



Writing@CSU Writing Guide

Understanding Your Purpose

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Introduction

The first question for any writer should be, "Why am I writing?" "What is my goal or my purpose for writing?" For many writing contexts, your immediate purpose may be to complete an assignment or get a good grade. But the long-range purpose of writing is to communicate to a particular audience. In order to communicate successfully to your audience, understanding your purpose for writing will make you a better writer.

A Definition of Purpose

Purpose is the reason why you are writing. You may write a grocery list in order to remember what you need to buy. You may write a laboratory report in order to carefully describe a chemistry experiment. You may write an argumentative essay in order to persuade someone to change the parking rules on campus. You may write a letter to a friend to express your excitement about her new job.

Notice that selecting the **form** for your writing (list, report, essay, letter) is one of your choices that helps you achieve your purpose. You also have choices about style, organization, kinds of evidence that help you achieve your purpose

Focusing on your purpose as you begin writing helps you know what form to choose, how to focus and organize your writing, what kinds of evidence to cite, how formal or informal your style should be, and how much you should write.

Types of Purpose

Don Zimmerman, Journalism and Technical Communication Department

I look at most scientific and technical writing as being either informational or instructional in purpose. A third category is documentation for legal purposes. Most writing can be organized in one of these three ways. For example, an informational purpose is frequently used to make decisions. Memos, in most circles, carry key information.

When we communicate with other people, we are usually guided by some purpose, goal, or aim. We may want to [express](#) our feelings. We may want simply to [explore](#) an idea or perhaps [entertain](#) or amuse our listeners or readers. We may wish to [inform](#) people or [explain](#) an idea. We may wish to [argue for or against an idea](#) in order to [persuade](#) others to believe or act in a certain way. We make special kinds of arguments when we are [evaluating](#) or [problem solving](#). Finally, we may wish to [mediate](#) or negotiate a solution in a tense or difficult situation.

Remember, however, that often writers [combine purposes](#) in a single piece of writing. Thus, we may, in a business report, begin by informing readers of the economic facts before we try to persuade them to take a certain course of action.

Purposes and Strategies

A purpose is the *aim or goal* of the writer or the written product; a strategy is a *means of achieving that purpose*. For example, our purpose may be to explain something, but we may use definitions, examples, descriptions, and analysis in order to make our explanation clearer. A variety of strategies are available for writers to help them find ways to achieve their purpose(s).

Definition

Writers often use definition for key terms of ideas in their essays. A *formal definition*, the basis of most dictionary definitions, has three parts: the term to be defined, the class to which the term belongs, and the features that distinguish this term from other terms in the class.

Term	Class	Distinguishing characteristics
Democracy is	government	by the people, exercised directly or through elected representatives

Look at your own topic. Would definition help you analyze and explain your subject?

Illustration and Example

Examples and illustrations are a basic kind of evidence and support in expository and argumentative writing.

In her essay about anorexia nervosa, student writer Nancie Brosseau uses several examples to develop a paragraph:

Another problem, lying, occurred most often when my parents tried to force me to eat. Because I was at the gym until around eight o'clock every night, I told my mother not to save me dinner. I would come home and make a sandwich and feed it to my dog. I lied to my parents every day about eating lunch at school. For example, I would bring a sack lunch and sell it to someone and use the money to buy diet pills. I always told my parents that I ate my own lunch.

Look at your own topic. What examples and illustrations would help explain your subject?

Classification

Classification is a form of analyzing a subject into types. We might classify automobiles by types: Trucks, Sport Utilities, Sedans, Sport Cars. We can (and do) classify college classes by type: Science, Social Science, Humanities, Business, Agriculture, etc.

Look at your own topic. Would classification help you analyze and explain your subject?

Comparison and Contrast

Comparison and contrast can be used to organize an essay. Consider whether either of the following two outlines would help you organize your comparison essay.

Block Comparison of A and B

Intro and Thesis
Description of A
Description of B (and how B is similar to/different from A)
Conclusion

Alternating Comparison of A and B

Intro and Thesis
Aspect One: Comparison/contrast of A and B
Aspect Two: Comparison/contrast of A and B
Aspect Three: Comparison/contrast of A and B

Look at your own topic. Would comparison/contrast help you organize and explain your subject?

