

# (Excerpt from:) Essays and Arguments: A Handbook on Writing Argumentative and Interpretative Essays

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## 3.4 The Importance of Defining a Focus

In setting up your own written or spoken arguments, you need to pay particular attention to defining the focus very clearly. Remember that you are in charge of the argument; you can define it in any way you like, indicating what you are looking at and what you are not looking at. Doing this properly will make constructing the argument very much easier to do properly. If you fail to define the focus, then the reader may legitimately ask why you have not looked at some things included in the general subject.

For example, suppose you wish to write an essay on *Hamlet*. This is a huge general subject, and you cannot proceed until you have determined what precisely you wish to examine in this large and difficult work of literature (and what you wish to leave out). So you will need to reflect upon what exactly in the play you wish to examine. The process of sorting this out may take a number of steps.

Suppose, for instance, you wish to look at the role of women in *Hamlet*. That narrows down the subject matter considerably, since there are only two women in the play. But you need not stop there. Do you wish to narrow the focus any more, for example, onto a consideration of one female character, Ophelia? And you can proceed from there to narrow the focus even further onto one aspect of Ophelia's life, her relationship with her father. If you wish the narrowest possible focus, you can further limit the essay to an examination of Ophelia's relationship with her father as it is revealed in a single scene or part of a scene.

By going through this process, you have taken a very large and complicated subject (which you would not be able to deal with satisfactorily in a short essay or even a large research paper), and selected from it a very specific part which will be much easier to manage in the written argument. In fact, as a general rule, the more narrowly and clearly defined the focus is, the easier the essay will be to write.

Remember to take charge of the argument at this stage. It is your case to make, and you can define it as narrowly as you wish, provided you are still looking at something important enough to enable you to make a case.

Students are frequently reluctant to narrow the focus because they are worried about not having enough to say (especially in research papers). Thus, they set themselves from the start an impossible task by choosing to set up the argument on a very wide topic. This mistake you should avoid at all costs.

It is much better to argue in depth and at length about a narrowly defined topic than to offer a superficial cursory look at something much wider. Make sure you understand this

point, particularly in setting up a research paper. For example, a paper which looks in detail at, say, the opening three pages of Descartes argument in the *Meditations* and which confines itself to that small portion of the text will almost invariably produce a more manageable and persuasive paper than one which attempts to deal with the entire content of that complex work.

Students who do not define a clear and narrow focus for the paper almost always end up doing rather poorly, because they commit themselves to a subject too large for detailed treatment in a short paper.

Here are some more examples (in point form) which illustrate the transformation of a very large general subject, through a series of steps, into a sharp and particular focus.

### **Essay 1**

General Subject: Pollution

Focus 1: Air pollution

Focus 2: Acid rain

Focus 3: Acid rain in BC

Focus 4: Acid rain in BC: effects on lakes and rivers

Focus 5: Acid rain in BC: effects on fresh-water fish

Focus 6: Acid rain in BC: effects on trout in the Cowichan River.

### **Essay 2**

General Subject: Alcoholism

Focus 1: Alcoholism in the family

Focus 2: Alcoholism in the family: teenage drinking

Focus 3: Alcoholism in the family: teenage drinking in Nanaimo

### **Essay 3**

General Subject: Popular music

Focus 1: Bob Dylan

Focus 2: Bob Dylan's early lyrics

Focus 3: Bob Dylan's first two albums: their impact on styles of song writing.

Focus 4: Bob Dylan's first two albums: their impact on styles of writing folk songs.

### **Essay 4**

General Subject: The French Revolution

Focus 1: The causes of the French Revolution

Focus 2: The immediate causes of the French Revolution

Focus 3: The immediate causes of the French Revolution: the economic problem

### **Essay 5**

General Subject: Modern Sports

Focus 1: The excessive salaries of top players

Focus 2: The excessive salaries of top players: the NBA

Focus 3: The excessive salaries of top players in the NBA: the New York Knicks

## Essay 6

General Subject: *Hamlet*

Focus 1: The women in the play

Focus 2: The women in the play: Ophelia

Focus 3: Ophelia's relationship with her father

Focus 4: The scene in which Ophelia and Polonius first discuss Hamlet.

Notice what is happening in these lists. The opening subject, which is very large and vague, is being transformed into a very specific narrow sub-topic, which the essay is going to look at. You should always end up with a focus which is much more narrowly defined but which is manageable in a short argument.

An examination of the examples above indicates some of the ways in which you can narrow down the general subject. In dealing with a work of literature, for example, you can limit the focus by looking at a particular character or a particular scene or both. If the general subject is a social issue, you can restrict the focus geographically (by looking, say, only at BC or Nanaimo) or demographically (by considering only teenagers)

This process of narrowing the focus is absolutely essential. The failure to do it properly is a major cause of problems in student essays and especially research papers. Do not say you have not been warned.

### 3.5 The Importance of Defining a Thesis

Once you have determined a specific focus for the argument, then you need to develop an opinion about that focus. In other words, you need to present an argumentative opinion about the narrowly defined subject matter you have selected.

This point is critical. You cannot base an argument merely on the focus you have defined. You must organize an opinion about that focus, something we can argue about. This opinion is called the **thesis**, and it is the single most important sentence or series of sentences in the entire argument.

For example, you cannot base an argumentative essay on teenage alcoholism in BC or on Ophelia in *Hamlet* or on the distribution of drugs in school. You must base the essay on an opinion about one of those. And, in general, the sharper the opinion and the more energetically you express it, the clearer the thesis will be, both to you and to the reader or listener.

The thesis should answer the question: What precisely is the presenter of this argument trying to persuade me to believe? If that is not clear, then the argument's central purpose is fuzzy or missing. So you need to take particular care to conclude the introduction with a precise definition of your thesis.

When you set out to do this, remember what we discussed in the previous section, namely, that certain statements do not make good arguments, because there is nothing we can usefully dispute in them. Make sure your thesis does not fall into this category (a great many students weaken their argument fatally by presenting a very poor thesis).

Notice, for example, that the following statements would make very poor thesis statements, because they are not sufficiently argumentative; they state matters which we can quickly confirm by an appeal to the text or to an existing authority:

1. Acid rain hurts fish.
2. Polonius is Ophelia's father, and when he dies, she goes insane.
3. Teenage drinking is very common in BC.
4. Bob Dylan started writing songs early in the 1960's.

These sentences are useless as thesis statements, because they present nothing we can usefully argue about. If that's all you offer at the end of your introduction, then the reader is going to be very puzzled about why you are striving so hard to argue about something obvious. Notice the difference between the above statements and the following.

1. Acid rain is the single most important threat to our quality of life, and thus we must undertake decisive action against it immediately, no matter what the cost.
2. Polonius's treatment of his daughter reveals clearly just how poisonous the emotional climate of Elsinore really is. His attitude to life is the source of much of the evil in the court.
3. Teenage alcoholism in BC is a vastly overrated problem. If there are difficulties, these have been exaggerated in order to scare us into thinking we are facing a new crisis.
4. Bob Dylan's early lyrics introduced the most significant changes in song writing since the early days of Tin Pan Alley. In one way or another, they have decisively influenced almost every other major song writer in North America ever since.

These statements put something argumentative on the table. We can easily disagree (or be reluctant to be persuaded), and the writer is going to have to work to convince us. Such statements do not simply announce a matter of fact about which we cannot argue significantly.

If you don't set the essay up with a clearly argumentative thesis, then the logic of the argument will be defective, because the reader will not be clear about what you are trying to establish. Please make sure you understand this key point. The failure to establish a good thesis is the single most important logical error in student essays.