. You may also find more techniques and strategies for helping writing happen among the suggestions incorporated in various writing workshops at Harvard, such as those offered by the Bureau of Study Counsel. Please refer to the Appendix for a list of such resources.

# Working Parts of a Paper

A piece of writing might be compared to a living organism. Its body, like the body of an organism, has various organs and limbs, which fulfill various functions. The following sections of this handbook describe generally some of the common organs and limbs—“working parts”—that almost any paper can be expected to have.

On this analogy of text to living thing, the world of writing as a whole is as diverse as the world of living things, and as with living things, we might categorize or taxonomize types of writing at various levels of generality and detail. At the highest level of generality, the world of living things is divided up into large kingdoms like animals and plants; so writing is often broadly divided into verse and prose (you decide which is the more vegetable of the two!). The natural world is further classified into increasingly narrow and detailed categories of phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species; similarly, we can imagine that forms of writing could be grouped by more and more specific resemblances, until we arrived at specific genres at the level of closest resemblance. Within each species of living things, we still find that individuals are never identical, and display a wealth of diversity within their resemblance to one another as instances of the same type; the same may be said of writing, where conformance to the rules of a genre does not automatically condemn a piece to the status of a degraded stereotype.

It is useful to think of the academic essay as something like a large group of similar organisms, perhaps on the order of a Linnaean “class” like the mammals. Within this class of genres of writing,

there are still relatively remote relatives, such as writing in the natural sciences or technical philosophy, that are not likely to concern us as students of East Asian Studies. In East Asian Studies, we are likely to encounter a range of writing styles and genres from a set of related disciplines—the humanities and the social sciences—and we can perhaps think of those forms of writing as comprising a related group something like a Linnaean “order.” This group comprises

a group of related “families” such as the sociological paper, the literary criticism paper, and so on; each of these families again comes in various shapes and sizes which we can think of as Linnaean “genera,” or genres in writing.

This analogy, like even the best analogy, breaks down at a certain point. Nonetheless, it helps us to see that some of the more remotely related types of academic essay might be, to the types of writing we do in East Asian Studies, like cetaceans or marsupials to us primates –

ultimately related, it is true, but quite different in many striking respects. We can also see that though we deal with quite a broad range of types of writing in East Asian Studies, all these types share significant features.

The “working parts” that we will examine in the following sections of this handbook comprise one set of such significant common features. Almost any piece of good writing in East Asian Studies can be expected to have most if not all of the components we treat:

- an opening
- a thesis statement
- the definition or clarification of some terms

## Working Parts of a Paper

- Opening
- Thesis
- Key Terms
- Counter-Argument
- Analysis of Evidence
- Structural Elements
- Conclusion

- consideration of a counter-argument
- citation and analysis of evidence
- a conclusion
- paragraphs with topic sentences
- sections joined by transition sentences
- signposts explicitly flagging its structure.

These common features might be thought of like the limbs and organs of a range of genera and species in a broad group of animals like the mammals.

A given working part—say, an opening—might look different and fulfill slightly different functions in different genres, just as a generic mammalian forelimb might be adapted to serve as a wing in a bat, a hoof in a giraffe, a claw in a lion and a hand in a human, and yet still be recognizable as the same anatomic structure.

As we treat these working parts in the following sections, therefore, keep in mind that we are being general. Things may be somewhat different as you work on any given piece of writing, and there is a great deal of scope for variation and adaptation.

In this handbook, we present the various components roughly in the order that they might come in a typical finished piece of writing, though some variation is certainly possible, and you should not think of this order as a rigid rule to be religiously followed. You should note, however, that the order in which these working parts appear in a finished composition may have nothing to do with the order in which they are created. For example, in the next section we move on to consider openings. It is often the case that the opening, though it comes first in the finished paper, is the last section a writer actually writes, since one needs a very clear idea of what the paper will say before one can announce its general thesis, draw up a roadmap showing the reader the direction the argument will take, and so on. To some extent, then, the order of presentation is an arbitrary one, and you should feel free to vary your own writing process freely to find what works best for you.

## Openings

By having a section in this handbook on “Openings,” as distinct from, say, the statement of thesis and the definition of terms, we court a certain danger. We could easily reinforce an impression that some students seem to have, that any piece of writing requires something called “an opening,” separate from all the other functional parts of the paper. This seems to require that this “opening” be aesthetically pleasing but entirely useless for practical purposes, like a bride’s tiara, or a brass fanfare before an athletic contest.

One of the most painful examples of this sort of frill and froth is the “grand sweep of world history” opening, which instructors meet with distressing frequency. The formula is simple—survey the history of the world, preferably as far back as possible, with an emphasis on whatever broad category you can place your own topic within. A handbook like this one, on writing, might thus have “opened” with something like the following:

For so long as humans have walked the face of the earth, they have sought to leave their mark. Paleolithic hunters on the Siberian steppe notched sticks to record the number of their kill; their brethren in France figured the hunt in haunting images on cave walls; Mayan Indians knotted cords to make records of unknown purport. With the dawn of the age of the great cities in world history, many cultures invented various systems for recording speech...

and so on, *ad nauseam*. Such writing might be current in some journalistic circles, but it will not wow your teacher, however much it might resemble the pyrotechnical special effects and grand scale of a blockbuster movie. It is usually uninformative, and too remote from the topic at hand to be relevant. There is also an alarming tendency to compensate for the lack of substance in such generalizations with bombast and purple prose.

The opening of an academic paper should not be mere ornament. It should be every bit as functional as an opening in a game of chess. In chess, the point in opening is to arrange all of one’s pieces so that one can achieve one’s aim as efficiently as possible. This should also be the case when writing a paper—though the aim may not necessarily be to grind an opponent into the dust, as in chess! One should aim to put in place all the pieces one needs to make one’s argument efficiently, stylishly, and convincingly. By contrast, in writing as in chess, if you spend your time making flashy but pointless moves, your partner (the reader) is not likely to take you very seriously, and you might cost yourself the game.

This means, of course, that a good opening is just one that does its job; our dictum that “Good writing is writing that serves its purpose” applies to the parts as well as to the whole. And since there are various things one can want to achieve in the opening of various papers, so there

are naturally various types of functional opening.

Think of an opening as an assembly comprised of a number of elements. In this handbook, we will present four such working parts that might typically be found in place in an opening:

- a paragraph posing the puzzle of your topic
- the thesis statement
- the “roadmap,” that is, a sketch outline of where the argument will go
- the definition of terms.

To return to our chess analogy, these are the various “pieces” that you need to get in place to set up your game; the subsequent sections of the paper will bring those pieces into coordinated play. Each of these pieces has its own section below.

### Openings

- **Posing the Puzzle**
- **Thesis Statement**
- **Roadmap**
- **Defining Key Terms**



## POSING THE PUZZLE

Sometimes a paper will have a paragraph in the opening separate from thesis statement, definition of terms, and the roadmap, which sets up the problem at the heart of the paper. This can be very effective, and it can sometimes be effective to open straight onto such a paragraph. For example:

English-language scholarship on the *Zhuangzi* generally accepts that a key part of its philosophy is an epistemology that gives central place to “skill knowledge”—so-called “knowing-how” as opposed to “knowing-that.” And yet, if we read closely the only chapters of the text generally regarded as authentic, we see that only one of the skill stories upon which such claims are based actually appears in those chapters. Moreover, the single exception—the famous story of Cook Ding—need not be read in terms of such a philosophy of skill knowledge. This leads us to ask: Is “knowing how” in fact important to the philosophy of the central chapters of the *Zhuangzi*? If not, what theory of knowledge do those chapters propound?

An opening like this cuts to the chase. By the end of the first sentence, the reader is faced squarely with the central issue that will occupy the paper. More than this, however, this opening presents the reader with a puzzle—probably the same puzzle that engaged the writer’s interest, and drove him to write the paper in the first place. As is often the case, this puzzle comes in two parts, background and foreground: first, for one reason or another, we would expect that such-and-such be the case (the background); second, the writer has found reasons to suspect that it may not in fact be the case (the foreground).

In scholarship, expectations are often conditioned by previous work in the field, and so the assumptions that form the background of the puzzle, as in the previous example, are often embodied in the received opinions of the field. This need not always be the case, however. In the following example (taken in substance, but not in wording, from an actual sophomore paper), it is simply a matter of common sense that the key facts under examination are puzzling:

The *qin*, or Chinese zither, has long been one of the key symbols of the culture of the cultivated classical Chinese elite. It features, for example, in the standard list of the four essential aesthetic attainments of the gentleman: the zither, chess, calligraphy and painting (*qin qi shu hua*). Given these strongly elitist associations with a life of wealth and leisure, we might expect that upon its accession to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party would have pilloried the instrument as an embodiment of feudal evils. In fact, however, within ten years of Liberation we find the *qin* firmly ensconced as a mainstay of the new nationalist-proletarian arts. How did this happen? How was an instrument virtually identical with the exclusive and even effete snobbery of the ruling classes woven into a program of socialist arts? And what might the unexpected fate of the *qin* tell us about the rationales and inner workings of Communist ideology and propaganda more generally?

Again, by the time we have read this paragraph, our interest has been piqued. We have been presented with a genuine problem, and if the writer is promising us a solution, we want to read on and find out what it is.

Paragraphs like these provide an excellent set-up for the thesis of the paper. To return to our first example on the *Zhuangzi*, the next paragraph might present the thesis as follows:

In this paper, I will argue that the core chapters (the “Inner Chapters”) of the *Zhuangzi* propound no such theory of skill knowledge. The Cook Ding anecdote, I will argue, is better read in conjunction with certain other passages in the Inner Chapters, as arguing that the Dao (“the Way”) cannot be captured in formulae or general propositions, but rather must be understood on a case-by-case basis. The analogy of the cook carving meat, however, is an analogy for understanding, and it is not important to that analogy that it involves a physical skill.

Our second example, concerning the *qin*, might continue like this:

I will show that the rehabilitation of the *qin* in the post-Liberation arts was underwritten by a careful ideological rethinking of even the most elite products of the Chinese tradition. Such works of art were read as embodying the spirit of the Chinese *people* as a whole, rather than an individual artist or even a certain social class. I

will further contend that this rethinking reveals a deep-rooted nationalism in the Maoist ideological project, a nationalism which, as I shall argue, is deeply problematic from the perspective of classical Marxist thought.

We will return to the thesis statement in the next section.

For the moment, note that the opening paragraph in each of our examples might appear dispensable. With some minor modifications, each paper could open directly with the thesis statement given above. Would things really be the same, however? If we did not have an opening paragraph pose the problem in this way, we would know *what* the paper was setting out to argue, but we would have more trouble seeing *why* anyone would want to argue such a thesis. The opening paragraphs given above tell the reader why the writer cares about the topic, and why the reader should, too; it gives the reader a stake in the outcome of the research presented.

Puzzle-posing paragraph like these, then, make explicit the paper's "motive" (to invoke a term you will probably recall from Expos). Any good thesis must be motivated, that is, it must argue something that is worth arguing. Unless you think the interest of your topic—the reasons anyone should care about it—is blindingly obvious, you should address it explicitly somewhere in your paper.

Both the examples we have given so far are very similar in structure. This is not meant to suggest that there is a single boilerplate style for an effective puzzle-posing paragraph. Naturally, there are many different ways of opening effectively. For example, in some cases it may work to open almost directly onto a string of questions:

As the PRC has moved towards a market economy in the last three decades, its white-elephant state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have presented a number of problems. How could SOEs be made responsive to market imperatives? How were they to achieve the transition from the old world of guaranteed employment (the "iron rice-bowl") to an open labor market? Should non-viable SOEs be allowed to fail, and if so, how should their bankruptcies be managed? If the Party dismantled SOEs, or ran them on free-mar-

ket regimes, or laid off their workers, would its actions be perceived as an admission of failure, and cost it its legitimacy? How was the Party to manage the political fall-out of SOE reform?

This is punchy and efficient, and quickly raises a number of key questions in the readers mind.

Another effective tactic is to (*briefly*) tell the story of the way you were led to your topic:

This paper began from my readings in literature published immediately after the Cultural Revolution in China. Much of this literature was, naturally enough, full of trauma and suffering; the well-known genre of "Scar Literature" is a good example. The works of Yang Jiang, however, were strikingly different. Yang writes about the Cultural Revolution in a light-hearted and often humorous vein. I was puzzled. How could anyone *laugh* about such awful events? I decided to examine Yang's writings more closely, and also to explore theories of the function of humor, to see if they could shed any light upon the efficacy of humor in helping her and her readers to cope with the legacy of upheaval and social hemorrhage.

An opening like this draws the reader in and invites them to identify with the writer's process of intellectual exploration and discovery.

In short, there are many ways of effectively posing the problem driving the paper. In this, as in all aspects of writing, your own readings should be a classroom. Watch the way writers you enjoy open their papers and books. What strategies do you think are effective, and for what tasks or materials? Try the tactics you think work well in other people's writing when you sit down to create your own papers.

## THE THESIS STATEMENT

One of the pieces that a writer normally puts in place as they open a paper is the thesis. Indeed, everyone knows that a thesis is *the* single most indispensable part of an academic paper. To return to our biological analogy (see “Working Parts”), an academic paper without a thesis would be something like a mammal without a spine. Like the spine of an animal, the thesis of a paper is the central axis upon which all other parts hang. A paper might perhaps be conceived without a thesis, just as an unfortunate mammal might be conceived without a spine; in either case, however, the resulting entity would likely be still-born, or a sad misshapen freak.

That much is plain. It is trickier, however, to say what counts as a thesis and what does not. As a first approximation, we might say that **a thesis must be original, interesting and arguable.**

When we say that a thesis must be original, we are actually saying two things. First, and most obviously, it must be your own work. Your thesis cannot be filched from something you have read, or something you heard someone else say. It must also not be something that would not be found in a conscientious reading of a reasonable amount of material on your topic—in the materials listed in your own bibliography, for example. Obviously, nobody is going to expect that a sophomore has read everything in the extant scholarly literature on any topic of size, but within the limits of what you can reasonably be expected to know, you must not be simply rehashing common ideas.

A thesis must also be interesting. In the previous section (“Openings”) we already saw a couple of examples of interesting theses: that the philosophy of the core chapters of the *Zhuangzi* does not entail a skill-based theory of knowledge; and that the place of the *qin* shows that Maoist agendas of the arts were based upon nationalist rather than Marxist ideology. These theses are interesting because, if shown to be true, they would require that common understand-

ings of their subject matter be rethought: that the *Zhuangzi* does propound a skill-based theory of reliable knowledge; or that agendas of the arts in Mao’s China were rooted in Marxist theory in fact as well as in name. “Interesting” here means, then, “liable to change what we think.” This is certainly one reasonable definition of “interesting” in an academic field, where we are seeking new knowledge.

Many students seem to remember from their Expos course the dictum that “The thesis should be controversial.” Properly understood, this means much the same thing as to say that the thesis should be interesting. A good thesis is “controversial” in the sense that it is something informed scholars in the field could reasonably argue over, and that they would find it worth their time to consider. In this sense, it is a possible topic of scholarly controversy. If a thesis is “interesting” in the sense of our examples above, in that it promises to change the common scholarly view on a certain topic, it can be expected to be “controversial” because some scholars would probably want to defend the received view—which will usually be the received view for good reasons of its own.

Sometimes the notion that the thesis must be “controversial” is misunderstood, however. Some students seem to think it means that you should take whatever thesis you have already come up with, and dress it in “controversial” garb. On this understanding, “controversial” means something like “provocatively worded” or “argued as strenuously and extremely as possible.” Of course, this is a basic misunderstanding of the principle at stake. Arguments in academia should ideally differ from those in competitive debates, or from debates in politics, for that matter.

In competitive debate, the point is to entertain, to persuade, and to display wit and ingenuity in sheer argumentative and rhetorical technique. Participants usually argue with no regard for their own opinions on the matter or the objective truth; indeed, to emphasize the strictly formal nature of the contest, topics mooted are often deliberately absurd or exaggerated (“That Television Is the Root of All Evil”). In



politics, the stakes are much more serious, of course, but for many politicians, it seems, the aim is similarly to persuade by whatever means possible to win votes for the policies they propound. The world of scholarship, by contrast, ideally places high value on scrupulously claiming just what the evidence warrants, and no more. For this reason, it is actually counterproductive to deliberately overstate your case—to state your thesis in a belligerent or confrontational manner, or artificially scapegoat an opposing point of view.

So long as such misunderstandings are avoided, however, the dictum that the thesis should be “controversial” is a very useful one, and boils down to much the same thing as the requirement that it be “interesting.” Your thesis must concern a topic worthy of consideration, and you must be attempting to convince the reader of conclusions that cast fresh light on that topic.

We said above that a thesis should also be arguable. This means, first, that it should be demonstrable. There must be evidence for the thesis. Now, in the humanities and social sciences, one cannot normally prove anything absolutely true or false, as one can in pure mathematics and many natural sciences. This means, naturally, that iron-clad proof one way or another is not necessary or even always possible for papers in the field of East Asian Studies. It is necessary, however, that there be enough evidence to make the claim worth considering, and that you find that evidence and cite it. There would be no sense in writing about whether anybody lisped in prehistoric China, for example. We have no evidence either way (there is no written record for the “prehistoric” era by definition, and we certainly have no sound recordings!), and it is difficult to imagine that we ever will.

The flipside of this requirement that a thesis be arguable is that it should be falsifiable. Again, since we are not dealing with hard facts on quite the same order of those handled by the natural sciences, there will be many times when an argument cannot be absolutely disproved. Nonetheless, it is worth considering, as you write, whether there is anything anyone could conceivably say or adduce that would blow

your argument completely out of the water. If you are asserting things that no conceivable evidence could refute, you may not be asserting anything interesting.

Unfortunately, there is of course a large gray area in which it is difficult to be sure if evidence is sufficient either way, and even in the professional literature, much ink is spilt arguing issues that we might feel have as much substance as lisps in prehistoric China; whether your evidence is sufficient, then, is ultimately a matter you will have to judge yourself. We will return to the issue of what constitutes good evidence in the section below on “Evidence and Analysis.”

So far we have seen that a thesis should be original, interesting and arguable. What, then, might such theses look like?

Because a good thesis, being interesting and original, is always surprising, we can hardly present you with a mould from which to stamp out quality theses. Anything that can be stereotyped is not surprising, original or interesting. As a first step towards illustrating what a good thesis is like, then, we will rather give a few examples of what a good thesis is *not*.

**A good thesis is not so basic as to be blindingly obvious.** An obvious thesis would not be “interesting” in the sense we have discussed above—it would not tell us anything we did not already know. For example, there is not much point in writing a paper arguing that the four seasons are an important theme in the poetry of Du Fu. It is perfectly true, but also perfectly plain for all to see. Moreover, that point alone would hardly distinguish Du Fu’s work from that of most other poets in China (or even the entire world). Not much of an advance is achieved, either, by proceeding to argue that Du Fu uses the four seasons as a source of imagery and symbols through which to figure his own moods and emotions. Again, this is a very common way for poets to work the world over, and this observation is therefore not substantial enough to form the basis of an entire paper.

**A good thesis also cannot be made by knocking down a straw man.** A “straw man” is a dummy posi-

tion, usually one that is not particularly plausible, and which no serious person would really hold. A writer sets up such a straw man merely to knock it down, and to appear to have thereby established something of note. Arguments that rely upon straw men are also not “interesting” in the sense we have discussed, because they only tell us something new if we are a fictitious person subscribing to a fictitious position.

A straw man is an illegitimate subspecies of a device called a “foil.” This latter term comes from a technical term in jewelry, where “foil” is “a thin leaf of some metal placed under a precious stone to increase its brilliancy, or under some transparent substance to give it the appearance of a precious stone” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). A foil, then, is something that is used as background, to set off a point of focus and make it shine.

As this definition suggests, foils can be used for both genuine and counterfeit ends. Foils have their place in writing; they can help make an honest point clearer by contrast. When we referred to competition debating and politics above, we were not really fair to either, but the comparison served our purpose, since it brought out the dimension of the academic essay we were driving at. It was not essential for our argument that our portrayal of these foils be strictly accurate. Such a use of a foil resembles the use of metal leaf to set off a genuine stone.

As the *OED* definition suggests, however, foils also lend themselves to abuse and counterfeiting, as when a piece of glass is passed off as a ruby. When a foil gets turned into a straw man, everything conspires to create the illusion that a mere bauble is a genuine gem of insight, and that illusion in turn hinges upon taking as truth what is in fact a thin background veneer, like leaf that looks like solid gold. Here is a particularly glaring example of this illegitimate use:

I divide philosophies into two types: the universal and the conditioned. Universal philosophies are true for all times and places, while conditioned philosophies hold only for certain cul-

tures or historical periods. For example, Buddhism and the works of Plato are universal, whereas the historical materialism of Karl Marx and the philosophy implicit in Sima Qian’s *Annals of the Historian* are specific. Having established these terms, I will now devote the remainder of this paper to showing that the universal type of philosophy is an illusion: it does not exist, and indeed, it cannot.

The entire thesis hinges on a straw man: an alleged position that holds that a “universal” type of philosophy exists, which obtains for all historical cultures. Unfortunately, however, we are not shown that this is a genuine position. The student even tells us that this position is of her own devising! She certainly does not show that it is a position actually held by anyone who matters to her audience, such as scholars in the field of East Asian Studies. The entire paper self-avowedly rests upon this house of cards, and a single puff of the fresh air of critical scrutiny will bring it all down in a shambles.

**A good thesis is also, importantly, a thesis. A paper must have a clear focus, and part of that focus consists in having a single main point.**

Unfortunately, some students—often the bright ones—find that as they read, ideas spring up “like mushrooms after rain,” and they are not adequately practiced at culling the wheat from the chaff, or at pursuing one or two meaty ideas through detailed analysis. Contrary to the products of such “dragonfly” minds (that dot their way rapidly across the surface of things), a good thesis is not a laundry list of loosely related points:

In this paper, I will argue that the “Great Preface” to the *Book of Odes* bears striking resemblances to theories of language put forward by the well-known German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. These resemblances can be related to similarities between the world-view or *Weltanschauung* of early China and that of German Romanticism, *viz.* the positing of an idealistic universal in Tao on the one hand, and Hegelian Spirit on the other. I will also argue that the poetics of the *Book of Odes* shows exciting resemblances to that of the *Rg Veda*, the oldest extant body of Indian verse. This suggests, as I will argue after Victor Mair and his



colleagues of the *Sino-Platonic Papers*, that the culture of Archaic Chinese is ultimately cognate with that of proto-Indo-European. Finally, I will argue that the rhyme scheme of the *Book of Odes* has been fundamentally misconstrued by scholars.

As you read these lines, the groans of professors and TFs everywhere should have been clearly audible. These various contentions are only loosely related; any one of them would require immensely detailed argument, which surely cannot be accomplished in the scope of anything less than a dissertation (if then); and any paper that promises so much on so many fronts is unlikely to deliver on any of them.

So far, we have characterized sound theses as original, interesting and arguable; and we have argued by counterexample that a good thesis is not obvious, nor predicated upon a straw man, nor hopelessly diffuse. In closing, we offer a few simple suggestions about how to state a thesis once you have it.

The most important thing is that you put your thesis in a prominent place, and state it loud and clear. There is no point in hiding your light under a bushel; teachers do not award grades for shyness. Unfortunately, too many potentially excellent theses are found squirreled away in obscure corners of student papers.

Thus, there would be nothing wrong with opening a paper with a flat-out, pithy statement of your thesis, and only subsequently getting on with the more finicky parts of your opening (“motive” or “puzzle,” definition of terms, “roadmap” etc.). To return to our example about the Chinese zither (earlier in this section and in the section on “Openings”), one could perfectly well begin with a paragraph of one sentence like this:

This paper will argue that the use of the Chinese zither (*qin*) in Maoist China reveals a deeply nationalistic streak in Communist Party ideology, a streak which is moreover fundamentally at odds with principles of orthodox Marxism.

and then move on to a second paragraph something like the one we gave as an example of an opening (“The *qin*...has long been one of the key symbols of

the culture of the cultivated classical Chinese elite” etc.). This opening kills two birds with one stone—it states the primary thesis, and also suggests, in a concise form that the essay can unpack in detail later, the reasons this thesis is interesting. You can also signal the importance of your thesis statement by beginning a paragraph with it, as in the examples given above in the “openings” section, where thesis statements were prominently placed as the topic sentence of the second paragraph after a bit of preliminary scene-setting.

It is useful to flag your topic statement clearly with explicit phrases like, “In this paper, I will contend...”; “This paper argues that...”; or even “My main thesis is that...” Some examples:

*In this paper, I will argue* that the discourse of race that developed around the Boxer Uprising in late nineteenth century China contains many components of a nascent nationalism, and further, that the existence of such proto-nationalistic discourse in China at this time poses serious problems for Benedict Anderson’s model of how nationalism rose and spread in the modern era. (Note how the one stone of this opening kills the same two birds of stating thesis and motive—Benedict Anderson’s influential general theories of nationalism are our foil, the background against which the thesis is interesting.)

*This paper argues first and foremost that* the category of *minjung* literature in contemporary Korea, which scholars have unproblematically assumed labels an object with conceptual unity, is in fact radically diffuse, and is best characterized as a rhetorical catch-all that gives a spurious appearance of unity and solidarity to otherwise quite diffuse interests and literatures.

*In this paper, I contend that* English lyrics in Korean pop-songs serve a paradoxical double function, whereby they at once link the audience to a trans-national, post-modern culture and marketplace, and at the same time mark a very local and specific identity in the Korean idiosyncrasies of their use of the English language.

These examples also illustrate other features of powerful thesis presentation. First, each introduces us immediately to key terms (“nationalism,” “proto-nationalistic,” “race”; “*minjung* literature,” “rhetorical”; “trans-national,” “post-modern,” “local,” “identity”). We would expect to see these terms defined and

unpacked for us in the body of the essay (see “Defining Key Terms”). Such a thesis statement is thus a concentrated encapsulation of large amounts of argumentation—just add the water of detailed explanation for the full flavor of convincing argument!

Second, each of these thesis statements also states its respective thesis clearly, without over-simplifying what may be a complex argument. This is particularly important for your thesis statement, which is probably the most important sentence or sentences in any piece of writing. For detailed advice on clear wording and how to clear away impediments to it, refer to section “Writing Strategy Revisited.”

Third, as these examples also show, you should word your thesis statement not just clearly but *carefully*, so that it only claims what your evidence warrants and what you are prepared to defend. Thus, the discourse of race in late Qing China “poses serious problems” for Anderson’s theory, but the writer is not so hyperbolic as to claim it “completely invalidates” or “smashes” it; the category of *minjung* literature “is best interpreted as...” implementing a rhetorical unity, but the writer implies he would admit other, complementary readings.

We mentioned earlier that arguments in the humanities and social sciences often do not result in a clear proof either for or against a thesis, but rather in a balance of likelihood. If your paper presents a novel close reading of a set of Japanese poems, and yet you remain aware that other readings are possible and you do not wish to deny the validity of those other readings, you should say something like “I argue that these poems *can be read as...*” rather than “These poems are...” If you review evidence for and against claims that the PRC has shifted to an aggressively expansionist foreign policy in recent years, and feel that though arguments on both sides of the issue have their strengths, in the balance these claims are correct, you can give a nuanced presentation of your stance by saying, “Though arguments for and against this proposition have their merits, I will argue that in the balance, it does seem...”

While it is important not to overstate your claims,

it is also vital to use language that is equal to their strength. In our third example above, our writer backs her claims to the hilt when she says, strongly, “I *contend*” (while still thereby signaling that she recognizes that her argument differs from other existing interpretations). If you feel you have shown something clearly, say, “I clearly show...” and not “I suggest...” (which is much more tentative). If you feel strongly that your thesis sums up a correct view of the material you study, use strong verbs, as in “I argue,” “I contend,” or even “I hold that X is *clearly*...”

In our discussion of what makes a good thesis, we were quite broad, and in the second part of our treatment, we concentrated more on the presentation of a thesis (its “statement”) than its content. As we said, there is something slightly mysterious about the spark at the heart of any topic statement—it is an idea, which should be your own, and therefore new and somehow surprising. How do we arrive at such ideas? How do we distinguish good ones? Such questions take us beyond writing *per se*, and into a realm of intellectual content that is the primary business of your classroom and individual learning. These questions therefore lie beyond the proper purview of this handbook, and you can pursue them further with your teachers and through your courses. Here we will turn to the next part of the task to hand, and continue our exploration of the working parts that comprise the opening section of a paper with the “roadmap.”

## THE ROADMAP

The next working part often found in the opening section of a paper is the “roadmap.” This is a section of a few sentences that tells the reader, ahead of time, where the writer will take them in the course of making the argument. In effect, it is a sketch outline of the paper, but presented in discursive prose; we did not want to call it an “outline” here, however, in case that led you to confuse it with the outline writers often make as part of the drafting process.

Note that like most of the other pieces we are covering in the section on openings, the roadmap may not always be necessary. We will see in the section on response papers, for instance, that in a very short piece, when space is at a premium and there is little likelihood of the reader getting lost, it may be best to dispense with the “roadmap” entirely. Nonetheless, on most occasions a roadmap is very useful or even essential.

A roadmap serves at least two useful purposes. First, it helps the reader orient themselves in your argument. If they have been given a skeleton of the argument up front and have it in mind as they read, they will recognize each major component in the argument as it comes up, and be less likely to get lost at any major turning point. This will mean that they follow the argument better, and are more likely to be convinced (or at least to judge the argument on its real merits).

Second, writing an explicit roadmap ensures that the writer has the structure of the essay clear in their own head. Putting an explicit roadmap at the front of the essay acts as a kind of promise to yourself and the reader that you will follow a consistent, orderly line of attack, and so helps keep the writing focused. This benefit will be redoubled if you refer back to the roadmap at each key turning point, a technique that we will explain in more detail in the section below on “signposts.”

Note that what we are calling the “roadmap” corresponds most closely to what is spoken of as the “introduction” to a paper in the “hamburger” model. At some point in their school careers, many students

have been taught a “hamburger” model of the essay, that is, Introduction-Body-Conclusion: introduction and conclusion are the “bun,” and the body is the “meat.” There is nothing wrong with this model, as far as it goes; it is somewhat simplistic, however, and we hope that by the time you have worked through this handbook and the Sophomore Tutorial, you will feel that you have the toolkit to compose papers more freely.

When it is mechanically applied, the hamburger model sometimes seems reducible to a very stereotyped structure, which we might parody as:

1. “What I Will Say”;
2. actually saying it;
3. “What I Have Said.”

Now, repetition in and of itself is not necessarily anathema, and well-used, can make the difference between dense and crystal-clear presentation. A hamburger, then, is better than just an unadorned slab of meat.

The art lies in using enough repetition to furnish your work with rhythm and a comprehensible pattern, but not so much that it becomes stultifying. This is where the difference lies between our “roadmap” and hamburger model introduction. The hamburger introduction might easily become a summary of all the major points of the paper, almost like an abstract. A roadmap, on the other hand, need not give all of even the most important details of the argument in each section: it aims, rather, to identify the major sections in turn and forewarn the reader that they will come up in a particular order. Where the roadmap is like the program to an orchestral recital, which announces the pieces and their respective movements in the order they will be played, the hamburger introduction is like the overture to an operetta, which is a medley of highlights from each number in turn—a whistle-stop tour through the action.

