

## ESTABLISHING A CONTEXT FOR A THESIS

In addition to defining the purpose and focus of an essay, a thesis must set up a **context** for the writer's claim. The process of establishing a background for understanding an issue typically involves four steps:

1. Establish that the topic of conversation, the issue, is current and relevant—that it is on people's minds or should be.
2. Briefly summarize what others have said to show that you are familiar with the topic or issue.
3. Explain what you see as the problem—a misinterpretation, a gap, or a modification that needs to be made in how others have addressed the topic or issue—perhaps by raising the questions you believe need to be answered.
4. State your thesis, suggesting that your view on the issue may present readers with something new to think about as it builds on and extends what others have argued.

You need not follow these steps in this order as long as your readers come away from the first part of your essay knowing why you are discussing a given issue and what your argument is.

### AN ANNOTATED STUDENT INTRODUCTION: PROVIDING A CONTEXT FOR A THESIS

We trace these four steps below in our analysis of the opening paragraphs of a student's essay. Motivating his argument is his sense that contemporary writers and educators may not fully grasp the issues that limit the opportunities for low-income youth to attend college. His own family struggled financially, and he argues that a fuller appreciation of the problem can help educators partner with families to advise youth in more informed ways.

Colin O'Neill

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Money Matters:

Framing the College Access Debate

College is expensive. And with prices continuing to rise each year, there are those who are beginning to question whether or not college is a worthy investment. In a recent *Newsweek* article, journalist Megan McArdle (2012) asserts that the process of obtaining a college degree has morphed into a "national neurosis"

*The student establishes the timeliness and relevance of an issue that challenges widely held assumptions about the value of attending college.*

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He begins to summarize what others have said to demonstrate his familiarity with the conversation in popular media and scholarship.

The student identifies what he sees as a problem signaled by words like "however," "overlooked," and "instead" and begins to formulate his own argument.

He points out a misconception that he wants to correct.

The student cites research to further define the problem and show that he is aware of the very real barriers that affect college access for low-income youth.

and calls upon Americans to question whether college is necessary for lifelong success. McArdle joins a chorus of voices calling upon a reevaluation of the current educational pipeline at a time when the number of American students who are ill-prepared to face the rigors of a college curriculum has increased. Some writers suggest that a renaissance of vocational education may, in fact, begin to compensate for the disparate nature of American education. Based on research conducted by Bozick and DeLuca (2011), it is clear that these opinions are grounded in reality.

Of nearly 3,000 surveyed "college non-enrollees," roughly 50 percent attributed their withdrawal from the education system to either the high cost of college education or the desire to look for work and embark along their chosen career path. However, for those like me, who believe strongly that higher education is a right that ought to be available to all students, McArdle's and others' assertions add to the list of physical and social barriers that keep students of poorer backgrounds from pursuing their educational aspirations. The ability to pay for college may not be the only consideration keeping students from exploring higher education. Instead, researchers have overlooked the extent to which knowledge (or the lack of it) of college costs and awareness of different financing options (such as grants, scholarships, and loans) may preemptively alter the way in which children envision themselves within the college experience.

In many cities where the median household income often hovers slightly above \$30,000, college is, according to some educators, a pipedream to which nearly every family aspires, but most are not convinced this goal will ever become a reality (United States Census Bureau). Indeed, with the average cost of a college education rising to upwards of \$20,000, it is unclear whether this dream will, in fact, come true. Although parents have a strong desire to send their kids to college, the financial numbers do not seem to add up. While educators have tended to leave parents responsible for educating their children on the financial realities of higher education, researchers such as Elliot, Sherraden, Johnson, and Guo (2010) make the case that awareness of college costs makes its way into the worldview of students as young as second grade. In light of this work, it becomes important to note that the large price tag of a college

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*He uses research to understand further a problem that others may have overlooked or ignored.*

degree may have implications that spread far beyond a particular family's capacity to fund their children's education. As the recent research of Bozick and DeLuca (2011) suggests, the cost of college is changing and challenging the way students begin to examine the purpose and necessity of college education. College costs are diminishing one's access to college in more ways than restricting their ability to foot the bill. For low-income students and their families, for whom every day is filled with financial burdens of all sorts, high college costs are changing the way they perceive college as an institution.

