

SPECIFIC, INFORMED OPINIONS

If you start with a thesis like “Napoleon was bad,” you’ll have a harder time writing a focused, argument-driven paper than if you set out to explain why the Napoleonic Wars had a powerful and lasting negative impact on France’s economy and its relationships with other countries. These kinds of specific statements guide you through what you have to write about.

In this case, I’ll need to write about just Napoleon’s wars (I don’t need to get into any other aspect of his reign); and within that narrowed subject, I’ll need to discuss what Napoleon did in bringing about these wars that caused harm to his own people.

Knowing this saves me a lot of work, because I know what I don’t have to write about.

Now if you have an assignment question like (2), you need to deal with the provided assertion and relate it to yours. It’s still a good idea to come up with your own assertion first on the topic at hand, and then relate it to the one given to you. For example:

I believe that Bonaparte’s wars of conquest were severely detrimental to France’s internal economy and external relations with Europe. However, the negative fallout from the Napoleonic Wars still falls short of the destruction resulting from the kind of monstrous rampage envisioned by Hubert Constantine.

Your thesis statement is the basis for your paper. In writing it, you’ve already determined what the rest of your paper is going to have to say. Suddenly you have a place to go, and you’re halfway to mapping out how to get there.

SUPPORTING YOUR ARGUMENT

Supporting statements drive your paper as they strengthen your thesis. Formulating a thesis statement should give you a pretty good idea of the statements you’ll use to support it – you may already have some of these in mind as you write your thesis. The supporting statements are statements you feel you can prove that, in turn, provide evidence for your argument. They will be specific and driven by the factual evidence you can present.

Supporting statements also drive your paper, because they essentially provide a road map or checklist of what you’ll be writing about. That’s why it’s a good idea to construct a simple outline at this point.

Here’s a sample outline.

I. Introduction

II. Bonaparte's wars harmed France's economy

- A. A large portion of France's population was drafted into Bonaparte's massive armies, depriving France of farmers and laborers
- B. At the same time these armies consumed massive amounts of natural and agricultural resources, impoverishing the nation for years to come
- C. Bonaparte's prodigality with the lives of his soldiers permanently removed much of a generation of wage-earners and food producers
- D. Because of its enmity with Britain, France was prevented from profiting from its rich overseas possessions

III. Bonaparte's wars harmed France's international standing

- A. Nations like Italy and Spain that were initially allied with France resented the way their troops were used more expendably than French troops
- B. Conquest by France was a factor in Prussia's drive to assert itself among the European powers, which resulted in France's humiliating defeat by the Prussians in 1870
- C. Because of the wars Great Britain was able to become the predominant European power

And so on. You'll notice that each of these supporting statements is still not pure fact. You'll need to use primary sources and scholarly writings to support these statements, which in turn will support your central thesis.

Writing out your supporting ideas in this way gives you an instant plan for your paper.

- ▶ First you start out with an introduction in which you describe what you're going to argue and some of the evidence you'll use to support it.
- ▶ Then you'll write about each of your supporting ideas in turn, tying together evidence in each case.
- ▶ At the end, you summarize what you've argued in a conclusion.

Don't forget that if you have an assignment that involves someone else's assertion, you have to talk about that too. Usually you will need to discuss the other person's assertion first, then compare it to yours. The following might continue the earlier outline:

IV. A Godzilla rampage would cause random destruction

- A. Untold millions die in all age groups
- B. France defenseless after attack, open to attack
- C. Britain weakened too, unable to rally Europe afterwards

V. Conclusion: Bonaparte less harmful than Godzilla

Of course, you would need to do research on the rampages of Godzilla in order to support your assertions.