What might a competent roadmap look like? Let us return to our earlier example of the *qin* zither. Here is a possible third paragraph for that paper, to follow the opening paragraph and thesis statement



paragraphs we gave in the “Openings” section. We will give you the first two paragraphs in brackets, so that you don’t need to flip back:

[The *qin*, or Chinese zither, has long been one of the key symbols of the culture of the cultivated classical Chinese elite. It features, for example, in the standard list of the four essential aesthetic attainments of the gentleman: the zither, chess, calligraphy and painting (*qin qi shu hua*). Given these strongly elitist associations with a life of wealth and leisure, we might expect that upon its accession to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party would have pilloried the instrument as an embodiment of feudal evils. In fact, however, within ten years of Liberation we find the *qin* firmly ensconced as a mainstay of the new nationalist-proletarian arts. How did this happen? How was an instrument virtually identical with the exclusive and even effete snobbery of the ruling classes woven into a program of socialist arts? And what might the unexpected fate of the *qin* tell us about the rationales and inner workings of Communist ideology and propaganda more generally?]

[I will show that the rehabilitation of the *qin* in the post-Liberation arts was underwritten by a careful ideological rethinking of even the most elite products of the Chinese tradition. Such works of art were read as embodying the spirit of the Chinese *people* as a whole, rather than an individual artist or even a certain social class. I will further contend that this rethinking reveals a deep-rooted nationalism in the Maoist ideological project, a nationalism which, as I shall argue, is deeply problematic from the perspective of classical Marxist thought.]

*Roadmap:*

First, I will briefly review the place of the *qin* in traditional literati culture, and the associations the instrument held prior to Communist rule. I will then describe the vicissitudes of the instrument and some of its foremost exponents in the period from Liberation to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Next, I will examine the ideological pronouncements of China’s arts commissars in this period, and the writings and biography of Mao Zedong, in a search for explanations for the Maoist rehabilitation of the *qin*. Finally, I will draw on theories of nationalism from the work of Benedict Anderson and Ernst Gellner to argue that Party justifications for including the *qin* in its arts programs indicate a deep-seated conflict in its political theory between Marxist and nationalist imperatives.

This roadmap tells the reader what subtopics the paper will take up, and in what order; except in the last case, however, it does not say anything about what the content or conclusions of each of these smaller investigations will be. Even in foreshadowing the last section, where the writer takes the opportunity to reiterate his most significant thesis, we are not told anything about how this point will be argued. The roadmap, then, serves purely to orient the reader, and gives only enough information to achieve that end.

Now try to imagine how this paper would read with no such roadmap (especially if there were also no signposts, as defined below). As the last section opens, for example, the writer might suddenly introduce the ideas of Anderson or Gellner. For readers, this unprepared turn would come from left field.

Why is the writer suddenly talking about these guys?

While it might seem obvious that this would be disorienting, and make for ineffective argument, it is unfortunately true that many writers (and not just student writers) often make sudden changes of direction or begin major new sections without preparing the ground. It is an easy thing to do; after all, a writer already has in mind where it will all lead. It is easy to forget that readers may not know what you do, and assume that they will be able to follow you on your merry way. The roadmap helps avoid this sort of jarring turn, and the mental whiplash that can result.

As with actual maps of physical terrain, the map should be as simple and clear as possible. On real maps, this end is achieved by marking each feature of the terrain with a highly stylized icon, as when a mountain peak is marked with a solid black triangle, or a city with a red dot. Extraneous detail is excised; one does not try and show in miniature the real shape of the mountain’s flanks, or the actual New York skyline. The same goes for the roadmap for a paper. Your aim should be to set up simple cues that the reader will remember and recognize when they actually arrive at the relevant section of the paper. To this end it will also help if when you arrive, you repeat the core of the phrase identifying a given section in the roadmap (again, see “Signposts”).

Finally, again as with a real map, it is also important to ensure that the roadmap is an accurate representation of the actual terrain! While this may seem like a statement of the obvious, it often happens that as we draft, we write a roadmap paragraph early on, but the actual outline of the paper turns out to be somewhat different. It is important to revise, therefore, and in revising, to remember to check that the map is still a trusty guide.

## DEFINING KEY TERMS

Our last working part in the opening is the definition of terms.

Unfortunately, definition of terms is also often neglected by novice and journeyman writers. As with most of the other pieces that comprise the opening, the definition of terms may not always be necessary. To return to our example about the *qin* zither, for example, it is probably unnecessary to tell an informed reader what the *qin* is. Even if there did happen to be a reader who did not know the *qin*, it would suffice for them to consult a good dictionary. The term does not require definition because informed readers could hardly disagree over what it means.

This is often not the case with key terms in an argument, however. We often use terms that require definition in order for the argument to proceed. For example, let us imagine a paper for which the opening reads:

In this paper, I will analyze instances of androgyny in Travis Anderson's film adaptation of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. I will argue that androgyny functions in the film as an allegory for the breakdown of fundamental identities on a number of fronts, including gender identity, nationality and political convictions. I will also link this breakdown to a specific historical moment at which the film's story is located, a moment of transition from a modern to a post-modern world; and I will argue that on several levels, the film is best understood as an expression of the profound historical and conceptual anxiety that attended the onset of the "post-ideological" age.

It should be clear that a number of key terms in this paragraph will need to be pinned down if the discussion is to be useful: at the least, "androgyny," "gender," "modern," "post-modern," and "post-ideological."

Now, it is probably not necessary that one define all of these terms *before* starting analysis. As you may have noticed, the above paragraph could well function as a roadmap for the paper, and if this were the case, and each sentence in the paragraph was to represent a major section, it would probably be possible

to define “androgyny” and “gender” (which are obviously interrelated) in the set-up for the first section, and leave “modern,” “post-modern” and “post-ideological” until the outset of the third and last.

At the very least, however, it will hardly be possible to get the paper started without defining “androgyny,” since the way one understands the term determines the very selection of objects (aspects of the film) for analysis. This is especially true since “androgyny,” if left undefined, is a dangerously broad and ambiguous word that could mean many different things to different readers. For example, the only definition of the word given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is as a technical term in biology: “Union of sexes in one individual; hermaphroditism.” Now, as you will realize if you have seen *M. Butterfly*, the film contains no instances of such anatomical hermaphroditism, and if this was our definition, there would be nothing to analyze.

Note, by the way, that this is the *only* definition given in the *OED*, and yet it does not suit the purposes of the paper. This shows that it is sometimes not adequate to refer to a general English dictionary (even the greatest!) when defining a term for use in a scholarly paper.

So, if the word is not being used in the sense we find in the *Oxford*, what does it mean? The writer is referring, of course, to a more metaphorical use of the term, often found in literary criticism, gender studies, and other fields. This usage broadens the word from its technical biological usage to refer to “the presence of traits commonly identified with both *genders* in a single individual.” Already, then, we have the bare bones of a working definition:

For the purposes of this paper, “androgyny” will refer to a mixture of traits usually considered proper to both genders in a single individual, so that the individual is ambiguous in terms of *gender*. This use of the term to refer to an ambiguity of gender characteristics should not be confused with the use of the term in biology, where it refers to anatomical hermaphroditism, or the simultaneous presence of features of both biological sexes. No such biological reference is intended at any point in this paper.

Sharp readers will already have noticed that this much, however, does not settle the issue. The definition as we have it so far depends upon an implicit contrast between the italicized terms “gender” and “sex.” This is why we said earlier that the definitions of “androgyny” and “gender” will be interrelated. One frequently finds a pair or set of terms that require definition in relation to one another, and writing can gain immensely in clarity and precision when such key terms are used in a mutually consistent and illuminating fashion.

Let’s add a definition of “gender,” then:

“Gender” here refers to the identity of a human subject as male or female individual, as constituted by factors other than their anatomical features (especially sex organs). For the latter, anatomical distinction, we reserve the word “sex.” In distinction from sex, gender is typically marked by behaviors, emotive attitudes, speech patterns, dress and so forth that are interpreted in a given cultural context as typical of either masculinity or femininity—in short, by systems of signs that represent biological sex in cultural codes.

Clearly, having such a definition will make things much clearer than they would be otherwise. It also makes an implicit contract with the reader that says: I undertake to use these terms in this sense. It invites the reader to hold you to your definition, and thereby keeps your argument honest.

Often, as with this example, terms that require definition are drawn from one or another domain of theoretical scholarship. In this example, we are dealing with a definition of gender and androgyny close to the way the term is used in gender studies and literary criticism (they in turn developed it out of psychoanalysis). There is often a close overlap, then, between sections of a paper defining terms and those that lay theoretical groundwork for the argument and acknowledge theoretical debts.

You will frequently find, then, that the most effective way of defining a term is to refer to the work of one or more scholars. For example, we might find the following definition early in a paper arguing that deficiency of social capital was a major impediment



to democratic reform in post-war Korea:

In this paper, I shall use the term “social capital” in the sense given it by R. D. Putnam and other theorists, to mean “those resources inherent in social relations which facilitate collective action.”

You need not always have the firepower of academic big guns to back up your definitions, however. Indeed, one of the beauties of the definition is that it offers the freedom to define to suit your own purposes (within reason). To return to the analysis of androgyny in *M. Butterfly*, you might wish to restrict your analysis further by making the following stipulation:

While these definitions of “gender” and “androgyny” remain quite broad, for the purposes of this paper I will consider as androgyny only instances so consistent and pronounced as to give the impression that an individual is actually of the other gender, or at least that he or she is fundamentally atypical of his or her own gender.

It is even possible to define a term entirely according to your own lights, as suits the purposes of your project (see below for examples). There is a limit to this process of idiosyncratic definition, however, and you have to be careful not to violate the basic sense of the terms you use. For example, few people would be able to accept the definitions given in this example, even temporarily for the purposes of a given project:

For the purposes of this paper, “mother” and “father” will be defined as follows: the “mother” is the parent that spends the most time with the child and acts as primary caregiver, and the “father” is the less involved parent, regardless of biological sex. Thus, it is possible to have a biologically male “mother” and a biologically female “father.”

This does too much violence to our basic sense of what constitutes a mother or a father, and most readers would probably demand very good reasons before they would go along with these definitions, even for the purposes of argument.

This example has grown to be quite extensive, and you should not get the impression that a paper must have such a detailed definition of some term to

be valid. Here are some further examples of thesis statements followed immediately by clarification of a pivotal term. First, a definition from authority:

In this paper, I will argue that the discourse of race that developed around the Boxer Uprising in late nineteenth century China contains many components of a nascent nationalism, and further, that the existence of such proto-nationalistic discourse in China at this time poses serious problems for Benedict Anderson’s account of how nationalism rose and spread in the modern era. My use of the term “nationalism” here follows Benedict Anderson’s definition of the term as an ideology of belonging and loyalty to a “nation,” where a “nation” is defined as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”

Second, a creative definition, almost entirely by the writer’s own lights:

In this paper, I will argue that the later films of Fifth Generation film-makers like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige were produced primarily for foreign consumption, that is, for consumption in translation (with subtitles) in the art-house cinemas of the developed world. I will further argue this production for translation results in an alienated artwork.

For my purposes, “alienation” has multiple, interrelated senses. First, the work of art is literally “alienated” (made alien) in that it is exported from its country of origin, and consumed as exotica in its target market. Second, I use the term in a loosely Marxist sense. Karl Marx says that workers in a capitalist economy are “alienated” from the products of their labor; and just as factory workers do not own the things they make, so the overseas consumption of “Chinese” film alienates signifiers of Chineseness from their producers and rightful owners, and delivers them over to the possession and delectation of the global bourgeoisie. Third, once more taking my cue from Marx, I hold that these first two types of alienation involve “false consciousness”—a basic misapprehension of the real conditions of one’s economic and social existence. These films and the way they are consumed constitute a falsehood, and as such, “alienate” viewers by *making them other* to the truth of their existence.

Third, an *ad hoc* tightening of some common terms for the particular purposes of an individual paper:

In this paper, I will analyze the actions and policy of the People's Republic of China in the Spratly Islands over the last three decades. On the basis of this analysis, I will argue that these actions and policies show clearly that the PRC is now engaged in a clearly aggressive and expansionist military policy, although this fact has as yet received little recognition in the United States defense establishment.

For the purposes of this paper, a military policy is "aggressive" if it is consistently characterized by a pattern of first strikes against foreign powers with no substantial provocation. Such aggression is further "expansionist" if the most plausible motive for it, once rhetorical justification has been cleared aside, is the aggrandizement of a nation's sphere of influence, whether by annexation of territory, the application of pressure underwritten by a military threat, or other intermediate means.

Finally, we should mention an important difference between definitions and other typical opening components. Although we have introduced the definition of terms among the components that comprise the opening of the paper, definitions are, for obvious reasons, found throughout papers, in a way that is not so true of items like the thesis statement and the roadmap. Partly for this reason, we have treated definitions last in this section on openings, as a kind of transition into working parts like evidence and "signposts" that are used throughout a piece of writing.

Once more, think back to our *qin* example. We have said that it is not necessary to define *qin*. It *would* probably be necessary, however, for the author to state clearly his understanding of "nationalism" in his last section, where he argues that the theories developed by Party arts officials to justify the continued support of *qin* music betray a conflict between nationalism and Marxist orthodoxy. In this case, it would probably be best for the writer to offer such a definition near the beginning of that last section,

where the term will be coming into play.

As we said above, there may be cases where terms admit of little enough misunderstanding that they can be used without definition. In such cases, a paper may not contain much definition. It is important, however, that you ask yourself of all your key terms, and especially those upon which comprehension of your thesis hinges: Are these terms clear? Could an informed and well-intentioned reader misunderstand them? Can they be made clearer or more specific? Where definition is necessary or would help, a paper can suffer greatly if it is omitted.

This brings us, in closing, to the slightly vexed question of how you can know when terms require definition. Obviously, you need to avoid reinventing the wheel and defining terms everyone understands in the sense you intend them. It can be difficult for newcomers to a field to judge what is common knowledge, however. We suggest you consider giving a definition at least:

- When you use a term that comes from outside the strict province of your topic (for example, when you use a term from literary studies in a paper on politics).
- When you know it to be quite technical. For example, it may be a term that you have noticed scholars usually define on its first occurrence in published papers; or it may be an acronym that an author in one of your sources coined themselves.
- Where you have seen that it provokes disagreement in the field. In this situation, you need to stipulate for your reader the sense in which you intend the term, i.e. where you stand on debates about the proper sense of the term.
- Where you want to tailor a term for purposes of your own argument.

Of course, these general guidelines may still leave you in some doubt in specific cases. It is probably

best to err on the side of caution; if in doubt, define. Do not be afraid to learn from trial and error, and remember that you can always ask your professor or TF if they think the term requires defining.

There are many places where we define terms in this handbook, and we invite you to look at some of those definitions and see how you think we did. See the following, for example:

- Distinction between a “discipline” and a “field” (“What Is East Asian Studies?”)
- Distinction between “rewriting” and “editing” (“Editing”)
- “Nominalization” (“Editing”)
- “Preposed participial modification”
- “Sundered companions” (“Reordering”)
- Definition of Professor Puett’s arms as “patient” (“Active and passive voice”)

## OPENINGS: CONCLUSION

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We began our discussion of openings by noting the danger of writing an opening for opening’s sake. It is worthwhile to reiterate this point. You may find that your paper works best with only some of the pieces we treat in the previous sections—for example, you might write a short paper that only requires a thesis statement and a clarification of one key term before you dive into the argument proper. If this turns out to be the case, avoid the temptation of creating something extra for no good reason! If you try and create a token puzzle-posing paragraph merely for form’s sake, for example, it will probably show, and the result will be wooden and fruitless. Besides, you will be spending words from your word limit for nil or negative returns!

Above all, avoid the temptation to create a purely rhetorical “opening” for opening’s sake. You’ll soon find yourself blowing hot air (“Never in history, until the Cultural Revolution, had so much been suffered by so many for the whims of so few” etc.). If this happens, chances are your reader will spot it, and your paper (and possibly your grade) will suffer for it.



## The Body

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The previous section, on definitions, took us into the territory of elements that sometimes appear in the body of an essay as well as its opening. In the next section, we discuss the presentation and analysis of evidence, a topic that takes us well and truly into the body.

In this handbook, we present our advice about crafting the body of a piece of writing in two parts. First, in the sections on evidence and on counter-argument, we consider content. This is the bread and butter of academic argument—what you argue and how you argue it, step by step. Next, we consider the form this content is cast in. Our treatment of form comprises two sections on structural elements of the essay—“signposts,” or words, sentences and phrases that tell the reader where they are in the overall argument at any given point; and paragraphs.

### The Body

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- Evidence
- Some Typical Kinds of Evidence
- The Analysis of Evidence
- Counter-Argument

argument is still a sub-species of evidence and analysis—against one’s thesis rather than for it. Content, then, can be reduced almost entirely to evidence and analysis.

Exactly because the presentation and analysis of evidence is so central to academic argument, and therefore to the presentation of research findings in general, it is, strictly speaking, a huge, even endless subject. What constitutes adequate evidence? What types of evidence legitimately underwrite what types of knowledge? How can evidence be misused or misconstrued, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and how can we avoid being led into error by such abuses? A person’s development as a scholar and a thinker depends as much on increasing

sophistication, insight and experience with regard to these evidential problems as it does on accumulating a store of factual knowledge, or specific skills like languages. You will also see in your readings, lectures and section discussions that the controversies that animate fields of academic inquiry, too, often boil down to honest disagreements over whether one can legitimately reason from a given body of evidence to certain conclusions.

For this reason, this handbook does not pretend to give the last word on what constitutes valid evidence for an argument, or how evidence is best presented or analyzed. We will simply try and give you some starting points so that you can think constructively about the problems involved, critically evaluate the evidence presented in your readings, and exercise due care in the way you choose and handle evidence in your own written work.

The most basic rule of thumb for using evidence in an academic argument is that you must do so! In an academic environment, an argument without evidence is little better than mere bluster and woolgathering. This may seem obvious, but it is surprising how often teachers are presented with a

## EVIDENCE

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Some people might argue that the body of an academic paper is entirely about the presentation and analysis of evidence. This is not strictly true, since most cogent writing also contains a number of more or less purely structural elements that exist simply to keep the content of the argument in order, and to orient the reader within it. (We will deal with these structural elements in two later sections of this handbook: “Paragraphs” and “Signposts.”) If we restrict ourselves for the meantime to content, however, it is certainly true that a large part of the nutty-gritty work of an academic argument consists in presenting and analyzing evidence.

For this reason, in this part of our handbook, where we consider the content of the body of a piece of writing, we concern ourselves primarily with evidence and its analysis. This section is followed by a shorter section on counter-argument, but counter-



string of bald, unsupported assertions.

An academic argument is like the argument of an attorney before a judge. It is not enough for a prosecutor to say, “This person is clearly guilty,” or, “I am sure this person is guilty.” Reasons must be given, and ideally, they must be reasons that will ineluctably lead the judge to the desired conclusion, regardless of his or her personal quirks and convictions. Nothing less is required of a scholar who wishes to persuade her peers to share her conclusions.

We can illustrate the necessity of evidence by reference to the response paper, which (as we shall see in the section devoted to it) provides us with a simple test-tube environment in which to observe many elements of writing at work. When you sit down to write a response paper, you have a circumscribed set of readings—often, you are only writing about a single piece of work. To some extent, this simplifies the problem of citing sources—you can often get away with simply giving a page number for each point. It does *not*, however, mean that you can assume that your teacher knows *which part* of the piece you are basing a point upon, or that you can assume your teacher knows how *you* are interpreting a given passage. Response papers, then, as much as any other type of academic argument, require the presentation and analysis of supporting evidence.

Let’s begin with a counter-example illustrating the weakness that besets unsupported argument. It is not uncommon, especially early in the fall semester, for part of a response paper to read like this:

Jones argues that Chinese thought is fundamentally different from its Western counterpart in basic orientation and worldview. She claims that these differences can be accounted for by differences in physical and agricultural environment—particularly by the fact that the soil in the core Chinese cultural zone requires extensive irrigation works to give high yields of the available staples (sorghum, and later, rice); she further claims that when modified by such irrigational facilities, the land supported high population densities from relatively early in the historical period. Irrigation projects required the mobilization of large quantities of labor power under the direction of despotic rule; high population density entailed crowding living conditions, under

which heightened sensitivity to the subjective needs of one’s neighbors and fellows was essential to social stability. These conditions in turn favored styles of thought characterized by submission to a dominant, rigid orthodoxy, and emphasis on the group rather than the individual. One further gains the impression that for Jones these traits are negative, and that by virtue of them, the Chinese tradition fails to measure up on an implicit (Western) yardstick.

Now this is perfectly serviceable, clear writing, and it *might* be an efficient and coherent summary of Jones’s argument. On the strength of this presentation, however, we simply cannot tell; there is not a single reference to Jones’s text.

What kind of evidence can be cited to support the argument here? How can we fix this counter-example to make it into a positive model?

First, note that much of the paragraph makes claims about *what Jones says*, not first-hand claims about Chinese history itself. We are not concerned to establish, for example, that “the soil in the core Chinese cultural zone requires extensive irrigation works...,” but rather that *Jones says* it does. We don’t need a tabulated analysis of nutrient levels in core samples from the Yellow River valley, then; just a reference to the place where Jones makes this claim. Beyond that point, the truth of the claim itself is Jones’s business. Many of the evidential concerns in the first part of the paragraph are similar, and by inserting a reference to Jones’s text for each of the substantial points we claim she makes, the evidential basis of the paragraph can already be greatly strengthened:

Jones argues that Chinese thought is fundamentally different from its Western counterpart in basic orientation and worldview (212). She claims that these differences can be accounted for by differences in physical and agricultural environment (213), particularly, by the fact that the soil in the core Chinese cultural zone requires extensive irrigation works to give high yields of the available staples (sorghum, and later, rice) (214); she further claims that when modified by such irrigational facilities, the land supported high population densities from relatively early in the historical period (221). Irrigation projects required the mobilization of large quantities of



labor power under the direction of despotic rule (215-6); high population density entailed crowding living conditions, under which heightened sensitivity to the subjective needs of one's neighbors and fellows was essential to social stability (222). These conditions in turn favored styles of thought characterized by submission to a dominant, rigid orthodoxy (217-20), and emphasis on the group rather than the individual (224-7).

Note that nothing about the substantive content of the paragraph has changed. The impression this paragraph will make on a reader is very different, however. Each key point is now solidly documented by relevant evidence (here, Jones's article itself), and readers are given the opportunity to check for themselves any points they find dubious. In other words, the paragraph has become more meticulous and more responsible.

Note also, by the way, that so far, none of these references to Jones's text is necessarily motivated by the fact that we are quoting Jones directly. Some sophomores in the tutorial in past years have seemed to be under the impression that one need only give a page number in the text under discussion when citing directly. **This is a mistake!** You should cite the text each time you say that the text says something, so that your reader knows where you mean in the text.

Some further evidential doubts might still linger, however. Perhaps the reader might wonder how fairly this paragraph characterizes Jones's own argument. Now let us suppose that some of the key phrases in this paragraph are, in fact, taken directly from Jones. Of course, conventions of intellectual honesty and avoidance of plagiarism also demand that direct quotations be acknowledged, but here, we should also note how the presentation of phrases found in Jones's paper as direct quotations increases the accuracy and rigor of the paragraph:

Jones argues that Chinese thought is fundamentally different from its Western counterpart in "basic orientation and worldview" (212). She claims that these differences can be accounted for by differences in physical and agricultural environment (213), particularly, by the fact that the soil in the core Chinese cultural zone

requires extensive irrigation works to give high yields of the available staples (sorghum, and later, rice) (214); she further claims that when modified by such irrigational facilities, the land supported high population densities from "relatively early" in the historical period (221). Irrigation projects required the mobilization of large quantities of labor power under the direction of "despotic" rule (215-6); high population density entailed crowding living conditions, under which heightened sensitivity to "the subjective needs of one's neighbors and fellows was essential to social stability" (222). These conditions in turn favored styles of thought characterized by "submission to a dominant... rigid orthodoxy" (217-20), and emphasis on the group rather than the individual (224-7).

The tagging of these quotations as such makes the paragraph more persuasive. To return to our courtroom analogy, quotations are like the "exhibits" ("Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I give you Exhibit A")—pieces of solid material evidence that embody a key point in tangible form.

This example also shows that a direct quotation—a piece of evidence—can be as slender as a single word. Some students seem to labor under the impression that if one takes anything less than a stand-alone phrase or sentence from a source, it does not count as a quote, and, conversely, that if one is to quote, one must quote at least a phrase or sentence. Neither notion is correct. As you can see above, a responsible writer will acknowledge any words borrowed from another writer, however few; more than this, such acknowledgement does not compromise your own writing, but *strengthens* it. In fact, your writing is more efficient if you only quote as many words from a writer as you need to make a point.

The paragraph now has an abundance of evidence for its claims about Jones's argument. This leaves us with the last sentence of our original paragraph, which moves from paraphrasing Jones to discussing a possible implicit bias in her argument. In draft, that sentence read:

One further gains the impression that for Jones these traits are negative, and that by virtue of them, the Chinese tradition fails to measure up on an implicit (Western) yardstick.

Thus unsupported, this is a very flimsy statement. It flatly presents the subjective impression of the writer, presumably in the hope that the reader will have received the same impression and agree. Now, even if it looks flimsy, this statement may well be valid; indeed, it may be very important for the remainder of the response paper to establish that Jones does indeed betray bias, and entirely possible to gain most readers' agreement on the matter. To do so will require a slightly different kind of evidence, however.

In previous parts of the paragraph, where it was simply a matter of paraphrasing Jones's explicit argument, a page reference was sufficient at each point, since we could trust that a reader would be able to see which part of the page we meant. Here, however, we need to be very specific about exactly what Jones says that gives us the impression the traits she identifies in Chinese thought are negative. This can be accomplished quite economically, however:

One further gains the impression that for Jones these traits are negative, and that by virtue of them, the Chinese tradition fails to measure up on an implicit (Western) yardstick. Chinese thought is "incurable" in its deference to classical authority (218); it "failed" to develop a "cogent jurisprudence of individual responsibility" (225); it is not "fully rational in the Greek sense of the term" (226).

Note that these may be only three of a dozen or more places that could be pointed out to establish Jones's bias. Where a few well-chosen examples suffice, it is not always necessary to be exhaustive, especially when battling a word limit.

Our full paragraph is now well documented, and hopefully, if you compare the final result with our first draft above, the defects of the former—bereft as it is of all evidence—will be clear:

Jones argues that Chinese thought is fundamentally different from its Western counterpart in "basic orientation and worldview" (212). She claims that these differences can be accounted for by differences in physical and agricultural environment (213), particularly, by the fact that the soil in the core Chinese cultural zone requires extensive irrigation works to give high yields of the available staples (sorghum, and later, rice) (214), and that, when modified by such irrigational facilities, the land supported high population densities from "relatively early" in the historical period (221). Irrigation projects required the mobilization of large quantities of labor power under the direction of "despotic" rule (215-6); high population density entailed crowding living conditions, under which heightened sensitivity to "the subjective needs of one's neighbors and fellows was essential to social stability" (222). These conditions in turn favored styles of thought characterized by "submission to a dominant... rigid orthodoxy" (217-20), and emphasis on the group rather than the individual (224-7). One further gains the impression that for Jones these traits are negative, and that by virtue of them, the Chinese tradition fails to measure up on an implicit (Western) yardstick. Chinese thought is "incurable" in its deference to classical authority (218); it "failed" to develop a "cogent jurisprudence of individual responsibility" (225); it is not "fully rational in the Greek sense of the term" (226).

Evidence, then, is essential to a good argument. In many types of written work, including response papers, much of the evidence will be of this secondary type—evidence that another scholarly source does in fact say what you say it says. Here are many other types of evidence you might cite, however, and so we now turn to a discussion of some representative types of evidence.

## SOME TYPICAL KINDS OF EVIDENCE

We will first consider some types of evidence more often found in the social sciences.

Let us consider a paper whose thesis statement paragraph reads as follows:

The recent low birth rates in Japan—lower than replacement rate—and the concomitant aging of the Japanese population may be attributed, in part, to the desire of new generations of Japanese women to have sustained, meaningful careers, coupled with the failure of workplace structures and culture to adapt to that change. A Japanese woman can only pursue a serious, competitive career if she matches the long work hours and long years of complete commitment to work still expected of her male colleagues. This means that it is not possible to combine active, intensive child-rearing with career development. Confronted with the choice between losing their toehold in the job market if they take extended maternity leave or even work part-time, or returning to full-time work and placing children in full-time childcare almost immediately after birth, many women are choosing neither—they are choosing not to have children at all.

This is a relatively complex argument. What sorts of evidence might we demand before we accepted its main thesis as true? We would probably at least demand evidence to support each of the following assertions:

1. Recent birthrates in Japan are below replacement levels.
2. Younger Japanese women are keen to pursue serious competitive careers.
3. Younger Japanese women are free to pursue such careers and are in fact doing so.
4. Japanese workplace culture demands long hours over many years without any long break, and the career prospects of those who do not conform to this model are seriously compromised. These expectations are no different for women.
5. Japanese women who remain childless by choice themselves attribute their decision to do so primarily to a conflict between the demands of child-rearing and career prospects. Alternatively, if they do not do so, we can otherwise show that this is indeed

the reason, and offer an explanation for the failure of women to be aware of it, or to offer it when asked why they are childless.

6. The number of such women for whom the claims above can be shown true is enough to constitute a major factor in population decline.

Let us consider evidence that might help establish some of these conclusions.

Let us first take (1): “Recent birthrates in Japan are below replacement levels.” This is going to require well-sourced statistics. Students obviously do not have to go out and gather these statistics themselves, but can find them in official publications of the Japanese government, or in a sound and properly sourced scholarly publication.

The use of statistics is a discipline unto itself, and students who anticipate making regular use of statistics in their work should take one or more of the specialist courses on offer at Harvard. This handbook will not even attempt to teach you what is required for the sound and rigorous use of statistics. It is often the case, however, that students whose primary interests will not require expertise in statistics need to cite statistics from secondary scholarship to make a point. When this is the case, a little thought about exactly what the figures you quote do and do not tell us can help avoid some common mistakes.

In this example, it will not be sufficient to simply present a graph or table of the birth rate in Japan over the period relevant to the study. Figures always require contextualization if they are to make sense. Here, we will also need to know what is considered the “replacement” birth rate. It would also help our argument to have statistics showing that experts project birth rates will remain low or continue to fall, i.e. that if the rate is currently below replacement, that this is not a temporary hiccup for some extraneous reason. Our argument also makes mention of the “graying” of Japan—the ongoing increase in the proportion of elderly persons in the population as a whole—and it might help contextualize our claims, and make our readers aware of their full implications,

if we present figures that show the existence and extent of this problem.

Statistics, then, are one major type of evidence you will probably find yourself using or considering frequently. In addition to (1) in our argument above, we would probably want to adduce relevant statistics to establish points (3), that “Japanese women are now free to pursue competitive careers and are in fact doing so”; and (6), that “the number of such women for whom the claims above can be shown true is enough to constitute a major factor in population decline.” We might also do so, in part, for (4), that “Japanese workplace culture demands long hours over many years without any long break, and the career prospects of those who do not conform to this model are seriously compromised.” We might use statistics to show, for example, that men and women who took significant long breaks from career-path work, or those who reduced their work hours significantly to meet family commitments, had lower promotion rates than peers who did not.

Let us now turn to another type of evidence by considering (2): “Younger Japanese women are keen to pursue serious competitive careers.”

To some degree, this claim, too, could be supported by statistics, as for example if we gave figures that showed that younger Japanese women are in fact working more than earlier generations of Japanese women, and in “serious competitive careers” (note that we would probably need a definition of this latter term—see “Defining Key Terms”).

Even if we did show that women were in fact working in such jobs, however, we would not necessarily have shown that they were doing so by personal choice. We could imagine, for example, that increasing numbers of women, or their husbands, were biologically sterile, perhaps due to pollutants in an increasingly industrialized environment, and that they were working because they simply could not have children. Cause and effect would be the reverse of our thesis: greater commitment to work is a result of childlessness, rather than childlessness being a

result of greater commitment to work. Statistics showing that women are actually working, then, would better establish point (3), that Japanese women are now free to pursue such careers and are indeed doing so.

