

12

Steps to Better Exposition

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To J.D.
Who encouraged and indulged

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To the Teacher

I hope I have made this book flexible.

I have tried to include all the important elements of expository organization in the first nine steps for the benefit of students who must complete this basic study of rhetoric in a brief college quarter. But by including optional theme assignments for most of those nine steps and by providing additional explanation and examples on style (Steps 10-12), I intended to provide topics and assignments which would expand to a full semester's work.

The consideration of paragraph development as four separate steps will perhaps seem arbitrary. My purpose was to emphasize as constructively as possible a fundamental weakness in most student composition—anemic, underdeveloped paragraphs—without belaboring the problem indefinitely. If I have failed to state clearly enough that every piece of exposition need not employ all six methods of development considered in these four steps, perhaps you can supply my omissions—as indeed you may feel it necessary to do elsewhere.

For the ideas and examples in this book I am indebted to many people. First of all, I am grateful to my students who continually help me discard, temper, and improve my theories and methods. Secondly, I am appreciative of my fellow teachers who have given encouragement, offered suggestions, and supplied material from their own files: Mrs. Janet Booth, Mrs. Marie LeHolm, Mrs. Elaine McKay, Mrs. Carol Madsen, and Mrs. Emma Lou Thayne. But the biggest share of gratitude surely goes to Mrs. Kathleen Darley, Supervisor of Remedial English, Division of Continuing Education, University of Utah. Without her confidence, prodding, and careful reading of manuscripts, I should never have undertaken the project—much less seen it through to the end. Cheerful and competent clerical assistance was provided by Mrs. Joyce Howe. To her, too, I am sincerely indebted.

To the Student

If words flow from you like filament from a spider . . .

if committing your ideas to paper is effortless and delightful . . .

if you have already written *The Great American Novel*, or are working on it, or have it securely in mind . . .

in short, if you think composition is easy, and you always write successfully . . .

this book isn't for you.

This book is intended for those of you who chew more pencils than you write with, crumple more pages than you finish, and worry yourself to paralysis every time you are given a writing assignment. For you students perhaps this book can offer some help. It makes no guarantee of Pulitzer prizes—just a little peace of mind and the self-confidence to produce written work that communicates the ideas you want it to and makes reading a pleasure.

Because most of the writing you will do in college will be explanation—how Elizabeth I succeeded or failed as a diplomat, why Paine's *Crisis* papers are still meaningful today, in what ways Willa Cather uses color and symbol—the emphasis here will be on how you go about explaining your ideas. Maybe you will discover in the process that writing is enjoyable and will want to go on for specialized courses in news-writing, short story writing, poetry writing, or playwrighting.

But for now you will look only at writing that explains—that is, exposition.

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PART I

Overcoming That Problem of Getting Started

Step 1. Planning the Thesis Statement

The first rule of good exposition can be put into a single word: **Plan**. Exposition, like a moon rocket or a house or even a hand-knit sweater, must begin with a pattern. And as a writer you will find that the simplest kind of a pattern is a *thesis statement*—a single sentence setting forth your purpose and point of view—which you carefully plan **before you begin to write**.

Any expository writing—that is, English themes, term reports, and informational papers of all kinds—must have some kind of underlying point or idea which you are trying to explain. That underlying idea, the *thesis*, may or may not be stated explicitly within the paper itself. If you do choose to spell out the thesis for your reader, you will probably put it in the first paragraph or the last—although when you gain experience, you are free to place it anywhere you care to. Occasionally (but only after you gain experience) you will not state the thesis in a particular sentence but merely suggest it in the paper as a whole.

Such fuzzy rules regarding the placement of a thesis may result in serious difficulties both in reading and writing. Students may read carelessly, allowing themselves to be sidetracked by incidental examples and details, without truly seeking the author's message. Or worse still, they may attempt to write exposition of their own which either has no thesis or does not stick to a *single underlying idea*.

Consider the following student theme:

Aunt Ellie

My great aunt Ellie, who is a spry little widow of nearly 80 years, is one of the most quick-witted people I have ever met. With the aid of her numerous jokes, her sparkling dialog, and her ability to laugh at any situation, she can always coax a person out of a glum mood, and I would rather spend an afternoon talking to Aunt Ellie than anyone else I can think of.

One of the most pleasant aspects of a visit to Aunt Ellie's house is the original refreshments she always serves. She never lets a guest leave her house without offering him something to eat, even if she can provide nothing more than stale bread and peanut butter. Of course her specialty is homemade peppermint ice cream, which she still manages to crank in an antique freezer.

I am 60 years younger than Aunt Ellie, but those old-fashioned hand freezers wear me out. I bought Mother an electric freezer for Christmas, but the ice cream it produces isn't very creamy. Nevertheless, ice cream is my favorite dessert, and I am glad we now own a freezer.

