

Writing a Position Paper

FORMULATING A THESIS

A **thesis** is your position on an issue. It's an informed opinion that someone could disagree with.

The first thing you have to decide, before you even begin writing, is generally what you're probably going to say about the topic you've been assigned. (Sometimes it changes a bit as you write, but you should know where you're going before you start.)

Your assigned topic will normally fall into one of two categories. It may ask you to present an argument on something, usually a relationship between people, like so:

(1) Discuss the impact Napoleon Bonaparte had on France's political and social landscape.

Or the question may itself assert something and ask you to agree or object.

(2) Hubert Constantine has said that the harm Bonaparte did to France is comparable to Godzilla rising up from the Atlantic and laying waste to every farm, village, and city in Western Europe. Discuss Dr. Constantine's statement.

The first type of question gives you a little more leeway in choosing a position. The second question obliges you to deal with the opinion of the (entirely made up, by the way) Dr. Constantine in presenting your own ideas.

In either case you must begin by coming up with a statement that reflects your understanding of the topic and your opinion on it. A research paper is not an opportunity to recite a laundry list of facts relating to the topic. This requires no skills and furnishes no insight. A research paper presents an argument and methodically supports it.

It is a good idea to set up your argument, or thesis, as a positive statement of belief:

I believe that Bonaparte's wars of conquest were severely detrimental to France's internal economy and external relations with Europe.

So here you are arguing that Bonaparte was bad for France. The question can certainly be (and is) argued the other way; those who study this period may not agree on whether Bonaparte was good for France, or to what extent. Very few questions in history are not open to debate and new interpretations – as long as those interpretations can be supported.

The important thing, since you are writing the paper, is what you believe, and what you can support with evidence. (More on supporting evidence in a moment.) Having done your readings and research is crucial here. You cannot formulate a thesis without thoroughly understanding the topic. And you cannot write a research paper that does not spring from a solid, assertive, supportable thesis.

Once again, you must be arguing a position. “Napoleon was a French emperor who killed a lot of Europeans” is not a thesis, because this statement is essentially a matter of record. We already know this.

But the sample thesis statement above is not a matter of record. It is something that you must persuade the reader of; it is something that could be debated, the result being judged on the persuasiveness of the arguments presented by the opposing sides. You must set out to win that debate and persuade your audience.

Notice also: My thesis statement has taken the assigned topic (essentially “Napoleon: good or bad?”) and gotten **more specific**. Why? It’s easier to defend a specific assertion.

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 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.

CITING YOUR SOURCES

Any idea or fact that was not an original thought out of your head must be cited.

Why We Cite

Citations serve many functions.

- ▶ A citation lets the reader know that an idea came from someone other than you
- ▶ A citation from an expert source lends authority to your argument
- ▶ A citation tells the reader where to go to find out more about the idea.

Whenever you quote something from another source, you need to cite it. Whenever you reference an idea you found in someone else's work, you need to cite it.

For example: If you read in a book that Godzilla killed a million people, whereas you found in another book that Napoleon only killed half a million people, you could use these two facts together in support of your argument that Napoleon was less harmful than Godzilla. You would need to cite both sources:

Napoleon may have caused the deaths of half a million people,¹ but Godzilla caused twice as many.² The general's destructive power is clearly no match for that of the rampaging monster.

In other words, even when you are not directly quoting your source, you still must cite it.

Where We Cite

There are two places where your sources get cited. They each serve a different purpose.

- ▶ In the bibliography. The bibliography is a list of all the sources you used. Each source is listed once.
- ▶ In footnotes. A footnote says where in a book or article this information can be found. Footnotes usually have page numbers.