*Citing a key study, the student underscores a gap in the research, again signaled by "however."*

The correlation between the college choice process and students' perceptions of the cost of higher education is not an unexamined phenomenon. Many researchers have looked at the ways in which the cost of a college education affects the ways low-income students begin to foster a relationship with the college system. The existing body of research, however, has tended to focus solely on high school students, students who are mere months away from beginning the college search process. According to Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), the college choice process actually begins much earlier, commencing between the time a child enters middle school and embarks upon his or her high school journey. It is this process that ultimately dictates the level of college access a particular student does or does not have. Therefore, my study will focus primarily on what Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) termed the "predisposition" stage. Between grades seven and nine, predisposition draws upon parental encouragement, socioeconomic status, and "information about college." Along the trajectory set in place by Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), these factors have a profound influence on the search and choice stages of the college-access process. Recognizing the interrelational nature of these different stages, that is, both how they are different and how each one builds upon the other, is key to navigating the ill-defined nature of the pre-collegiate experience.

*He adopts a frame through which to think about the issue and narrow his focus.*

*He begins to offer a solution to a problem researchers have not fully appreciated.*

Given the findings of prior research, it is important to push back the discussion about college affordability and college access to examine how the notion of cost impacts the fragile, emerging relationship that middle school students are just beginning to develop. To recognize how students begin to understand college

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The student explains that the purpose of his research is to fill the gap he identifies above and correct a misunderstanding.

Here he makes a policy-related claim that challenges a conflicting point of view.

and develop college aspirations, then, I conducted interviews with middle school children to assess how early awareness of college costs plays a role in shaping families' decisions about the need, desire for, and accessibility of higher education. By doing so, I have tried to fill a gap left behind by previous research and add to the wider discussion of college affordability and its overall impact on college access amongst students of all ages. Although educators may argue that American education ought to revert to an old, draconian system of vocational education, preparing low-income students to enter technical fields, I argue that it is important to create programs that encourage parents, teachers, and students to think early about the costs of college and the possibilities that exist to help children pursue a college degree.

### ■ Establish That the Issue Is Current and Relevant

Ideally, you should convey to readers that the issue you are discussing is both current (what's on people's minds) and relevant (of sufficient importance to have generated some discussion and written conversation). In the first two sentences of the first paragraph, O'Neill explains that the increase in college costs has not only become a focus of national attention, evidenced in the *Newsweek* article he cites, but has motivated writers to question whether the cost to low-income families is a worthwhile investment. In the next sentence, he explains that the author of this article, Megan McArdle, is not alone in challenging some widely held assumptions about the value of attending college. In fact, O'Neill indicates that McArdle "joins a chorus of voices calling upon a reevaluation of the current educational pipeline at a time when the number of American students who are ill-prepared to face the rigors of a college curriculum has increased." Thus, O'Neill demonstrates that the issue he focuses on is part of a lively conversation and debate that has captured the imagination of many writers at the time he was writing about college access.

### ■ Briefly Present What Others Have Said

It is important to introduce who has said what in the conversation you are entering. After all, you are joining that conversation to make your contribution, and those who are in that conversation expect you to have done your homework and acknowledge those who have already made important contributions.

In the first few sentences of his introduction, O'Neill sets the stage for his review of research by citing McArdle's *Newsweek* article. Although he takes issue with McArdle, he is careful to explain her argument. In addition, he refers to research in the final sentence of the first paragraph to suggest the extent to which her argument may be "grounded in reality." Indeed, in the second paragraph, he cites a study that reports on the significant number of students surveyed who dropped out of college, nearly half attributing their decision to the high costs of pursuing a college degree. However, O'Neill, who makes clear that he believes everyone has a "right" to an education, uses his review to reframe the issue, calling attention to the way McArdle and others have "overlooked the extent to which knowledge (or the lack of it) of college costs and awareness of different financing options (such as grants, scholarships, and loans) may preemptively alter the way in which children envision themselves within the college experience." In turn, O'Neill highlights research that focuses on parents' and children's perceptions of college access as a way to challenge those writers who call for a "reevaluation of the current educational pipeline."

