Social Epidemiology,
Summer Institute of Epidemiology and Biostatistics

Description of Writing assignment

Overview

Students are asked to complete one of two possible writing assignments. The two options are:

1) Submit a 5-page write up of answers to discussion questions from one of the 5 class sessions
   or
2) Complete a 5-7 page analytic essay on a topic that is related both to the student’s particular area of interest outside of the class, and to a topic related to the class material. If students elect this option, they should get approval of their topic and tentative thesis from one of the course instructors prior to the end of class on the final day.

Writing assignments must be turned in to the TA by 5 pm on the first Monday after the end of class. A writing assignment is optional for students who are not taking the course for credit. The remainder of this document describes in detail the nature of option 2 (analytic essay).

Description of the analytic essay

The purpose of an analytic essay is to give students an opportunity to pursue a topic of particular interest in greater depth, while providing a structure that leads to a more focused effort. An analytic essay differs from a more traditional ‘term paper’ in that it is vertical rather than horizontal in its approach. Where a traditional term paper covers a wide range of literature by spreading laterally across a topic, the analytic essay pinpoints a more limited and circumscribed area by delving downward into the substance of one particular argument, or thesis. The objective of the analytic essay is to answer as many questions as possible that arise from consideration of just one argument. The emphasis is on depth of analysis and the degree to which a thesis is defended against possible criticisms. While a term paper may be judged according to the breadth and thoroughness of its coverage, the analytic essay is judged on how convincingly the central thesis is argued. In practice, the two modes of writing share much in common. The analytic essay may, for some, represent only a minor deviation from the normal practice of writing course papers. This project is designed to highlight several of the most important aspects of any professional writing.

How to begin: selecting a topic

A topic can be selected among the wide range of material covered in the course, or can extend to a topic that is relevant to the subject of the course, but which falls outside the boundaries of the syllabus. Remember that the topic of your paper is itself a question (or implies one), while your thesis is the answer to that question. In order for a topic to be appropriate, it must have several characteristics. When you think you have decided upon your topic, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is the topic relevant to the subject of the course?
2. Does relevant data exist that can be brought to bear?
3. Can I address this topic in 1 page (even though I have more than that to work with)?
4. Is this a dissertation topic?

If you answer yes to the first three questions, and no to the last, you are on the right track. Question number four is vague but important and is intended as a marker for the appropriate scope of your paper. Remember that in the course of 5-7 pages, the goal is to address as many of the possible issues suggested by your thesis as possible. Select a topic which is significantly less ambitious than an MPH thesis topic. You will be asked to identify your topic and tentative thesis by the end of the course.

Evaluating a thesis and composing a defense

A thesis is the answer to a question. It too must have several essential properties. Properties 1-3 are used to judge the suitability of a candidate thesis before the essay is written, while properties 4-5 are used to judge a thesis after it has been written. To evaluate your tentative thesis ask the following questions:

Is your thesis:

1. Falsifiable: Can you imagine an alternative? A thesis which is beyond debate is a truism and not a thesis. An example might be, "Death is a risk factor for mortality." This is true by definition and is, at least in the prevailing environment, beyond the scope of our debate.

2. Plausible: Does your thesis make sense? In most lists of what is required for proof of causation (a first cousin of analytic reasoning) we include the notion of biological plausibility. Your thesis must pass a test of plausibility of another kind.

3. Scientific: Is your thesis defensible in the realm of science (as opposed to moral theory)? Students often get into trouble by attempting to defend moral positions. While this is not itself a bad kind of thesis, it is not relevant for this course, and must be defended according to a different set of rules (i.e. moral theory). Theses of the form 'X is bad' or 'Y is good' can be of this type. This is not to argue that your thesis cannot have good/bad implications, (good science always does) but that your thesis should be cast in terms of ‘scientific’ kinds of argument and evidence.

4. Logical: Does your thesis follow from your data? Here the word data can be confusing and is meant to include all sources of information brought to bear in the course of your argument. Conflicts between your data and your thesis deserve comment. It is important not to exclude all conflicting sources of data. A good analytic essay remains mindful of alternative theses by addressing the shortcomings of conflicting data.