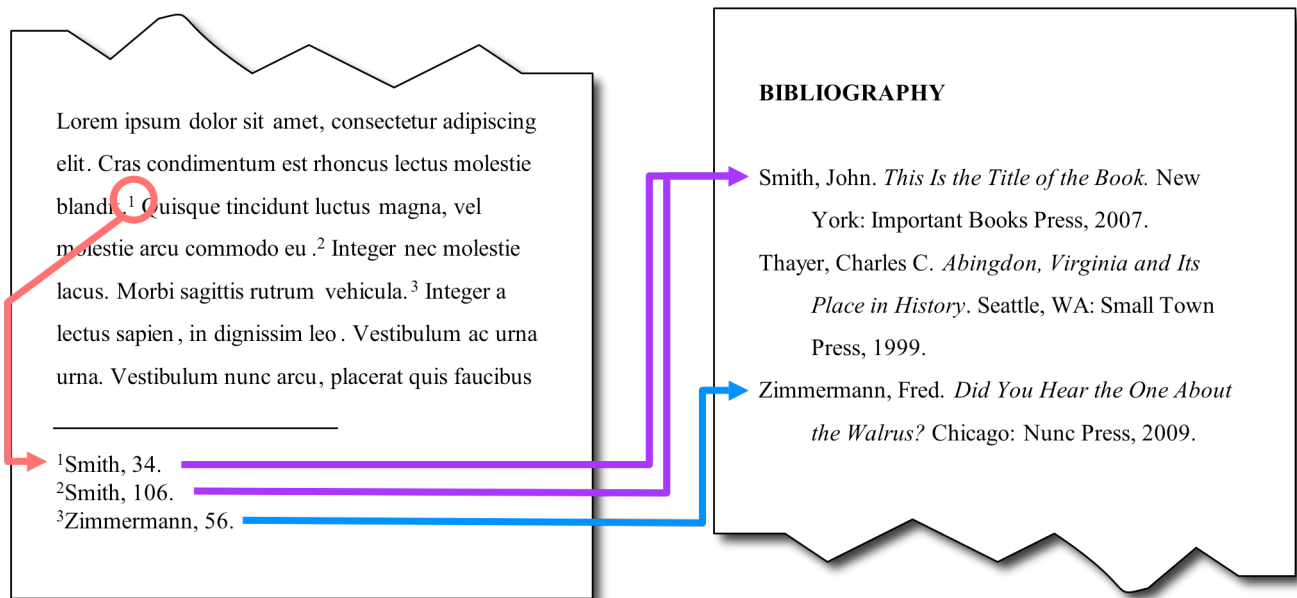
These are separate things. Do not make your footnotes just references to numbered bibliography items

¹ John Doe, *Stuff that Napoleon Did*, 324th edition (New York: Fictitious Publishers, 1932), 471.

² Fred Flintstone, *Godzilla Was Not My Grandfather* (Bedrock: Dodo Bird Press, 10,000 BCE), 12.

Think of your footnotes as pointing to your bibliography.

Like so:



The first footnote in this illustration says:

You can find this information on page 34 of the book listed under "Smith" in my Bibliography.

How We Cite

You should consult a fuller reference on citations; the one used here is:

University of Chicago Press. *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 2003.

Here you see the information needed for anyone to find the work being cited:

- ▶ The author [normally a person, of course, but in this case, an organization];
- ▶ The title;
- ▶ Version or edition;
- ▶ Location and name of publisher;
- ▶ Copyright or publication date.

This is the bibliography entry. The footnote entry is formatted slightly differently. Because a footnote is used to point to a specific idea expressed in a specific place in a work, it usually contains a page number.

SAMPLE CITATIONS

The following styles are derived directly from The Chicago Manual of Style (15th ed.), accessible online at <http://chicagomanualofstyle.org>.

- ▶ All sources you use must appear (once) in the Bibliography. The publication information and year are important in that they both help establish the reliability of the work and make it easier to find the work should the reader want to find out more.
- ▶ All facts, quotes, paraphrases, and ideas from your sources used in your paper must be cited with either footnotes or in-text citations.

Example

Suppose you're writing about how the Aztecs were very different from the Spaniards that conquered them, and on page 65 of a book called *Stuff About the Aztecs* by Fred Smith you find information that's helps you support that argument: that the Aztecs painted their legs blue on Arbor Day. You can use that information either by direct quote, or just by paraphrasing it:

The Aztecs' daily lives were unlike those of the Spaniards. For example, the Aztec practice of painting their legs blue on Arbor Day was unlike anything the Spaniards had ever encountered.¹ In fact it has been said that "the Aztecs were inordinately fond of the color blue, and please don't take any of this seriously as it's just joke examples."²

¹Smith, 65.

²Truman, 379.

The first footnote points to page 65 of the book listed under "Smith" in your Bibliography. Likewise, the second footnote, for the direct quote, points to page 479 of a journal listed under Truman in the Bibliography.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Smith, Joseph. *Stuff About the Aztecs*. Berkeley, CA: U. of California Press, 2008.

Truman, Robert C. "This Is a Journal Article About the Aztecs." *Journal of Historical Journal Articles* 34 (1997): 347–400.

The format for the journal article citation is slightly different. You include the article title, the journal name, the volume number, the year, and the pages covered by the entire article.