By pointing out what journalists and researchers may have overlooked in discussing the college-going prospects of low-income youth, O'Neill is doing more than listing the sources he has read. He is establishing that a problem, or issue, exists. Moreover, his review gives readers intellectual touchstones, the scholars (e.g., Cabrera and La Nasa [2000]) who need to be cited in any academic conversation about college access. A review is not a catchall for anyone writing on a topic. Instead it should represent a writer's choice of the most relevant participants in the conversation. O'Neill's choice of sources and his presentation of them convey that he is knowledgeable about his subject. (Of course, it is his readers' responsibility to read further to determine whether he has reviewed the most relevant work and has presented the ideas of others accurately. If he has, readers will trust him, whether or not they end up agreeing with him on the issue.)

### ■ Explain What You See as the Problem

If a review indicates a problem, as O'Neill's review does, the problem can often be couched in terms of the models we discussed earlier: misinterpretations, gaps, modification, or hypothesis testing. In paragraph 4, O'Neill identifies what he sees as a gap in how journalists and researchers approach the cost of attending college and the question of "whether college is necessary to lifelong success." He suggests that such a view is the consequence of a gap in knowledge (notice our underlining):

The existing body of research, however, has tended to focus solely on high school students, students who are mere months away from beginning the college search process. According to Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), the college choice process actually begins much earlier, commencing between the time a child enters middle school and embarks upon his or her high school journey.

While O'Neill acknowledges the value of others' writing, his review of research culminates with his assertion that it is important to understand the problem of college costs with greater depth and precision. After all, researchers and journalists have overlooked or ignored important sources of information. At stake for O'Neill is that limiting low-income youth's access to higher education challenges a more equitable view that all children deserve a chance to have a successful life. Moreover, at the end of paragraph 3, he shifts the burden from parents, alone, to educators who clearly influence the "way students begin to examine the purpose and necessity of college education."

### ■ State Your Thesis

An effective thesis statement helps readers see the reasoning behind a writer's claim; it also signals what readers should look for in the remainder of the essay. O'Neill closes paragraph 5 with a statement that speaks to both the purpose and the substance of what he writes:

Although educators may argue that American education ought to revert to an old, draconian system of vocational education, preparing low-income students to enter technical fields, I argue that it is important to create programs that encourage parents, teachers, and students to think early about the costs of college and the possibilities that exist to help children pursue a college degree.

In your own writing, you can make use of the strategies that O'Neill uses in his essay. Words like *although*, *however*, *but*, *instead*, and *yet* can set up the problem you identify. Here is a variation on what O'Neill writes: "One might argue that vocational programs may provide a reasonable alternative to meeting the needs of low-income students for whom college seems unaffordable and out of reach; however [but, yet], such an approach ignores the range of possibilities that exist for changing policies to ensure that all children have access to a college education."

### Steps to Establishing a Context for a Thesis

- 1** Establish that the issue is current and relevant. Point out the extent to which others have recognized the problem, issue, or question that you are writing about.
- 2** Briefly present what others have said. Explain how others have addressed the problem, issue, or question you are focusing on.
- 3** Explain what you see as the problem. Identify what is open to dispute.
- 4** State your thesis. Help readers see your purpose and how you intend to achieve it—by correcting a misconception, filling a gap, modifying a claim others have accepted, or stating an hypothesis.

### A Practice Sequence: Building a Thesis

We would like you to practice some of the strategies we have covered in this chapter. If you have already started working on an essay, exercises 1 through 4 present an opportunity to take stock of your progress, a chance to sort through what you've discovered, identify what you still need to discover, and move toward refining your thesis. Jot down your answer to each of the questions below and make lists of what you know and what you need to learn.

- 1 Have you established that your issue is current and relevant, that it is or should be on people's minds? What information would you need to do so?
- 2 Can you summarize briefly what others have said in the past to show that you are familiar with how others have addressed the issue? List some of the key texts you have read and the key points they make.
- 3 Have you identified any misunderstandings or gaps in how others have addressed the issue? Describe them. Do you have any ideas or information that would address these misunderstandings or help fill these gaps? Where might you find the information you need? Can you think of any sources you should reread to learn more? (For example, have you looked at the works cited or bibliographies in the texts you've already read?)
- 4 At this point, what is your take on the issue? Try drafting a working thesis statement that will present readers with something new to think about, building on and extending what others have argued. In drafting your thesis statement, try out the models discussed in this chapter and see if one is an especially good fit:
  - *Misinterpretations model*: "Although many scholars have argued about A and B, a careful examination suggests C."
  - *Gap model*: "Although scholars have noted A and B, they have missed the importance of C."
  - *Modification model*: "Although I agree with A and B ideas of other writers, it is important to extend/refine/limit their ideas with C."
  - *Hypothesis-testing model*: "Some people explain A by suggesting B, but a close analysis of the problem reveals the possibility of several competing/complementary explanations such as C, D, and E."