How might we show (2) that women are working by choice—that, as our thesis statement at least implied, work is valuable for them as the source of new freedoms and a different type of personal worth and identity? This is a question of attitudes across a large demographic segment of an entire society, and obviously, such questions are best answered by asking the people concerned. But how many people?

Students in previous years have tried to argue similar points on the basis of astoundingly unrepresentative evidence. For example, one student tried to show that there is a significant level of anti-American sentiment in Taiwan by conducting a single informal email interview with a Taiwanese friend. Another argued in a response paper that “Chinese people seem to think” such-and-such, and supported the point with an anecdote about a single conversation with a Chinese person met on a backpacking trip. Obviously, neither of these sources is sufficient to prove anything like the level of generality claimed. The Taiwanese friend could have been a freak anti-American in a population otherwise sycophantically in love with the US; the backpacking student’s Chinese interlocutor could have been a stray lunatic, prone to uncontrollable attacks of chatting with tourists in parks.

Obviously, one common type of evidence for a claim like (2), that “Japanese women are keen to pursue competitive careers,” is a more qualitative survey. The survey, like statistics, is complex territory, and again, this handbook cannot go into the details of what makes a survey sound. Methods exist in disciplines like sociology to ensure that a survey is sufficiently representative, that the questions are not leading, and so on; students who anticipate that they will regularly be considering questions of knowledge, attitudes, beliefs or experiences across broad social groups should find a way to incorporate study of sur-



vey techniques into their degree program through courses on offer in other departments at Harvard.

Again as with statistics, however, it often happens that many of us make passing use of the results of surveys in the scholarly literature as part of our arguments, without conducting such surveys ourselves, or without the survey necessarily being the primary form of evidence we cite. When this is the case, it is again necessary to bring an intelligent critical gaze to the material we wish to use. We must be sure that the survey does in fact establish its purported conclusions. This includes being sure that there is room in the question structure of the survey for results to emerge that disappoint the expectations of researchers conducting the survey; that there are not plausible explanations for the survey results other than those given by the authors of the survey; that the survey subjects constitute a sufficiently large and representative sample of the social group whose attitudes are under study; and so on.

Survey results, then, are another major type of evidence, and in the context of our current argument, we can anticipate that something along these lines would be required also to establish (5): “Japanese women who remain childless by choice themselves attribute their decision to do so primarily to a conflict between the demands of child-rearing and career prospects.” We can also imagine that we could find such evidence for (4): “Japanese workplace culture demands long hours over many years without any long break, and the career prospects of those who do not conform to this model are seriously compromised.” Researchers might have conducted surveys of managerial executives who regularly make promotion decisions, for example, and been able to show that anything short of total commitment of one’s time to work prejudices chances of promotion.

Note that parts (2), (4) and (5) of this argument might also be supported by more in-depth interviews with representative members of the social group or groups under study. Here, instead of dealing, for example, with a set of constrained and statistically analyzable responses to a relatively targeted and

delimited set of questions, as with a multi-choice survey, we could imagine another way of eliciting evidence in which subjects are asked more open-ended questions, and their responses or parts of them are reported at greater or lesser length in their own words.

Of course, there is no hard-and-fast distinction between this sort of “interview” and a “survey,” nor between these and “statistics.” Another way of making the distinction is to talk about a continuum between more “quantitative” and “qualitative” studies, where the former elicit information in a format that is susceptible to statistical study, and the latter elicits information in the form of individualized, verbalized responses that require more subjective interpretation on the part of researchers. As this way of making the distinction also shows, statistical evidence and evidence from various types of “survey,” including to some extent more qualitative surveys, often overlap.

This range from the strictly quantifiable realm of statistics, on the one hand, to more qualitative types of evidence, on the other, can in fact be extended further by considering the role to be played by anecdotal evidence and single cases. Obviously, an individual case means little if it is not supported by other types of evidence that can suggest that it is significantly representative. This was the problem with the example we gave earlier, where a student had tried to argue that “Chinese people think” this or that by recounting a single conversation had with a Chinese person on a backpacking trip. This problem is shared by all single cases, including in-depth interviews and even, often enough, historical example.

Anecdotal evidence and other types of singular evidence have their place, however. When they are placed in a context of more generalized evidence showing that certain phenomena hold over a range of circumstances or for a sizeable social group, they can add invaluable depth and detail to a picture that would otherwise remain mere broad brush-strokes.

We can illustrate this by returning to our example of the relationship between the career aspirations of

Japanese women and birth rates. Imagine that we had found an article in the popular Japanese press following the lives of two sisters. The elder sister qualified as a lawyer and began a promising career in a major Tokyo law firm. She married, and when she had a child she took significant amounts of time off work. She then returned to work, to find herself passed up for promotion in favor of less impressive peers who took little or no leave and worked long hours. She had told the firm that she was committed to the law and happy in her position, and her superiors had assured her that her prospects of promotion were not affected by maternity leave. She also heard through the grapevine, however, that in a meeting to discuss promotions, a senior partner questioned whether she could be relied upon to remain at the firm long-term, or whether she might not ultimately become a full-time housewife.

When her second child was born, the lawyer put the baby directly into full-time care, and returned to long hours at the office. This left her feeling guilty. Her second child seemed more irascible and less contented than her first, and she worried that this was due to long hours away from its parents. Despite her demonstrated commitment to work and excellent results, she was still passed up for promotion. In the end, dispirited, she left the law firm, feeling that her prospects there were irreversibly blighted, and that she might as well devote herself to her children while they were still young. Since quitting she has frequently been depressed.

The younger of the two sisters, a promising architect, tells the reporter that having watched her go through these troubles, she has recently turned down a proposal of marriage from a man she liked very much. The man was adamant that he wanted children, and she felt that it would not be possible for her to balance childrearing with her career.

It is important to note that on its own, this example really establishes none of the larger points that we want to make in our argument as a whole. It is a single example, and cannot prove anything about trends across a whole generation of Japanese women. If, on

the other hand, this example is given in the context of an argument where statistical evidence, survey results, and so forth have established that these trends do indeed exist, this example adds invaluable detail and depth to the argument. This is the real power of the individual case, even if it is anecdotal, when it is supported by other types of relevant evidence.

The example of the relationship between women's career paths and the birthrate in Japan has enabled us to draw out a broad range of partially overlapping types of evidence, from statistics, through quantitative and qualitative interviews, to individual cases and anecdotal evidence. It is important that we are aware of the nature of these various types of evidence – of their strengths, but also their limitations. At the strictly quantitative extreme, we tend to find a high degree of objective reliability, but relatively little nuance and depth. At the strongly qualitative end of the spectrum, as we have seen, we find a great deal of detail and nuance, but relatively little power of generalization. Strong argument often artfully combines these various types of evidence, using relatively hard, statistical fact to characterize the bare bones of a phenomenon, and then fleshing out those bones with the more selective and nuanced, but also more subjective, evidence provided by quantitative testimony.

Note that as with all types of evidence, statistics survey results, and the other types of evidence we have considered in this section must not only be presented, but also analyzed and interpreted. We will return to this point below when we consider the analysis of evidence.

As we moved away from straight statistics and towards the qualitative end of the spectrum in our consideration of the last example, we also moved gradually in the direction of another key type of evidence—citation from **primary texts and documents**. “Primary” here means that the text or document in question was produced by authors or actors that form part of the object under study, and is opposed to “secondary,” which means that a text or document is produced as part of a scholarly endeavor to analyze and



understand the object.

Thus, for example, items of diplomatic correspondence between the Tibetan and Tang Chinese courts would be considered primary documents. These documents were created as a direct part of the phenomenon to which they bear witness, and which a historian of Sino-Tibetan relations might be concerned to analyze.

Historiographic analyses of the relationship between the two courts as recorded in that correspondence, on the other hand, are “secondary,” be they the studies of contemporary Western scholars, of Qing historians in China, or of any other party external to the place and period actually under study. The example we gave above of how to present evidence in a response paper (“Jones” on Chinese thought) was a good instance of the presentation of secondary, as opposed to primary, evidence.

If we understand the notion of “primary text” broadly, then this sort of evidence is found in both the social sciences and the humanities. In the social sciences, in-depth interviews used to establish that certain attitudes prevail in a given social group, as in our previous example, could be considered a type of “primary document.” So, too, might passages, for example, from white papers, treaty documents, official government press releases, etc., in the context of political analysis. The social sciences also make extensive use of many of the same types of primary sources that we will discuss below as typical of the humanities, though often from a different perspective to that which humanists bring to bear.

Even though there are many such instances of citation from primary documents to be found in the social sciences, there is a sense in which the analysis of such primary documents is more characteristic of the humanities. Very frequently, work in the humanities boils down to the analysis of one type or another of “primary text”: an image in art history; a treatise in philosophy; documentary records in many types of historical work; a poem, play or story in literary analysis; a ritual structure or doctrinal tract in religious studies. In fact, so much is this sort of work

characteristic of the humanities that one might conceivably (if controversially) define the humanities as a whole in terms of their pivotal engagement with one form or another of primary text. We might say, for example, that the humanities undertake the study of such cultural objects, rather than of a reality external to them (note, however, the problems this definition would create for the placement of history, in particular).

Conversely, the sort of evidence we considered in the previous extended example—statistics, surveys, and so on—while not unknown in the humanities, is much more characteristic of the social sciences.

As we have just noted, there are very many types of primary text or document. We have already mentioned things like philosophical and literary writings, historical records, art objects, interviews, official documents, and religious rituals. We might further add such types of evidence as personal correspondence, diaries, account and ledger books, grave goods, architecture, the layout of cities, or social codes governing behaviors like eating or intermarriage; the list is, in fact, potentially endless. This variety makes it impossible and unnecessary to give any general guidelines about how to present such evidence, and in fact, the plain presentation of the evidence is usually a fairly straightforward process—you quote the text, reproduce a photograph or sketch of an image or object, and so on.

Things get tricky, however, when, having once presented the evidence, you have to tie it into the rest of your argument. This is a question of how you analyze and interpret your evidence, and it is to this problem that we now turn.



## THE ANALYSIS OF EVIDENCE

Sometimes, evidence speaks for itself. This happy state of affairs is rare, however; it requires that there be only one conceivable way of reading, and human understanding being what it is, this is seldom the case. Most of the time, then, it is not sufficient to find the relevant evidence and present it; you will also need to analyze each piece of evidence as you present it, and make it clear to the reader what significance you see in that evidence for your overall argument.

As we have seen in the previous pages, there are many types of evidence that you might present. All types of evidence equally require analysis, however, which is to say they require it nearly all the time. For the sake of simplicity, however, we will illustrate our points mostly with the analysis of written texts. The same lessons apply, *mutatis mutandi*, for statistical tables, graphs, images, maps and so on.

Our first example comes from a paper by Kwong-loi Shun on the relationship between the concepts of *jen* (Pinyin: *ren*; “benevolence”) and *li* (“rites”) in the *Analects* of Confucius.<sup>1</sup> Shun is in the process of outlining a position that holds that *li* is instrumental to *jen*—that is, roughly, that *jen* is an inner state, and that the ritual forms of *li* serve to cultivate that state where it is lacking, and to express it where it is present:

[T]here are passages in which Confucius speaks as if there is a justification for the revision of or departure from an existing rule of *li*... In 2.23 and 3.9, Confucius describes changes in *li* from the Hsia to the Shang and then to the Chou dynasty, and in 3.14 he advocates the *li* practices of Chou over those of Hsia and Shang. These passages do not yet imply a justification for the changes or for Confucius' preference for Chou *li*. However... a justification is implied in 9.3, where Confucius says:

Using a linen cap is *li*. Today, black silk is used instead. This is more economical, and I follow the majority. Bowing before ascending the steps is *li*. Today, people bow after ascending them. This is presumptuous and, although it is contrary

to the majority, I follow the practice of bowing before ascending.

...Confucius is here not just advocating the retention of or departure from a rule of *li*, but is also giving reasons for doing so. He cites economic consideration in favor of replacing the linen ceremonial cap used in rituals with one made of black silk. Economic consideration cannot be the only relevant consideration, since otherwise it would have justified the elimination of the ceremonial cap altogether. Presumably, it can justify departure from a *li* rule only when the efficacy of the *li* rule in serving its purpose remains unaffected. This explains why Confucius rejects departure from the traditional *li* rule of bowing to the prince before ascending the steps to the upper hall. This *li* rule serves as a means of paying homage to the prince, and to depart from the rule without good reason shows disrespect for the prince, thereby defeating the purpose of the rule.

Note that Shun's analysis of his evidence here falls into two parts. First, he sets up his quotation, priming the reader to look for the aspect of it that will be relevant for his argument. He does this by discussing other *Analects* passages where change in *li* is relevant, and then uses these other passages as a foil against which to bring out the key aspect of this passage for his argument—that change is here *justified*. This will ultimately serve his larger argument because he interprets this justification to be based upon the assumption that *li* exists to serve a purpose ulterior to itself, that purpose being *jen*: in other words, *li* is instrumental to *jen*.

Shun then cites his evidence—*Analects* 9.3.

He immediately sets about analyzing the passage, drawing out exactly those aspects of it that the reader must notice for his argument to hold water. He does this by a nice series of precise steps.

First, he points out that the passage gives reasons for the retention or modification of *li*, that is, that it does indeed justify practices in terms of ends external to *li* itself. He then uses the example of the cap to show that economic justification does not account for all that is going on in the passage—an excellent illus-

<sup>1</sup>Kwong-loi Shun, “Jen and Li in the Analects,” *Philosophy East & West* 43.3 (July 1993), 457-479.

tration of the consideration of counter-argument in miniature (see our section on “Counter-Argument” below), since there would be no room for *li* being instrumental to *jen* if economic imperatives were the sole deciding factor in Confucius’s reasoning.

Shun then analyzes the second example of the bow to suggest that the further, more fundamental criterion at work in both instances is whether a practice respects or violates the integrity of sentiment behind the ritual act. In the context of his larger argument, it will be clear that the sentiment so respected or violated is *jen*, and Shun has made a neat case for his main point, that *li* is best understood in this passage as instrumental to *jen*.

Shun thus gives us an excellent example of the way close reading can tease out of a piece of evidence more than might otherwise be immediately obvious. Try going back and imagining what you would have got from the evidence if Shun had simply cited 9.3, without the supporting analysis in the following paragraph. You might not have arrived unassisted at the conclusions Shun requires us to accept for his larger argument to follow.

The analysis of one’s evidence need not always be so detailed, of course. With our next example, from Robert H. Sharf’s *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism*, we stay with the concept of *li* or “rite,” but here our author is citing from a secondary source. Sharf is quoting another scholar, Joseph Needham, as part of an argument that seeks to compare *li* to Western “morality”:

The classical understanding of *li* has little to do with Western conceptions of morality that entail a congruence between inner intention and outer activity. *Li* is behavior that resonates with the flow of cosmic forces (*yin* and *yang*, *ch’i*, the five phases, and so on). As Needham explains:

One would not appreciate the full force of the word *li* if one failed to recognize that the customs, usages and ceremonials which it summed up were not simply those which had empirically been found to agree with the

instinctive feelings of rightness experienced by the Chinese people “everywhere under Heaven”; they were those which, it was believed, accorded with the “will” of Heaven, indeed with the structure of the universe. Hence the basic disquiet aroused in the Chinese mind by crimes or any disputes was because they were felt to be disturbances in the Order of Nature.


Thus the king’s ritual conduct was more than a public enactment of social and ethical norms for others to emulate. According to the formulations of the Chou classics, the king occupies a pivotal position in the hierarchical structure of the cosmos, mediating between heaven and earth. His ritual life, consisting of a complex cycle of sacrifices and offerings, mirrored the passage of the constellations and planets through the heavens...<sup>2</sup>

Sharf does not analyze Needham’s writing at anything like the microscopic level of Shun reading the *Analects*. His analysis is more a matter of paraphrasing the main point he is taking from Needham, and fleshing it out with a little supporting background information. Sharf’s comments perform a vital function, nonetheless. It is as if he is checking that his readers are still “on the same page” as he is; that the quotation didn’t send them off on some unanticipated tangent that will lead them astray from the trajectory he is plotting with his own argument.

Our next example is taken from an actual past sophomore paper by Jia Jia Liu, analyzing the *anime* (Japanese animated film) *Ghost in the Shell*. The plot of the film prominently features androgyny and cyborgism, and Jia Jia is arguing that both are means of figuring a crisis of subjective identity. We join her when she is already in full flight, and we miss a little context, but here she cites a particular scene in the film as further evidence that it figures subjectivity in this crisis-ridden manner:

The implications of such a crisis of identity are profound—it leads to the realization that the subject is empty, a view reflective of post-structuralist criticism and also of the illusion of the self at the

<sup>2</sup>Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: Kuroda Institute through University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), 89; citing Joseph Needham, “Human Laws and Laws of Nature in China and the West,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12:1 (1951), 14.



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heart of Buddhism. Emptiness is conveyed by the striking visual styles of certain scenes. After the beginning credits, the film opens onto a pitch-black room with a single rectangular window right in the center [Jia Jia here inserted a still to illustrate this scene]. Bright skyscrapers fill up the window as if they were a picture framed by it... the actual focus of the scene lies not with the skyscrapers but with Kusanagi, whom we only see intermittently, as her black silhouette crosses the bright window. Kusanagi's presence is not represented positively, through a visual depiction of her physical features—her body, her clothes, etc.—but negatively, through her shadow. In fact, we perceive her individual shape at all only because of the contrast between her dark silhouette and the light window. When she moves away from the window into the darkness of the frame, we lose sight of her completely. This has overtones of the Barthesian “emptiness of the sign,” where the sign itself is meaningless unless it is differentiated against other signs. What is of interest is not the actual substance of anything... but rather how one thing sits in relation to others—it is not that Kusanagi's own particular physical appearance distinguishes her from the buildings, but rather the pure difference between her shadow and their light... The human subject is thus no longer fixed in its essence; its essence shifts depending upon the circumstances...

Like Shun, Jia Jia sets up her evidence, framing it in terms of a particular concept through which she will ask us to read it—here, the emptiness of the subject as a sign. She then presents the evidence, in this case a visual image presented as both a still and a verbal description. The verbal description is already a form of analysis, in that she draws out certain aspects of the image as relevant to her point and disregards others. Intertwined with the straight description, however, we have an analysis that draws insightful and persuasive connections between particular aspects of the film text (the evidence) and the larger theoretical concepts around which the paper as a whole builds its arguments.

You can turn your reading to good effect into a school of writing—a laboratory for seeing what works, and how. Read with a critical eye to the way your authors analyze and paraphrase their argument, and weave their evidence into the skein of their own ideas. Do they do so effectively? How? What can you take from their methods and use in your own writing? Or do they fail? If so, why? What cautionary lessons can you draw from their failings?

We said in opening that the study of what comprises valid evidence, what constitutes an abuse of it, and how to profitably analyze it is endless, and a large part of our development as a scholars. There is no short-cut, then, to mastery of evidence and its analysis. We hope that this section and its companions in this handbook at least provide some pointers to orient you, so that you can profitably refine your understanding through your readings, your writing assignments and section discussion, and by digesting the feedback your teachers give to your work.

## COUNTER-ARGUMENT

Counter-argument, as we said above, is merely a sub-species of argument in general. Its mechanism conceals no mysteries not shared by the consideration and analysis of ordinary evidence. This section, therefore, primarily considers when we should consider counter-evidence, and what an argument gains if we do so.

As with many of the other working parts we have been considering so far in this handbook, it is sometimes possible to write a good paper without too much consideration of counter-evidence. There is no law graven in stone to state that to every good argument there is an opposite and equal counterargument. If it is not natural and intrinsic to the development of your argument, therefore, you should not forcibly introduce an artificial counter-argument just to spruce your paper up. If it is to be useful, then, consideration of counter-argument must be motivated, that is, it must have a purpose.

That said, if you are writing a paper and there are no points at which you feel compelled to try to refute counter-arguments, you might ask yourself whether you are not simply stating the obvious. We noted above (“Thesis Statement”) that one basic requirement of a thesis is that it be interesting—it should tell the reader something they did not know or would probably not have thought of otherwise. If you can find or think of no objections to your thesis, you could well be saying nothing new. One reason teachers urge their students to incorporate consideration of counter-arguments is that a worthy counter-argument is often a litmus test of a worthy thesis.

You are particularly likely to want to consider a counter-argument when it is likely to occur to a reader. You might also need to refute a counter-argument because it already exists—it might be a viewpoint articulated in work already published, which you are setting out to overturn. Another common source of counter-argument is in the hypotheses you consider yourself at some point in developing your ideas, and then discard in favor of something more

persuasive; a great way to convince your reader is to lead them through the very process whereby you yourself became convinced of your thesis.

Counter-arguments can vary in scale from a single sentence to an extended section. Sometimes a counter-argument constitutes an elaborate foil (see “Thesis Statement”) against which an entire paper is written and structured. A single paper can incorporate consideration of any number of counter-arguments of various scales.

We saw a small example of counter-argument in the quotation from Kwong-loi Shun in the previous section (“The Analysis of Evidence”). Shun is considering *Analects* 9.3, where Confucius explains that he approves of replacing a certain ceremonial cap dictated by ritual codes, but will not countenance the omission of a prescribed bow. Shun briefly considers, and neatly disposes of, the possibility that these ritual foibles can be entirely explained by economic motives:

[Confucius] cites economic consideration in favor of replacing the linen ceremonial cap used in rituals with one made of black silk. Economic consideration cannot be the only relevant consideration, since otherwise it would have justified the elimination of the ceremonial cap altogether. Presumably, it can justify departure from a li rule only when the efficacy of the li rule in serving its purpose remains unaffected.

Shun disposes of the economic argument in a single sentence. Counter-argument often requires no more attention than this, but an argument can be greatly strengthened by a gesture in its direction.

We will end this brief section with a more extended example, taken from a former student paper in which Shea Haynes argues that China’s actions in the Spratly Islands in recent decades indicate that its military establishment has moved from a passive, defensive posture to a policy of expansionist aggression (see “Defining Key Terms”). Shea includes an extended section analyzing the theory, advanced by some analysts, that China’s actions in the Spratlys have been primarily motivated by a need for increased access to petroleum reserves, the islands being oil-

rich. This is an important counter-argument to Shea's thesis, for if a need for oil could explain all of China's actions, the hypothesis that Chinese military policy is now expansionist would be seriously weakened.<sup>3</sup>

A number of scholars have asserted that China's actions reflect a desire to further its economic interests—namely, to procure the petroleum resources thought to be harbored in the Spratly Islands. These resources, some argue, are essential to an inward-looking nation like China, which is ever concerned with its self-sufficiency. Military considerations—for example, that China might be pursuing the islands to further its strategic presence in Southeast Asia—are clearly not the primary motivation. But a careful analysis reveals that it is the Spratlys' geo-strategic resources, not their petroleum resources, that are the main impetus for China's actions in the region.

This is an excellent set-up for the consideration of the counter-argument. The stakes for Shea's own thesis are clearly identified, and the last sentence gives the reader a clear sense of the direction he is headed.

Shea then fills the reader in on some background information. The Spratlys are thought by experts to be oil-rich; since 1993, China has been dependent upon oil imports; the Spratly oil would make a significant difference to China's self-sufficiency. Chinese scholars and government leaders have expressed concern about China's vulnerability to external influence, due to its dependence upon imported oil. This leads up to the crunch:

Given the Chinese government's obvious concern about its need to import foreign oil (and thereby sacrifice a piece of its sovereignty), one might imagine that the Spratly Islands and their additional oil resources would help alleviate this problem and perpetuate Chinese domestic stability.

Note that this counter-argument is stated as forcefully as possible, without pulling any punches. It has also been laid out in sufficient detail that one can appreciate its persuasive force.

Shea now turns to convincing his reader that there are cogent reasons for dismissing this argument.

[T]he conflicts arising over the Spratly Islands have thus far done little more than raise international ire toward the Chinese regime, and have yet to produce any tangible energy resources. Indeed, from the perspective of procuring additional energy resources, the conflicts that have erupted over the Spratlys between China and Southeast Asian neighbors seem quite unnecessary.

For one, China has a plethora of untapped domestic sources of crude oil. The northwestern province of Xinjiang alone is estimated to contain over twenty billion tons (150 billion barrels) of oil, amounting to over twenty times the amount that China could potentially procure from occupying the Spratlys. Tibet is also suspected to harbor rich petroleum resources... these resources could be harnessed without further damage to China's cherished international image and without threat to its Southeast Asian neighbors. This strategy would not only be more practical and peaceful, but also more in concert with China's long-term goal to be a leader in East Asia.

China's energy needs are also met much more flexibly than those of the United States and other Western nations. Without the environmental and human-health interest groups exerting influence over their system, China's leaders are better able to meet their nation's energy needs with dirtier, more "economical" sources of energy. As a result, coal currently accounts for 76% of Chinese energy consumption, a figure unheard of in other nations. With oil accounting for only 22% of China's energy consumption, its need for the resource is somewhat modulated, and any sudden deficit in the resource could theoretically be compensated for with coal.

Having argued the details, he now moves in for the kill.

It is clear that the Spratly Islands' petroleum resources are not as central to the Spratly Islands dispute as one might at first believe. With untapped domestic petroleum resources, an energy market dominated by coal, and undeniable interests in keeping peace within its sphere of influence, China must have further, more significant interests that would lead it to assert itself so aggressively in the South China Seas.

<sup>3</sup> We have removed references from this excerpt for ease of reading.



This example illustrates well the power that an argument can gain from considering and competently dismissing a strong counter-argument. Shea's thesis gains force when the ground is cleared of possible competing explanations. As readers, we are more likely to feel that a number of possible explanations have been considered when we see counter-arguments raised and refuted, and that the author is not simply riding a blinkered hobby-horse along a predetermined path.

## Structural Elements

In the previous sections on evidence and counter-argument, we have been thinking about the content of an academic paper. In this section, we will be considering its form, as we look at the structural elements that give content a clearly defined shape and orient the reader within the argument. These structural components can be deceptively self-effacing, but are pivotal to strong writing.

To return to the analogy we drew between written compositions and living organisms in the section on “Working Parts,” structural elements are to a piece of writing what the skeleton is to a mammal. A mammal's skeleton might comprise only, say, 15 percent of its body weight, and perhaps even less of its body mass. Without it, however, a mammal would simply be a heap of formless jelly; similarly, papers without structuring elements can be as horrifying (and as “B-grade”!) as *The Blob*. In good writing, similarly, structural components are usually not obtrusive or flashy, and only comprise a small fraction of the total word count. Nevertheless, they are vital.

### Structural Elements

- Paragraphs and Topic Sentences
- Signposts

Alternatively, we can imagine a piece of writing as a building. Structural elements are thus like the foundation and framework, out of sight and mind, but quietly working all the while to stop the whole thing from crashing down in a heap of rubble. Rubble is weighty and substantial, but you can't live in it as you can in a building; similarly, a paper can be full of solid evidence and substantial writing, but without a framework to give it structure, it will be a very inhospitable place. On the other hand, an elegant and carefully realized structure can almost work miracles. It is as if someone takes the rubble and fits it together, piece by piece, into a cathedral with vaulted arches. The resulting edifice is still solid (cathedrals are built

in stone), but to move through it is to experience a play of light in an orderly, ample space.

Sad to say, such structural components are sometimes sorely neglected by novice or journeyman writers (and even some otherwise competent professional academics!). Our aim in the next few sections is to make sure you are never counted among them. In the first part of this section on structural elements, then, we will think about what makes a strong paragraph; in the next, we will look at components that hold the paragraphs and other components of the paper together in a single, structurally sound whole—components that we will call “signposts.” First, we turn to the paragraph.

## PARAGRAPHS AND TOPIC SENTENCES

Let us expand a little on the analogy of the paper as a building. We will say that paragraphs are the bricks, and signposts the mortar. Just like the bricks in a building, each of the paragraphs in a piece of writing must be individually sound for the whole to hold together.

The core of each paragraph, the core about which the brick is made, is the topic sentence. A topic sentence functions in a paragraph much as a thesis statement does for the argument as a whole, but on a microscopic level: it announces the overall point of the paragraph, and sums up its main idea. As you write, and particularly as you rewrite and edit, you should ensure that each paragraph contains an identifiable topic sentence, usually close to its beginning. You do not want your readers to find themselves ensnared in a thicket of detail and wondering where on earth you are taking them.

Elizabeth Abrams, of the Writing Center at Harvard, points out that “there’s no set formula for writing a topic sentence.” Rather, she suggests, “you should work to vary the form your topic sentences take. Repeated too often, any method grows wearisome” (Section 11, “Topic Sentences and Signposting,” in the Writing Center handbook entitled “Strategies for Essay Writing”). Abrams goes on to give a useful list of commonly encountered types of topic sentence:

### 1. Complex sentences.

These are sentences that combine a transition from the previous paragraph (see our next section on “Signposts”) with a statement of the main point of the new paragraph. Here is an example (underlined), cannibalized from an earlier draft of the first section of this handbook, “What Is East Asian Studies?”:

East Asian Studies differs in important respects from such a “discipline.” As a field, it is unified only by the object of study—East Asia. Scholars in the field can and do study some aspect of this

object of study using the assumptions, questions, definitions, methods and theories of any one of a number of the disciplines listed above (history, philosophy, philology etc.). It is because scholars draw on the tools and perspectives of a number of various disciplines that East Asian Studies is often justly referred to as an interdisciplinary field.

If the object of study is the only thing that unites East Asian Studies, the nature of that object is also significant. The object of East Asian Studies is a geographic unit...

## 2. Questions.

Asking a question can be a very effective way of setting up the thrust of a paragraph—just as long as you make sure you answer it! Here is another example from our first section:

What, then, are the implications of the interdisciplinary nature of East Asian Studies for students and scholars who research and write in that field? For writing in particular, it means that even more than in individual disciplines, there is no single, standard way of writing that is adhered to across the field. Rather, it is usual in East Asian Studies to encounter all of the various types of writing that characterize the disciplinary approaches...

## 3. Bridge sentences

**(a term Abrams borrows from John Trimble).**

Abrams writes, “Like questions, bridge sentences... make an excellent substitute for more formal topic sentences. Bridge sentences indicate both what came before and what comes next (the “bridge” paragraphs) without the formal trappings of multiple clauses.” Abrams’s example is “But there is a clue to this puzzle.” Here is another example from this handbook, this time from the section on “The Sophomore Tutorial”:

The Sophomore Tutorial has a number of goals. As we have already mentioned, the Sophomore Tutorial aims to introduce students to the field of East Asian Studies as a whole . . .

## 4. Pivot sentences.

These are topic sentences that, unusually, come in the middle of a paragraph, indicating that the paragraph will change direction. Such topic sentences are often found in “signpost paragraphs” that themselves serve overall as a pivot in the larger structure of the argument as a whole.

Abrams points out that they are often used to introduce the refutation of counter-evidence, and indeed, our example comes this time from the student essay we offered in our section on “Counter-Argument,” at precisely the point where the author begins laying out his objections to the counter-argument:

Given the Chinese government’s obvious concern about its need to import foreign oil (and thereby sacrifice a piece of its sovereignty), one might imagine that the Spratly Islands and their additional oil resources would help alleviate this problem and perpetuate Chinese domestic stability. But the conflicts arising over the Spratly Islands have thus far done little more than raise international ire toward the Chinese regime, and have yet to produce any tangible energy resources. Indeed, from the perspective of procuring additional energy resources, the conflicts that have erupted over the Spratly Islands between China and its Southeast Asian neighbors seem quite unnecessary.

Since they are frequently the topic sentence of a “signpost paragraph,” that is, an entire paragraph that functions primarily to clarify structure than further elaborate content, topic sentences of the pivot type blur the line between topic sentence and signpost even further than the hybrid examples given in (1) above. They therefore serve as an excellent transition to the consideration of signposts.



