



Writing Center
Academic Affairs

Tips on Focus

Perhaps one of the hardest things to do as a writer is to establish a clear focus. Using a problem-solving approach can help you to explore a problem, narrow it, and arrive at a thesis.

Establishing Your Purpose

Good writing is interesting to the reader and accomplishes something for the author. To establish purpose, ask the following questions:

- What is the purpose of the piece? Does it show, establish, explain, describe, prove?
- What point does the paper make?
- Why is it important?

Relating Purpose to Audience Problem Analysis

How will reading your paper change what your audience thinks, feels, or knows about the topic?

When you have a general assignment in which you have been asked to focus on a problem of your choice, performing a problem analysis will help you to narrow and establish a thesis.

Define the conflict or key issue.

Most real-world problems represent a conflict between two goods or between the conflicting needs of two groups. Real problems are complex and difficult to solve without some compromise.

Place the problem in a larger context.

Step back and give yourself a broader view by considering the social, political, economic, historical, or legal setting.

Make your problem definition specific and concrete.

Explore the constituent parts of the problem. Divide it into manageable parts.

Come to an open-minded conclusion.

Show your reader that you have seriously considered the alternatives, recognized the implications of your position, and have taken a reasoned but solid stand.

Establishing a Thesis

Once you have defined and explored your problem, you will have the information you need to make an assertion about the topic. A strong thesis is one that makes an assertion and then defends it with reason and evidence. Theses can take different forms:

- Theses that assert that a problem exists.
- Theses that assert a hypothesis or new understanding of the problem.
- Theses that assert a solution to the problem.

Information from Linda Flower's *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing*. 4th ed. N.Y.: Harcourt, 1993.