

Writing in a Scholarly Style

Scholarly style differs from sermons and reflection papers in that it is an assertion

- based on reading
- backed by evidence
- arranged in a logical progression.

It should never include

- references to yourself
- unsubstantiated personal opinions
- appeals to emotion.

Thesis—the thesis is your main claim, i.e. the idea that you will use the rest of the paper to prove. It's the one sentence answer to those who ask you what you are trying to say. If you are having trouble writing a formal thesis, just brainstorm informally for awhile, either aloud or by jotting down notes, then translate your thoughts into "proper" English after you feel you have a handle on where you want to go.

Like Goldilocks you are striving to formulate a thesis that is neither too wide nor too narrow. You want something just the right size for the page limit of your assignment.

- Too broad: "Methodism as a Religion of the Heart"
- Too narrow: "Methodism as a Religion of the Heart in Rural East Anglian Parishes between 1790 and 1792"
- Just right (for most classes): "Methodism as a Religion of the Heart as Reflected in John Wesley's Later Sermons"

Evidence—begin to research the source material to collect evidence supporting your thesis. Don't be so committed to your thesis, however, that you don't allow the results of your searching to modify and inform your thinking. Allow your thesis to evolve as you go.

IMPORTANT—keep track of where your evidence is coming from. Tracking down page numbers at the last minute is hugely tedious.

- Primary sources—Accounts by those who witnessed an event, such as Charles Wesley writing about John Wesley's preaching, or who were really close in time to an event, like Suetonius writing about the Roman emperors.
- Secondary sources—Accounts removed by time or place from the primary sources, such as scholarly interpretations of an event that draw upon and synthesize numerous primary sources.
- Tertiary sources—reliable dictionaries and encyclopedias, like *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, that contain article bibliographies. NOT Wikipedia.

Arrangement—gather the evidence you have collected in a logical sequence. Create an outline based on what you think is the best way to present the evidence to the reader. For example, the outline of a brief essay might look like this:

- Introduction/Thesis paragraph
 - Evidence Paragraph #1: topic sentence, supporting sentences,
 - Analysis, transition
 - Evidence Paragraph #2: topic sentence, supporting sentences
 - Analysis, transition
 - Evidence Paragraph #3: topic sentence, supporting sentences
 - Analysis, transition
- Concluding paragraph (Intro/thesis reiterated)

The Introduction and Conclusions should be written after you have finished with the main body of the paper, so that they reflect exactly what you want to say. The Introduction should outline your thesis statement, and the Conclusion should reiterate it, taking it one step further. Use the conclusion to make a bold statement related to the topic. This is your chance to go a little over the top.

Analysis—As you present the evidence supporting your argument, you need to tell the reader how it contributes to your overall thesis. A wise Perkins professor has noted that “We are lazy readers who don't want to have to figure out what you are trying to say, so hand it to us on a platter.” In other words, show the reader how a logical interpretation of this piece of evidence supports your thesis.

Good analysis depends on thoughtful reading. Here is your chance to use those hard-won exegetical skills. Pay attention to language, context, structure, and all the other “silent” clues to an author's thinking.

Quotations—Quotations should be brief and on target. While it is tempting to use Big Block Quotes because they take up a lot of space, it is better to break them down into more manageable units. Select the one sentence that really carries your argument a step further. The rest of the quote can be paraphrased. Quotes should be introduced briefly and then explained, so that the reader understands its significance.

Other tips:

Keep summaries to a minimum. The paper needs to demonstrate what you think about a topic, and extended summaries interfere with that goal.

Create a solid organizational structure for your paper and stick to it. Digressions waste the reader's time. If you can't let go of your digressions, then stick them in the foot/end notes.

Keep the focus of the paper on your topic. For example, some writers fall into the trap of writing a history of the world as an introduction. It's tempting, but resist! Give the reader as concise a background as possible, then move into your main point.