## SIGNPOSTS

If paragraphs are the bricks of the edifice of writing, we have said, signposts are the mortar. We mean this in the sense that these structural components “glue” all the separate parts of the essay together in a solid whole.

These components of the essay can also be termed “signposts,” in the sense that they usually perform this adhesive function by pointing the reader to various things. They can point back, to a previous sentence, for example, but also to any earlier moment in an essay—even back to the very opening where appropriate—to tie the present moment to what has come before. They can point forward, showing where the present moment is aiming, so the reader is oriented in the movement of the argument. They can also “point to,” or simply label, the place where the reader is now, like signs giving street names, or ones that say, “Welcome to Smallville”—the equivalent of the “You Are Here” mark on a map.

In good writing, signposts are present at every level of scale. They are even found within single paragraphs, where they can be just a single word. We will look at signposts on each scale in turn, beginning where we left off in the previous section, with the paragraph, and working outward to the macroscopic arc of the argument as a whole.

If the topic sentence is the core of the brick, intra-paragraph signposts are the moisture that binds the clay together. Without them, the paragraph will crumble into shapeless dust. Most of these signposts binding single paragraphs together are no more than a word or a tiny phrase. They make it clear what kind of relationship obtains between clauses and sentences that would otherwise simply follow one another in bald sequence. As such, they are invaluable. Common items in this toolbox include *therefore*, *however*, *nonetheless*, *still*, *at the same time*, *thus*, *then*, *now*, *accordingly*, *by contrast*, *despite*, *for example*, *in this sense*, *moreover*, *furthermore*, *even*, *while*, *although*, *in*

*other words*, *first*, *second* etc., *finally*, *indeed*, *likewise*, *on the one hand*, *on the other hand*, and so on. An exhaustive list is probably not possible; even a representative one would certainly be long.

Here again, it may be best to sound a note of caution. These fasteners and adhesives may be useful, but like any element of writing, they must serve a purpose. More is not always better. Some students, having discovered the power of such words and phrases, produce writing that is the verbal equivalent of punk fashion. Paragraphs sprout superfluous zippers, chains and buckles all over the place; sentences end up with so much glue in them they congeal in a solid lump, like a super-glued Mohawk spike cut. Maxine Rodburg, also of the Writing Center at Harvard, calls these purely decorative conjunctions “Velcro transitions”:

Keep in mind that although transitional words and phrases can be useful, even gracious, they never should be applied to force a vagrant paragraph [or sentence] into a place where it does not, structurally, belong. No reader will be fooled by such shoddy craft, which is designed to help the writer finesse the essay’s flaws, rather than to illuminate for the reader the connections among the essay’s ideas and textual evidence. A strip of Velcro on a cracked wall will not fool us into thinking we are standing somewhere safe; neither will a Velcro transition persuade an essay’s readers that they are in the hands of a serious writer with something serious to say. (“Transitions: Beware of Velcro” in “Strategies for Essay Writing”)

“Velcro” like this features prominently on every professor or TF’s list of pet peeves. Indeed, at least one TF has been known to fantasize, in the dim blood-shot light of a late-night grading session, that he was the ruler of the world and his first act was to legislate the words “important” and “relate” out of existence—especially as found in that freak of verbiage, *This relates importantly to...* (“Relate” is so vague—*what is the relation?* And don’t tell us that it is important, *show us!*) As examples of phrases that, though not without their uses, seem especially prone to such abuse, Rodburg lists the following: *It is also important*

to note that...; Thus, it can be said that...; Another important aspect to realize is that...; Also, this shows that...

Taking these cautions as read, such little words and phrases, when inserted appropriately, can single-handedly turn an otherwise amorphous and stodgy paragraph into a wonder of sleek beauty and flowing line. We will illustrate this point by performing the reverse operation. We will reduce beautiful, flowing writing to stodge.

Consider the following two paragraphs from *Omen of the World*, by Harvard's own Stephen Owen.<sup>4</sup> Professor Owen is comparing poems by Tu Fu and Wordsworth, to argue that fundamentally different attitudes and practices of reading characterize the Chinese and English poetic traditions. We will underline words and phrases that do the structural work of shaping and binding the paragraphs, understanding all the while that the line between structure and content is in some cases blurred. We therefore adopt a broad definition that includes all phrases that indicate relationships between propositions, attitudes towards them, and directions in which the reader is invited to go—everything but propositional content.

Consider two versions of metaphor: "The poet is a gull between Heaven and Earth"; "It seemed to me I was like a gull between Heaven and Earth." Between these two statements is the center of the difference between two traditions of poetry and reading. The first statement is not true: it is a metaphorical fiction and asks you to consider how the poet might be like a gull. The second statement may be literally true; it also asks you to consider the relation between poet and gull, but it asks for the sake of what the comparison reveals about *the state of mind of the poet*, the direction of his attention, his desire to know himself, to find one like himself, to share his condition with another.

The distinction extends beyond obvious metaphors. One poet [Wordsworth] perceives "ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples"; the other poet [Du Fu], "slender grasses, breeze faint on the shore." We assume that Wordsworth is not simply naming what he saw;

the items of the scene are listed for some purpose; we look beyond the mediating scenes for ends and artistic motives which we must intuit or guess.... Though the precise purposes must remain forever uncertain, we accept with certainty that the fusion of significance and word-scene occurs on the level of art. But for the other poet, we assume instead that the "slender grasses, breeze faint on the shore" is indeed simply what he has seen, or more precisely, what has drawn his attention: the enumeration in the poem indicates some meaningful pattern which is both present in the world at the moment and of special interest to the poet's mind. For Wordsworth's reader, the poem (and sometimes even the world itself) is a created set of hermeneutic signs. For Tu Fu's reader, meaning is subtly infused in the particular forms of the world perceived and uncertain, perhaps, even to the poet; the poem raises up portentous forms, and in doing so, it tells you about both the world and the inner concerns of the poet. (15-16)

These structural components do several different jobs. Each paragraph opens with a topic sentence that announces what it will consider. Several items direct our focus as we are led back and forth between the two terms of the comparison ("between these two"; "the first statement," "the second statement"; "for one poet," "for the other poet"; "we assume *instead*"; "for Tu Fu's reader," "for Wordsworth's reader"). Others show that a point is being elaborated further ("more precisely"; "Wordsworth is not *simply* naming"; even "The distinction extends beyond obvious metaphors"); that a point is being conceded, if only by way of preparing the ground for a more telling one ("may be literally true"); that a thought is the first of two that must be considered together ("*both*... and"); or that a thought is surprising ("*even* to the poet") or even naïve ("we assume instead that the 'slender grasses...' is *indeed*..."). Some devices, including reversal of common word order, foreground a particular aspect of an observation to make clear the contrast being drawn ("slender grasses... *is what* he has seen" rather than "He has seen slender grasses"; "*what* has drawn his attention"). Finally, the most obviously

<sup>4</sup>Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

rhetorical devices invite us as readers to enter into Professor Owen's reading, to agree, to empathize ("consider"; "we assume that..."; "we look..." etc.; even "for Wordsworth's reader," i.e. "us").

Let us imagine, for a moment, what the second paragraph would look like stripped of these structural supports (including some types of punctuation), and reduced to a bare string of propositions. It is impossible, obviously, to denude writing completely of such apparatus, but to the extent that it is possible, let us try (with apologies to Professor Owen for the resulting butchery of his work!):

Wordsworth perceives "ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples." Tu Fu perceives "slender grasses, breeze faint on the shore." Wordsworth is not naming what he saw. The items of the scene are listed for some purpose, beyond the mediating scenes, for ends and artistic motives which we must intuit or guess.... The precise purposes must remain forever uncertain. The fusion of significance and word-scene occurs on the level of art. Tu Fu has seen "slender grasses, breeze faint on the shore." This has drawn his attention. The enumeration in the poem indicates some meaningful pattern which is present in the world at the moment and of special interest to the poet's mind. Wordsworth's poem (and sometimes even the world itself) is a created set of hermeneutic signs. Tu Fu's meaning is subtly infused in the particular forms of the world perceived and uncertain to the poet. The poem raises up portentous forms. It tells you about the world and the inner concerns of the poet.

The propositional content of the paragraph remains (at lonely a slight stretch) roughly the same, but we submit that in this second form, it is well nigh impossible to discern the underlying logical relations that bring these propositions together in one place. The sentences are reduced to what Wallace Stevens might have called "thought-like Monadnocks,"<sup>5</sup> discrete, brute lumps strewn singly about. This is no longer a paragraph, in fact—it is a mere mess of sentences.

So, ladies and gentlemen: we have reduced fine writing by a prominent scholar to the stuff TFs tear their hair out over, and that in one easy move. (Our

thanks to our unwitting "volunteer" from the faculty!) We performed this trick simply by removing the signposts; keep your eyes peeled for opportunities to effect the reverse transformation, especially when you are editing and rewriting.

At an intermediate scale, we find signposts that bind paragraph to paragraph. These signposts usually comprise an entire clause or sentence, and sometimes even more than one. They can be found either at the beginning or the end of the paragraph, though seldom elsewhere. As we saw above, such signposts are frequently included as clauses in complex topic sentences.

Just as signposts within a paragraph make explicit the type of relation obtaining between consecutive sentences, paragraph-to-paragraph signposts mainly exist to flag the relationship that obtains between consecutive paragraphs. The logic of these inter-paragraph signposts is thus much the same as that of intra-paragraph signposts. Let us look at some examples. Here are the first few inter-paragraph signposts from this current section on signposts, in order of occurrence, with brief explanations (it will probably be necessary to refer back to the paragraphs in question to understand these explanations in their original context):

"If paragraphs are the bricks of the edifice of writing, we have said, signposts are the mortar."

*This sentence recalls an analogy raised earlier, and introduces the second part of the analogy ("mortar") as the new topic. It is frequently used in this recollective sense; we have said nudges the reader's memory further.*

These components of the essay can also be termed "signposts," in the sense that they usually perform this adhesive function by pointing the reader to various things.

*Carries over the topic of the first paragraph, where it will be explained by the new analogy of the signpost.*

<sup>5</sup>"This Solitude of Cataracts," from *Auroras of Autumn* (1950); in *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 424.

"In good writing, signposts are present at every level of scale."

*Here the only thing that might be considered a "signpost" is the grammatical subject, which resumes the topic of the previous paragraph and indicates that it will be the main topic of discussion in the new paragraph too. This illustrates the important axiom: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Where so little will suffice, don't weigh your prose down with a signpost for its own sake.*

"If the topic sentence is the core of the brick, intra-paragraph signposts are the moisture that binds the clay together."

*Here again, we hark back to our guiding analogy, which was last considered eight or nine paragraphs earlier. Reminder is once more signaled by the opening "if."*

"Here again, it may be best to sound a note of caution."

*Again points way back, to link the paragraph to earlier instances (many in previous sections of the handbook) where similar cautions were given. Here asks the reader to consider the significance of giving this caution at this place in the argument and not elsewhere; it casts the paragraphs leading up to this point in a slightly different light, as potentially implying over-enthusiasm about the power and indispensability of signposts.*

"'Velcro' like this features prominently on every professor and TF's list of pet writing peeves."

*Like this flags "Velcro" as a topic carried over from the quotation, and also refers the reader back to the way the quotation was set up as a passage about something called "the Velcro transition."*

"Taking these cautions as read, such little words and phrases, when inserted appropriately, can single-handedly make . . ."

*This phrase bundles up the previous two paragraphs into a single unit—the "caution" promised in the topic sentence two paragraphs earlier—and signals that we are finished with it, and can therefore expect to move back to the point where we left off, i.e. the recommendation of signposts.*

"Consider the following two paragraphs from *Omen of the World...*"

*Signals the introduction of an example, and therefore points back to several paragraphs at once, where the large point has been made that signposts are a good thing (the point to be illustrated), and also forward to the several paragraphs it will take to discuss this extended example.*

If we have done our job properly in writing this section, these phrases should ensure that the passage from one paragraph to the next is smooth. Readers should always know enough about where they are and where they are going not to get lost, and should never mistake the relation that obtains between successive paragraphs—they should not think we are changing the subject when we are actually expanding the same point further, for instance, nor vice versa.

At the largest scale, we come to signposts that bind entire sections of a paper to one another, and orient the reader in the macroscopic argument as a whole.

It is not uncommon, and can make for very clear writing, for signposts at this level to comprise entire paragraphs. Indeed, this is where that noble beast, the very short paragraph, comes into its own. Signposts at this macroscopic level mark major points of articulation in the structure of the large argument, and setting these markers apart on the page in separate paragraphs, even very short ones, is a simple and effective way of alerting the reader that something significant is afoot.

We have tried to use such paragraphs in many places in this handbook, and as they represent the most readily accessible examples of these most macroscopic signposts, we will begin by listing some of our own examples. Go back to the contexts from which they are taken, and see if you think they are effective.

First, the paragraph before last:

At the largest scale, we come to signposts that bind entire sections of a paper to one another, and orient the reader in the macroscopic argument as a whole.

Next, the first paragraph of this entire section on “Signposts”:

If paragraphs are the bricks of the edifice of writing, we have said, signposts are the mortar. We mean this in the sense that these structural components “glue” all the separate parts of the essay together in a solid whole.

From Section 6, “General Writing Skills”:

One of the first things we should consider is what kind of process we might follow in order to produce the best writing we can, as efficiently and painlessly as possible.

Section 10, “Thesis Statements,” is a longer piece of writing, and therefore requires more signposting to hold it together. In it, we find these examples:

That much is plain. It is trickier, however, to say what counts as a thesis and what does not. As a first approximation, we might say that a thesis must be original, interesting and arguable.

So far we have seen that a thesis should be original, interesting and arguable. What, then, might such theses look like?

Notice that many of these signposts function as an analogue to the topic statement within a paragraph, but perform that function for a large chunk of the argument. Notice also that the same pointing and tying that we noticed at work between paragraphs, in the previous section, also go on here. The logic is the same; it just works at a higher level.

Of course, not all signpost paragraphs can get away with being as short as these. There may be more work to do than can be done by a single sentence or two. For example, the last major signpost paragraph in Section 10, “Thesis Statements,” reads as follows:

So far, we have characterized sound theses as original, interesting and arguable; and we have argued by counterexample that a good thesis is not obvious, nor predicated upon a straw man, nor hopelessly diffuse. In closing, we offer a few simple suggestions about how to state a thesis once you have it.

By this point (some 3000 words into the section), we have come a fair distance. The first sentence simply reminds the reader of the terrain covered so far, to help them recover their general bearings as they emerge from the details of the section that has just concluded. The last sentence, by contrast, allows them to glimpse the end of the road (“In closing...”) while at the same time functioning as a topic sentence for the last section. Like many signposts, then, this paragraph is a Janus-like entity, looking back, to what has gone before, and also forward to what is yet to come. The first paragraph cited from Section 10, above (beginning “That much is plain...”) operates the same way; so does the very first paragraph of this section on “Structural Elements”:

In the previous sections on evidence and counter-argument, we have been thinking about the content of an academic paper. In this section, we will be considering its form, as we look at certain structural elements that give that content a clearly defined shape and orient the reader within the argument...

Using signposts in conjunction with the roadmap

Perhaps the most elaborate signpost of all is the “roadmap,” which is like a signboard in a mall or a city district that shows you the overall layout of your surroundings, and your location within it.

In our section on “The Roadmap” we mentioned signposts several times. This is because one way to construct a tightly structured paper is to use the roadmap and signposts to support one another. Major signposts, such as sentences concluding one large section, introducing another, or doing both jobs by bridging between the two, are very effective when they refer back to a sketch of the paper’s overall contours given early on—the roadmap. As we suggested in the “Roadmaps” section, this strategy works particularly well if the key words identifying a given section in the roadmap are repeated more or less verbatim, or nearly so, in the signpost that signals to the reader that the section has arrived.



For example, here again is the roadmap paragraph from our example paper about the *qin* zither (see “The Roadmap”):

First, I will briefly review the place of the *qin* in traditional literati culture, and the associations the instrument held prior to Communist rule. I will then describe the vicissitudes of the instrument and some of its foremost exponents in the period from Liberation to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Next, I will examine the ideological pronouncements of China’s arts commissars in this period, and the writings and biography of Mao Zedong, in a search for explanations for the Maoist rehabilitation of the *qin*. Finally, I will draw on theories of nationalism from the work of Benedict Anderson and Ernst Gellner to argue that Party justifications for including the *qin* in its arts programs indicate a deep-seated conflict in its political theory between Marxist and nationalist imperatives.

We have here a virtually ready-made set of signposts to signal the introduction of each of the major sections of the paper as the argument progresses:

I begin by looking at the place of the *qin* in traditional literati culture, and the associations the instrument held prior to Communist rule.

A few pages later:

We have seen that the *qin* held pride of place as *the* instrument for elite musical expression in the classical period. How, then, did it fare in post-Liberation days of overturning “feudal” culture? In this section, I will briefly present pertinent facts from the history of the *qin* and some of its foremost exponents in the period from Liberation to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

Later still:

Thus far, we have seen that the *qin*, despite its very elitist associations in the classical period, was oddly reincarnated as a kosher expression of proletarian art after Liberation. I now turn to examining the ideological pronouncements of China’s arts commissars in the period under consideration, in an attempt to explain this rehabilitation of the *qin*. In this section I will also examine aspects of the writings and biography of Mao Zedong himself, and show that they, too, can help us understand the *qin*’s intriguing progress from elite shibboleth to the voice of the oppressed masses.

And finally:

I have shown that in salvaging the *qin* from the stigma of elitism for the purposes of proletarian art, Mao and his cultural commissars appealed to notions of national character and sentiment. In this final section, I draw on theories of nationalism from the work of Benedict Anderson and Ernst Gellner to argue that official justifications for including the *qin* in Maoist programs of the arts betray a deep-seated conflict in its political theory between Marxist and nationalist imperatives.

As these examples hopefully show, it is not quite necessary that the signposts are word-for-word reruns of the corresponding parts of the roadmap; it is sufficient that enough is repeated to recall the roadmap to the reader’s mind. Depending upon your own stylistic preferences, you may find it more aesthetically pleasing to introduce a little variation. This can easily be done as you edit a final draft.

## Signposts as an embedded outline

Of course, in a paper of any length—for example, the final independent research project of 15-20 pages that caps your sophomore year—there will be more than three or four turning points, and it will therefore be kinder to your reader, and make for more powerful argument, if you include more signposts. If you try to forecast each twist and turn of the argument in your roadmap paragraph, however, the result will be bloated and cumbersome, and perhaps do more harm than good. What to do?

One tactic that you will often see to deal with this problem in longer pieces of writing is nesting, that is, each smaller section repeating the basic structure of the whole on a smaller scale. One simply repeats the basic process, giving a lean mini-roadmap and then referring back to it on a smaller scale for each section:

WHOLE PAPER SECTIONS		
WHOLE PAPER	SECTIONS	
Roadmap	Section 1 roadmap	Part A
		Part B
	Section 2 roadmap	Part A
		Part B
		Part C
	Section 3 roadmap	Part A
		Part B
		Part C
		Part D
	Section 4 roadmap	Part A
		Part B
		Part C

When set out in diagrammatic form like this, this nesting tactic admittedly looks very mechanical and dull. Still, a certain degree of dullness can be a virtue in the structural work of an essay, especially if dullness means predictability; it allows these workaday elements to fade into the woodwork, so the reader's attention can be fully devoted to content—the rightful star of the show.

If you keep your eyes open as you read, you will see that this nesting technique is actually the working method of many good authors, and that for a reader, it is usually not obtrusive, and preferable by far to the absence of any guiding framework whatsoever. This recursive structure is particularly strong in very long pieces of writing, like a full-length book. Many authors write an introduction, in which they give a roadmap that previews the argument chapter by chapter; they then give each chapter a prefatory section containing a roadmap sketching the direction of the chapter as a whole; and they further divide individual chapters into sections, each of which has its own roadmap (perhaps no more than a single sentence) in turn.

Of course, when you look at this diagram, what you see is an *outline*. This gives us another way to think of the structural support that is given to a paper when a roadmap and signposts work in concert. It is as if the author has taken an outline diagram, fleshed it out with grammatically full sentences, and embedded it at helpful points throughout the paper. When artfully made, such an embedded outline is like a trail of breadcrumbs that enables both reader and writer to find their way through the forest—past the individual “tree” of each paragraph—and back out to a vantage point on the high ground, where they can take in the whole “woods” at a glance. Without such a trail, the unlucky pair might well end up in the clutches of that infamous witch, Poor Structure—and then they'd be well and truly cooked!

We have seen that signposts—the mortar of the argument’s edifice—operate on a number of levels: within the paragraph, from paragraph to paragraph, from section to section, and across the broad sweep of whole papers and books. A very worthwhile exercise is to spend thirty minutes of your life reading a good piece of prose (Mark Twain, George Orwell, Sir Francis Bacon) specifically for these features, highlighter in hand. (Should you not have something especially good to hand, you could even try it with this section!) If you have not done it before, chances are this exercise will give you a view of writing you never had before. It is like seeing a photograph in the negative, or one of those optical illusions where figure and ground are reversible—what was incidental and even invisible at first suddenly leaps into focus, and turns out to be structuring the whole pattern of things.

## Endings

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We are nearly at the end of the part of this handbook that considers the working parts of a piece of writing in turn. We first looked at a number of components typically found in the opening of a paper. Then, in the sections immediately before this one, we looked at components of the body. We are now ready to wind up this first part of the handbook by considering working parts found at the end of a piece of writing.

There are a number of working parts that help a writer to wrap up. First, given that the conclusion of a paper is a major structural section of the argument, and relatively separate from other sections that precede it, we would expect to typically find a major signpost at the opening of the conclusion, telling the reader they have arrived at their destination. When we arrive at the conclusion of an argument, we need to step back out of the various levels of detail that have engaged us in the body, and fix our gaze once more on the big picture. This can require more re-orientation than a simple transition from one section to the next within the progression of the argument, and it is often useful to skip lightly over the main features of the argument as a whole in retrospect, so that readers have them fresh in their mind as you tie them together in support of your thesis.

Of course, the scale of such a signpost depends upon the scale of the piece of writing. In a longish piece of writing, like this one, there will probably be several large pieces that need to be marshaled together. The result might be a substantial paragraph like the first paragraph of this section. At the other end of the spectrum, in something as miniature as a response paper, where the reader can be counted upon to remember the whole with almost no assistance, it could be as slight as a single gesture—*in conclusion, finally, to sum up, thus*—or you may be able to get away with nothing at all.

Obviously, the key function of a conclusion is to “conclude,” not just in the sense of ending the paper,



but making up your mind (and hopefully the reader's) about the questions under consideration. Here the paper will usually come back to its thesis. The concluding restatement of the paper's thesis and the mustering of preceding argument should be coordinated into a tight whole; to return to the chess analogy we explored in discussing openings, a concluding section is like an endgame. At a certain point (at least if you are winning!), it becomes apparent that you can finish off with the pieces in hand. Usually, you then have to maneuver those pieces into the right conformation. When you restate your thesis, it is like a final checkmating move that only works because it is supported by other pieces in the right places. Few checkmates are achieved with a single piece.

Note that thesis statement and conclusion are thus effectively two sides of a single coin. The thesis statement should be an advance notice of the conclusion; the conclusion should be a return to the thesis statement. For example, here again (with its lead-in sentence) is the thesis statement from Shea's paper about the Spratly Islands, which we used as an example in the section on "Counter-Argument":

This paper seeks to examine the validity of these claims [that PRC military policy is purely defensive] with regard to the Spratly Island dispute, and the strategic aims and ambitions behind China's increasingly aggressive pursuit of these islands. China's behavior suggests that its military goals may in fact be more expansionistic than concerned with the preservation of China's territorial and political integrity.

Here is how the paper closes:

It is clear that China's actions were motivated by geo-strategic interests—namely the ability to be within sight of Singapore and Indonesia and to be placed astride the only international sea lane connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Such interests may not have been of importance to the inward-looking, defensive China of yesterday, but contemporary China has a new military doctrine at the helm, one that might well be labeled "military assertion with Chinese characteristics."

Conclusion restates thesis, and thesis statement anticipates conclusion.

So far we have looked at two aspects of the conclusion—recovering your overall bearings, and restating your thesis in a context where it is fully supported by all the members of the argument. Now, an artful writer will often kill both these birds with one stone, reviewing the members of the argument in such a way that the relationships between them are clearly brought out, and the ground thus prepared for a fully-supported restatement of the thesis. For example, here is the opening of a section concluding the tenth chapter of Peter N. Gregory's *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism*.<sup>6</sup> The book is a study of Kuei-feng Tsung-mi (780-841), one of the most celebrated Buddhist thinkers in Chinese history. The section is subtitled "Tsung-mi's Intellectual Personality":

Tsung-mi's attempt to elaborate a synthetic framework in which Confucian moral teachings could be integrated within Buddhism, his effort to clarify the underlying ontological basis for moral and religious action, and the ethical thrust of his criticism of the Hung-chou line of Ch'an all reveal his preoccupation with moral order. One could... say that Tsung-mi's writings demonstrate a life-long effort to justify the values that he had learned as a youth [Confucian values] in terms of the discrepant claims of the [Buddhist] intellectual tradition to which he had converted as an adult. (293)

The three clauses in the long grammatical subject of the first sentence each call to mind an entire chapter. Gregory skillfully gathers up roughly a hundred pages of argument into a single thought, and then moves forward to a significant and far-reaching conclusion about the thinker he is analyzing—that a basic drive in Tsung-mi's thought is a concern for moral order, combined with the need to reconcile Confucian and Buddhist sides of his "intellectual personality."

Everything we have discussed so far is part of what might be called the "inward-facing" aspect of a conclusion—the side of the conclusion that looks

<sup>6</sup> Peter N. Gregory, *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism* (Honolulu: Kuroda Institute through University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).



after the domestic housekeeping of the essay, tidying up loose ends and putting the argument into final order. The most satisfying conclusions, however, often also incorporate an “outward-looking” aspect. They do not stop at merely restating the thesis and positioning its supports around it, but step back even further, opening up our view beyond the confines of the topic to its broader context and implications.

We thus often see an author assume a more reflective or speculative tone in the closing passages of a piece of writing, posing further questions that they feel are opened up by their conclusions, but that are too large to be resolved in the context of their current project. For instance, in the case of the *qin* paper, the restatement of the primary thesis could open out into a set of concluding paragraphs like this:

We have seen that the unexpected admission of the *qin* to the orthodox pantheon of the Maoist arts is a sign of a deeper anomaly. In a significant sense, the orthodoxy of the Chinese Communist Party can be read as a sheep in wolf's clothing—common garden nationalism clad in the revolutionary garb of “Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought.” In closing, we might ask ourselves whether the PRC under the CCP is entirely unique in this regard.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Benedict Anderson's work is his contention that nationalism is *the* modern ideology *par excellence*, so much a part of the air modernity breathes that it is less a system of political thought than the ground of such systems. For Anderson, nationalism is therefore a set of implicit cultural assumptions, to be uncovered with the same tools anthropology uses to articulate the worldviews of Amazon tribes. Herein may lie the nub of his fascination with the fact that people will *die* for their country; it suggests that a nation is somehow an ultimate term, a bedrock more substantial than a mere idea.

Such questions as these are naturally far too large for us to explore fully here, but they suggest that the curious political indestructibility of the *qin* may be of interest to more than aficionados of Chinese music, or even Sinologues at large. Perhaps the *qin* stayed incongruously afloat on the stormy waters of post-Revolution politics not by innate buoyancy, but because it

happened to fall where the seabed rose close enough to the surface to bear it up; and perhaps, if we could only see deep enough, that submerged nationalist ground extends far beyond Chinese waters, and undergirds all the stretch of the modern political seas.

Of course, this example is somewhat elaborate, and the same ends can be accomplished by far more simple means. Let us return to the example of the Spratly Islands paper. Shea might have finished in the following speculative vein:

The question remains, of course: Is this military expansionism really so new? Both scholars who claim that China's actions are even now primarily defensive, and those who see them as aggressive, assume that a conservative, defensive China has been the historical norm. But nations and powers regularly portray themselves as peace-loving and reactive; why should China be any different? It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the question of whether China's aggressive policy in the Spratlys is really a radical departure, or merely an especially clear indication of something that has always been true behind the scenes, but this problem could well reward further research.

When we open out an ending like this, we show that our topic is worthy of attention, because it has implications beyond its own strict confines. This is another way of showing that it is, indeed, *interesting*, and as such, it forms the closing counterpart to the opening gesture of “posing the puzzle” (see section above).

Such closing questions also give a writer the opportunity to acknowledge (as is likely) that even their best efforts will not have answered all questions or settled all doubts. When a writer explores the limitations of her own thesis with the reader in closing, she can defuse objections, and paradoxically render the stable core of her argument more persuasive. We feel that we are in the hands of someone whose first concern is truth, not winning an argument at all costs, and are so much the more likely to trust them as our guide through material we do not know so well.

The icing on the cake for a piece of writing is to go out in style. In final sentences and paragraphs, writers are somehow freer than elsewhere to indulge themselves in rhetoric or wordplay. Break out, have some fun! Good academic papers, like good speeches, often close with a flourish of some sort—a quip, for instance, or an especially balanced phrase. We have already seen a good example of this above, again from the paper on the Spratly Islands:

contemporary China has a new military doctrine at the helm, one that might well be labeled “military assertion with Chinese characteristics.”

This is, of course, a play on Deng Xiaoping’s famous slogan promoting “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Here is another example, from a paper by former Sophomore Tutorial student Emma Nothman (slightly adapted), which discusses the “Misty Poets” of contemporary China. Emma relies on prosody and rhythm, rather than humor, to bring the flow of her prose to a halt:

[The Misty Poets] and their poetry must be recognized on their own terms—as something unknowable, as something not understandable. And if... that incapacity to understand is the basis of our fascination, then so be it. But let us admit that we are fascinated – fascinated by the ways in which the Misty Poets elucidate for us our own experience, suggest to us their experience, and propose to us new ways of understanding our world.

In the closing sentence, Emma uses repetition (fascinated—fascinated...; our own experience... their experience; elucidate for us... suggest to us... propose to us); direct appeal to the reader instead of flat propositional statement (let us admit...); judicious shift to a more conversational and therefore intimate register (beginning the sentence with “but”); and, of course, the mysterious appeal of things that come in threes (Misty Poets fascinate in exactly three ways). Granted, these are the oldest tricks in the book—so

old, in fact, that a disproportionate number of closing sentences could certainly be analyzed in terms of the formal figures of classical Greek rhetoric<sup>7</sup>—but they have only stuck around so long because they work.

There are many other ways to end with a bang (and not with a whimper!). You can write a particularly complex sentence, one that builds up a great head of steam before it blows. Equally, this is a great place for a single sentence paragraph, often the shorter the better. You can assume a slightly unusual diction, be it archaic, poetic, or slangy. You can construct an extended metaphor, a vivid image that captures some aspect of your key point and will linger in the reader’s mind. You can finish with a quotation, perhaps from the general treasure-trove of great and quotable English writers.

Of course, there are risks. One can always lay the rhetoric on too thick, and end up with something hackneyed or pretentious. For example, one of the most abused endings in all English combines quotation and high diction to achieve almost perfect pomposity:

“The rest,” as the bard has it, “is silence.”<sup>8</sup>

This often seems to mean no more than “I’ve got nothing in particular left to say, but I would like to say it fancy.” Poor old Shakespeare must be spinning in his grave when his phrase circulates as such debased coinage.

