



NO. 39 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

Writing Effective Position Papers

Position papers are demanding assignments that require you to take a stand on an issue or idea presented in a text. Although your opinion is important and forms the basis for your argument, it should not dominate the assignment. Position papers rely on critical evaluation that goes beyond a mere surface reading or a passionate personal reaction. Remember, if there's no other side to your argument ...you don't have one.

Think in debate mode.

You have to choose a side and argue in favor of your point of view. A position paper should not restate the obvious facts about the text or topic; a strong position paper shows the author's ability to pick a side or take a stand. Whether you choose to write about a theme throughout a particular work, a specific scene that captures the essence of an entire text, or one side of an issue, remember to write definitively about your position.

- ✗ **Ineffective:** Legislators continue to debate the extent to which government should be involved in the lives of individual citizens.
- ✓ **Effective:** A responsible government must respect the rights of individuals and agree not to interfere with citizens' abilities to make sensible decisions for themselves.

The second point can easily be debated while the first states a well-known fact that is not open to individual interpretation.

Consider the opposing side.

What would somebody say to challenge your stance? You must consider the other viewpoint and dismantle it in your paper, using enough details to show that you understand both sides. Remember, though, that name calling has no place in position papers.

- ✗ **Ineffective:** People who think otherwise are idiots and therefore their opinions don't count.

Such personal attacks can backfire and make you appear to have no valid reasons for holding different views.

Include evidence.

Although you are expressing your personal opinion, it must be upheld by references to specific details — supporting facts, arguments, quotations — in order to have any validity. You must be able to prove that your position is valid based on a thorough knowledge of the topic, text, or argument. Outside research may be required; look for other sources based on opinion as well as sources providing factual background information.

Use vivid verbs, concrete nouns.

In a position paper, avoid using the passive voice and words such as “maybe, perhaps, possibly, etc.” that weaken your argument. Phrases like “in my opinion” are also needless and sound apologetic instead of certain; if you're writing the paper, it's obviously your opinion.

- ✗ **Ineffective:** It is possible that people support the idea of abortion because women should have the right to decide what to do with their bodies.
- ✓ **Effective:** By threatening to pass antiabortion laws, the government violates an essential right for all mankind: the right to choose.

Remember:

- ✓ Don't be afraid to be argumentative...that's the reason it's called a “position” paper.
- ✓ Look at all sides of the issue and base your position on a thorough examination of all the relevant evidence.
- ✓ Convince the reader that you have critically read the text or analyzed the issue.
- ✓ Express your thoughts clearly and concisely.

For more information on writing position papers, see

Patterns for College Writing (5th ed), Laurie G. Kirszner, Stephen R. Mandell, Nancy Perry: 519-534

College Writing Skills (5th ed), John Langan and Sharon Winstanley: 103-137

The St. Martin's Handbook (5th ed): 264-300