

Writing Workshop: building an essay

Corina Logan
cl417@cam.ac.uk

- It is exam day.
- You are presented with an essay topic that you must write an essay about.
- **What is your thesis?**

What is a thesis?

Thesis (noun):

1. "a proposition stated or put forward for consideration, esp. one to be discussed and proved or to be maintained against objections:
He vigorously defended his thesis on the causes of war.
2. a subject for a composition or essay."

Take a position

- A thesis is a **statement**; it is **your opinion** on a particular topic (the essay question that has been presented to you). You will **argue** for your opinion in your essay by supporting it with **evidence**.
- Take a position, have an opinion, state it clearly up front, and argue for it.

Get Organized

You are given:

- Essay topic

You must provide:

- Thesis – the skeleton of your essay
- Evidence

Evaluating Theses

‘Evolution is a theory.’

Discuss

- Thesis 1: Yes, I agree.
- Thesis 2: Evolution is a theory and not a fact because a theory can never be proven, only unproven.

‘Evolution is a theory.’

Discuss

- Thesis 1: Yes, I agree.
- Thesis 2: **Evolution** is a **theory** and not a **fact** because a theory can never be **proven**, only unproven.

In what ways might corvids be considered 'feathered apes'?

- Thesis 1: They are smart, as are the apes.
- Thesis 2: Corvids show evidence for episodic-like memory, future planning, tool use, and physical cognition at a level that has only been shown in apes previously.
- Thesis 3: Corvids possess cognitive abilities previously only attributed to the great apes.

In what ways might corvids be considered 'feathered apes'?

- Thesis 1: **They** are **smart**, as are the **apes**.
- Thesis 2: Corvids show evidence for episodic-like memory, future planning, tool use, and physical cognition at a level that has only been shown in apes previously.
- Thesis 3: Corvids possess cognitive abilities previously only attributed to the great apes.

In what ways might corvids be considered 'feathered apes'?

- Thesis 1: **They** are **smart**, as are the **apes**.
- Thesis 2: **Corvids** show **evidence for** episodic-like memory, future planning, tool use, and physical cognition at a level that has only been shown in **apes** previously.
- Thesis 3: Corvids possess cognitive abilities previously only attributed to the great apes.

In what ways might corvids be considered 'feathered apes'?

- Thesis 1: **They** are **smart**, as are the **apes**.
- Thesis 2: **Corvids** show **evidence for** episodic-like memory, future planning, tool use, and physical cognition at a level that has only been shown in **apes** previously.
- Thesis 3: **Corvids** possess **cognitive abilities** previously only attributed to the **great apes**.

How might you persuade governments not to cut funding for basic biological research?

- Thesis 1: Our lives depend on the natural world and the more we know about it the better we can alter our actions to live in a sustainable way.
- Thesis 2: Less than 10% of the species on earth have been described; expanding this number will greatly impact the medical field.
- Thesis 3: The discovery of new plants and their medicinal properties contributes significantly to medical advances, however only 10% of the species on earth have been described, thus exploration of the other 90% will bring many medical discoveries.

How might you persuade governments not to cut funding for basic biological research?

- Thesis 1: Our **lives depend on the natural world** and the **more we know** about it the better we can **alter our actions** to live in a **sustainable** way.
- Thesis 2: Less than 10% of the species on earth have been described; expanding this number will greatly impact the medical field.
- Thesis 3: The discovery of new plants and their medicinal properties contributes significantly to medical advances, however only 10% of the species on earth have been described, thus exploration of the other 90% will bring many medical discoveries.

How might you persuade governments not to cut funding for basic biological research?

- Thesis 1: Our **lives depend on the natural world** and the **more we know** about it the better we can **alter our actions** to live in a **sustainable** way.
- Thesis 2: Less than 10% of the species on earth have been described; **expanding this number** will greatly **impact the medical field**.
- Thesis 3: The discovery of new plants and their medicinal properties contributes significantly to medical advances, however only 10% of the species on earth have been described, thus exploration of the other 90% will bring many medical discoveries.

How might you persuade governments not to cut funding for basic biological research?

- Thesis 1: Our **lives depend on the natural world** and the **more we know** about it the better we can **alter our actions** to live in a **sustainable** way.
- Thesis 2: Less than 10% of the species on earth have been described; **expanding this number** will greatly **impact the medical field**.
- Thesis 3: The **discovery** of new plants and their medicinal properties contributes significantly to **medical advances**, however only 10% of the species on earth have been described, thus exploration of the other 90% will bring many medical discoveries.

From Thesis to Outline...

From Thesis to Outline...

In what ways might corvids be considered ‘feathered apes’?

Thesis 3:

Corvids possess **cognitive abilities** previously only attributed to the **great apes**.

Outline

- What is a **corvid**?
- Cognitive abilities**: episodic-like memory, future planning, tool use, and physical cognition
- Compare **corvids** with **great apes**: bird brain anatomy recently revised, shows corvids and apes have comparable relative brain size with enlarged cognitive processors, evidence supports high levels of cognition in corvids which may surpass that of great apes

Practice

Practice:

thesis → outline → write

- Choose an essay **topic**
- Write a **thesis**
- **Outline** your essay based on keywords in your thesis
- **Write** up to one page of the essay

Exchange Feedback

Swap essays with your partner and exchange respectful, honest feedback regarding:

- Thesis strength, word choice
- Essay structure: what were their thesis keywords? Did they cover them?

Essay Topics (2009)

1. What global issues would most concern Darwin, were he alive today?
2. Would it be good for humanity if we could sequence everyone's genome at birth?
3. If Darwin were to write an appendix for *The Origin of Species* today, what do you think he would include as the most compelling new evidence for the fact and the mechanisms of biological evolution?
4. Discuss whether there are too many or too few model organisms used in the study of biology.
5. Is the study of biology intellectually more rigorous than stamp collecting?
6. Discuss whether non-hypothesis driven science is important in biology.
7. 'Biologists have to know a lot of facts' (John Maynard Smith). Do you agree?
8. What are the pros and cons of being intelligent?
9. You are modelling a biological process and the predictions of the model are not as accurate as you would wish. How do you choose between adjusting the model's parameters and abandoning it altogether?
10. Will research on brains and behaviour annihilate the concept of free will?
11. How might you persuade governments not to cut funding for basic biological research?

From Thesis to Outline...

In what ways might corvids be considered 'feathered apes'?

Thesis 3:

Corvids possess **cognitive abilities** previously only attributed to the **great apes**.

Outline

- What is a **corvid**?
- Cognitive abilities**: episodic-like memory, future planning, tool use, and physical cognition
- Compare **corvids** with **great apes**: bird brain anatomy recently revised, shows corvids and apes have comparable relative brain size with enlarged cognitive processors, evidence supports high levels of cognition in corvids which may surpass that of great apes

Exchange Feedback

Swap essays with your partner.

Exchange respectful, honest feedback regarding:

- Thesis strength, word choice
- Essay structure: what were their thesis keywords? Did they cover them?

Debrief

- How was this process for you?
- How does this process compare with how you previously approached essay writing?

Resources

- Peers
- CamTools: Part II zoology essay
- Writing guides online
 - MLA+ www.owl.english.purdue.edu
- Writing centre at Cambridge?
- Zinsser W. 2006. On Writing Well. Harper & Row Publishers: New York.