These finishing flourishes are, of course, strictly dispensable, so don’t get hung up on trying to find the perfect parting crack. They are also a matter of art and not rule, and can perhaps be taught less than most other components of good writing. If, you think them worthwhile, however (and why not?), you can’t do better than trial and error; and as with all the working parts we have considered in this handbook, you can also learn constantly about good and bad closing sentences through your own critical reading.

<sup>7</sup>A list of some of the more common of these terms, with definitions and examples, may be found at <http://www.net.armstrong.edu/HLHshaler.html#2100H>

<sup>8</sup>Hamlet V, ii, 372

This brings to a close the first part of this handbook, in which we have considered various working parts—openings, bodies and endings, through puzzle-posing paragraphs, thesis statements, roadmaps, definitions, evidence, structure and signposting, closing summary, and final rhetorical flourishes. In the second major part of the handbook, we will look at the factors that come into play as you tackle different sorts of writing assignment, focusing first on the response and module papers required in the Sophomore Tutorial, and then on the longer, independent research project.





# The Response Paper

**W**hen you enter the Sophomore Tutorial, the first writing assignment that will be required of you is the weekly response paper, which offers you a great chance to hone your writing skills.

The response paper is like a test-tube in which you can experiment with the ingredients of the academic paper, tweaking week by week until you find the precise formula for creating dynamite. It is especially well suited to such experimentation because, like any good laboratory set-up, it establishes an artificially simplified situation, in which the dynamics of the process at work can be scrutinized clearly and easily. The readings are prescribed and delimited, so there is no need to go out and do independent research to find extra sources—you can concentrate on reading, thinking and writing. The word limit is very tight, and this enables you to get regular practice at running through the whole process of composing an argument, from start to finish, with a manageable investment of time. You are also provided with set questions, and though this may sometimes seem to cramp your style, it also enables you to leap-frog most of the often vexing process of finding a problem, and cut straight to formulating a thesis, constructing an argument to support that thesis, and articulating your argument in writing.

Of course, the artificial limitations and simplification of the response paper also bring certain challenges. Like any miniature form in any art, the response paper demands a special economy in the way you use your raw material, and a special elegance and sparseness of line. The response paper, if you like, is the haiku of your academic career. As anyone who has ever tried to write haiku will know, it is easy to under-

estimate the artfulness and sheer difficulty of such a tiny compass, and this is equally true of the response paper. Just because it is “only” a page or two does not mean you should take it lightly!

It will help, then, if you write your response paper in the awareness that it is an exercise in the skills that the tutorial aims to teach: reading critically; developing an informed opinion about a body of fact and scholarly argument; and articulating a focused argument in clearly structured, cogent writing. Response papers in the Sophomore Tutorial are not required merely to ensure that you read (passively); nor are

they viewed by the teaching staff merely as a way of gauging student reactions to the reading material, or generating grist for the mill of section discussion. Response papers *do* serve these purposes, but only in passing—they are still primarily an exercise in serious reading, thinking and writing.

As we discuss the way specific structural elements of good writing apply to the response paper, concepts that each have their own section in this handbook (“Working Parts” etc.) are in **bold** the first time they occur. If you have not already read them you can refer to the sections in which those elements are discussed individually.

Because the response paper is so circumscribed in scale, it is something of a special case, in that you may do without some of the **working parts** we have discussed. It may not be necessary in opening your response paper to **pose the puzzle**, for instance. The topic of a response paper is assigned, and you may be able to assume that your teacher knows why it is interesting (or at least why they think so!). Similarly, there may not be any need to **define terms**. So long as you follow a clear progression of ideas, moreover,

The response paper is the haiku of your academic career.

you can probably assume that no reader is going to get lost in the space of a page or two, and this may mean that you can dispense with the preliminary **roadmap**. There may also be little need for a full-fledged free-standing **conclusion** when it would merely recapitulate what you have said on the very same page.

Even where you do retain some trace of these structural elements in response papers, they may be very much reduced or abbreviated in comparison to the forms we discussed in the independent sections on each working part. If you do decide that you need to give some sort of roadmap to orient your reader in your argument, you might cut it down to a single sentence, for example; this might also be true of your conclusion.

There are some structural components that you will want to retain. Foremost among these is the **thesis statement**. Even in a response paper, where the raw material and the question are strictly assigned, you need an idea that is original, interesting and arguable—your own answer to the question. You should state this thesis clearly and prominently early on. The thesis statement of a response paper often takes the form of a single-sentence summary of the most important points in your response to the question posed, and the rest of the paper will often boil down to supporting arguments that enable you to assert the point contained in that sentence.

Another important working part you are unlikely to dispense with entirely, even in something as small as a response paper, is the **signpost** between paragraphs. Even though a typical response paper has only two to five paragraphs, response papers are immensely more readable—and therefore effective—if the writer tells the reader where they are turning as they transition from each paragraph into the next.

It is even more likely that you will need signposts within your paragraphs, as we saw in the section on such signposts. You certainly cannot dispense with clearly structured **paragraphs** in a response paper.

Your paragraphs will also require **topic sentences**.

You also cannot dispense with the presentation and analysis of **evidence** in a response paper. We already made this point when using the response paper to exemplify the point that all arguments must cite supporting evidence in the “Evidence” section above. In that section, we said:

When you sit down to write a response paper, you have a circumscribed set of readings—often, you are only writing about a single piece of work. To some extent, this simplifies the problem of citing sources—you can often get away with simply giving a page number for each point. It does *not*, however, mean that you can assume that your teacher knows *which part* of the piece you are basing a point upon, or that you can assume your teacher knows how *you* are interpreting a given passage. Response papers, then, as much as any other type of academic argument, require the presentation and analysis of supporting evidence.

Finally, a well-structured response paper is likely to have some sort of recognizable **ending**. The ending of a response paper may be greatly scaled down, however, and it is often extremely effective to combine all the elements of a good ending into a single-sentence paragraph. For example, this might be the final paragraph of a response paper about the relationship between *ren* (“benevolence”) and *li* (“rites”) in Confucius:

In sum, the relationship between *ren* and *li* in the *Analects* is mutually entailing; we must be *ren* to truly practice *li*, but only through *li* do we attain *ren*.

Here we have a signpost telling us we have arrived at the end (“in sum”), a restatement of the main point of the argument (that *ren* and *li* are mutually entailing), and enough final flourish to give us a sense of closure—a slightly more complex sentence structure, with two independent clauses joined by a semicolon, and the nice mirror symmetry of the closing chiasmus.

The small scale of the response paper thus means that many of its working parts are barely sketched by comparison to the examples we discussed in the sec-

tion devoted to each. We stress, however, that this small scale does not mean that a response paper should be any the less complete.

If academic papers as a class are analogous to the class *Mammalia* in the natural world (see “Working Parts”), a response paper is like the Thai bumblebee bat (reputedly the smallest mammal in the world). At 0.06 oz., this bat is certainly tiny, but it still has all the organs that characterize mammals as a class—internal skeleton, warm blood, hair on its skin and so on. It is not just a lump of flesh gouged from the side of a whale. Similarly, the response paper, lightweight though it may be, should still be a complete argument, and not just a random segment of something that would properly be much larger.

To change the analogy, if a full-fledged academic paper is like conventional warfare, the response paper should be conducted like a guerilla campaign. In conventional warfare, you take time to put in place supply-lines, you concentrate all the firepower you can on the enemy position, and once you open fire, you do your darnedest to pound all opposition into the ground before you move on. Guerilla warfare, by contrast, is all mobility and lightning speed. You go in, strike and run. You never attack a position you think cannot be taken out *quickly* with the forces you have. Likewise, in a response paper, you should make each point, *bam!*—without beating about the bush, and then get out of there and straight to the next point of engagement. If you squander all your resources fighting a single engagement with heavy artillery, you might win the battle and lose the war.

In practical terms, this means a response paper often reads like the bare bones of a more detailed argument lightly sketched—an outline, if you like, clad in the lightest veil of sentences and examples possible.







# A Sample Response Paper

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**W**e will now illustrate these points by dissecting a very fine response paper written by Jennie Johnson, a former tutorial student.

The paper is from a week late in the Spring semester when the class studied modern Korean literature.

Among our readings that week was Yi Sang's celebrated "Wings," a surreal psychological short story.<sup>9</sup> Yi's protagonist is an alienated, emasculated, futile young man who lives with his wife in two rooms in a run-down set of apartments; he has the inner room, and his wife the outer. He lives entirely within the rooms, only venturing outside in crisis towards the end of the story, and his wife brings him food, money and the only human interaction he knows.

His wife sometimes entertains male guests in the outer room, on which occasions the man retreats to his bed in the inner room and eavesdrops on her

encounters. The man displays an incredible lack of interest in or understanding of his wife's trysts, and indeed seems ignorant of their nature until one day he blunders in on one meeting and discovers that she has been supporting him all this time by prostitution. This precipitates the crisis. The man leaves the house and wanders the streets in a state of existential confusion.

We have modified Jennie's paper slightly in a few places. We also have removed page numbers because they would clutter the layout too much here, but note that each piece of evidence in the paper was, of course, accompanied by a reference to the text.

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<sup>9</sup> In Peter H. Lee, ed., *Flowers of Fire: Twentieth-Century Korean Stories* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1974).

What themes do you find in "Wings"? Do you think that this story colonial situations in Korea and the position of colonial intellectuals? If so, how do you interpret its comment on the "colonial" character of society? If not, what alternative reading would you propose?

- 1** Wastes no time, but **opens** directly on a substantive point.
- 2** Complicates the question rather than playing directly into its hands. Modernity is a broader issue than colonialism. By beginning here, the response deftly points out the limitations of the question, sets it in a larger context, and gestures towards larger theoretical themes of the course.
- 3** Good **clarification of referents of pronouns**.
- 4** Correct use of it is...that, in conformance with **old info first, new info last**.
- 5** Makes explicit the caveat hinted at by opening with modernism.
- 6** Narrows the focus by dismissing one arm of the question, and prepares for the introduction of the thesis statement.
- 7** Good use of **passive voice** in conformance with **old info first, new info last**.

**1** The thematics of Yi Sang's "Wings" seem to indicate a concern for the exploration of modernity **2**: individual helplessness, alienation, self-delusion, the futility and ultimate purposelessness of human existence. It is a story **3** which **4**, clearly, sustains a number of readings, each amplifying a different thematic aspect **5**. Among those feasible readings **3** is the prospect that "Wings" represents colonialism in Korea. It is perhaps not best to argue that it is a direct allegory for colonialism *per se*, that is, to claim the listless protagonist as a metaphor for Korea, and his wifely oppressor as Japan **6**. If "Wings" is to be interpreted **7** **12** as an allegory for the colonial experience (again, by no means the only compelling reading for the story), it is best seen as a metaphor for the fate of colonial-era intellectuals, victims of an emasculation at imposed in part by the Japanese and in part by themselves **8**.

A curious and persistent sense of powerlessness pervades the narrative **9**. The narrator depends entirely on his wife for money and for his "feed," **10** as he calls it; he even depends on her for the amusement her perfume bottles and hand mirror provide in her absence **10**. Their partitioned room has morphed into a prison of sorts, and because he has the inner room, he is all the more subjugated, restricted in his comings and goings by the imperatives of his wife's visitors **10**. His wife is the gatekeeper. As the narrator says, "Who would have guessed that the partition of one room into two with sliding doors would symbolize my fate?" **11**

Powerlessness, in turn **12**, seems to have bred lack of ambition **9**, although the two are to an extent mutually reinforcing. In the beginning of the story, the narrator asserts, "Trying to do something as a social creature or being scolded by my wife—no, idling like a lazy animal suits me best." **13** The narrator passes his life unwashed, ungroomed, hungry and sleepy, content with his suspended state of inaction. There is, moreover, a hint of earlier disillusionment: "Shut off the nineteenth century if you can. What is called Dostoyevsky's spirit is probably a waste." **13**

We must grant an allegorical reading if we consider that, although his is an extreme example, the narrator's retreat to dirty but reliable inner quarters is representative of the half-imposed, half-chosen fate of many colonial-era intellectuals **9**. The very presence of a violent and repressive colonial overlord to some degree stripped dignity from the educated, arrogating their traditional function as moral critics and officeholders. What government censors did not do, unemployment did: even college graduates had tremendous difficulty in finding work of an intellectual kind. Yet their education left them unwilling to engage in more menial labor. The outcome, for many, was a resort to despondent isolation, a cynical and poverty-stricken eremiticism in which they lived hand-to-mouth on friends' charity.

Thus, intellectuals were prisoners, too, but paradoxically, their imprisonment was at once enforced **7** from above *and* self-determined; economic dislocations limited their options, but the choice to retreat from society was ultimately theirs **9**. Much of this is mirrored **7** in "Wings": the narrator, clearly an intellectual (he composes poetry while lying in bed), is limited **7** both by his wife (who drugs him for a month) and his own dissolution. Only at the very end of the story—after what could be called a "moment of truth" apropos his wife's infidelity—does he seem to recognize the extent of his own degradation, saying, "Ah, these are the traces of where my man-made wings once grew, the wings I no longer possess."

**9** These are the "Wings" of the title. They are wings of "torn shreds of hope and ambition," torn, for Korean intellectuals under Japanese rule, by both colonial circumstance and alienated passivity **14**.

**8** **Thesis statement, and topic sentence** of the paragraph. The entire paragraph is structured to lead up to the thesis and place it in a particular frame.

**9** **Topic sentence.**

**10** Examples illustrating powerlessness. Note that these examples are evidence for the paragraph's key assertion.

**11** Direct quotation, also **evidence**. The entire paragraph sets the context for understanding this quotation, and thus works as its interpretation before the fact.

**12** Very efficient **signpost**.

**13** More **evidence** by direct quotation.

**14** Excellent **final flourish** by means of quotation, simultaneously summarizing the central thesis of the paper and bringing us back to a key aspect of the primary text—its title.

This paper has a clear and effective **structure**, supported by paragraphing:

Paragraph 1 sets the paper in a larger intellectual and interpretative context. If we are to read allegorically, the story is best interpreted as figuring the plight of intellectuals, specifically, under Japanese colonialism. Paragraph 1 thus achieves the “opening out” of a paper that we recommended when discussing **endings**. The caveats about multiple possible interpretations also hint at possible counter-argument, and acknowledge the limitations of the paper’s thesis. This is achieved with a very light touch, but the response is much stronger for these gestures. Jennie correctly does not develop these alternate directions (in such a constricted context they would make the argument too diffuse).

Paragraphs 2 and 3 analyze the contents of the story for links to the plight of real-world intellectuals. Paragraph 2 isolates the theme of powerlessness as the first link, and Paragraph 3 extends and builds on this, adding lack of ambition, disillusion and inaction. Note that these paragraphs treat, in turn, the situation and the protagonist’s response to it.

Paragraph 4 turns back to the real-world analogues for this allegorical content, treating in turn powerlessness (intellectuals robbed by the “repressive colonial overlord” of their traditional respect as officeholders, and reduced to poverty) and the resultant despondency and cynicism. This order of themes thus mirrors the order found the movement from Paragraph 2 to 3. We are prepared for this in four terse words in the topic sentence: “half-imposed, half-chosen.”

Paragraph 5 mirrors symmetrically the movement at the beginning of 4, and returns to the allegorical world of the story. The topic sentence subtly repeats and reinforces the idea of powerlessness and a despairing response (“enforced from above *and* self-determined”), and we then turn back to the story to see that it also contains an analogue of the “half-imposed, half-chosen” character of the intellectuals’ plight. In this last paragraph, the movement back and forth between the two terms of the comparison—the

real-life historical situation and its literary analogue—quickens, as the link between them is drawn tighter.

The response paper aptly closes with a reading of the story’s title in light of its interpretation of the story as a whole. This is aesthetically satisfying and rhetorically effective, and implies that the allegorical reading argued is general and fundamental to the story as a whole.

The use of **evidence** is excellent, and very economical. Examples and quotations are well-chosen, subtly but concisely interpreted, and coordinated for maximum interpretative mileage. This response paper is thus an excellent illustration of what we called above the “guerilla tactics” model. Note, for example, how each piece of evidence in the second paragraph gets a single sentence—a very light touch. Much of this economy is accomplished by precise, vivid wording and use of detail: “perfume bottles and hand mirror” as synecdoche for an entire scene; “wifely oppressor”; “gatekeeper”; “half-imposed, half-chosen,” etc.

Naturally, a response paper is held to the same standards of accurate wording, correct grammar and clear structure as any other piece of writing, many aspects of which are discussed in sections of this handbook about **structural elements** like **signposts**, **miscellaneous points of grammar and wording** and **rewriting**. Jennie’s paper illustrates many good practices here too—each move in the argument is well signposted, for example. We have pointed out some of the good moves above, and we refer you to the relevant sections for explanation. You should be able to find others.

The entire first paragraph, for example, is a consummate illustration of the principle of **old information first, new information last**. Each sentence in this paragraph picks out an element of the previous one as its topic (and the first does the same for the question), and then moves us to new ground, in an orderly sequence of topics that progressively narrow the focus from the larger context, through the issues posed by the question, to the paper’s own particular take on those issues.

In this tiny compass, then—under six hundred words—we are given a complete, if brief, argument, in support of the original thesis heralded at the end of the opening paragraph. This is a regular bumble-bee bat of a response paper.

If, like some students, you are understandably feeling a little daunted by the rigor we demand of you even in your weekly responses, take heart. Jennie’s paper is excellent, but in any given semester we could have chosen from a dozen or more equally excellent papers to illustrate our points, and a significant proportion of students manage to earn a “check plus” (the equivalent of a “Bravo!”) during the course of the year. You might be surprised (TFs are delighted!) by the number of tight, sparkling responses students produce once they have cut their teeth.

The response paper is your weekly writing workout, and as with any exercise, regular diligence leads to fitness. Work hard at your responses, and you will soon be rewarded by improvements in your thinking and writing as a whole.



# The Module Paper

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**I**n the course of the fall semester, you will be required to write four module papers. Three of these module papers fall at the end of large units in the course structure (the “modules”), and require you to look back over material you have examined during your work for that module. The aim of module assignments, and therefore of the questions set for papers, is to get you to think about broader issues and themes that run through the readings and lectures for multiple weeks of the course.

For example, the first module is on major traditions of thought that have served as intellectual reference points for East Asian civilization, and given its conceptual framework and worldview. The first module paper is an opportunity to think about comparative issues among those various philosophical systems; to winkle out recurring problematics that run through disparate philosophical positions, or areas of fierce contention and wide divergence; to identify common ground and consider whether it is possible to make general characterizations about East Asian thought as a whole, and if so, what such a characterization might look like; and so on.

The final paper carries this process to a higher level of generality again, and aims to get students thinking about themes and problems that run through the material of the entire course. Questions will therefore overtly or implicitly revolve around such broad concerns as whether “East Asia” is a coherent, meaningful cultural and historical entity, which can be usefully and cogently studied as a single whole; whether it makes sense, therefore, to construe the study of pre-modern East Asia as a single scholarly field (“East Asian Studies”); what meaningful characterizations of East Asia as a unit might be

made, or if such characterizations are impossible, what alternatives we might consider; and so forth.

At five pages, module papers are longer than response papers, but they are still short enough to require the concision and elegance we discussed above as desiderata of the response paper. The difference in scale is enough, however, to make it unlikely that you will resort to the structural abbreviation of the response paper. You will probably require at least a little explicit macroscopic signposting to guide the reader through the major subsections of your argument, though such signposting should still be kept light. You will also need to defend each point you make by thorough reference to relevant evidence (which in the fall semester is by definition confined to the assigned readings), and this may mean that you will adduce more evidence for some points than in a response paper.

In evaluating your module papers, we look primarily for original thinking and strong argumentation. You must have carefully considered the question and the readings to which it refers, and have arrived at your own conclusions. You must then write a clear, concise and tightly structured argument, showing your reasons for arriving at those conclusions and attempting to persuade your reader likewise.

Despite its tight word limit, therefore, the module paper really includes all of the major elements of good writing discussed in this handbook. If you have not already done so, we encourage you to refer to the sections in the first part of the handbook describing those elements for a clear idea of what we expect, and suggestions as to how to achieve it.

# The Larger Independent Research Paper

**A**s your career in EAS progresses, you will at some point be required to undertake your first major piece of independent research, and write up the results. Precisely when this point falls in the Tutorial program as a whole has differed somewhat as syllabi have changed over the years, but typically you can expect to be doing such work by your junior year at the latest. In the spring semester of your junior year you are expected to write a junior paper, which will certainly constitute the kind of independent project we are discussing here, even if it is not the first such project you undertake. For more on the junior paper, please refer to the section of this handbook entitled “The EAS Junior Paper.”

In the following sections of this handbook, we take you through some typical components of the process of producing such a piece of work, and offer some suggestions that we hope will make the whole undertaking more manageable, enjoyable and successful. First, however, we will make a few general comments about the process as a whole.

An independent research paper builds on writing and argumentative skills that most students should have already begun to hone if they have taken the tutorial in sequence and worked seriously at the various writing assignments expected of them. You should not feel, therefore, the first time you have to tackle a project like this, that it is entirely new; you will already have many of the necessary skills at the ready, and many of the basics of effective writing that we have discussed so far in this handbook as applied to smaller assignments apply just as much, *mutatis mutandi*, to larger work.

Your first such project is a watershed in your development that also looks forward, however, to foster skills that we hope will be useful to you in future work, both in the Tutorial and in your long-term career. Your first independent research project is therefore intended to develop important skills that will serve you right through to your senior year and beyond: formulating a topic, finding relevant bibliographic materials, developing arguments, evolving your ideas in response to peer and teacher feedback, presenting the results of research in oral and written form, and so on. For these reasons, the advice presented in the following pages, though it is addressed to students going through the process for the first time, should also be of value to seniors undertaking the preparation of a thesis.

Students who are undertaking such work for the first time can sometimes underestimate the amount of time it takes to do justice to each step in the process. This is particularly the case with early components like choosing a topic, developing a thesis, and generating a research bibliography.

Please take this friendly warning to heart: you will have to work steadily at each component in the overall process to get good results. This work will also only be truly effective if it is spread evenly over the entire time at your disposal. The research process is cumulative, and its fruits grow only with time and regular care, which means that you cannot neglect earlier components and then make up for lost ground in a rush in the reading period. It is because the early stages of the process, in particular, can be deceptively time-consuming and laborious that we have laid them out separately in what follows. This section of the

**Your research project will develop important skills that will help you with your senior thesis.**



handbook is designed to give to each piece of the project time and weighting that accurately reflect its proportionate contribution to a satisfying piece of research.

In the section on “Strategies for Writing,” we emphasized that the most effective path to a good finished piece of writing is often just to get writing. If you write something --anything!--we said, you have raw material, with which you can begin a process of development and refinement. We would like to reiterate that advice here. You may find it useful, even if it seems a little artificial, to keep a small diary of your work towards your research project—a notebook in which you record ideas and have a first bash at working through their implications. Writing is not merely a means to express the results of thought; it can be the enzyme that catalyzes reactions between what you read and what goes in your own mind.

Finally, as with other aspects of this handbook, we emphasize that what we say here is intended to offer helpful and stimulating ideas that might enhance your work process, and not as a Procrustean formula that has to be followed to the letter. While most researchers will follow a process that includes most of the components described below in some recognizable form or another, there are many ways of going about a research project, and we could not hope to present them all exhaustively here.

# Choosing Something to Study

Throughout the fall semester of the Sophomore Tutorial, and perhaps in most other coursework you did prior to that at Harvard, you worked from assigned questions for required work. Part of the excitement of the independent research paper is that you are free to study anything you like, but this also makes it a daunting and even risky prospect. Do not underestimate the amount of work it takes simply to arrive at a question. You will need to begin thinking and working steadily from the very start of the process to have a successful final project, and the work of EAS students in past years has shown that if you do work steadily, it can pay great dividends.

## **Choose to study something that genuinely captures your interest.**

First and foremost, do so because interest might be the only force that carries you through the patches of drudgery and discouragement that are often part of research and writing. Interest has another use, however. Your interest can also be like the twitching of a diviner's dousing rod, a quiver that betrays a hidden wellspring of worthwhile material and ideas. In academic work, your interest is your nose, and researchers who know how to follow their noses, like bloodhounds, stand the best chance of sniffing out whatever game is afoot.

## **Develop your study in a way that draws on your fields of strength.**

If your main area of concentration has been literature, history, or art history, for example, choose a topic in religion that can be developed in literary, historical, or aesthetic terms.

## **Focus on something specific.**

If you have only ever done shorter projects, it might seem as though fifteen or twenty pages is a lot to fill, but in fact, it is only possible to adequately treat a focused problem in this space, which is still relatively constrained. Thus, if the best you can do in describing your interest is to say you want to study “the one-child policy in China,” you still have work to do, as this is too vague to be useful. By contrast, if you have narrowed it down to “problems of implementing the one-child policy in Shanghai in the 1990s,” you are getting somewhere; your topic is already much more focused and analytical.

Once you have a general idea of what you would like to study, it can help to concentrate your attention on finding a specific example or case through which to get at the larger issues. This is often a very effective way of handling incisively issues that would otherwise be too diffuse to get a handle on. Watch carefully in your readings, and you will see that established scholars use this device all the time; it has also served students very well in past years. For example, a student who was interested in the broad dynamics of the democracy movement in Korea in the 1980s approached those issues through an analysis of representative writings of two authors in a school of literature commonly held to have been central to the movement. Another student, interested in broad issues of religious and national identity in the modern period, studied specific incidents in modern Japan where convert Christians had taken a stand against state Shinto because its practices offended their religious conscience.

This means you need to read extensively just to find out what you want to work on. If you can think of your topic without having done some serious read-

- **Choose what interests you**
- **Draw on your fields of strength**
- **Focus on something specific**
- **Keep your eye on the big picture**

ing (whether prior to beginning your current project, or subsequently), then it is unlikely that it is adequately focused. To return to our earlier example, you can be interested in the one-child policy in China just from reading the newspaper, but you will probably have had to do some digging to find out that telling problems were encountered in its implementation in Shanghai in the 1990s.

**Even as you focus, however, you should keep an eye on the big picture.**

A good paper naturally includes the close analysis of a specific body of focused evidence, but that analysis is likely to founder unless it is framed by an intelligent understanding of broader contextual issues. This means that the process of finding a topic, like the subsequent phases of research, often alternates, see-saw fashion, between movement in two opposite directions. On the one hand, it delves ever deeper into the details and nuances of specific cases; on the other, it thrusts ever outwards into broader context and theory. Truly interesting work keeps a foot in both camps, and thrives on the tension between the impulse for depth and the impulse for breadth.

## Articulating Your Topic

Once you have identified an object of study that combines general issues with a specific case or cases through which those issues can be explored, your next task is to ascertain that there is indeed a good prospect of it yielding interesting work. At this stage in the process, many teachers will ask you for a written proposal or topic statement. Even where such a written proposal is not required, it can help your thinking along to produce a brief, clearly articulated statement of your topic, be it for your own reflection, or for use in seeking the feedback of your teachers or friends.

Note that we are not suggesting that you should state a *thesis* at this early stage in the process. This is an important distinction. Nobody expects you to state, before actually undertaking a piece of research, the actual thesis that will result from that research. If you did know the thesis so far ahead of time, that would defeat much of the purpose of the process you pursue in the intervening weeks or months—to develop your ideas, to think unexpected thoughts, and to learn.

This stage of the research process is very similar to the task we address in the section of this handbook that we call “Posing the Puzzle.” You need to convince yourself or your teacher that the project you plan is potentially interesting and viable.

We discuss what it means for a project to be “interesting” in the section on “Thesis Statements.” In short, ideas in academia are interesting to the extent that they produce new knowledge, or new ways of seeing things. You do not have to come up with the goods just yet—if you already had an answer, that would be more than a topic, it would be a thesis—but you have to look like you are on the right track.

The only real way to tell if something interesting will come out of a topic is to see if it contains a genuine puzzle. Such a puzzle often emerges from a clash between a generally received picture of affairs and some particular case, which is another reason that

good work often emerges from the interaction of general and particular. When you find yourself thinking, “Hang on, according to what I have read in the past, this doesn’t seem to make any sense,” you might be onto something. Your nose is twitching—now follow it!

We have seen several examples of this dynamic at work in interesting topics in the various examples we have examined in the course of discussing general writing techniques. Think of the *qin* example (see “Posing the Puzzle,” “Roadmaps,” “Endings” etc.). Stated baldly, the topic of “political interpretations of the *qin* zither in Maoist China” will probably strike most readers as irremediably obscurantist. But the topic probably attracted the attention of the student who pursued it in the first place because there is something counter-intuitive about the fate of the *qin* under Mao. If this is an instrument that was the darling of the effete Confucian elite, then surely it should have been a pilloried pariah after the revolution overthrew that class and all it stood for. Why was it instead given pride of place? What on earth was going on?

Another student studied the sudden resurgence of the Mao cult that swept China in the early 1990s. Again, here was something that, at first blush, made no sense. If, as seemed to be the case, the Deng era was predicated upon a rejection of fundamental aspects of Mao’s legacy, why were taxi drivers hanging Mao’s portrait from their rear-view mirrors, and playing Cultural Revolution hymns to His Glory? This sense of puzzlement, it turned out, was also an accurate guide in the search for an interesting interaction between generally accepted stereotypes and a set of concrete facts.

If there is no such “Huh?” factor in your topic, you might need to dig a little deeper. Walter Benjamin once remarked, of those who were surprised that it should be possible for the Nazis to persecute Jews “in this day and age,” that the only use of such surprise

was that it forced us to question our picture of the world—what sort of a “day and age” had we taken this for?<sup>10</sup> This point can be generalized to various kinds of cognitive dissonance—surprise, puzzlement, disbelief. Such reactions spring from a misfit between our expectations and the facts of the world. New knowledge springs from adjusting not the facts, but our understanding of them. If we chase up things that puzzle us, then, they can therefore lead us to new understandings—more accurate representations of the real state of affairs.

## Developing a Working Hypothesis

Once you have found a topic that combines general issues with a specific case or cases through which those issues can be explored, it will help if you develop a provisional thesis.

“Hypothesis” is used in a number of senses in different fields in English, but we mean it here in no particularly technical sense. According to the OED, the broadest sense of the word is “foundation, base; hence, basis of an argument, supposition, also, subject-matter, etc.”; the narrower definition closest to our intention here is this:

A supposition or conjecture put forth to account for known facts; esp. in the sciences, a provisional supposition from which to draw conclusions that shall be in accordance with known facts, and which serves as a starting-point for further investigation by which it may be proved or disproved and the true theory arrived at.

The Greek prefix *hypo-* means “under,” and a *hypothesis*, then, can be a provisional thesis, a conjecture that “under”-writes the development of your eventual thesis proper by laying some ground for you to work across to get there. It is a starting point. To

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<sup>10</sup>“The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.” In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257.

have a hypothesis really means nothing more than to be able to say, “This is what I think might be going on here.”

It is extremely useful to clearly formulate this vague sense of what is going on to yourself, however. It gives you something to bounce new information off as you come across it. Of course, your hypothesis (or hypotheses—help yourself, take as many as you like!) will change as you go along, but that is healthy and as it should be. One of the most rewarding moments for a TF is when someone shows up at office hour and says, “You know, at first I thought it was all about such-and-such, but then I found *this*, and now I wonder if it isn’t all something entirely different again.”

## Gathering Materials and Making a Bibliography

**A**nother useful early step in checking that your project is viable and getting underway is to develop a bibliography. There is no mystery here, in fact—regardless of how interesting your topic is in the abstract, if there are not enough sources available to you for the pursuit of your project, you may not have enough material to develop a really interesting and in-depth analysis. This is also a way of checking that your project is sufficiently substantial. If you have chosen a question that can be resolved by reading, say, a single article in the *South China Morning Post*, then no matter how interesting it is, it simply will not represent substantial original work on your part, and is unlikely to satisfy the requirements of whatever assignment you are working to fulfill.

