

A Writer's Tool Box



This chapter presents four practical tools for building a thesis:

- **The Terms, Anomalies & Questions (TEQ) Sheet**, a critical record of what others have already said
- **The Purpose & Problem Statement**, a statement of your guiding questions
- **The Prospectus**, a first version of your own thesis
- **Checklist**, a review sheet for assessing your steps toward a thesis

These three tools strengthen connections between existing knowledge and your own ideas.

THINKING BEFORE YOU WRITE : THE MAP METAPHOR

A strong thesis grows from the careful study of what others have already said about a topic. Knowing what others have said then lets the writer see what still needs to be discussed and ask new questions that deserve a careful answer. This chapter offers a step-by-step process that simplifies this three-step process. You can use its tools throughout the term as you develop the ideas that give your papers strong ideas supported by evidence.

Mapping existing knowledge: TEQ Sheets

The Terms, Anomalies, and Questions (TEQ) Sheet is a tool for "surveying the field" of what has been thought about a subject. Not only does it help focus your attention on the details of the source, but it also helps locate the blank spaces in the "map" that others have made of the subject. These blanks will become the focus of your paper as you ask questions about them and develop your thesis.



Terms/Expectations/Questions: THE TEQ SHEET

Complete Citation:

Terms and Phrases

To make its claim, the source uses important concepts. These concepts organize the evidence and make sense out of it. **Identify** four key terms or phrases that are especially important to the source's claim. **Explain** why each is important to the source's claim.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Expectations

Readers already have beliefs about a topic even before they start reading. Most good writing discovers something new, and these discoveries surprise us. It is important to recognize the difference between what we expected and what we read. This helps us connect our work to the existing discourse. The difference between what we expect and what we read can identify unexplained territories that are worth writing about. List four ideas, facts, sources, or other features from the source that surprised you. How was each different from what you expected?

Surprising Elements	What You Expected to Read

Questions

After you have carefully reviewed the source, ask useful questions whose answer might become your claim. These questions should address the source's assumptions, evidence, thesis, or issues that it ignores.

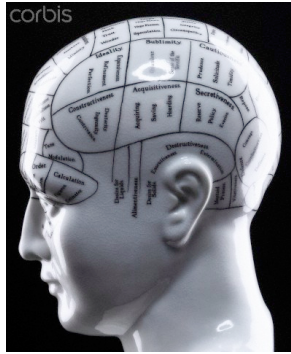
1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Naming the Gaps in the Map: The Purpose and Problem Statement

The Purpose and Problem Statement (PPS) focuses the TEQ sheets. It asks you to connect these



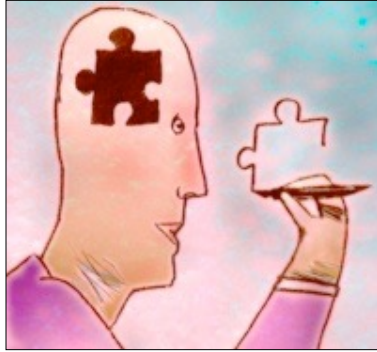
sheets to the specific assignment. It begins by asking you to review the purpose of the paper. The Purpose and Problem Statement is also the place where you directly ask about the gaps in the map. It gives you a place to name the problems in the existing map that you can fill with your own insight. Separate your PPS into two sections:

1. *The Purpose*: this statement quickly summarizes the assignment and identifies issues that might be important to a successful paper. The writer asks basic questions about the expectations for the task: its level of formality; required documentation; formats. Note that the writer is identifying key tasks that s/he will have to understand to produce a document that meets the expectations of its audience. Whether at school or work, you need to do the assignment. Reviewing the purpose of the writing helps you do so.

2. *The Problem*: These are the specific questions the student has about the topic. The questions should identify an error in the existing discourse, a contradiction, an important aspect of the topic that hasn't been discussed, evidence that would improve the understanding of the issue, or some other opportunity for improving the understanding of the topic. This section often uses questions from the TEQ sheet. However, the questions are much more developed. Note that the writer remains open to ideas. S/he is willing to leave some questions unanswered, but clearly points toward the thesis. These statements often are halfway between questions and answers. The questions contain terms, phrases, ideas, sources and tactics for dealing with the assignment.

Proposing the New Map: The Prospectus

The prospectus is the key step between the materials you write for yourself and what is written for your audience. It is the pivot between thinking about something and expressing your ideas so that *others* can share in your insight.



In many ways, it is the abstract for the paper. Of course, the paper has not been written yet, so the prospectus is tentative. It almost certainly will change, but it gives an anchor for developing the thesis. Often, an expansion of the Purposes & Problems Statement can be useful. Think of the prospectus as a larger form of an introduction. Second, note that you will want to clarify both what’s already known and your insight. You might do well to start out by summarizing what others have said or what is the “standard” response to the question you face. Then, state the insight that provides a well-connected response.

A CHECKLIST FOR WRITING TO LEARN

Writing to Learn	Yes/No
Surveying the field and building the map (TEQ Sheet)	
1. Does the TEQ Sheet identify key terms that explain evidence or that provide explanations?	
2. Do Expectations of the TEQ Sheet focus on content/argument of the reading? Are your expectations put in contrast to what you read?	
3. Do the Questions serve as a stepping stone toward the Purpose & Problem Statement (PPS)?	
4. Do the TEQ Sheets imply a problematic issue rather than a yes/no question?	
Discovering the Gaps (Purpose & Problem Statement)	
1. Does the PPS build on problematic issues recognized in the TEQ Sheets?	
2. Does the PPS ask questions that can use terminology, concepts, and insights developed in class discussion, readings, student examples, etc.?	
3. Does the PPS reflect a <i>disciplinary</i> understanding of the topic?	
Proposing a Preliminary Thesis: the Prospectus	
1. Does the Prospectus briefly explain how the PPS will be answered?	
2. Does the Prospectus offer a tentative thesis that can be supported with evidence?	
3. Does the Prospectus offers a tentative thesis that can be developed into a substantial claim worthy of an entire paper?	