5. Compelling: Is your thesis adequately supported by the evidence presented? Always the last criterion to consider, and the most important. There is no single rule that can be applied to test the adequacy of support. Imagine instead a dispassionate reader of moderate intelligence in a related but not identical field of inquiry. Does this imaginary reader find your presentation of thesis and its defense to bear the weight of criticism that you or the reader are prepared to level?
In the defense of your thesis, numerous sources of data can be brought to bear. They include but are not limited to direct observation (personal experience), expert testimony (citing other scholars who have addressed the topic), and empirical evidence (data collected by you or by other experts). Each has its own strengths and weaknesses. Reliance on any one alone (particularly the first) is an extremely difficult position to defend.

The writing process condensed

The writing of an analytic essay can be thought of as comprised of the following 5 steps.

1. Grazing  Pondering a topic and freely wondering through candidate sources of data

2. Harvesting  Identifying a tentative thesis and collecting relevant data sources for the defense

3. Percolating  Pondering alternative hypothesis, spinning lines of defense, narrowing topic, jotting and rejotting an outline

4. Writing  Tell em what you're gonna say, Say it, Tell em what you've said (done only after steps 1-3 are complete)

5. Pruning (editing)  Fill in holes, identify weaknesses, improve writing, issue disclaimers

Of these, steps 3 and 5 are by far the most important and the most often ignored. Do not attempt step 4 (writing) until you know what you are going to say. If the structure and outline of the paper are in place before you write, it will be much easier to know what to exclude. This allows the writer to take the reader on a well planned tour of the intellectual landscape, rather than a rambling, impromptu safari with no clear goal or direction. If you get stuck in the middle, repeat step 3. In Step 5 (pruning) the writer becomes the critic. Read your work as though you had not written it, and try to adopt the position of a skeptical editor. The weaknesses and holes in your thesis will appear much more clearly after you have written the first draft. Do not leave awkward sentences in your paper. Every sentence is precious in an analytic essay.

How the paper is evaluated

The paper will be evaluated according to how well the thesis is argued. Theses that are too broad, or that are disorganized are the most difficult to defend, and therefore the most likely to be negatively evaluated. Students are encouraged to exchange papers to practice giving and receiving feedback on where the argument is weak and where it is strong.

General rules of thumb

1. All students are asked to submit a tentative outline with title, topic, and thesis for general discussion at mid-course.

2. Your paper must be typed and well-written. Outline format is not permitted. Papers with numerous misspellings, ‘typos’ or other errors will be returned unread.

3. Your paper should be 5-7 pages in length (this is a guideline and not a firm rule). PLEASE NUMBER YOUR PAGES, so that I can make reference to page numbers in my comments.
4. Include a bibliography at the end of your paper in which you give reference to all sources of data utilized in your argument. Use standard and consistent formatting conventions.

5. Before handing in your essay, make sure you can point to the thesis. It should appear on the first page (and can appear additionally on the last). Please underline or highlight the thesis.

6. Read and grade your own paper before handing it in. Screen for awkward sentences, errors and remaining holes in the argument.

7. What's wrong with this picture:

   Some students write/are under the [mistaken] belief (usually) -- mostly from their high school writing teachers -- that students/teachers write better (e.g., more clearly) if they; use fancy punctuation--including dashes.

In this assignment, you are asked to avoid using parentheses, dashes, semicolons, or slashes in your writing.

**Most common mistakes**

1. *Defense without a thesis.* Students often leave their argument implicit in the text. Writers of fiction often do this to evoke a sense of surprise and wonder. There is no reason to make the reader guess what the thesis is in writing which is designed to be persuasion rather than literature.

2. *Defense of a different thesis.* One of the most common mistakes in analytic writing is to expound one thesis in the beginning of the essay, but then write a paper about something quite different. This sounds like a hard mistake to make, but it’s not. A simple test is that you should review each paragraph in your paper during the editing phase and put a star next to each paragraph that relates specifically to your thesis. At the end, un-starred paragraphs will need to look for a new home.

3. *Inadequate defense.* The bigger a topic, the bigger the thesis. The larger the scope of both, the more difficult it is to fill in all the holes. An adequate defense is one in which as majority of the reader’s questions and criticisms of the defense are addressed and answered in a way that forms a coherent and thoughtful whole. Inadequate defenses occur when large holes remain unaddressed.