The big question, of course, is how you go about finding materials. There are a number of resources you can make use of in this process. Many of these resources are introduced at the electronic learning session at Lamont Library in the first week of the Sophomore Tutorial, and you should take the opportunity to test-drive of those tools as many as possible. The librarians who teach that session have compiled a

“Webliography” specifically for students in East Asian Studies, listing the resources that they cover in the session and other useful tools. The Webliography is an extremely rich resource, and you should make use of it. It is available at

<http://hcl.harvard.edu/research/guides/classes/2003spring/eas97r.html>

There is also a link to it on the Sophomore Tutorial course website, under the “WWW Links” button.

Other resources will have been introduced to you during your tour of the Harvard-Yenching library early in your time in EAS, and those resources and more are listed on the library’s website.

The Harvard-Yenching Library homepage is at

<http://hcl.harvard.edu/harvard-yenching/>

and is also listed under “WWW Links” on the course website. Many of the more commonly used resources are found as “Online Resources” under the relevant regional rubric (“China Studies,” “Japan Studies,” “Korea Studies”) in the menu on the left-hand side of the page.

Here is a list of some other ways, formal and informal, that you can search for materials. For lack of a better organizing principle, we present these different methods in one order in which you might try them:

### 1. Talk to people about your project.

Useful leads often come up this way. Chief among the useful people you should talk to are your teachers and other faculty, and librarians. Research librarians are treasures too often underutilized by undergraduates.

### 2. Spend a little time searching on Google or an equivalent.

This is *not* to say that materials published on the Internet should be among your final sources (though in some cases they might), and it is almost certainly not the case that you can do interesting work using *only* Internet sources. Internet searching can be very useful, however, as a quick way of finding resources on a certain topic

published in other media; of finding out the names of scholars working on particular topics, whose works you can then retrieve in print from libraries; or of getting a quick idea of some of the most basic ways people are thinking about a given topic, and a leg-up in your own thinking. Note that in all these respects, the Internet is usually just a springboard for other types of research. There may not be a single topic that can yet be adequately studied through the use of Internet resources alone.

### 3. Use online search tools.

The first of these is HOLLIS, of course. If you have not already done a session on how to get the most out of HOLLIS, go and do so as soon as you can; far more power lurks beneath its mild-mannered olive exterior than you see when you log on. Many other search tools are available to Harvard students *through* HOLLIS. You should run the keywords for your topic through such tools as ProQuest (or its replacement, Academic Search Premier from EBSCO) and JSTOR, for example, and the equivalents in any Asian language you know well enough to use in your research.

- ### 4. Leapfrog your way to new material from the bibliographies of what you already have.
- In fact, bibliographies in published work can be so useful in this phase of your project that they should often be the first thing you read when you get hold of something. Look out for works exactly on your topic, or very close to it. Look out, also, for the works that are in every bibliography published in a particular area—the seminal works that set the tone for an entire discourse.

Try all these methods, and anything else you can think of. As you keep searching, repeat various steps and searches, too; you will think of other things to look for at every stage of your research, and you should not think that you have finished the bibliographic hunt just because you have gone

through steps like the above once, early in the research process.

At this stage in your project, your first aim should be to embarrass yourself with riches. You should ideally be forced to *cut down* to the items that you end up actually using for your paper—try to put yourself in a position where you can pick and choose. If your crew of sources numbers only the bare minimum of hands to get your project under sail, chances are it will harbor a few misfits press-ganged into service, and your argument will end up springing leaks or foundering because of them.

## Making Outlines

Once they have gathered material, read through a certain amount of it, and taken notes, many students find it useful to sketch an outline of the final paper, or some part thereof. Some assignment structures in certain courses also require this step, and ask students to submit outlines for teacher evaluation and feedback.

Rest assured that any outline you produce prior to the final whistle is not the be-all and end-all of your ultimate argument. When outlines are required as part of the assignment structure of a course, for instance, some students fear that they will be held to their outline in their final paper, almost as if teachers will sue for breach of contract if they depart from it in any way! This is naturally not the case.

The main purpose of making an outline, at any stage of the process, is to help you plan your research and writing in terms of the paper as a whole. Making an outline should give you an opportunity to take a step back from the detailed spadework that takes up so much of a researcher's time, and see what sort of an overall picture emerges from the various items you have dug up. This should allow you to identify things you need to work on more—places where perhaps you need to find more material, or parts of your argument that might require reconsideration in light of

your midterm experience—and formulate a plan of attack for subsequent phases of the project.

An outline can also be an ideal way to seek feedback. Presenting your ideas in outline form allows your reader—your teacher or your friend, say—to get a clear picture of what you are planning for your final paper, and makes any subsequent discussion that much more fruitful for being based upon a clear understanding of where your project stands. It is even possible to think of an outline as a device for getting feedback from yourself, in the sense that the very process of putting your ideas into such a structured form will usually spark new insights into connections between parts of the evidence and argument you had not previously seen, and allow you to see weaknesses that you had not otherwise noticed.

## Writing Drafts and Using Feedback

There are several good reasons to incorporate regular draft writing into your research process, rather than leaving all the writing until the very last.

First, producing draft versions of manageable chunks of your project as you go along can help you accumulate a fund of fragments that will end up in your final project, and so cut down the daunting task of writing the final paper down to a more manageable size. If you make yourself write some draft fairly regularly, then, it can “keep your nose to the grindstone,” though this phrase has a little too much the ring of the taskmaster. A part of what we need to learn as we accustom ourselves to independent research is the rhythm that such work typically has. It is common for all of us to underestimate how much work a piece of research entails, but especially common the first time around, and it can help students avoid panic as the deadline looms if they produce pieces of their final project as they go along.

Like an outline, drafts can also provide a very good medium for seeking feedback. For this reason,

many writers find it useful, at various stages in the research and writing process, to show a draft to friends or teachers and ask their opinion of it. The feedback you receive will be most useful if you seek out the feedback you most need. This means that your long-term best interest, if not the immediate plumpness of your ego, might be served by asking for feedback on the aspect of your project you feel least secure about. Sometimes, if there is some major question you still haven't really broached, or if there is something niggling you that might not be going right, writing a draft can be a good way to confront it squarely and try to work it through.

Note that if you are going to use a draft to seek feedback from others, you should not let the word “draft” mislead you into inflicting sloppy writing on them. If we call a piece of writing “draft,” it simply means that it is subject to revision; there is a difference, however, between “draft” and mere notes, or a diary-like record of your stream of consciousness.

There are two good reasons, then, for making any draft you ask others to comment on as polished as you can in the time available to you. The first is common courtesy. If you ask someone to think about your work with you, you are asking for their time, and you can show that you value that time by ensuring that the other person has to spend as little of it as possible peering through the fog of poor expression merely to discern your ideas in the first place. You are asking for intellectual advice, not copy-editing, and you should therefore make sure you have done the copy-editing already, rather than inflicting that task too on your hapless helper.

The second reason to make a draft as good as possible is more utilitarian. When you ask someone for feedback, you really want them to comment on your ideas. Obviously, comments will be useful in proportion to the degree in which the other person has *understood* your ideas, and nothing helps their understanding like clear writing. If you are discussing your ideas with someone, it is as much a waste of time for you as for them to spend your time talking about something you don't actually think, simply because

you didn't take the care to express yourself with sufficient clarity. For these reasons, any draft you write to seek feedback from others should ideally be as clearly and correctly written as anything you would submit for a grade.

Once you have written the draft and obtained feedback from your teacher or your friend, the last question, of course, is how to make best use of it. This can be the most difficult part of the process, since it involves something few of us are truly good at—listening to criticism. The most important thing, however, is to consider the feedback you get carefully, and in each case to be open to the possibility that the other person has seen something that you really would benefit from changing in your work. Beware of rejecting criticism out of hand because it entails abandoning work you have already invested time in—the natural tendency we all have is to protect the fruits of our labors as if they were our children, regardless of their actual merits.

On the other hand, you should also be aware that even the feedback you receive from your TF or professor will almost never be 100% useful or on track.

**Seek out feedback on the aspect of your project you feel least secure about.**

You should take all feedback—even the most strongly worded comments scrawled on your papers!—as suggestions, and nothing more.

Students who bend over backwards to follow every suggestion given them run the risk of ending up with-

out direction, and it is important that you have a sufficiently strong sense of your own direction, thinking, interests and style to know when feedback is actually not useful to your project.

Perhaps the single most important thing, even before the question of *how* you make use of feedback, is that you do make use of it, in some way or other. Even the most annoying and tactless TF comments on response papers are written with the ultimate intention of helping you improve your work, and you

should try and see that intent behind any comment before you decide to disregard it. It is also true that even the most doggedly impartial and conscientious teachers are discouraged to see students ignore all their advice, and heartened when they see that their careful suggestions are considered and at least sometimes acted upon. This naturally spurs them to spend more thought and care on making further suggestions to students who appreciate them. One way to get good feedback, then, is to value the feedback you do get—a virtuous cycle.

## The Final Paper

**D**rum roll please! The paper you produce at the end of this research process may well be your first full-scale written argument of this scale, based upon your own independent research, investigating a problem you identified yourself. As we said earlier, although the idea of writing such a paper might be daunting, you are not in fact entirely unprepared, if you have worked consistently at the writing assignments in the Tutorial program and followed even some of the steps we suggest in this section.

The assignment structure of the entire Sophomore Tutorial is designed to prepare you for the step up to this kind of work. Through weekly response papers and module papers in the fall, you should have been honing your ability to structure an argument, to evaluate evidence critically and present your analysis, and to use language clearly and precisely. Writing assignments in the spring semester continue to build on these first steps. If you think of your longer research paper as comprised of several components like the smaller projects you have already worked on, you should be able to see that writing it is quite a manageable task.

If you have followed some of the advice in the sections of this handbook immediately preceding this one, you should also have material that will be of use in constructing your final paper. If you wrote out some version of your topic statement, for instance,



you should be able to use that material in “posing the puzzle” that drives your final paper. Various versions of your hypothesis, as you worked on the project, may have metamorphosed into something readily modifiable into a thesis statement. If you produced one or more outlines as you went along, they should have helped you to develop your thinking about the overall structure of your final argument. If you have been writing a draft for yourself or your teachers and friends to reflect on, some of it might be usable as raw material for the actual content of sections of your paper.

Even to the extent that this is not the case, there should be no mystery left in the process of gathering what remaining evidence you need, presenting that evidence and its analysis, and collecting it into a coherent order from which you can build the last components of your final argument.

At this point, we would like to make a plug for rewriting and editing. We have emphasized throughout this handbook that the Tutorial in East Asian Studies is as much an extended writing workshop as it is an introduction to theoretical issues, factual knowledge, or disciplinary approaches. Indeed, this handbook only exists because writing is such a key part of what the tutorial aims to teach.

For this reason, it will be to your own benefit if you regard the last stages of writing your final paper in part as an exercise in *writing*. If this is indeed the first time you have followed this independent research and writing project through to the end on such a scale, you may well find that structuring the final argument and polishing the prose is more of a challenge than you anticipate. You should leave adequate time for these steps, therefore. You may also find, to your delight, that if you do knuckle under to this “labor of the file” (see “Rewriting”) it is possible to make more difference than you anticipate to the finished product.

We are not so naïve as to recommend this exercise to you merely for the good of your soul! There is a simple ulterior equation, if such a thing will help motivate you: diligent rewriting and editing makes

for clearer argument and more elegant prose; clear argument and elegant prose makes for enjoyable and rewarding reading; enjoyable reading stops your TF climbing the walls; and a TF who is not climbing the walls gives out better grades! In all seriousness, the TF does not give out better grades for better writing merely because of its benefits for her emotional state, but because enjoyable writing is actually better writing; and since it is not possible to write clearly without clear thought, clear writing is actually a sign of a better argument and more incisive thinking.

Everyone’s a winner!

If you are reading this at or near the end of the process of producing your first piece of independent research writing, or indeed in the course of working on later projects like a senior thesis, you might reflect on the lessons of the process you have followed. We noted in talking about “Writing Strategies” that different people have different processes for producing writing. The same is equally true of research. The advice presented in this section on steps you might follow in an independent research is designed to suggest some ways in which you might arrive at a finished piece of research, but we are well aware that there is no one fixed way of doing so that fits all researchers equally. As your career progresses, you will probably be increasingly free to follow your own lights when researching, just as when writing; and as with writing, it will repay you handsomely if you observe yourself in the process, and learn what works for you and what does not.

If it has served its purpose, the assignment structure in the EAS Tutorial will hopefully have taught you research and writing skills that not only lead to a successful papers at each stage of the syllabus in the sophomore year *per se*, but also serve you well for the rest of your university career and beyond. The process of research and writing is infinitely perfectible, however, and we wish you every success as you strike out on your own.

# The EAS Junior Paper

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**M**any of the comments made in the sections immediately preceding this one, on “The Larger Independent Research Paper,” will be particularly germane to the experience of writing your junior paper. Here, for your reference, is the section on “The EAS Junior Paper” from the handbook entitled “The Concentration in East Asian Studies in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations: A Guide for Undergraduates,” which presents the basic requirements for this piece of work.

Students write the junior paper in the spring semester of their junior tutorial. It is the capstone experience of the East Asian Studies concentration. Although some students do not go on to write senior theses, all concentrators in the junior tutorial write the junior paper. Writing the junior paper integrates research and writing skills developed in the concentration. It also allows students to go beyond the material covered in class and pursue independently a topic of interest. For some students, the topic of the junior paper may develop into a senior thesis topic. For others, it will be a project of interest, which gives them the experience of conducting systematic research on a topic in East Asian Studies.

Each junior tutorial develops its own approach to the junior paper, but they share certain common concerns. Tutors and professors discuss techniques of research appropriate to each junior tutorial, and provide guidance on interim products such as annotated bibliographies, outlines, and rough drafts. Each student is encouraged to develop topics within scholarly disciplines encompassed by the Junior Tutorial. Topic selection is guided through a conference with tutors. Students are advised of resources available in the Harvard Library for general use in each field, and given guidance on materials appropriate for their topic. In some tutorials, junior paper research is presented in class, giving students an opportunity to develop presentation

skills, and to learn how to receive and give feedback among peers.

Junior papers are generally twenty-five to thirty-five pages in length. They are expected to focus on a question relevant to the particular field of the junior tutorial. Each develops an argument, presents counter-arguments, and discusses evidence from secondary and primary sources, as appropriate. A series of deadlines throughout the semester guides steady progress. The topic and evidence used in junior papers goes well beyond the content of readings in the tutorial, although the theoretical issues raised in class should be addressed in the junior paper.

As students progress through the fall semester of tutorial, they should begin to think about possible topics. The junior paper need not be written on a topic covered in the spring semester of tutorial, so whenever some issue or topic comes up that seems especially interesting, it is advisable to talk to your tutor for some initial guidance. In addition, the various Asian studies centers offer summer grants for preliminary thesis research in Asia. The application deadline for these is late February, so it is valuable to get started thinking about a topic well in advance. A letter of recommendation from a professor who might advise a thesis growing out of that research is important to the application, as well. Thus it is a good idea at an early stage to talk to a faculty member who has particular interest or expertise in the area, to get ideas for further thought and reading. That makes it easier to later ask for a letter.

As is clear even from this brief description, the junior paper demands most of the skills this handbook sets out to foster in its readers, and juniors are encouraged to make extensive use of the handbook as a reference in the process of researching and writing their junior papers.

# Senior Thesis

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**H**onors concentrators who will write a senior thesis are referred to the handbook entitled “The Concentration in East Asian Studies in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations: A Guide for Undergraduates,” pp. 12-16, for guidelines.

Note, in particular, the section of that handbook that states:

Writing well is extremely difficult; it requires persistence and revision. It is an important skill, but many seniors have progressed through their studies at Harvard without having worked much to improve their writing (13).

It is in the hope that these words will no longer apply to EAS concentrators that the Department of EALC has developed this handbook, and the components of its tutorial syllabi that integrate it into normal course structures and emphasize so heavily the development of writing skills.

If you are reading these words before your senior year, therefore, take heed! In a very significant sense the process of producing a good senior thesis reaches back long before the senior year itself, into the groundwork you do in sophomore and junior tutorials. The good news is that if you approach writing as

a continually developing skill, as this handbook recommends, you can do a great deal to make your thesis (or your junior paper) excellent, long before you ever set pen to paper for that specific project.

If you are reading these words *in* your senior year and fear the forbidding warning they convey applies to you, do not despair. It is certainly not too late in your senior year to do a great deal to improve your writing. If you are keen to do so, the advice laid out in this handbook applies equally to senior theses as to sophomore response papers, and the steps to the process of research and writing suggested in the sections immediately preceding this one should also be useful to you. Remember also that nothing gladdens the heart of a teacher or graduate student advisor like a student who is determined to work deliberately on improving their writing, and you can certainly get a lot of help in that regard from your teachers in the process of writing the senior thesis itself.

# Writing Strategy Revisited: The Importance of Rewriting

**“Nothing is poorer than a truth expressed as it was thought. Committed to writing in such cases, it is not even a bad photograph.”**

**“Work on good prose has three steps: a musical stage when it is composed, an architectonic one when it is built, and a textile one when it is woven.”**

– Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

So far in this handbook we have moved in an airy-fairy world of ideals. As we talked about the “Working Parts” of a paper, we were thinking of the finished product, and we treated each component roughly in order of appearance in that finished product, even though the order in which we really produce them may be different (we noted this in “Strategies”). When we discussed the various assignments required in the Tutorial, such as response papers, module papers and longer research papers, we sometimes talked about how to produce work, but our focus was similarly on the ideal finished product most of the time.

In considering rewriting and editing, we return to the actual, messy process of getting your writing to its final shape. Good writing with a full complement of well-crafted working parts is a complex machine, and almost nobody can just sit down and spit out writing that cannot be improved upon. There are simply too

many things at play to give adequate attention to all at the same time.

Unfortunately, the same myth that we tried to put paid to in “Writing Strategies”—the myth that good writing comes all in one untrammelled flow—gets in the way of sufficient rewriting for many people. Many frustrated writers are unaware that even geniuses of the written word like Walter Benjamin (cited in the epigraphs above) often polish numerous drafts, working with lapidary care for a finish as smooth as finest jade. Kevin Guinagh tells us, for example, that Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* over a period of seven years—an average rate of one line a day! “It was this labor of the file,” Guinagh writes, “that Tennyson had in mind when he wrote of Vergil:

who would write ten lines, they say,  
At dawn, and lavish all the golden day  
To make them wealthier in his reader's eyes.”<sup>2</sup>

Now, obviously we are not all going to suddenly turn into Virgils, no matter how many golden days we lavish on our lines. It is possible, however, for all of us to make our drafts much better with patient toil. This is one of the beauties of writing; you get as many takes as you like before the final cut. It is thus perfectible in a way that an extemporaneous product like unplanned speech is not.

The first purpose of this section, then, is to fervently recommend the habit of rewriting to readers who do not have it already. If you do not already carefully rewrite your work, start doing so! Your writing will benefit greatly (and your TF will love you for it).

<sup>1</sup>Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London and New York: Verso, 1979), 85, 61.

<sup>2</sup>Kevin Guinagh, “Introduction” to *The Aeneid of Vergil*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), xi; citing Tennyson’s “Poets and Their Bibliographies.” See *The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Poet Laureate* (London: Macmillan, 1923), 578.

What should we look out for when we rewrite? A good list of things to work on is comprised by the contents table of this handbook. Almost every aspect of writing it talks about, with the possible exception of “Evidence and Its Analysis,” is in fact an aspect of re-writing, or could be.

Indeed, rewriting can be thought of much more broadly than as merely the polishing and perfecting of a readymade draft. In “Writing Strategies,” we strenuously recommended that however imperfectly you go about it, you write *something* to start with when you have a writing assignment. Nothing comes from nothing, but if you have something—anything!—you have something to work with. What is missing can be put in place when you go back later. In fact, for many writers most of the nuts and bolts usually do come later in the writing process, and should at least be checked when editing. This is true even if you are the sort of person who writes first drafts with full sentences and paragraphs in readable sequence.

If we take the term in its broadest sense, then, much of writing is in fact “rewriting.” Now, just as there are many ways to write, there are also many ways to rewrite. One common strategy, however, is to begin by collecting pieces of evidence, and then work outwards. If you have a piece of evidence you think you will use, then try starting a written analysis, even if you haven’t the foggiest idea what your overall thesis will be or where that evidence will fit in. It doesn’t matter if ultimately you don’t use everything. In fact, most people probably discard material in most projects. When the deadline looms, a surfeit of material is much easier remedied than a shortfall.

Once you have enough of these building blocks, one way or another of combining them will probably occur to you, and you might cobble together a section. Once you have a few such prospective sections in hand, you might be able to try writing an outline or roadmap for the whole paper, and you will probably find that a conclusion emerges. Then you can begin your end section, draft a thesis statement, and

start worrying about the fiddly bits like signposts, wording, proofreading, grammar and punchy openings and endings.

Following such a process of repeated writing and rewriting is not simply an aid to writing; it is an aid to thinking itself. Laura Saltz, of the Writing Center, writes of “the kind of precise thinking that it is only possible to achieve by writing” see

<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/Revising.html>).

There is nothing to be lost by thinking on paper or a computer screen: it will not necessarily take you longer (especially if you are otherwise stuck!), and the end result will not suffer. In fact, many people find that their thinking improves when they can see it in front of them, just as it is often useful to talk through your ideas. For these reasons, writing and rewriting alike can be used not just to present the results of analysis and thinking, but as powerful tools to make analysis and thought happen. We urge you to explore this use of writing and rewriting, and yoke its power to your thought.

# Editing

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**I**n the previous section, we were deliberately trying to stretch a narrow conception of what it means to “rewrite,” in the hope that it might help some readers free up their approach to writing. Of course, there is also a more narrow sense in which we often “rewrite” work—when we already have a relatively complete draft in place, with thesis, definitions, roadmap, a body, and conclusion. At this point, we often turn our attention to fine-tuning structure, wording and grammar—what we might call “fiddly bits.” We will artificially distinguish this kind of “rewriting” and call it “editing.”

In the course of such editing, you naturally need to be on the lookout for anything and everything. It would be a rare writer who ever ceases to be surprised and amused by the bizarre and unpredictable glitches they occasionally find in their drafts when they read back over them. That said, there are also certain basic fixes that many writers find themselves applying repeatedly as they edit. What follows is a partial checklist of some of the most basic and common fixes.

## (1) SPLITTING

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As we draft, we frequently write sentences that are too long and complex, and can profit from being split into two or more parts. This is also often true of paragraphs.

Sentences can grow beyond their means for many reasons, but some key words are like sirens that lure far more than their fair share of sentences to ruin on the rocks of prolixity. “While” is a prime culprit. Imagine, for example, if Kwong-loi Shun had begun the paragraph cited in “Counter-Argument” with “while.” He might have ended up with a draft sentence like this:

While [Confucius] cites economic consideration in favor of replacing the linen ceremonial cap used in rituals with one made of black silk, economic consideration cannot be the only relevant consideration, since otherwise it would have justified the elimination of the ceremonial cap altogether, and presumably, it can therefore justify departure from a li rule only when the efficacy of the li rule in serving its purpose remains unaffected.

By the time you get to the end of this sentence, you might feel like a snake that has ingested a goat. A little editing produces something much easier to read—Shun’s real paragraph:

[Confucius] cites economic consideration in favor of replacing the linen ceremonial cap used in rituals with one made of black silk. Economic consideration cannot be the only relevant consideration, since otherwise it would have justified the elimination of the ceremonial cap altogether. Presumably, it can justify departure from a li rule only when the efficacy of the li rule in serving its purpose remains unaffected.

Other words to be wary of include however (after a long first clause), despite, although, and even the common but. It is worth keeping a mental checklist of those that give you the most trouble.

## (2)

### MERGING

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Sometimes, you will find that two sentences or paragraphs work better combined. A string of simple sentences (in the technical sense of sentences that each contain only one verb clause) can make for a bumpy ride. Kim Cooper of the Writing Center memorably makes this point as follows:

Try to avoid repetitive sentence structure. Try to vary the rhythm in your sentences. Try to avoid starting all your sentences the same way. Try to write sentences of differing lengths. (The structure and length of the preceding sentences make this choppy and dull to read, and readers get so distracted by the monotony of the sound, that they lose focus on the sense of what you're saying.)

*("Strategies for Essay Writing," Section 17, "Editing the Essay, Part Two")*

In judging whether your sentences need splitting or merging, let variety be your guide. A varied rhythm goes a long way to making prose engaging and readable.

## (3)

### REORDERING AND SUNDERED COMPANIONS

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As we write drafts, we naturally tend to write ideas down in the order in which they occur to us. The mind works in convoluted ways, however, and there are no guarantees that the order in which it thinks is the clearest order in which to present its thoughts to others. Quite the opposite is often true, in fact. Draft order often tends to loop back on itself, to pursue two or more ideas at the same time, to leave an idea

half-developed and then pick it up without fair notice later on—in short, to do all the things that the mind does as it feels its way into its ideas.

It is true writing can gain a certain fresh candor if it seems to ask the reader to walk with the writer through a process of thought. Writing that gives this impression, however, is as artful and crafted as any other good writing. The *appearance* of thinking things out as you go, which is a rhetorical strategy designed to help your reader, should not be confused with the gaffe of thinking with your brain exposed to public view. This is the intellectual equivalent of chewing with your mouth open, and equally to be discouraged.

As you edit, then, look for places where sentences and paragraphs can be switched around to make the progression of ideas clearer.

You will also often find that individual sentences work better if you reshuffle them. In particular, look out for sundered companions: elements of the sentence that have been forced apart from others with which they logically belong. (We touch briefly on this notion in discussing "Split Infinitives.") Often, you make such reshuffles within a sentence because you need to reunite such elements with their rightful mates. For example:

This is one reason that we often find word order that would be relatively unnatural in speech in academic writing.

#### **Better:**

This is one reason that we often find in academic writing word order that would be relatively unnatural in speech.

Especially if you were talking, it would be normal to say "find X in Y." Here, however, because "X" is a noun clause a line long, *in academic writing* is relatively distant from *find*. By the time they get to it, readers will need to pause and think back to connect the two. This is one reason that we often find in academic writing word order that would be relatively unnatural in speech. The gain in clarity usually amply compensates for the slight awkwardness of the inversion.

Most of the time, companion elements are sundered by some complex subordinate element—a parenthetical remark, a subordinate clause modifying an element of the main clause, etc. Here are some further examples.

If you are going to make this sort of edit effectively, you may need to give the idea that the word order of spontaneous speech is always the best order up.

**Better:**

If you are going to make this sort of edit effectively, you may need to give up the idea that the word order of spontaneous speech is always the best order.

Transitive phrasal verbs like “give up” often get sundered (phrasal verbs are idiomatic verbs that combine a common verb with a preposition: *put down* meaning *derogate*; *take over*, *do in*, *play up* etc.).

On reflection, however, you may find that your drafts can be greatly improved, and the relationship between your ideas made much more apparent, by an extra dose of reordering—going through and rearranging the order in which sentences and paragraphs occur.

**Better:**

On reflection, however, you might find that an extra dose of reordering improves your drafts greatly. It may be possible to make the relationships between your ideas much more apparent by going through and rearranging the order in which sentences and paragraphs occur

This example combines a shuffle and a split. In the first version, the logical subject (“an extra dose of reordering”) is separated from its verbal predicate by an entire line. Note that passive voice (“can be improved *by* an extra dose”) is also responsible for more than its fair share of sundered companions in prose.

As here, phrasal verbs (idiomatic verbs that combine a common verb with a preposition: *put down* meaning *derogate*; *take over*, *do in*, *play up* etc.), like “give up,” often get sundered.

**Better:**

As here, phrasal verbs like “give up” often get sundered (phrasal verbs are idiomatic verbs that combine a common verb with a preposition: *put down* meaning *derogate*; *take over*, *do in*, *play up* etc.).

What was later known as the May 4th Movement, which marked the inception of a huge wave of serious effort to come to terms with intellectual challenges from the West and left a legacy that has huge influence on Chinese thought and arts to this day, began with the reaction to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.

**Better:**

In 1919, reaction to the Treaty of Versailles was the catalyst for a set of intellectual and artistic developments later known as the May 4th Movement. This movement marked the inception of a huge wave of serious effort to come to terms with intellectual challenges from the West, and left a legacy that greatly influences Chinese thought and arts to this day.

We must not confuse, in a way that does disservice to the clarity of our analysis and often merely annoys the reader, the use of obscure vocabulary with a flair for precise language.

**Better:**

We must not confuse the use of obscure vocabulary with a flair for precise language. To do so does disservice to the clarity of our analysis and often merely annoys the reader.

**Better:**

We must not confuse obscure vocabulary with precision. To do so makes our analysis unclear, and often merely annoys the reader.



## (4) SHEDDING, PRUNING, CULLING, SLASHING AND BURNING

Getting something on a page can be hard work, and we all feel some sense of achievement having got it there. Beware of letting this warm glow translate into an irrational reluctance to relinquish a single word, however. A first draft is almost always burdened with some excess, and you do your better words no favors if you send them forth with a retinue of hangers-on and poor cousins.

There are many common types of excrescence and bloat. Many are a hangover from speech. Mouths commonly work faster than brains, it seems, and therefore require ways of marking time to avoid embarrassing pauses. This is fair enough, but in writing such mouth-movers are just dross. Prime candidates for the chop:

- **Redundancy.**

Never say twice what you can adequately say once.

“This is not only a *mere* misunderstanding . . .”

“We must *again* reiterate . . .”

- **Double-barrels.**

By this we mean near-synonymous pairs of words joined by *and*. These bores are close cousins of out-and-out redundancy. *Examples and instances* include *analyze and interpret, interesting and noteworthy, quick and easy, complex and involved, trite and boring*. For example, in an earlier draft of this section, we had written (below), “Try to gain a conscious awareness of the quirks and foibles that regularly appear in your drafts...” The first title of the “Digression” item on this list was “Digression and irrelevancies.” The second member of each pair adds nothing to the sense, and was scrapped upon editing. True, such phrases, in judicious measure, can impart a certain *measure and dignity* to prose; when used *excessively and immoderately*, however, they merely *annoy and irritate* the reader.

- **Superfluous adjectives.**

While a well-chosen adjective can be all that separates the lackadaisical from the wondrous (think of Tennyson’s “all the *golden* day,” above), adjectives left unchecked can blight all the face of your writing. Beware the habit of adding an adjective to every second noun merely for the sake of rhythm, for example. Prominent among repeat offenders in this category are *important* and *interesting*, but any adjective can be culpable. Build an adjective detector into the editing part of your mind, and keep it on high alert.

- **Fudging.**

You must have the courage of your ideas. Be alert for places where you might be hedging. Particularly apt for this ignominious office are adverbs of degree like *almost, virtually, and nearly*; there also exist entire phrases that seldom serve any other, more legitimate purpose, such as *This could give the impression that, We might be forgiven for thinking, or Some people might even argue that...* All of these phrases do, of course, have valid uses, but watch that they do not degenerate into verbal tics and plain old ass-covering.

- **Dummy signposts.**

These are found particularly often at the head of sentences and paragraphs, and in fact, this category overlaps quite significantly with fudging. The instinct for signposting, it seems, sometimes gets out of hand, and makes the writer feel uncomfortable with a good clean start. *Interestingly*, such hot air can creep in without our even noticing it. *We might even say that* it has little more content than the sound of clearing your throat. *It is also the case that*, like clearing your throat, it can be ungraceful to indulge in it too much. Scalpel please!

- **Dummy relative clauses.**

Often, we take a perfectly word or clause, and embed it in a relative clause that serves no purposes.

*It was in 1949 that Mao Zedong stood on Tiananmen and declared China Communist.*

**Better:**

In 1949, Mao Zedong...