5 If you haven't chosen a topic yet, try a group exercise. Sit down with a few of your classmates and choose one of the following topics to brainstorm about as a group. Choose a topic that everyone in the group finds interesting, and work through exercises 1 through 4 in this practice sequence. Here are some suggestions:

- the moral obligation to vote
- the causes or consequences of poverty
- the limits of academic freedom
- equity in education
- the popularity of \_\_\_\_\_
- gender stereotypes in the media
- linguistic diversity
- the uses of a liberal education
- journalism and truth
- government access to personal information

### AN ANNOTATED STUDENT ESSAY: STATING AND SUPPORTING A THESIS

We have annotated the following student essay to illustrate the strategies we have discussed in this chapter for stating a thesis that responds to a relevant, timely problem in a given context. The assignment was to write an argument focusing on literacy, based on research. Veronica Stafford chose to write about her peers' habit of texting and the ways in which this type of social interaction affects their intellectual development. Stafford develops a thesis that provides a corrective to a misconception that she sees in the ongoing conversations about texting. Her approach is a variation on the strategy in which writers correct a misinterpretation. In turn, you will see that she makes claims of fact and evaluation in making an argument for changing her peers' penchant for texting.

As you read the essay, reflect on your own experiences: Do you think the issue she raises is both timely and relevant? How well do you think she places her ideas in conversation with others? How would you respond to her various claims? Which do you agree with and disagree with, and why? What evidence would you present to support or counter her claims? Do you think she offers a reasonable corrective to what she believes is a misconception about texting?

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Veronica Stafford  
 Professor Wilson  
 English 1102  
 April 20 —

## Texting and Literacy

As students walk to class each day, most do not notice the other people around them. Rather than talking with others, they are texting their friends in the next building, in their dorm, or back home. Although social networking is the most common use for text messages, they are not used solely for socializing. While texting is a quick and easy way to keep up with friends, it threatens other aspects of our lives. When students spend time texting rather than focusing on those other important aspects, texting becomes detrimental. Students' enjoyment of reading, their schoolwork, and their relationships with others are all negatively affected by text messaging.

Due to the mass appeal of text messaging, students pass their free time chatting through their cell phones rather than enjoying a great book. Texting is so widespread because 25 percent of students under age eight, 89 percent of students ages eleven to thirteen, and over 95 percent of students over age fifteen have a cell phone ("Mobile Phones"). On average, 75.6 million text messages are sent in a day, with 54 percent of the population texting more than five times per day ("Mobile Phones"). In contrast to the time they spend texting, fifteen- to twenty-four-year-olds read a mere seven minutes per day for fun and only 1.25 hours a week (NEA 10), which is less than half the time that seventh-grade students spend texting: 2.82 hours a week (Bryant et al.). While more than half of the population texts every day, almost as many (43 percent) have not read a single book in the past year (NEA 7). It seems there is a direct correlation between reading and texting because, as text messaging increases in popularity, reading decreases. The National Endowment for the Arts surveyed eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds and discovered that the enjoyment of reading in this age group is declining the fastest. Inversely, it is the group that sends the most text messages: 142 billion a year (NEA 10). From 1992 to 2002, 2.1 million potential readers, aged eighteen to twenty-four years old, were lost (NEA 27). As proved by the direct correlation, reading does not have

*The student identifies an issue, or problem, and states her thesis as an evaluative claim that attempts to correct a misconception.*

*She summarizes research, placing the conversation in a larger context. Her citations also indicate that the problem she identifies is relevant and timely.*

*She uses evidence to support her thesis—that we take for granted a mode of communication that actually threatens the development of literacy.*

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*She refines her thesis, first stating what people assume is true and then offering a corrective in the second part of her thesis.*

*She also makes a secondary claim related to her thesis.*

*And she elaborates on this claim to point out one of the detrimental effects of texting.*

*The student presents a possible counter-argument from a published writer and then restates her thesis in an effort to correct a misconception.*

the same appeal because of texting. Students prefer to spend time in the technological world rather than sitting with a book.

