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# Signposting 101

## HELPING READERS FOLLOW YOUR THOUGHTS

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Have you ever felt that your thoughts are *exactly* as you want them in your head, but then, when you write them out, they become all scattered? Do readers, and professors, sometimes tell you they have difficulty following your argument? If so, you're experiencing some of the same challenges I have.

**It's easy to lose your reader when you write.** Other readers can often trip over or get stuck on ideas that made perfect sense to you. Once other readers point out where and when they become confused, it might be easy to fix—but how can you tell where your reader may have trouble *even before* they even read? You won't be able to resubmit your paper for a rereading *after* your teacher has already read, and graded, it so it's crucial to answer this question.

Luckily, there's a useful technique called **signposting** that allows you to effectively focus your reader's attention throughout a paper and ensure they can follow all of your ideas. Once you master this simple technique, your reader can focus on your ideas and substance, instead of on trying to figure out what is even going on!

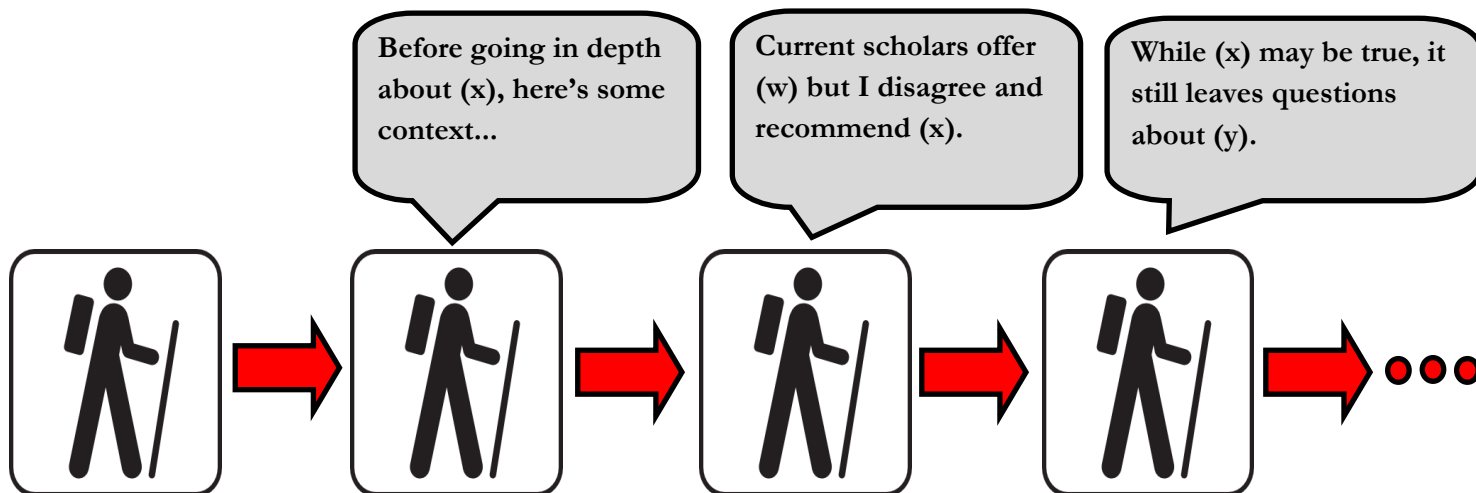



### What is Signposting?

Signposting is just another technique you can add to your writing toolbelt to help clarify your ideas and convey the structure and flow of your essay more effectively to your readers. A “signpost” is normally just a phrase or sentence—sometimes even a paragraph—that keys the reader in to something you want to emphasize. In fact, you've probably used a signpost before!

Here are a few basic examples from my own writing:

- ⇒ **Through this change** in teaching methods, professors can ensure that novice writers overcome hesitation in writing. *This signpost emphasizes cause and effect.*
- ⇒ **This essay will argue** that it is the duty of the teacher to help build confidence in his or her students. *This signpost emphasizes the focus of the essay.*
- ⇒ **Most importantly, how might** these two roles, teacher and student, interact together effectively? *This signpost uses a rhetorical question to clarify the direction of the argument and indicate an important concern.*



This graphic should help you visualize how signposting can flow through and control your essay. Notice how with just a few key phrases, you can already begin to grasp the outline of this essay and how different pieces are connected. While this type of order may seem obvious in your head, it is critical to bring your reader there, too. 

### The Thesis

The thesis is perhaps the most important place to get signposting right; this is where most essays deliver their central ideas and you want to ensure your reader understands your thesis completely. Different disciplines and faculty may differ in their expectations—so ask!—but consider stating your thesis directly (e.g. “This essay will argue...”) or being similarly emphatic in your language.

There are also some other helpful signposting techniques you can use to strengthen your thesis:

#### Key Terms & Phrases

Every thesis should involve key terms and phrases that will show up again repeatedly throughout the essay. By weaving key terms throughout your essay, you'll remind a reader how a new idea or argument fits into your central claim and connects with other ideas. Make sure you're *precise* and *consistent* with the terms you use!

#### Boldface & Italics

Another signposting technique lies in using boldface and italics to stress key terms, important ideas, or different transitions in your argument—or to highlight crucial bits of information that might slip by if a reader isn't careful. Notice how I use italics above and below to focus the reader's attention to a key point. Just make sure you *don't overdo it*. And again, don't hesitate to ask your professor if using formatting in this way is appropriate for your specific assignment!

### Topic Sentences

Topic sentences equally benefit from strong signposting. First off, those ‘key term’ signposts you used in your thesis need to be reflected in topic sentences. Second, your topic sentences drive your whole argument; that means if they don't clearly broadcast your focus and direction, your reader doesn't stand a chance. Topic sentences are also incredibly diverse in form and function. I've listed a few building blocks below from my own work. You'll get the idea—and then you can modify and expand on them in your own writing.

Introducing ideas
⇒ Scholars discussing ... show that ...
⇒ Initially, ... occurs like this because ...
⇒ Due to ..., ... becomes increasingly important
Relating ideas
⇒ In the same vein as ..., one can see that ...
⇒ While ... may be true, others might argue ...
⇒ Once ... is established, ... can be addressed by...
Concluding
⇒ The evidence presented suggests that...
⇒ It can be concluded that...