These verbal barnacles most thickly encrust the hulls of grammatical subjects. Beware particularly of turns of phrase like *It is this that*, *This is something that...* etc.

You may be a person *who* is easily swept away in the heat of the moment...

**Better:**

You may be easily swept away...

- **Dummy verbs with nominalization.**

We discuss “over-nominalization,” that is, the excessive recasting of verbal processes as abstract nouns, in the Appendix to this handbook entitled “Miscellaneous Points of Grammar and Wording”). We will not repeat that analysis here. Note, however, that nominalization often automatically creates its own piece of accompanying dross—an empty verb, whose sole purpose is to indicate that the action engulfed by the monster noun is “being done.” A couple of examples should suffice:

Often, you need to make such reshuffles within a sentence.

**Better:**

Often, you need to reshuffle a sentence...

In this section, we will make an analysis of...

**Better:**

In this section, we will analyze...

Some of the America’s Most Wanted perpetrators of this particular offense are the words *make*, *do*, *undertake*, *engage in*, and the verb *to be* (“It is my contention that” is better as “I contend . . .”).

- **Digression.**

The writer of this handbook was once accused of being “one big sidetrack.” Don’t let your writing share his fate.

As we write, fascinating sidetracks open up on every side. At least the ghosts of some will find their way into our writing. It is rare for a paper to gain from the retention of these ornaments, however delightful they may be.

Parentheses, for example, should always give you pause in editing. Is what they contain really necessary? Other giveaways include phrases like *Incidentally*, *We should note in passing*, *By the way*, and *It is not within our scope to consider this here*.

## (5) ADDING WORDS

William Strunk, Jr., a great teacher of writing and for many years the Grand High Priest of clean-cut, decent American prose, famously thundered, “Omit needless words!”<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, some writers mistake this sound principle to mean that of any two pieces of writing attempting to convey the same ideas, the shorter is the better. This is not always true, of course. Strunk himself explains, “This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.” In other words, words *do* belong so long as they do a job, and if a job is being neglected, you need to put in some words to do it. In editing, therefore, you will regularly need to add as well as subtract.

One regularly adds words when editing:

- **To create signposts and other structural aids neglected in the draft.**
- **To clarify the referents of pronouns like *this*, *that*, *them* and *it*.**

These small words frequently lead to ambiguity, and it is better to err on the side of repetitive clarity than to lean on them too heavily. Potential ambiguity and confusion should be avoided by repeating the substantive word or clause to which the pronoun refers, even at the cost of raising your word-count slightly. For example, this paragraph would have been more confusing, though slightly shorter, had it read:

To clarify the referents of pronouns like *this*, *that*, *them* and *it*. They frequently lead to ambiguity, and it is better to err on the side of repetitive clarity than to lean on them too heavily. Potential ambiguity and confusion should be avoided by repeating the substantive words or clauses to which they refer, even at the cost of raising your word-count slightly. For example, this would have been more confusing, though slightly shorter, had it read...

- **In splitting sentences.**

Single, complex sentences often incorporate long subordinate clauses, or contain more than one complex predicate for the same grammatical subject, or both. When you split such sentences, you will usually have to add words that resume the subject or the headword of the subordinate clause. A few added signposts may improve matters still further:

The process of editing, which is an aspect of writing novice and journeymen writers frequently neglect despite the fact that it is urged upon them so strenuously by teachers, can make all the difference between mediocre and sparkling prose, and is nowhere near as painful or time-wasting as those who have not tried it sometimes fear.

### **Better:**

Editing can make all the difference between mediocre and sparkling prose. Unfortunately, it is an aspect of writing novice and journeyman writers frequently neglect, though their teachers may strenuously urge it upon them. Yet editing is nowhere near as painful or time-wasting as those who have not tried it sometimes fear.

- **In eliminating nominalization.**

As we argue in “Nominalization” (see Appendix, “Miscellaneous Points”), writing in which things actually happen, and concrete agents do things with real verbs, usually engages us more than a still-life of obdurate abstract nouns. This is true even if it costs us a few more words to bring it off. See “Nominalization” for examples.

<sup>3</sup>William J. Strunk, *The Elements of Style* (Ithaca: W. P. Humphrey, 1918), 23.

# Some General Advice

This section has strongly recommended that you rewrite as much as possible, and tried to provide useful concrete advice about how to do so. We will offer a few more general recommendations about rewriting to close.

First, as you gain experience editing your own writing, try to **gain a conscious awareness of quirks that regularly appear in your drafts**, and use that knowledge to direct your editing process.

For example, you may be easily swept away in the heat of the moment, and pump out ideas on the trot as they occur to you. Properly harnessed, this could be a very useful trait—after all, at least you are producing plenty of raw writing. On reflection, however, you might find that an extra dose of reordering improves your drafts greatly. It may be possible to make the relationships between your ideas much more apparent by going through and rearranging the order in which sentences and paragraphs occur. Note that the point is *not* to squash the flow of ideas as they originally come, and strive for an artificial working method that may not be natural to you. It is, rather, to recognize that most working styles have their shortcomings, and to find compensating strategies.

Again, you might notice that you have a strong tendency to produce lots of simple sentences, and that as a result, your drafts can be a bit choppy to read, as in Kim Cooper's example above. If this is the case, you might need to be especially alert for sentences that would do better joined by a well-chosen, precise conjunction. You might even incorporate into your editing routine a special sweep through your

text specifically devoted to looking for such places. Again, the beauty of rewriting and editing is that you need not cramp your style in the earlier phase of raw production by fussing over sentence length at the same time as trying to generate content.

If you notice that you have some tic or another in your writing, or if your teacher points one out, consider using the “Search and Replace” utility on your word processing software to break yourself of the habit. Perhaps you use too many semicolons; you can set the computer to search for them, and judiciously edit to make your style more varied. Perhaps you have unwittingly become addicted to some piece of empty verbiage, like the dreaded *This relates importantly to... or It is this that...* It happens to the best of us—these phrases can be like viruses of the mind!—but the computer can help you weed those out too.

- **Look for your writing quirks**
- **Don't be afraid to make major changes**
- **Address your specific writing weaknesses**
- **Bring a fresh eye to your work**
- **Practice**

**Don't be afraid to make major changes.**

Be ruthless if ruthlessness is in order. If you have an entire paragraph or section that looks incoherent or irrelevant to you on review, it can be much more efficient to scrap it and start from scratch than to sit fiddling with it ad infinitum.

**On the other hand, don't throw out the baby with the bathwater.** Some people show their attachment to the myth of inspired creation by always scratching what doesn't wholly please them, and going back to square one. This is not really “rewriting,” if by that word we mean working again over something already written; it is just writing something else. What if the problem is that like most mor-

tals, you don't get things perfectly right straight off? No amount of repeating the same process will fix things. You may need, rather, to identify the specific weaknesses in what you have, and address them specifically in rewriting. You may find that you develop a better knowledge of your strengths and weaknesses as a writer if you apply such critical scrutiny to work that dissatisfies you, rather than simply turning away.

**Bring a fresh eye to your work.** This can be achieved by allowing time to elapse between drafting and editing. You can also borrow the fresh eye of another person. Swap writing with your classmates, friends or family, and gently but honestly critique one another's writing.

**Most of all, keep at it.** We can all take a leaf from the book of the greatest of Chinese calligraphers, Wang Xizhi (303-361 CE). Tradition has it that he practiced his art so assiduously that the pond outside his house went black from the washing of his brushes. For Wang as much as for Virgil, then, the perfect finished work was the fruit of patient toil; with a similar readiness to correct and improve, our own work might become, if not perfect, at least a little better.

## Miscellaneous Points of Grammar and Wording

**I**n the following sections of our handbook, we offer miscellaneous advice on grammar, wording, and such matters, and try to head off at the pass some common concerns and mistakes. In each case, the ultimate decision about what style to adopt is your own; our discussion here is intended only to lay out some of the relevant considerations, and help you make an informed choice.

Some of the points discussed below, like nominalization, topic, and old and new information, are discussed very clearly and informatively in an excellent writing workbook by Joseph M. Williams, entitled *Style*.<sup>4</sup> Williams gives a series of exercises designed to hone your sense for each point, and does the same for many of the aspects of editing discussed later in this handbook. You might like to check Williams's book out, and work through relevant sections to foster skills in which you feel you are weak.

These principles are also taught at the Harvard Writing Center, and if you feel you would benefit from more guidance and practice, we invite you to alternately pursue some of the "Writing Resources at Harvard" listed in the Appendix to this handbook.

You will notice as we go through this section that many of the troublesome points we discuss are troublesome because the accepted rules of good prose are sometimes in flux. Before we embark on the discussion of specific points, then, it will be useful to

talk briefly about the history of "correct" English usage and its teaching.

Many people are aware that in Shakespeare's day, there was no such thing as "standard" or "correct" English spelling. The same thing is true, in a sense, of grammar and usage. During the eighteenth century, however, at the height of Enlightenment interest in the formalization of rules and guidelines for the creation of perfect rationality, many scholars turned their attention to language, and labored to identify and eliminate irrational elements within it. As part of this endeavor, scholars studied the grammar and vocabulary of European vernacular languages, a study that previously had been almost entirely confined to hallowed classical languages like Latin, Greek and (to a lesser extent) Hebrew. This study proceeded falteringly at first, however; it took some time

before scholars realized that the grammatical terminology developed for the analysis of Latin and Greek was not always applicable to vernaculars. It nonetheless laid the foundations for the ultimate formalization of prescriptive rules of correct usage in English.

As Europe entered the nineteenth century, political arrangements throughout the continent underwent a fundamental change, and nationalism and the nation-state rose to play a central role. A part of this sea-change was the rise of interest in national histories and cultures. We are familiar with these changes

**You can receive additional help on writing style and grammar at the Writing Center or through other resources listed in the Appendix "Writing Resources at Harvard."**

<sup>4</sup>Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1996).

in what is known as Romanticism in the arts, for instance—think of the Arthurian poems of Tennyson, or the Ring cycle of operas by Wagner. This interest in national heritage also showed itself in scholarship. The brothers Grimm, for example, collected their fairy tales as part of a large scholastic project to gather and analyze the German folk heritage.

As part of this large historical moment, thinkers began to turn away from the fervid classicism (i.e. admiration for the classical period) of the eighteenth century, and claim that these newly valorized national cultural heritages and standardized vernaculars were the equal of classical counterparts, or could and should be made so. In language, this was reflected by attempts to codify standards and rules for “correct” use of vernaculars, and eliminate dialect and demotic elements from educated common use. This movement was heralded in England by a grammarian called William Cobbett, author of the 1818 classic *Grammar of the English Language*.

Cobbett, it seems, originally intended his grammar as an empowering self-help for the working classes, to allow them to speak in language that would command respect and thereby enable them to exert influence over their own political destinies. Ironically, however, prescriptive grammar was fated to sometimes ossify into gate-keeping conventions that operated to exclude aspects of natural English from accepted usage, and thereby *reinforce* class distinctions and prejudice. This was in part because the grammatical analysis upon which prescriptions were based was the imperfect science inherited from Enlightenment pioneers, which sometimes reasoned by false analogy from classical models. It was also perhaps because prescriptive grammarians had an understandable drive towards certainty—a tendency to nail down with explicit, unambiguous rules even those linguistic phenomena that are in fact somewhat fluid or unruly, or to formulate overly simplistic rules

for phenomena whose full complexities they do not necessarily understand.

Whatever the complex mix of factors that decided its ultimate shape, the prescriptive tendency in grammar (“prescriptive” meaning that it concerned itself with how speakers and writers *ought* to use language, rather than how they actually do so) was taken up and institutionalized in the system of universal compulsory education that was ushered in with the English Education Act 1870. For half a century and more, generations of school children had the rules of prescriptive grammar drummed into them (often literally, with a stick!). Users who violated these “rules” could be stigmatized as ignorant, and often it was precisely the most unnatural rules that made the best shibboleths, since they were hardest to learn and therefore the most exclusive preserve of the artificially “improved” middle classes.

Eventually a reaction set in against the worst excesses of the prescriptive movement. The publication of H. W. Fowler’s classic *Modern English Usage*, in 1928, is often identified as a turning point;<sup>5</sup> as his title indicates, Fowler’s criteria was the way the language was actually used, rather than any putative first principles of how language “ought” to be (even if he sometimes honored this intention as much in the breach as the observance). By this stage, however, universal education was nearly sixty years old, and several generations of speakers and writers of English had taken certain unnatural prescriptive rules to heart and made their observance integral to their intellectual self-esteem.

Similar trends swept the United States, and in fact, writers everywhere in the English-speaking world today write in a context still shaped by the legacy of these developments. Some of the rules we deal with in this part of our handbook are partly hangovers from the work of the prescriptive grammarians—for example, the correct coordination of

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<sup>5</sup>See, for instance, G.H. Vallins, *Better English* (London: Pan, 1953), 8.

participial phrases with the grammatical subject (see “Preposed Participial Modification”), the avoidance of dangling prepositions (see “Ending Sentences with Prepositions”), the exaggerated taboo against split infinitives of all descriptions (see “Split Infinitives”), and the extreme segregation of relative pronouns “that” and “which” (see “Relative pronouns “That” and “Which”). As we will see in detail in the respective section treating each of these points, each of these rules has something of substance behind it, but each has also been dogmatically exaggerated, and an over-generalized, artificially rigid version of each has become entrenched.

If you are going to break a rule, however—even an arbitrarily unnatural one—you should first know it and understand the reasoning behind it, and you should always be able to give a clear explanation of why you have broken it in a given instance. You should also be aware that while an occasional deliberate flouting of convention can enliven prose, such things are distracting and counter-productive if they devolve into mere tics.

The sections that follow are therefore intended to give you the necessary information to make informed decisions about keeping—and breaking—some of the more controversial conventions in modern formal prose. With such an awareness, you can decide these and like questions at your own discretion, depending upon how formal or casual you would like your tone to be, and the conventions you see scholars respecting in writing you like with the disciplinary slant that most interests you. This may mean that you will selectively break some of the more conservative “rules”; it will also mean, conversely, that you will on occasion choose to respect a rule that you believe to be artificial, in recognition of the fact that it is now entrenched in the expectations of readers. In minor points of academic prose, where there is often no great principle at stake, it can sometimes be better to bow to convention than to stand on vain principle and be thought ignorant in consequence.





# Preposed Participial Modification

“A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to a grammatical subject”! This is the one of the most succinct rules in Strunk’s delightful 1918 manual of style, and also, in this form, one of the most opaque.

A *participle* is defined as a form of a verb that can function as an adjective. The most common examples in English are:

1. the *-ing* form of any verb, used in the sense that the action described by the verb occurs concurrently with another action (“he said, smiling”);
2. the past passive participle, i.e. the *-ed* or equivalent form, when used in an adjectival sense, as in “This sentence is very poorly written.”

A *participial phrase* is therefore usually an entire phrase built around such an adjectival verb form and its paraphernalia—object, adverb and so on. It is common in English to create complex sentences by preposing such a participial phrase to the grammatical subject. For example:

Flinging his arms outwards with great enthusiasm and beaming with irrepressible fervor, Professor Puett exclaimed once more, “East Asian Studies will change your life!”

Everything before the comma is “preposed participial” matter. In fact, we have here a double whammy—two preposed participial phrases for the same sentence.

Such preposed participial phrases, as here, contain no explicit grammatical subject. They do not tell us who does the flinging, the beaming, the whatever-ing they describe. This is because they function to describe further the subject of the verb in

the main clause; this means that participial phrases allow a very useful economy, by which we can give more than one verb (where the action of those verbs is predicated of the same subject) without repeating the subject itself. The alternative is redundancy:

Professor Puett flung his arms outwards with great enthusiasm. Professor Puett beamed with irrepressible fervor. Professor Puett exclaimed once more, “East Asian Studies will change your life!”

Even with repetition eliminated by pronouns and conjunctions, this is less elegant than the participial:

Professor Puett flung his arms outwards with great enthusiasm and beamed with irrepressible fervor. He exclaimed once more, “East Asian Studies will change your life!”

We have also lost the sense that Professor Puett’s exclamation is the focus of attention; in the rewrite, the verbs have attained an equal status that obscures the main point.

Now, to avoid ambiguity, careful writers observe a rule stipulating that the verbs in such participial phrases must be predicated only of the grammatical subject of the main clause. A participle is thus like a promissory note to the reader: “IOU one subject.” The reader knows, when they read a sentence that starts with a participle, that the subject of those verbs will be given them as the *subject* of the main clause, and you only keep this promise if the subject of the main clause is in fact the grammatical subject of the participial verbs.

This means that sentences like this are downright wrong:

Walking across Harvard Yard, Widener Library loomed up like a bibliographic behemoth before the hapless sophomore.

Thanks to the promise of the participial phrase, we read this sentence to mean that Widener Library walked across Harvard Yard.

Another example:

On using one too many incorrectly preposed participial phrases, Yasuo's TF had a heart attack.

This sentence is incorrect if it is intended to mean that Yasuo used the incorrect grammar. In its current form, it means that the TF made the grammatical mistakes in question (and that could obviously *never* happen...).

Phrases built around a past passive participle are also often incorrectly preposed:

Vilified for his supposed betrayal of the revolution, Party commissars erased Lin Biao from officially approved histories and even air-brushed him out of propaganda photographs and posters.

It is also possible for simple adjectives used participially to be incorrectly preposed.

This example is adapted from Professor Strunk:

Young and inexperienced, writing a perfect first draft seemed easy to me.

Strictly speaking, this has the very bizarre implication that the act of writing was young and inexperienced!

Not all examples are as obvious as these, and in some subtle cases it can be very difficult to catch such errors even if you are on the lookout.

Following hard on the heels of its Han volume, Cambridge University Press has recently released the volume of its China history series covering the period of division from the fall of the Han to reunification under the Sui.

Strictly speaking, this sentence means that it was Cambridge University Press itself that followed hard on the heels of the Han volume, not the successor volume produced by the press. Almost nobody would ever read the sentence this way, however, and indeed,

most readers would probably breeze through the sentence without realizing that something was “wrong.”

Examples like these require us to ask: If this rule is absolute and inviolable, how can transgressions against it be so subtle, and why do native speakers fall into them so often?

Strictly speaking, if we did not have such a rule in English, all such participial phrases would be ambiguous—we would never know, except from context, whether it was Widener or the sophomore doing the walking, or John or his TF who had the heart attack. Often, however, it is possible to tell from context whether the participial phrase is intended to modify the subject or object. As you will surely have noticed by now, in cases where participial phrases are used incorrectly, to modify some element of the main clause other than its grammatical subject, interpretation according to the “correct” grammatical rules often leads to absurdity—walking libraries, presses that follow upon the heels of books they themselves issue, and even TFs who make grammatical errors! Probably, the very fact that these interpretations would be absurd renders them remote to the mind of writers and readers alike, and makes “error” easy and sometimes nearly unnoticeable.

In fact, it seems that before the prescriptive grammarians of the nineteenth century, preposed participial matter was regularly coordinated with *various* elements of the main clause, so long as no ambiguity would arise. The “rule” restricting participial phrases to modification of the subject was apparently often not observed even by the best English writers in the eighteenth century, such as Jonathan Swift.<sup>6</sup> In their zeal for rendering the language rigorously consistent and obedient to rule, it seems, prescriptive grammarians over-generalized what was initially nothing more than a tendency for such matter to be read as relating to subject first, and only as relating to other elements in the main clause

<sup>6</sup>Vallins, *Better English*, 9.

when such a reading was illogical.

The fact remains, however, that we now write in a culture where this rule has been taught, and observed by careful writers, for over a hundred years. This means that there is no longer much latitude for loose use of participial phrases, especially in formal contexts like academic writing. You are therefore best served by training yourself to be relatively strict, if not artificially so, in observing the rule.

Unfortunately, mistakes are still widespread, not only in undergraduate writing, but also in the media and published works. This means we are all constantly exposed to models of “incorrect” usage. Observation of this rule can thus require some retraining of unconsciously acquired habit, or particular care in the editing process, or both.



# Split Infinitives

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A few decades ago any self-respecting writer would have scrupulously avoided split infinitives. These days, however, split infinitives are back in style in some quarters, coming back to haunt the tasteful like bad seventies tie-died shirts; they are widely regarded with increasing latitude despite the best efforts of self-appointed wardens of good diction. As a result, insistence upon avoiding split infinitives can seem stuffy in some contexts, and you may sometimes be unsure whether you want to keep or break the rule.

This uncertainty over the status of the split infinitive is not new. The split infinitive is one of those corners of the grammar that has been most hotly contested over the course of the history we briefly traced in our introduction to this section, and as a consequence, it has also been one of the rules that had to be most energetically and corporally drummed into generations of writers at school. Why has it been such a problem? It seems that there are several reasons.

First, it is worth observing that there is very good reason to avoid the split infinitive in most circumstances, but that this is not because there is anything special about the split infinitive *per se*. It is, rather, because it is generally a good idea in written English to keep elements with a close logical connection close together in the sentence. (We discuss this principle when we discuss rewriting to fix violations of it, under the heading of “Sundered Companions”) Obviously, the logical marriage between the preposition to and the verb itself in the English infinitive is particularly close, and this gives us strong grounds for avoiding putting them asunder.

That said, some sticklers do excoriate all split infinitives with a virulence that seems to go beyond rational objection. This may originally have stemmed

from reasoning by false analogy from the nature of infinitives in other languages, particularly the classical languages that were traditionally held in such high esteem. English is unusual among European languages in that its infinitive incorporates a preposition (*to*). This preposition is a relatively free-floating, independent element, and creates the very possibility of splitting the infinitive in English—a possibility that simply does not exist in Greek and Latin, or many modern European languages like French.

One can easily imagine that for thinkers whose model of a rational, standardized language was classical Greek or Latin, and who set out to prescribe the correct grammar of English in terms of categories derived from the analysis of those languages, a split infinitive must have looked like plain parochial *gaucherie*. The temptation to legislate such an embarrassment out of existence must have been strong. Once such a prescription gained currency, its very unnaturalness made it an excellent shibboleth by means of which the properly educated could distinguish themselves from the great grammatical unwashed, and it took on a self-perpetuating life of its own.

As a result, the “rule” against the split infinitive is best thought of as a useful guideline, to which, however, there are valid exceptions. For example, nobody would want to split the infinitive here:

To be or to not be  
(example from Kim Cooper of the Writing Center).

On the other hand, we all know this split infinitive quite well, perhaps without realizing that it is one:

To boldly go where no man has gone before...  
and we submit that Gene Roddenberry and his

*Star Trek* scriptwriters were right to split this one: the alternative (“to go boldly”) is rhythmically far less satisfying, and to favor it would require a tin ear.

An infinitive split by a negative is usually quite awkward, as in the Shakespeare example above. On the other hand, fewer people will be troubled by the insertion of an adverb, as in the *Star Trek* example:

We need to honestly ask ourselves if this is true.

This is easily avoided, however:

We need to ask ourselves honestly if this is true.

Here is a great example, adapted from Kathleen Baron’s *Good English*:

The nations of the world should combine  
to flatly forbid hostilities.

As Baron points out, the “correct” alternative (“to forbid flatly hostilities,” or “to forbid hostilities flatly”) is very unsatisfactory. She suggests rewriting the sentence:

The nations of the world should combine and  
should flatly forbid hostilities.

but this seems wordy, if not downright redundant.

What makes the difference? Apart from considerations of prosody, it seems that most of the time, the decision “to split or not to split” boils down to a choice between the lesser of two evils, each of which is evil precisely because it separates elements that belong logically together in the sentence. The two members of the infinitive, that is the preposition “to” and the verb itself, obviously belong together, since the verb is only “infinitive” with both of these parts. Sometimes, however, where an infinitive is modified by a single-word adverb, it seems that the adverb is so important to the way that the verb is to be understood that it can almost enter into the infinitive and form a unit with it. On these unusual occasions, if we remove the adverb outside the infinitive, the violence that would be done to the intended sense—the weakening of the idea that the action of the verb is being

done *in this particular manner*—is sufficient to override the usual objection to the split infinitive. The split infinitive is then the lesser of the two evils, and to be preferred.

These occasions where the removal of the adverb outside the infinitive offends the ear are relatively rare, however. Most of the time, however, you can easily avoid split infinitives, and your prose will gain strength if you do so.

# Ending Sentences with Prepositions

A tourist is walking through Harvard Yard, and stops a well-heeled young man for directions. “Scuse me, can you all tell me where Widener library is at?”

The young man looks down his nose and says, “This is Haahvud. We do not end out sentences with prepositions.”

“Okay, let’s try again. Can you all tell me where Widener library is at, smart-ass?”

This joke hinges on the rule “Do not end a sentence with a preposition” (also found in the lesser known form, “A preposition is something you should never end a sentence with”!). This rule holds a lot of water. For example, this sentence is just plain awful (though for more reasons than one):

There is an ethical point for all of us that we would refuse at any cost, no matter how much it might impinge upon our general well being or even imperil our lives, to go beyond.

On the other hand, almost any writer will judiciously break this rule in the right circumstances, and perhaps good writers always have. This sentence is awful too, even though it is supposedly “correct”:

This is a point over which people still fight.

**Better:**

This is a point people still fight over.

Even worse:

To what is the world coming? —*or worse:*

What is it to which the world is coming?

**Better:**

What is the world coming to?

Between these two extremes lies many a close call.

Which of the following two sentences reads better?

You will also probably want to take into account the conventions of the disciplinary approach you consider yourself most closely allied to.

*or:*

You will also probably want to take into account the conventions of the disciplinary approach to which you consider yourself most closely allied.

We submit that it is six of one and half a dozen of the other.

Eliminating dangling prepositions requires that the preposition be placed with the relative pronoun at the beginning of the clause (“to which”), and sometimes that comes out sounding a little clunky. Would anybody “correct” this sentence, for example?

... To die: to sleep;  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to... (*Hamlet III:1*)

On the other hand, there are times when prepositions really do dangle, and give us a kind of verbal vertigo. It depends on a number of things, including: whether there is already a relative pronoun in the sentence, even with the preposition at the end; the number of words that come between the preposition and its verb; and which particular preposition and relative pronoun you are dealing with. In considering whether to allow a dangling preposition, you might consider which version of the sentence separates the verb from its preposition by the greatest distance, in accordance with the principle that things that belong logically together should be kept as close together as possible in the sentence (see “sundered companions” in the section on “Editing”). In the end, however, you just have to let your ear be the judge; certainly don’t get too hung up on this rule.

## “Who” and “Whom”

Most careful writers still observe this distinction, but it seems likely that it is in the process of falling away in the language, and that “whom” may ultimately go the same way as pronouns like “whence” and “whither,” which now have a decidedly musty aroma. If you choose to abandon “whom,” however, you should also be aware that

some readers will think you ignorant. There are people who hate the word “whom,” and those to whom it is indispensable.

The rule is simple: use “who” for the grammatical subject, and “whom” for the grammatical object (both direct and indirect).

## Relative Pronouns “That” and “Which”

Some style guides recommend a hard and fast distinction between the use of “that” and “which” as relative pronouns. If you are not familiar with this distinction, it goes like this.

Use “which” for modification of a head noun which is not set off parenthetically within commas, and “that” for modification that is not. This formal distinction corresponds to a difference in meaning. When modification is set off parenthetically in commas, it functions as an aside that gives us additional information about the thing described, information not strictly necessary to identify that thing:

The People’s Republic of China, which was founded in 1949 upon the victory Mao’s People’s Liberation Army over Kuomintang forces, is the most populous country in the world.

Even without the information in the “which” clause, we know which PRC we are talking about. On the other hand, consider this example;

The book that my brother brought back from the library for me yesterday turned out to be useless.

Were it not for the subordinate clause here, we would not know which book was meant.

This distinction in meaning means that the distinction between the usage of *that* and of *which* has a solid basis, as is abundantly clear if we change the pronoun in the first example:

The People’s Republic of China, that was founded in 1949 upon the victory Mao’s People’s Liberation Army over Kuomintang forces, is the most populous country in the world.

This is clearly wrong. It gets worse if we remove the commas:

The People’s Republic of China that was founded in 1949 upon the victory Mao’s People’s Liberation Army over Kuomintang forces is the most populous country in the world.

This gives the peculiar impression that there is a whole passel of PRCs on the loose, and we therefore need to specify which one we are talking about.

So far, so good. The reverse transformation, however, is nowhere near as offensive. In fact it is rather innocuous:

The book which my brother brought back from the library for me yesterday turned out to be useless.

Some rule mavens argue that this is as wrong as using *that* for parenthetical modification. If *that* can only act as relative pronoun to one type of subordinate clause, they seem to feel, then we should even the score, and restrict *which* to the parenthetical use. For example, the grammar checker in Microsoft Word (which can often be quite schoolmarmish) observes this rule, and will punctiliously mark every “incorrect” *which* with a wavy green line.

You can decide for yourself whether you wish to eliminate from your writing usage which breaks this rule. We submit, however, that in actual usage, *which* can serve as the relative pronoun for both kinds of subordinate clause, and that the last example above (“The book which my brother brought...” ) really has nothing wrong with it. We have even deliberately “misused” *which* twice in this section, and we would be surprised if most readers so much as blinked.

If you decide not to worry about the *which* rule, you will be in very good company. Mark Twain, for instance, once defined a literary classic as “a book *which* people praise and don’t read,” and his flagrant disregard for this “rule” doesn’t seem to have done his reputation as a fine writer any harm.





# Authorial Self-Reference

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**P**ronouns are the source of much trouble for writers. We have seen this with relative pronouns *that* and *which*, and below, we will examine the ways pronouns force us to grapple with issues of sexism in language. Another pronominal source of trouble is the problem of authorial self-reference. Should authors refer to themselves overtly in their writing? If so, what pronoun should they use to do so?

The first problem with authorial self-reference is more fundamental than one of pronouns: we must decide whether to refer to ourselves at all. Many academics use passive voice to erase all direct mention of themselves from the text, leaving only a faint ghost of authorial voice. This strategy is becoming less fashionable, especially in the humanities (where it has never been universal), but it is by no means dead. If you do choose to adopt this strategy, however, you should know that it comes at the cost of some wordiness and abstraction. It is up to you to decide if you think there are important enough compensating advantages to justify this price. In considering this problem, it might help you to know the arguments people give one way or another.

Some authors avoid the circumvention of authorial self-reference by means of passive voice as part of a more general stylistic decision to avoid passive voice in general, wherever possible. We discuss the reasons for this in the section on “Active and Passive Voice.”

If, as we have seen, some writers dislike passive circumlocution of authorial voice because it is passive, others hold that it is undesirable because there are special reasons not to circumvent overt authorial self-reference, whatever means we achieve it by.

It is sometimes argued that avoidance of authorial self-reference is motivated by the high value placed

on objectivity in the age of science. Authorial passive thus creates an air of objectivity by eliminating the need for reference to the author as a subjective individual (“I”), and can even create the illusion that no human agency is involved at all in the process of thinking and writing. If we say, *In this paper, it will be contended that...* it is as if contentions will just spring into existence of their own volition.

There are those, then, who oppose the elimination of authorial voice because they take philosophical issue with the notion that humans can achieve objectivity. They hold that we are irreparably subjective beings, and that it is healthier for us to face up to the fact than hide it behind roundabout turns of phrase. Not surprisingly, this attitude towards the authorial passive tends to be found more frequently in fields that study human phenomena (human *subjects*)—some social sciences, and particularly the humanities—since such phenomena themselves incorporate a dimension of subjectivity. Qualms about authorial passive are less typical of fields that study natural *objects*, like the natural sciences, where it is generally recognized that a more rigorously objective knowledge is not only possible, but has been achieved.

You can decide to use authorial passive or not, depending upon what you think about this argument and the arguments for favoring active over passive voice below (“Active and Passive Voice”). You will also probably want to take into account the conventions of the disciplinary approach you consider yourself most closely allied to.