Analysis

Analysis is simply dividing some whole into its parts. A library has distinct parts: stacks, electronic catalog, reserve desk, government documents section, interlibrary loan desk, etc. If you are writing about a library, you may need to know all the parts that exist in that library.

Look at your own topic. Would analysis of the parts help you understand and explain your subject?

Description

Although we usually think of description as visual, we may also use other senses--hearing, touch, feeling, smell-- in our attempt to describe something for our readers.

Notice how student writer Stephen White uses multiple senses to describe Anasazi Indian ruins at Mesa Verde:

I awoke this morning with a sense of unexplainable anticipation gnawing away at the back of my mind, that this chilly, leaden day at Mesa Verde would bring something new They are a haunting sight, these broken houses, clustered together down in the gloom of the canyon. The silence is broken only by the rush of the wind in the trees and the trickling of a tiny stream of melting snow springing from ledge to ledge. This small, abandoned village of tiny houses seems almost as the Indians left it, reduced by the passage of nearly a thousand years to piles of

rubble through which protrude broken red adobe walls surrounding ghostly jet black openings, undisturbed by modern man.

Look at your own topic. Would description help you explain your subject?

Process Analysis

Process analysis is analyzing the chronological steps in any operation. A recipe contains process analysis. First, sift the flour. Next, mix the eggs, milk, and oil. Then fold in the flour with the eggs, milk and oil. Then add baking soda, salt and spices. Finally, pour the pancake batter onto the griddle.

Look at your own topic. Would process analysis help you analyze and explain your subject?

Narration

Narration is possibly the most effective strategy essay writers can use. Readers are quickly caught up in reading any story, no matter how short it is. Writers of exposition and argument should consider where a short narrative might enliven their essay. Typically, this narrative can relate some of your own experiences with the subject of your essay.

Look at your own topic. Where might a short narrative help you explain your subject?

Cause/Effect Analysis

In cause and effect analysis, you map out possible causes and effects. Two patterns for doing cause/effect analysis are as follows:

Several causes leading to single effect: Cause 1 + Cause 2 + Cause 3 . . . => Effect

One cause leading to multiple effects: Cause => Effect 1 + Effect 2 + Effect 3 ...

Look at your own topic. Would cause/effect analysis help you understand and explain your subject?

How Audience and Focus Affect Purpose

All readers have expectations. They assume what they read will meet their expectations. As a writer, your job is to make sure those expectations are met, while at the same time, fulfilling the purpose of your writing.

Once you have determined what type of purpose best conveys your motivations, you will then need to examine how this will affect your readers. Perhaps you are explaining your topic when you really should be convincing readers to see your point. Writers and readers may approach a topic with conflicting purposes. Your job, as a writer, is to make sure both are being met.

Purpose and Audience

Often your audience will help you determine your purpose. The beliefs they hold will tell you whether or not they agree with what you have to say. Suppose, for example, you are writing to **persuade** readers **against** Internet censorship. Your purpose will differ depending on the audience who will read your writing.

[Audience One: Internet Users](#)

[Audience Two: Parents](#)

Purpose and Focus

Your focus (otherwise known as thesis, claim, main idea, or problem statement) is a reflection of your purpose. If these two do not agree, you will not accomplish what you set out to do. Consider the following examples below:

Related Information: Focus One: Informing

Suppose your purpose is to *inform* readers about relationships between Type A personalities and heart attacks. Your focus could then be: Type A personalities do not have an abnormally high risk of suffering heart attacks.

Related Information: Focus Two: Persuading

Suppose your purpose is to *persuade* readers not to quarantine AIDS victims. Your focus could then be: Children afflicted with AIDS should not be prevented from attending school.

