

Structuring ideas across paragraphs

Reading (before seminar)

Here you will learn how to organize your paper at the macro-level. We will begin by considering the **thesis statement**, which is *the central argumentative claim(s)* of a work. The thesis statement is the backbone of a standard academic paper, and the same should be true of the papers you write for this course.

Make sure that your thesis statement is controversial. If it is obviously true, then there is no need to write a paper arguing for it.

I will give you a basic template for writing a strong thesis statement, which will in turn guide the structure of your paragraphs. This template, while not the only effective one, is an excellent starting point. As you develop your writing skills, you will learn to adapt and refine it as necessary.

The template has three parts:

- 1) A **signpost** clearly marking the paper's thesis as such.
- 2) The **thesis** itself.
- 3) A detailed **description of the evidence** supporting the thesis.

Below are examples of strong thesis statements which use this template. For each thesis statement, identify the signpost, thesis, and description of evidence:

In this paper, I will show that Bernard Williams defends internalism about reasons. For he accepts the constraint that any genuine reason must be able to explain human behavior, and he claims that only internal reasons can do so.

Here I aim to reconstruct Laozi's understanding of the Way as ineffable to human reason, but nevertheless graspable via intuition. To support this interpretation, I will draw on Laozi's comparison of the Way with a mother, his discussion of names, and his link between the Way and empty spaces.

My thesis is that any assertion, action, or belief epistemically ought to be knowledgeable. I will defend this view by appealing to facts about our patterns of epistemic criticism and praise.

Since it combines standard literary devices with the symbolic complexity of the visual arts, the graphic novel is more expressive than the traditional novel. Or so I will contend.

Important note: avoid diffident signposting phrases like "I believe that ...," "I think that ...," "It seems to me that ...," or "In my opinion," Instead use assertive signposting phrases like those above.

A well-crafted thesis statement also indicates the specific structure of the argument. For example, the first thesis statement above indicates that the author will sequentially discuss (1) the constraint that any genuine reason must be able to explain human behavior and (2) the claim that only internal reasons can do so.

Even professional articles and books usually include a thesis statement – or a thesis paragraph or chapter – drawn from the basic template. Look at the thesis paragraph of the first article that I ever published and find the signpost, thesis, and description of evidence. Then predict the structure of the major sections of this article:

“In his 2009 article ‘Self-Representationalism and Phenomenology,’ Uriah Kriegel argues for self-representationalism primarily on phenomenological grounds. Kriegel’s argument can naturally be cast more broadly as an argument for higher-order representationalism. In this paper, I will examine this broadened version of Kriegel’s argument in detail and show that it is unsuccessful for at least two reasons. First, it relies on an inference to the best explanation that is insufficiently defended. Second, phenomenological investigation does not adequately support the key phenomenological premise of the argument.”¹

The signposting in this example is blunt, but eventually you will learn to signpost with grace. Consider the first sentence of Timothy Williamson’s article “Is knowing a state of mind?”:

“Let there be no vulgar suspense: the title will be answered in the affirmative.”²

Williamson goes on to outline the evidence for this thesis.

Practice (in seminar)

Now it is your turn to write thesis statements. In groups, invent a thesis statement in response to the question, “What is Xunzi’s view of human nature?” Then write all topic sentences required by this thesis statement.

REFERENCE LIST

- Mehta, N. (2013). “Is there a phenomenological argument for higher-order representationalism?” *Philosophical Studies* 164 (2): 357-370.
- Williamson, T. (1995). “Is knowing a state of mind?” *Mind* 104 (415): 533-565.

¹ Mehta (2013, p. 358).

² Williamson (1995, p. 533).

Homework (after seminar)

Remember to **print two copies** of your homework, one of which you should retain for reference in class. Also **put your name on the back** so that I may practice anonymous grading.

Exercise 1: Write a thesis statement for your first paper.

Exercise 2: Write all of the topic sentences for your paper.

Exercise 3: For each of your topic sentences, list one claim that evidentially supports it.

Note: I strongly encourage you to write a complete draft of your first paper.