If you do choose to refer to yourself in your writing, you have three basic strategies to choose from:

1. **You can still avoid the use of pronouns, by using such locutions as *the author, the present writer, or this researcher*: “It seems to this writer that such turns of phrase do have their place.”** Overuse of this sort of wording can sound rather wooden, however.
2. **You can use first person plural pronouns (“we,” “us,” “our”).** Obviously, if you are involved in a project with plural authorship, these are the only first person pronouns available. Even authors who work alone, however, often use “we” in a rhetorical sense, to invite the reader to join them in a collegial process of thinking through a problem together. This tactic is particularly suited to uncontroversial statements, where there is little risk that the reader will feel the author is hustling them into consent or collusion. A roadmap paragraph and signposts (“We will then discuss...”), for example, can usually be fairly safely case in this form, since it is patently true that anyone who reads your paper will follow your ideas through in the order you present them.

It pays to have a light touch with this plural pronoun, however, when you are trying to persuade your reader of any controversial point—and remember that your thesis should be controversial to be interesting! If you come on thick with “We have seen that” or “We are now convinced” in a concluding section, skeptical readers may be driven away from agreement by a suspicion that you are trying to pull the rhetorical wool over their eyes.

### 3. You can use the first person singular

(“I,” “me,” “my”). Some students feel, or have been cautioned by teachers, that the use of first person singular to refer to oneself is bad practice, supposedly because it imparts to the writing a taint of subjectivity.

Such reasoning seems to confound form and substance. If your thinking is marred by excessive subjective bias, you won’t fix the problem merely by weeding out the word “I” with the “Find and Replace” utility in Word. If your work is sound and objective in substance, on the other hand, any reader worth her salt will surely see past the occasional “I” and judge it on its real merits. We patronize the reader if we suggest they judge the objectivity of an argument on the presence or absence of a slender pronoun.

Think also about whether you believe absolute objectivity is attainable in your field of interest. If you believe it is not, is it honest to adopt a writing style that deliberately disguises the subjectivity you believe is inevitable? That said, too frequent use of the first person, like overuse of anything in writing, is liable to irritate and distract your reader. Again, we can recall our watchword: “Good writing is writing that serves its purpose.” You can avoid overtaxing the first person pronoun by using it only when you have good reason.

Given that the word “I” does draw some attention to the subjectivity of the author, the best reason for using it is probably to signal to your reader that you are presenting your own opinion or analysis. You can also use it to claim credit where credit is due, that is, to signal that you believe an idea is original. Measured use of first person for these ends is often found in turns of phrase like “I contend,” “I argue,” “I will show,” “I hold” etc.

Use of the first person for these purposes can have the added benefit of helping you own up to your ideas. Nothing is less conducive to fudging than prefacing a key point with a strong verb in the first person, as in “I disagree.”

We have looked at four strategies for handling authorial self-reference: circumvention with passive voice, the use of substantives like “the present author,” and first person pronouns, both plural and singular. These strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is possible to get by with a judicious mix of some or all of them, and as we have seen above, careful thought may show that each is suited to a slightly different purpose. Whichever strategy you adopt, however, it will help if you have thought through your reasons, and if you are consistent in your choices.



# Pronouns and Sexist Language

**S**exist language is a serious concern in our academic culture. However, a little thought and experiment will show that there is no perfect fix for the admittedly sexist conventions of the English language, and the search for remedies can be quite vexing.

We commonly have particular difficulty finding pronouns for hypothetical, abstract persons, or persons of unknown gender. Traditionally English has used the male third person to refer to such hypothetical unknowns. Take “the reader” for example. The norm used to be something like this:

The reader will have to have his wits about him to find a non-sexist way of talking about hypothetical persons.

A very common fix for this problem is to use the pronoun “they” for singular subjects. This does not work in writing. In speech, of course, we can these days increasingly get away with saying something like this:

Having once referred to “the reader” in a passage of prose, it is difficult to find a neutral pronoun with which to refer back to them on second mention.

It can be very tempting to transfer this practice to writing. Were it acceptable, it would solve all our problems in one fell swoop. It is not generally accepted as correct grammar, however, for obvious reasons: it is simply illogical (it makes a singular person plural), and therefore jars.

We do *not* recommend that you adopt this tactic, therefore, unless you are reconciled to being thought unlettered or illogical by many of your readers. Note that this use of “they” is now so common in speech that it can easily find its way into your writing without you noticing, and you should root it out vigilantly when editing.

What can we do, then? Let us examine the most common alternatives briefly in turn.

**1. “One.”** This has the advantage of being formal, singular and perfectly neutral. Unfortunately, it is somewhat obtrusive when used repeatedly:

One sometimes finds when writing that one needs to refer repeatedly to a hypothetical subject. One might be tempted to fall back on “one” in this case, but one risks offending one’s reader if this is one’s sole means of handling the problem.

One wants to tear one’s hair out, doesn’t one? Unless used quite seldom, “one” tends to make you sound like the Queen of England, hardly the biggest role model for most Harvard sophomores. Handle this device with caution. We recommend using it only once or perhaps twice at a time.

**2. Making hypothetical persons plural.**

It is frequently possible (though not always) to substitute plural hypothetical persons for singular. This allows us to use “them” and related pronouns without the logical dissonance we discussed above. It has the additional advantage of being comprehensive (it includes both males and females) and concise.

Readers will have to have their wits about them to find a non-sexist way of talking about hypothetical persons.

You can get a lot of mileage out of this tactic, and we have used it frequently throughout this handbook.

### 3. Using male and female pronouns alternately.

By this we mean the practice of using male pronouns in one example, female in the next, and so on, by turns. For example, we might say,

The reader will have to have his wits about him to find a non-sexist way of talking about hypothetical persons.

and then say, a paragraph or a page later,

Having once referred to “the reader” in a passage of prose, it is difficult to find a neutral pronoun to refer back to her on second mention.

This is quite a useful tactic, especially when the examples are separated by a good distance. We have used it in places in this handbook. It has the added advantage of presenting us with female hypothetical subjects, rather than simply sweeping the whole issue of gender under the carpet.

Obviously, it is necessary, having once chosen a gendered pronoun, to stick with the same gender for the duration of a given example. Failure to do so leads straight to trouble:

A writer sometimes finds that he needs to refer repeatedly to a hypothetical subject. She might be tempted to fall back on “one” in this case, but he risks offending her reader if this is his sole means of handling the problem.

Even in hypothetical persons, Gender Identity Disorder is distressing.

4. **Using exclusively female pronouns.** This tactic was seen more frequently a decade or so ago, and may be on the wane. It is understandably motivated by a desire to redress the imbalance created by the thousands of books already in print that are absolutely overrun with hypothetical persons called *he*. Whether you use this tactic will probably depend upon your convictions about the extent of remaining discrimination against women, the influence of language in creating and perpetuating it, and the tactics likely to be effective in countering it.

Exclusive use of female pronouns has a certain disadvantage, in that it creates an opposite imbalance

at least within a single work. This offends some readers, and you should be comfortable with that possibility if you adopt this tactic.

5. **Using “he or she.”** Another tactic that was seen more frequently ten or twenty years ago was the exhaustive use of “he or she” at each juncture where a hypothetical pronoun was needed. This has the advantage of truly representing a non-sexist understanding of the identity of a hypothetical person—that they can be male or female. Unfortunately, it can rapidly lead to very wordy and clunky style:

A writer sometimes finds that he or she needs to refer repeatedly to a hypothetical subject. He or she might be tempted to fall back on “one” in this case, but he or she risks offending his or her reader if this is his or her sole means of handling the problem.

Like “one,” then, this tactic is probably best used once only on a given occasion.

6. **Replacing pronouns with substantives.**

It is frequently possible to avoid reference to hypothetical persons by pronoun, simply by replacing the pronouns with a repeated substantive. In other sections on pronouns in this handbook (see “Editing”), we will see that over-use of pronouns can lead to ambiguity, and this tactic has the added advantage of reducing such ambiguity.

7. **In the case of “the reader,” it is possible in some registers of prose to use the second person (“you”).** We have relied heavily on this tactic throughout this handbook. However, this handbook is more relaxed and informal in style than an academic argument. Second person is not really appropriate in academic argument, and we mention it here only to warn against taking its use in this handbook as a model.

As with authorial self-reference, the various tactics for the avoidance of sexist pronouns are not mutually exclusive, and best results are often achieved by a judicious mix of several tactics for slightly different purposes.

# Nominalization

“Nominalization” here refers to the process of making nouns out of other parts of speech like verbs and adjectives. “Nominalization” itself is a nominalization—it is a noun created by adding the suffix *-ation* to the adjective “nominal.” Nominalization can be a useful tool, but it is easily and frequently abused in writing.

There are a couple of reasons for the abuse of nominalization. First, nominalization can reduce your word count, and can thus be favored by writers who confuse absolute concision with maximum clarity. Beyond a certain point, however, concision makes writing more difficult to understand—the extreme example being the language of the telegram, which nobody in their right mind would use for an extended abstract argument. Look where maximum nominalization leads if we rewrite of the current paragraph, for example:

Two explanations exist for nominalization. Nominalization is economization, and thus a temptation due to the confusion of concision and maximization of clarity. Excess in the utilization of concision creates obfuscation for writing, however—the extreme exemplification being telegram language, the employment of which for extended abstraction and argumentation would be insanity.

—a dozen words shorter, and nearly a dozen times as difficult to understand.

Nominalization can also be tempting because it is more typical of writing than speech, for valid reasons that we will touch upon below. To some extent, therefore, nominalization creates a more formal tone, and can thus be favored by writers who confound distance from spoken language with profundity of ideas. A flawed or unoriginal idea remains flawed or unoriginal, however, no matter what pomp you dress it in.

Like many counter-productive traits of style,

excessive nominalization is difficult to read and make sense of because it makes the reader do unnecessary extra mental work. No matter what some philosophers may argue, we do not seem to live in a world of static ideals. We live in a living world, a world of event and movement where things act on things, and things constantly *happen*. Now, the verb is the part of speech that captures the event and movement of the world; and excessive nominalization kills verbs dead, taxidermically fixing their corpses in grotesque, unnatural attitudes. Heavily nominalized writing is thus divorced from real-world movement, and requires that the reader back-translate before they can imagine what is really going on behind its *-iousnesses* and *-ations*. Reading the resulting style is like watching an event filmed on a camera that films at stop-motion intervals of five or ten seconds, and having to conjecture the excised motion from the freeze-frames. It forces the reader to play a fiendish game of intellectual join-the-dots.

It gets worse. Having killed off all the verbs, nominalization replaces them with pale frauds like *makes*, *constitutes*, *exists* and above all *to be*. Look, for example, at the sad excuses for verbs that remain in the ludicrous paragraph we created above:

Two explanations exist for nominalization. Nominalization is economization, and thus a temptation due to the confusion of concision and maximization of clarity. Excess in the utilization of concision creates obfuscation for writing, however—the extreme exemplification being telegram language, the employment of which for extended abstraction and argumentation would be insanity.

These are not verbs you want to spend time hanging out with. They will soon bore you to death.

Excessive nominalization also makes for bad writing precisely because of the distance from ordinary

speech that we noted above. (Perhaps, indeed, it is distant from everyday speech precisely because everyday speech reflects the active, happening way the world works for us.) Of course, writing is always different from speech, and should be, because its mechanism, and the thought processes possible and necessary in absorbing it, are not the same. When writing does diverge from speech, however, it should do so for a good reason, just as all aspects of writing should rest on sound reasons. To distance writing from speech merely for the sake of sounding impressive is bad practice, no matter how we do it, and nominalization is no exception.

Of course, this is not to say that all nominalization is abomination. At the other end of the spectrum, Jorge Luis Borges has given us a brief glimpse of what might happen to language if verbs ran amok and banished all the nouns. In his bizarrely brilliant story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” Borges imagines a world one of whose languages (the tongue of the “austral hemisphere of Tlön”) has no nouns at all:

[T]here are impersonal verbs, qualified by monosyllabic suffixes (or prefixes) with adverbial value. For example: there is no word which corresponds to the word “moon,” but there is a verb that would be in English “mooning” or “to moon.” “The moon shone over the water” one would say *Hlör u fang axaxaxas mlo*, that is, in its order, “Upward (*hacia arriba*), behind lastingly-flowing it was mooning.” (Xul Solar translates with brevity, “Behind the onstreaming, it mooned;” *Upa tras perfluye luno*.)<sup>7</sup>

Surely, when Mother Nature is “mooning” us from behind the stream, we are definitively in trouble.

Obviously, then, if we are to write well, we need to steer a course between a plague of nouns and a tyranny of verbs. When, then, are we justified in using nominalization? Once more, “Good writing is writing that serves its purpose.” The acid test for valid nominalization is whether you have a concrete reason for using it. Expression by means of verbs (in

active voice!) should be your “default position,” and you should only swerve away from it when you have good reason.

Nominalization is very useful when you require a shorthand for a complex notion to which you wish to refer repeatedly. We need look no further afield than the title of this section. Of course, it is partly tongue-in-cheek to use nominalization in the title a section fulminating about the evils of nominalization. Consider the alternative, however. “Nominalization” captures in a single word what we would otherwise have to use a whole phrase to say:

Nominalization is very useful when a shorthand is required for a relatively complex notion to which you wish to repeatedly refer.

De-nominalized: It is very useful to make a noun out of a verb or verbal phrase when you wish to refer repeatedly to a relatively complex notion.

This sort of thing is very well if it happens only once or twice, but we have used the word “nominalization” twenty-three times so far in this section. Note that where nominalization is justified as a shorthand of this kind, the notion it labels often serves, as here, as the topic (see “Topic”) of an extended discussion.

Note also that this section opened by introducing “nominalization” as a special term, and defining it. Often, then, nominalization flexes its real muscle in conjunction with the definition of terms (see “Defining Key Terms”). You can usually be pretty sure you are on safe ground making a nominalization if you find you are making a definition, however brief, to go with it. Another example in this handbook is the notion of “sundered companions” (see “Editing”).

Of course, nominalization is useful far more often than this. In fact, it is unusual, and can even be tricky, to write a single decent sentence without some use of nominalization. As an exercise, you might go back through this section and find all the nominalizations, and try to rewrite them in your head with strictly verbal phrases. We hope you will find that

<sup>7</sup>Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” <http://www.zooleika.org.uk/langue/borges/tlon.html> (accessed September 21, 2004)

some pithy turns of phrase would thus be reduced to flaccid blather (since we would not have otherwise used the nominalizations in question). Some examples:

This is not to say that all nominalization is abomination.

Consider the alternative... (“Consider what we would have had to do otherwise”)

There are a couple of reasons for the abuse of nominalization. (“We can explain the way people abuse nominalization in a couple of ways”?)

Like many counter-productive traits of style... (“Just as is often the case when we write in ways that do not best serve our ends”?)





# Active and Passive Voice

**P**assive voice troubles many student writers.

It is likely that you have heard that passive voice is an evil. As we noted elsewhere, however (“Authorial Self-Reference”), there are other desiderata, like the demand that we strive for objectivity, that seem to force us to use passive voice (it is difficult to circumvent authorial self-reference entirely without resort to the passive). What to do?

The reason that you may have been presented with conflicting advice about the passive voice is, in part, that writing conventions are in flux. For example, use of passive voice to avoid the first person was very widespread, if not almost universal, in formal academic writing several decades ago. In more recent years, it has fallen into disfavor in some quarters. There are two main reasons this has happened.

First, as we saw in “Authorial Self-Reference,” some writers object to the circumlocution of authorial voice in principle, regardless of whether it is achieved by passive voice or by other means.

Second, however, some object to the circumlocution of authorial self-reference by passive voice because they object for stylistic reasons to passive voice in general. These stylistic arguments against the general use of passive voice are powerful, and worth laying out in some detail.

In vigorous, clear prose, proponents of active voice hold, clearly visible agents should be said to do what they do, with no beating around the bush. Active voice achieves this: in active voice, A does B, plain and simple. The use of active voice is thus driven by the same motive that we saw compels frugality in nominalization—it produces language that talks the way things happen in the world. Active voice, like

the expression of actions in verbs, should therefore be the “default position.” By comparison to active voice, passive voice has several disadvantages.

First, passive voice can hide the grammatical subject, and with it what it represents—the agent of the action described by the verb. This requires extra work of the reader, who has to recall or infer the subject and agent, and thus makes prose less transparent. It also creates a slightly artificial mental atmosphere. It is as if things are happening and objects moving by themselves, as in those scenes from *The Invisible Man* where guns and chairs are hoisted through the air by a disembodied force. Compare “Professor Puett flung out his arms” with “Professor Puett’s arms were flung out.” When we write this in the passive, where has Professor Puett himself gone? Why are his arms still here? Who would do such a thing to them in his absence?

Second, constructions framed in passive voice usually violate the order in which events present themselves to our minds and senses in the real world. Any passive construction, by definition, is made out of a transitive verb. Now, in any *transitive* sentence, X does Y to Z; we conceive of the action as originating from the agent (represented in language by the grammatical subject) and moving outwards to work on the patient (the object). (“Patient” is related etymologically to “passive” as “agent” is to “active,” and has a technical sense of “the recipient of an action.”) When we say, for example, “Professor Puett flings out his arms,” we understand in some sense that the action of *flinging* “originates in” *Professor Puett* (the agent) and proceeds “from” him “to” *his arms* (the patient). This real-world order is respected in an active sentence: subject-verb-object corresponds exactly to agent-action-patient.

In a passive sentence, however, word order inverts real-world order: “Arms are flung out by Professor Puett” is ordered patient-verb-agent. A passive sentence therefore requires a nanosecond of extra mental work from the reader to translate the action back into real-world sequence, and other things being equal, this means passive voice is detrimental to clarity.

Third, passive voice is often found in conjunction with other stylistic features that compromise clarity. By cultivating reluctance to use the passive, writers can help to break themselves of these other unconstructive habits. For example, excessive nominalization frequently encourages or requires passive voice.

Fourth, passive voice usually leads to slightly wordier constructions than active, and therefore fosters flabby prose.

Taken together, these various arguments make a strong case for preference of the active voice in general. We suggest that for these reasons, active voice should be your “default position.” You should only use passive voice when you have a clear reason to do so. This amounts to no more than our watchword that “Good writing serves its purpose.” Unmotivated use of passive voice, that is, passive voice for no good purpose, does not make for good writing.

This does *not* mean that passive voice is to be shunned completely, however. It would not exist if it did not have its uses. Under what circumstances, then, is passive useful?

Generally speaking, you should use passive when you have a special reason to put the focus on the *logical object* (that is, the real-world “patient,” as defined above). This is the proper function of the passive, the reason we have it in our language in the first place. If I say “John hit Joe,” the focus is on John, and we imagine him dealing out the blow. If I say “Joe was hit by John,” on the other hand, the focus is on Joe, and we imagine him suffering the blow. It is a matter of point of view, which is why passive can lead to such peculiar sentences when used with a little ingenuity. “Professor Puett flung out his arms” is perfectly normal, because we readily conceive of such

an action from the point of view of the actor. But “Arms were flung out by Professor Puett”? Why on earth would we want to assume the perspective of Professor Puett’s *arms*?

There are two main reasons you might need to focus on the patient, the most common being the following:

- 1. The patient may require grammatical modification (the addition of elements describing or further specifying a part of speech), and it may be secondary or irrelevant what or who was the agent.**

For example:

The texts that have been analyzed using this methodology in the past have usually been well-known texts from the canons of literature; it has been little used on demotic or oral texts.

If we were to convert the passive *have been analyzed* to active voice, we would have to insert an agent as the grammatical subject of the verb, as in “The texts that scholars have analyzed using this methodology in the past...” The reader learns nothing further by this addition, however, and in fact, it might be slightly distracting.

- 2. The patient may be the *topic* of a discussion that extends over several clauses or sentences, and the point of view may jump around too much without the use of passive.** Passive allows the topic to remain the grammatical subject of all sentences, even those in which it is the patient and not the agent of the action described by the verb:

In this essay, we will discuss the implications of recently excavated silk manuscripts for our understanding of early Han intellectual and political history. These manuscripts were discovered in 1976, in a tomb in Hubei Province. The manuscripts contain new versions of some texts handed down by received tradition, and other texts *previously unknown*. Scholars have suggested that some of these new texts can be identified with a tradition known as Huang-Lao whose existence *was rumored* in the historical record, but whose contents had long *been lost*. Due to political complications, the manuscripts were not published for nearly two decades after their dis-

covery, though they were studied in that interval by Chinese scholars with privileged access, and some results of those studies were published in scholarly journals.

The several passives in this paragraph (italics) allow the manuscripts and their contents (underlined) to remain firmly in the focus of our gaze. Contrast this with what would happen if we mechanically and dogmatically put everything into active voice:

In this essay, we will *discuss* the implications of recently excavated silk manuscripts for our understanding of early Han intellectual and political history. Archaeologists *discovered* these manuscripts in 1976, in a tomb in Hubei Province. The manuscripts *contain* new versions of some texts that the received tradition *had handed* down, and other texts that nobody *knew* about previously. Scholars have suggested that we can *identify* some of these new texts with a tradition known as Huang-Lao. The historical record *had spoken* of this tradition, but *had lost* all trace of its content. Due to political complications, nobody *published* the manuscripts for nearly two decades after their discovery, though Chinese scholars with privileged access *did study* them in that interval and *publish* some results of those studies in scholarly journals.

Every verb in the paragraph is now in active voice (italics). But we have paid a price for all this action. We are now dealing with a much more motley crew of active characters (underlined)—*we*, *archaeologists*, *the historical record*, and even *nobody* have appeared on the scene, and with such a crowded stage, it is more difficult to discern where the real action is.

Implicit in this discussion of when it is useful to use passive voice are two concepts: “Topic,” and “Old Information First, New Information Last.” We recommend you refer to the relevant sections on these two handy ideas for further suggestions about how to decide whether you need passive voice in any given situation.

# Topic

**I**t is very useful to understand the distinction between *topic* and grammatical *subject*. Much confusion surrounds this distinction, because in ordinary speech “subject” is used to refer to both.

In thinking about writing, however, it is useful to use “subject” to mean only the grammatical subject of the main verb in the sentence. This is a grammatical matter, and has nothing to do with the reality the language describes; it is language-*internal*. In the second version of the example paragraph about Han tomb manuscripts (see “Active and Passive Voice”), every italicized item is the *subject* of its sentence, because it labels the thing that performs the action of the main verb (underlined).

Not all of these italicized items are *topics*, however. We are here using “topic” in the sense of “what you are mainly talking about.” It is thus language-*external*—a matter of the reality the language describes—and has nothing to do with grammar. Again, in the same example paragraph (Han tomb manuscripts, “Active and Passive Voice”), the *topic* throughout remains the manuscripts and their contents, despite the kaleidoscopic changes of grammatical *subject*. In fact, it is because we “change the (grammatical) *subject*” so often, while the *topic* remains the same, that the second paragraph is a less elegant way of presenting the same ideas.

This gives us a very sensible and concise way of saying how to decide when to use active and when to use passive voice: Use passive voice only when you need it to ensure that topic and grammatical subject coincide; in other words, to make sure that when you change the grammatical subject, you are also “changing the subject,” however slightly, in the sense of “what you are talking about”—the topic. Most of the

time, it turns out that the topic is also the agent of action for the main verb, and this is why active voice should be your default—it keeps the topic as the subject.

When the topic is not the agent of action, not only passive voice, but almost any amount of verbal gymnastics can be justified to get the true topic into subject position. Topic is therefore a concept useful for more than deciding the toss between active and passive voice.

For example:

Li Si (280?-208), prime minister of the Qin and prime architect of China’s first unified empire, seems to have been a very cautious man. It was with caution that he built the Qin into a rational centralized state and subsequent empire. It was caution that drove him to build a wall the length of China’s northern frontier, to keep out barbarian hordes. Cautious fear of disaster saw him burn books in 213, lest the historical record inspire malcontent with Qin rule and foment instability. He even exercised most circumspect caution when he decided to ally himself against Qin Shihuang’s rightful heir upon the latter’s death in 209, and support the plot of Zhao Gao. It is especially ironic, therefore, that Li ended his days on the execution ground, and that within a few years the empire he planned was in ruins. All his caution seems to have come to naught.

The topic, here, is obviously Li Si’s caution. This justifies the repetition in the paragraph, even though repetitive prose is as a rule to be shunned. It also justifies the judicious use of a few other techniques that sometimes lead to trouble, such as the construction *It was... that* (see “Dummy Relative Clauses” in “Rewriting and Editing”). To see the difference it makes to keep the topic of caution firmly in view, let us imagine the same paragraph written far more eco-

nominally, with the single word “cautiously” and no regard for topic:

Li Si (280?-208), prime minister of the Qin and prime architect of China’s first unified empire, seems to have been very cautious. He built the Qin into a rational centralized state and subsequent empire cautiously. He also a wall the length of China’s northern frontier, to cautiously keep out barbarian hordes. In 213 he burnt a lot of books, cautiously preventing the historical record from inspiring malcontent with Qin rule and fomenting instability. He even allied himself cautiously against Qin Shihuang’s rightful heir upon the latter’s death in 209, and supported the plot of Zhao Gao. It is especially ironic, therefore, that Li ended his days on the execution ground, and that within a few years the empire he planned was in ruins. Even though he did everything cautiously, he was not cautious enough.

The paragraph is now fifteen words shorter, and the poorer for each missing word. The topic is now just poor old Li Si, and the intended focus—caution—is lost in pokey little corners of the sentences, where it barely sees the light of day. If you keep asking yourself what you are really talking about as you write, and checking that this topic is placed in the sentence so that it actually looks like one, this sort of vagueness should be much easier to avoid.

# Old Information First, New Information Last

**T**he second notion implicit in our discussion of useful functions for passives can be summed up thus: “Old information first, new information last.”

You will see that this dictum overlaps a good deal with proper attention to topic. Topic, being “what you are talking about,” is by definition old information, and throughout the previous section we have been placing topic first in the sentence. This principle can guide us even when no single topic threads through several consecutive sentences (i.e. where each sentence takes us from an old topic to a new one, as it were).

We can illustrate this by showing when this principle would justify the use of a passive. It is possible to use a passive construction as a kind of bridge or signpost, to pick up an element introduced in the previous sentence and shift the attention to it for the next sentence. In this case, the patient of the new passive construction is the topic of the new sentence, and the use of passive is justified by the smooth bridging between sentences that results:

With the famous Battle of Sekigahara on October 20 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu established a hegemony that his scions would oversee for more than two and a half centuries, and ushered in a new age of peace. This peace had taken over a hundred years to forge, however, and credit for *it* cannot *be assigned* to Ieyasu alone.

*Compare:*

With the famous Battle of Sekigahara on October 20 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu established a hegemony that his scions would oversee for more than two and a half centuries, and ushered in a new age of peace. We cannot *assign* credit to Ieyasu alone, however, because various feudal lords took over a hundred years to forge this peace.

In the first version, the first sentence prepares the ground for, and then introduces, the Tokugawa peace; this peace is then taken up as the topic of each clause in the next sentence, and the predicate of each clause tells us something more about it. In other words, in the first sentence, the peace is the “new information” and therefore comes last; in the second, it has graduated to the status of “old information” and comes first.

In the second version, by contrast, this flow is destroyed. We have to wait for the end of the second sentence before we know that the camera is still on the peace, and in the meantime two distracting bit players have walked through the shot—ourselves (*we*) and *the feudal lords*.

Here is one more example of this use of passive, from “Defining Key Terms” above:

The last of the “pieces” commonly found in the opening of a paper is the definition of terms. Definition of terms is unfortunately also often neglected by novice and journeyman writers.

Like topic, the principle of “old information first, new information last” can help us see the good reason for more types of unusual wording than just passives. For example, above we wrote:

Implicit in this discussion of when it is useful to use passive voice are two concepts.

We were here introducing “two concepts,” which therefore constituted our new information. Even though the word order is unusual, it is justified by the logic it adds to the flow of ideas. Compare a more regular word order:

Two concepts are implicit in this discussion of when it is useful to use passive voice.

This sentence, though slightly less contrived, puts all its cards on the table straight away, and therefore

exerts less of a hold on the attention of the reader.

For a more extended illustration of the way this principle decides the clearest word order in sentences, see the excellent first paragraph of Jennie Johnson's response paper (the sample response paper give in "The Response Paper").

As good prose advances, it moves like the tide advancing up a beach. Each sentence is like a wave reaches a little further inland than the last. When each wave has passed, the sea falls back upon itself and the progress it has already made, and regroups a little before the next advance. The advance of each wave in prose is achieved by the introduction of new information, usually at the end of each sentence, while the falling-back motion occurs when we regroup old information in readiness for each new step.



## APPENDIX:

# Style Conventions for East Asian Studies

**W**hen listing items in Asian languages, you must be careful to correctly and consistently use a single, accepted Romanization system for the language concerned. Do not, for example, chop and change between Hanyu pinyin and Wade-Giles, and make sure you

have spelled things correctly, referring to a dictionary if necessary. Note also that when transcribing titles of books and journal articles in Asian languages, it is standard practice to capitalize the first word *only* of the title; thereafter you should capitalize only proper nouns (see the examples below).

### BOOKS

Hu, Zhefeng 胡哲峰, *Mao Zedong tan Mao Zedong* 毛泽东谈毛泽东 (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, Xinhua shudian jingxiao 中共中央党校出版社, 新华书店经销, 1993), 27-43.

Myers, Brian, *Han Sōrya and North Korean Literature: The Failure of Socialist Realism in the DPRK* (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1994).

### JOURNAL ARTICLES

Murakami, Yasusuke, “*Ie as a Pattern of Civilization*”, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 10:2 (1984), 279-363.

Iwata, Taijō 岩田諦静, “Shindai no yuishiki setsu no tokushoku ni tsuite” 「真諦の唯識説の特色について」, *Indogaku bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 印度学仏教学研究 99(50-1), 173-180.

### NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

Yeung, Linda, “University to Boost Foreign Intake”, *South China Morning Post*, Thursday July 29 2004, D12.

### WEBSITE

“Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’”, document dated 2003/03/31 on the website of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology at <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/03072801.htm> (accessed August 3, 2004).





## APPENDIX:

# Writing Resources at Harvard

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### HARVARD UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER

[www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntrl](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntrl)  
617-495-1655  
Barker Center 019

Free, pre-scheduled conferences with trained peer tutors are offered Monday through Friday during the day. Drop-in hours are offered from 7 to 9 p.m., Monday through Thursday at the Barker Center, and on Sunday evenings during the academic year from, 7 to 9 p.m. in Room 209 at Hilles Library. (During the week, you need to arrive no later than 8 PM to guarantee a slot.) You are also welcome to drop in during the day, and, if one of the tutors is free, he or she will gladly meet with you at that time.

### WRITING CENTER'S "WRITING TOOLS"

<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntrl/html/tools.htm>.

These are brief articles explaining various elements of the academic essay, from how to write an introduction to how to construct a counterargument.

### BUREAU OF STUDY COUNSEL

<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~bsc/index.html>  
617-495-2581

The Bureau offers students help with some common academic problems. There are workshops available about reading, writing, procrastinating, time management, and other academic issues. The Bureau also offers individual counseling, both academic and personal, as well as peer tutoring, and other services.

### WRITING WITH SOURCES

[www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos/sources](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos/sources)

This booklet is Harvard's official publication on conventions for using and citing sources, including the University's policies on plagiarism.

### LAMONT LIBRARY'S WEBSITE FOR STUDENT WRITERS

<http://hcl.harvard.edu/lamont/resources/guides/>

This is a good collection of handouts and research guides created by Lamont's librarians to help you begin your research.

### HOUSE TUTORS IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Your house may have a resident or non-resident writing tutor who holds regular office hours.