

Writing in the Humanities

General Advice

Humanities as a field of study deals with questions for which there are no definitive answers. Consider the questions that have haunted the humanities for centuries: What is justice? The nature of friendship? The properties of truth? While scholars in this field certainly hope to address these questions in ways that are compelling and authoritative, they don't write first and foremost to establish consensus among their peers. In other words, they do not expect to create in their work a reliable, scientific truth. Writing in the humanities is not about finding *the* answer; it's about finding *an* answer. The humanities concern themselves with the construction and deconstruction of meaning. They have, as their center, not the interpretation of hard evidence, but the interpretation of texts.

Evidence and Methods

Evidence in the humanities is textual. In other words, scholars in this field work most often with written documents, though films, paintings, etc. are also understood as "texts." Humanities scholars read texts closely, looking for patterns, examining language, considering what is not present in the text, as well as what is. The pattern of discourse in the humanities usually goes like this: a writer makes a claim, supports that claim with textual evidence, and then discusses the significance of the passage he has just quoted. This pattern of claim / textual support / discussion is repeated again and again until the writer feels that her argument has been made. What distinguishes the humanities from the sciences and the social sciences is that each claim is supported and discussed before the next claim is considered. In the sciences and social sciences, discussion is held off until methods and results have been supported in full.

Structuring the Argument

In the humanities, form is dictated by content. In other words, *what* you intend to say will determine *how* you are going to say it. Figuring out the best of all possible structures for your argument is among the most difficult challenges a student writing in the humanities will face.

Preferred Style of Writing

Every discipline has a preferred writing style. In the humanities, paragraphs tend to be longer than in the sciences. Sentences are longer, too, and more eloquent. Parallel structures are used to manage long and complex thoughts, which will resonate with images and metaphors. Authors are active, not passive, in their voices. When writing a humanities paper, language and the way it is used in a paper is nearly as important as that paper's content.

A Good, Working Thesis:

1. Narrows your topic to a main idea you want to communicate;
2. Asserts your position clearly in a sentence that makes a claim about a topic;

3. States not simply a fact but an opinion;
4. Makes a generalization that you can support with details, fact, and examples;
5. Stimulates curiosity and interest in readers and makes them want to keep reading.

When writing an Introduction:

1. Make sure the first sentence stands alone and does not depend on the title or assignment to make sense.
2. Provide context and background to set up your thesis.
3. Define key terms.
4. Establish the tone of the paper: serious, humorous, formal, informal.
5. Engage reader's interest.

Avoid:

1. Being overly general, telling the obvious such as "Crime is a big problem" or "Since the beginning of time the sexes have been in conflict."
2. Referring to your intentions, such as "In this essay I will..."
3. Restating the assigned essay question.

When writing a Conclusion:

1. Include a short summary of the points you've made, using fresh wording.
2. Frame the essay by referring to some aspect of your introduction and to your thesis.
3. End on a strong note: a quotation, a question, a suggestion, a reference to an anecdote in the introduction or a humorous insightful comment.

Avoid:

1. Apologizing for the inadequacy of your argument or for holding your opinions.
2. Using the same wording as your introduction.
3. Introducing totally new ideas—since a reader might expect more details.
4. Contradicting what you said previously.
5. Being too sweeping in your conclusions. For example, don't condemn the whole medical profession because one person you know had a bad time in the hospital.

Source: Adapted from *Keys for Writers* by Ann Raimes, 3rd edition. Houghton Mifflin, 2002, and adapted from a handout provided by Karen Gocsik, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, July 12, 2005.