Writer and Reader Goals

Kate Kiefer, English Department

Readers and writers both have goals when they engage in reading and writing. Writers typically define their goals in several categories—to inform, persuade, entertain, explore. When writers and readers have mutually fulfilling goals—to inform and to look for information—then writing and reading are most efficient. At times, these goals overlap one another. Many readers of science essays are looking for science information when they often get science philosophy. This mismatch of goals tends to leave readers frustrated, and if they communicate that frustration to the writer, then the writer feels misunderstood or unsuccessful.

Purpose and Audience

Donna Lecourt, English Department

Whatever reality you are writing within, whatever you chose to write about, implies a certain audience as well as your purpose for writing. You decide you have something to write about, or something you care about, then purpose determines audience.

Writer Versus Reader Purposes

Steve Reid, English Department

A general definition of purpose relates to motivation. For instance, "I'm angry, and that's why I'm writing this." Purposes, in academic writing, are intentions the writer hopes to accomplish with a particular audience. Often, readers discover their own purpose within a text. While the writer may have intended one thing, the text actually does another, according to its readers.

Purpose and Writing Assignments

Instructors often state the purpose of a writing assignment on the assignment sheet. By carefully examining what it is you are asked to do, you can determine what your writing's purpose is.

Most assignment sheets ask you to perform a specific task. Key words listed on the assignment can help you determine why you are writing. If your instructor has not provided an assignment sheet, consider asking what the purpose of the assignment is.

Key Words

Read over your assignment sheet. Make a note of words asking you to follow a specific task. For

example, words such as:

Describe
Argue
Define
Explain
Persuade

These words require you to write about a topic in a specific way. Once you know the purpose of your writing, you can begin planning what information is necessary for that purpose.

Example Assignment

Imagine you are an administrator for the school district. In light of the Columbus controversy, you have been assigned to write a set of guidelines for teaching about Columbus in the district's elementary and junior high schools. These guidelines will explain official policy to parents and teachers in teaching children about Columbus and the significance of his voyages. They will also draw on arguments made on both sides of the controversy, as well as historical facts on which both sides agree.

The purpose of this assignment is to explain the official policy about teaching Columbus' voyages to parents and teachers.

Purpose and Writing Assignments

Steve Reid, English Department

Keywords in writing assignments give teachers and students direction about why we are writing. For instance, many assignments ask students to "describe" something. The word "describe" specifically indicated the writer is supposed to describe something visually. This is very general. Often, assignments are looking for something more specific. Maybe there is an argument the instructor intends be formulated. Maybe there is an implied thesis, but often teachers use general words such as "Write about" or "Describe" something, when they should use more specific words like, "Define" or "Explain" or "Argue" or "Persuade."

Purpose and Thesis

Writers choose from a variety of purposes for writing. They may write *to express* their thoughts in

a personal letter, *to explain* concepts in a physics class, *to explore* ideas in a philosophy class, or *to argue* a point in a political science class.

Once they have their purpose in mind (and an audience for whom they are writing), writers may more clearly formulate their thesis. The *thesis, claim, or main idea* of an essay is related to the purpose. It is the sentence or sentences that fulfill the purpose and that state the exact point of the essay.

For example, if a writer wants *to argue* that high schools should strengthen foreign language training, her thesis sentence might be as follows:

"Because Americans are so culturally isolated, we need a national policy that supports increased foreign language instruction in elementary and secondary schools."

How Thesis is Related to Purpose

The following examples illustrate how subject, purpose and thesis are related. The subject is the most general statement of the topic. The purpose narrows the focus by indicating whether the writer wishes to express or explore ideas or actually explain or argue about the topic. The thesis sentence, claim, or main idea narrows the focus even farther. It is the sentence or sentences which focuses the topic for the writer and the reader.

Subject	Purpose	Thesis, Claim, or Main Idea
Childhood experiences	To <i>express</i> your feelings and explain how one childhood experience was formative.	The relentless competition between me and my sisters distorted my easygoing personality.
Heart disease	To <i>inform</i> readers about the relationships between Type A personalities and heart attacks.	Type A personalities do not necessarily have an abnormally high risk of suffering heart attacks.
The death penalty	To <i>persuade</i> readers that the death penalty should be used.	Despite our belief that killing is wrong, a state-administered death penalty is fair, just, and humane.

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