However, reading well is essential to being successful academically. Although some argue that text messages force students to think quickly and allow them to formulate brief responses to questions, their habit is actually stifling creativity. When a group of twenty students was given a chance to write responses to open-ended questions, the students who owned cell phones with text messaging wrote much less. They also had more grammatical errors, such as leaving apostrophes out of contractions and substituting the letter "r" for the word "are"

(Ward). Because of text messages, students perceive writing as a fun way to communicate with friends and not as a way to strongly voice an opinion. Students no longer think of writing as academic, but rather they consider it social. For instance, in Scotland, a thirteen-year-old student wrote this in a school essay about her summer vacation: "My smmr hols wr CWOT. B4 we used 2 go to NY 2C my bro, & 3 kids FTF ILNY, its gr8 . . ."

(Ward). She used writing that would appear in a text message for a friend rather than in a report for school. Furthermore, students who text become so accustomed to reading this type of shorthand lingo that they often overlook it in their own writing (O'Connor).

This means that teachers have to spend even longer correcting these bad habits. Regardless, Lily Huang, a writer for *Newsweek*, believes that text messages increase literacy because a student must first know how to spell a word to abbreviate it in texting.

However, texting affects not only the way that students write, but also the way in which they think about language. As a critic of Huang's article writes, "Habitual use of shorthand isn't just about choppy English, but choppy thinking" (Muffie). Writers who text will have trouble thinking creatively, and will especially have trouble composing intricate works like poetry because of the abridged way of thinking to which they are accustomed.

Outside of school, students' interactions with one another are similarly altered. Three in five teens would argue with a friend and one in three would break up with someone through a text message ("Technology Has Tremendous Impact"). Text messaging is now the most popular way for students to arrange to meet with friends, have a quick conversation, contact

*She restates an evaluative claim that runs through the essay like the skewer we discussed earlier.*

*She provides current research to support her thesis.*

*She concludes by restating her premise about the value of reading and her evaluation of texting as a form of communication that erodes what she considers the very definition of literacy.*

*She also concludes with a claim in which she proposes that students need to elevate the way they read and write.*

a friend when bored, or invite friends to a party (“Technology Has Tremendous Impact”). Eight out of ten teens would rather text than call (“Mobile Phones”). Although it is true that text messaging has made conversations much simpler and faster, it has not improved communication. Texting may make it more convenient to stay in contact with friends, but it does not ensure that the contact is as beneficial as talking in person. Text messages do not incorporate all of the body language and vocal inflections that a face-to-face conversation does. These nonverbal cues are essential to fully comprehending what is being communicated. Only 7 percent of a message is verbal. When the message is not communicated face-to-face, 93 percent of that message is lost (“Importance of Nonverbal”), and this nonverbal message is crucial to maintaining close relationships. According to Don McKay, a contributor to healthinfosource.com, the most important aspect of lasting friendships is effective communication. Friends must be able to convey emotions and empathize with others (McKay). However, friends who communicate solely through text messages will miss out on any truly personal interaction because they can never see the other person’s posture, body language, or gestures.

All of the negative effects of text messaging additionally deteriorate literacy. The enjoyment of reading leads to avid readers who eagerly absorb written words. A devotion to schoolwork encourages students to read so that they may be informed about important topics. Through book clubs and conversations about great literature, even relationships can foster a love for reading. However, text messaging is detracting from all three. In today’s society, literacy is important. Schools focus on teaching English at an early age because of the active role that it forces students to take (Le Guin). While students can passively text message their friends, they need to focus on reading to enjoy it. In order to really immerse themselves in the story, they need to use a higher level of thinking than that of texting. This learning is what causes avid readers to become so successful. Those who read for fun when they are young score better on standardized tests, are admitted to more selective universities, and are able to secure the most competitive jobs (NEA 69). The decline in literacy caused by text messaging

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could inevitably cost a student a selective job. If students spent less time texting and more time reading, it could give them an advantage over their peers. Imagine a scenario between classes without any students' eyes to the ground. Imagine that Notre Dame students are not texting acquaintances hours away. Perhaps instead they are all carrying a pen and notebook and writing a letter to their friends. Maybe they are conversing with those around them. Instead of spending time every week text messaging, they are reading. When those other students text "lol," it no longer is an abbreviation for "laugh out loud," but for "loss of literacy."

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