Aunt Ellie loves flowers and spends every waking moment from April through September working among her tulips, roses, petunias, and other blossoms. My sister in California has inherited Aunt Ellie's green thumb, and she has won several blue ribbons for her giant poinsettas. The climate is too cold for poinsettas in this part of the country.

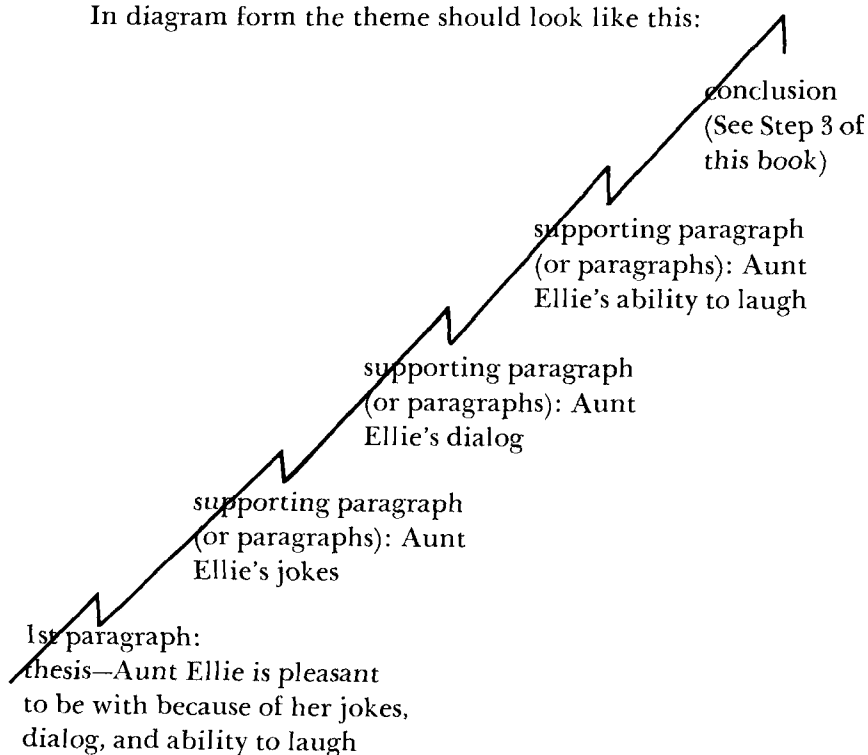
Aunt Ellie lives in a well-kept bungalow which she classifies as "an authentic reproduction of synthetic early American." As a matter of fact, most people who buy early American houses and furniture really don't have any idea about how our forefathers actually lived.

I am sure you will agree that Aunt Ellie is an interesting person that anyone would want to spend an afternoon with.

This theme does contain a thesis, the second sentence in the first paragraph: *With the aid of her numerous jokes, her sparkling dialog, and her ability to laugh at any situation, she can always coax a person out of a glum mood, and I would rather spend an afternoon talking to Aunt Ellie than anyone else I can think of.* But the ap-

pearance of the thesis seems to be a matter of accident rather than design, for the student has disregarded its function as a pattern. Having stated that Aunt Ellie is pleasant to be with because of her jokes, dialog, and ability to laugh, the writer should illustrate these qualities—and these qualities only. *Any other material distracts from the thesis and should be eliminated.*

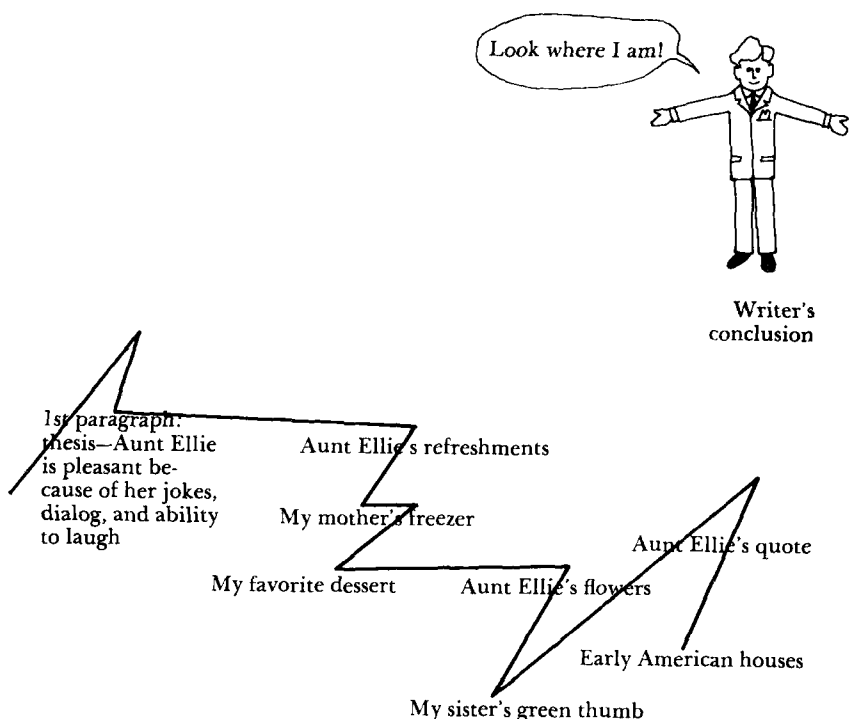
In diagram form the theme should look like this:



But what pattern does the Aunt Ellie theme actually follow? This paper is *nothing* but a string of aimless sentences, some less related to the thesis than others. Obviously the sentences about the writer's enjoyment of ice cream and his sister's green thumb do not belong in the paper. But neither does most of the material about Aunt Ellie. Only one sentence after the opening paragraph provides any evidence for the thesis. The first sentence in the fifth paragraph illustrates Aunt Ellie's wit and dialog and is therefore useful: *Aunt Ellie lives in a well-kept bungalow which she classifies as "an authentic reproduction of synthetic early American."*

But aside from the introduction itself, this is the only sentence which belongs in the theme.

An actual diagram of the Aunt Ellie theme might look like this:



It is not quite clear how the writer of this theme reached the conclusion without taking the reader along. At best, an unmerited conclusion like this is trite and dull. At worst, it leads to argument and irritation.

PLANNING THE THESIS STATEMENT

The writer of the Aunt Ellie paper got himself into trouble because he did not consciously plan a thesis statement but instead set down an accidental thesis without realizing it. And despite how obvious the faulty structure of this sample paper may now appear

to you, your own English teacher probably reads many themes each week which do not tightly focus on one clear underlying idea. However, you should have no real trouble avoiding this disastrous structural problem if you (1) can identify the difference between your topic and your thesis and (2) can recognize the qualities which make a good thesis statement.

The chart below points up the distinction between a topic (general subject) and a thesis (idea about a topic):

Topic	Improved Topic	Thesis Statement
College training in America	A comparison of Reed College and the University of California	Students at Reed College receive more personal attention than do students at the University of California.
The mail of a U. S. Senator	The crackpot mail received by a U. S. Senator	Much of a U. S. Senator's valuable time is spent answering crackpot mail.
My home town	The corner drugstore in my home town	The corner drugstore was the center of social life in my home town.

A thesis statement, therefore, narrows the topic and contains an idea or opinion about it. But other qualities are necessary as well for a good thesis statement:

- A. Is marijuana really dangerous?
(Poor thesis statement. No opinion, merely a question.)
- B. Marijuana may cause psychic if not physical dependence.
(Improved thesis statement. Complete sentence.)
- A. Sky diving is great.
(Poor thesis statement. Too vague.)
- B. Training in sky diving often justifies itself in rescue operations.
(Improved thesis statement. More specific.)

- A. Education is necessary.
(Poor thesis statement. Too obvious.)
- B. College-trained people adjust better to stress situations than other adults.
(Improved thesis statement. Not generally believed, but defensible.)
- A. Swimming is the best sport in the world.
(Poor thesis statement. Too emotional.)
- B. Regular swimming keeps the entire body in good physical condition.
(Improved thesis statement. Can be defended by reason.)

From these examples and the ones preceding you will see that

1. A good thesis statement is best expressed in a complete sentence (never a question).
2. A good thesis statement is clear.
3. A good thesis statement focuses on a narrow aspect of the topic.
4. A good thesis statement sets forth the writer's point of view.
5. A good thesis statement is not an obvious opinion which every reader already shares.
6. A good thesis statement can be defended by reason rather than emotion.
7. A good thesis statement sets the pattern for the paper to follow.

Whether they are beginning students or long-standing professionals, all careful writers of exposition will have their theses clearly in mind before they begin to write. But as a beginner you should do more than merely *think* about what you are going to say, or like the writer of the Aunt Ellie theme you may be diverted from your purpose during the course of composition. Until you gain experience, you will find the following rules helpful:

1. Write out the underlying idea of the paper in a complete sentence or *thesis statement*.

This thesis statement is not a part of the composition. It is the pattern for the paper which you must bear constantly in mind in order to prevent the introduction of unrelated or contradictory material. Unless the teacher specifically asks

to review the thesis statement, it will never be seen by anyone but you.

2. State the thesis in *another sentence within the composition*, as near the beginning of the paper as possible.

This kind of a sentence at the beginning of a paper is called an *explicit deductive thesis* although it is not necessary for you to remember the term. Not until you have mastered the simple method of placing a thesis at the beginning should you attempt a paper in which the thesis is placed elsewhere or a paper which does not state the thesis at all.

Following these two rules will make the task of writing easier and will result in better prose. The thesis statement is not one more problem for you to worry about but a useful pattern that will lighten your burdens considerably.

Exercise

The Thesis Statement

Observing the rules on p. 8, write a thesis statement for each of the following topics:

1. American morals
2. Divorce
3. Rock and roll music
4. Student government
5. Sports cars
6. Pop art