Tutorial:

Using Indicator Words to Achieve Clarity

One way your essays can be unclear is when you don’t use words that signal to the reader how you view the statements or arguments you are writing, or where they are headed.

**I. Signaling essay type:**

Let’s start to the top, that is, with essay intention words (or phrases). You should use these in the introductory paragraph to your paper to signal what you will be doing in your article. In this class, there are two basic sorts of essays that are appropriate: the review essay and the position paper. In the former, you review the major arguments for and against the major positions, along with clarifying the issue fairly, without taking a position yourself. In a position paper, you will present the major positions and the main arguments for and against them, but then espouse one position as being (all things considered) the best. (You will often want to add specific suggestions for improving one of the alternatives—say, appropriate regulations).

So in your introductory paragraph, you should have a key sentence—normally placed at the *end* of the introductory paragraph—that tells the reader precisely what it is you will be trying to do. For example, in a paper on the topic of legalizing prostitution, you might end your introductory paragraph, by saying, “In this article, I will try to review neutrally the reasons for and against legalizing prostitution, without myself taking an ultimate position on the matter.” The standard template for signaling to your audience that you’re doing a review essay:

**In this <A>, I <B> to <C> the <D> this <E> without <F>.**

Table 1 lists the most common phrases in each slot.

**Table 1**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **A** | **B** | **C** | **D** | **E** | **F** |
| essay;  paper;  article;  piece;  study; | intend;  want;  will try;  will attempt;  hope;  aim;  plan;  mean;  will endeavor; | review;  discuss;  explore;  rehearse in some detail;  give an overview of;  sketch out;  address; | arguments surrounding;  major positions involved in;  the opposing sides of;  the reasons supporting and opposing; | issue;  topic;  question;  proposal;  subject;  case;  matter;  theory;  thesis;  point-in-question | coming to a definitive answer;  drawing any ultimate conclusion;  reaching a verdict one way or the other; offering a solution; |

By contrast, in a position paper, you want to state at the end of the introductory paragraph that while you will be reviewing fairly the major positions and arguments surrounding an issue, you will be taking a side in the end. Again, for example, in a position paper on the topic of legalizing prostitution, you might end your introductory paragraph by saying, “In my paper, I plan to first review honestly the major reasons why people support or oppose the legalization of prostitution, and will conclude by arguing that the best thing to do would be to allow it, but with proper regulation.” The standard template will be something like:

**In this <A>, I <B> to <C> the <D> this <E>, but will <F> that such-and-such is <G>.**

Table 2 lists the most common phrases in each slot:

**Table 2**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **A** | **B** | **C** | **D** | **E** | **F** | **G** |
| essay;  paper;  article;  piece;  study; | intend;  want;  will try;  will attempt;  hope;  aim;  plan;  mean;  will endeavor; | review;  neutrally discuss;  explore;  rehearse in some detail;  give an overview of;  sketch out;  address; | arguments surrounding;  major positions involved in;  the opposing sides of;  the reasons supporting and opposing; | issue;  topic;  question;  proposal;  subject;  case;  matter;  theory;  thesis;  point-in-question; | argue;  attempt to show;  urge;  establish;  suggest; | ultimately the best choice;  right;  the case;  the most tenable option; the most viable solution;  the most reasonable solution; |

**II. Signaling knowledge versus simple belief:**

Let us turn next to a lower level of analysis, i.e., that of the statements (i.e., the claims or propositions). An important issue concerns whether you (or anyone you cite) can truly be said to know something, as opposed to merely believe it. We all believe many things, more or less confidently. It is only with a small percentage of what we believe that we claim to actually *know*. That is usually taken to mean that we have a lot of evidence for those beliefs, or very powerful evidence. It is important to indicate to the reader on any of the key statements you make whether you are claiming to know it, or only that you believe it with some degree of confidence.

For example, suppose you are writing an article on so-called ‘organic’ food, and in doing your research, you find an article that a researcher, say, Prof. Smith, reporting that foods labelled by the USDA as ‘organic’ have much lower levels of pesticide residue than do foods not so labeled. A student—especially one who antecedently believes that ‘organic’ foods are safer and better than ordinary foods—might write, “Prof. Smith, in his article (Smith, 2011), has proven that organic foods have much less pesticide residues than do non-organic foods. This shows that organic foods are healthier for consumers.”

However, here you would be dramatically overstating what your modest evidence shows. First: let’s say that this piece of research reported finding lower levels of pesticide residue in food labeled ‘organic.’ But you haven’t reviewed *all* research papers in this area. Maybe other articles—maybe *many* others—do not show lower levels of pesticide on organic produce. Second: suppose the literature does uniformly show lower levels of pesticide on organic produce. Does that show that the levels of residue on the non-organic-labeled foods are *harmful* or *dangerous*? Hardly. Often, if not typically, chemical compounds safe or even beneficial in *small* quantities can be harmful in *major* quantities—a little aspirin will cure your headache, a lot can kill you. Third: pesticides kill insects, no? So is it not possible that foods grown without pesticides will have *higher* levels of insect residue—bits of dead insects or insect excreta? The paper you are quoting probably did not test for levels of such ‘natural toxins.’

In short, you can’t honestly claim that the Smith paper proves conclusively that organically-labeled foods do have lower rates of pesticide residue; moreover, even if they did, it doesn’t follow the residue on non-organically-labelled food poses any health risk, nor that the organically-labelled food is free of other residues that may be harmful.

More intellectually honest would be, “Prof. Smith, in his report (Smith, 2011), reports finding lower levels of pesticide residues on foods labeled ‘organic’ than on those not so labeled. If this study has been well-replicated (which I have not investigated), this might support the conclusion that such foods are safer, although further studies would be needed to show this, such as ones comparing disease rates between people who eat mainly foods labeled organic and people who don’t.

There are indicator words that signal when you (or someone you are citing) know something, and words that signal when it is a case of some degree of belief. And there are words—called modalities—that indicate how much confidence the speaker has in what he or she sates or believes. Table 3 lists the common words and phrases for knowledge, belief, and strength of belief.

**Table 3**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Knowledge-indicator words | Belief-indicator words | Modalities |
| knows;  recognizes;  sees;  proves;  understands;  shows;  establishes; | believes;  thinks;  feels;  views;  theorizes;  hypothesizes;  opines;  holds;  avers;  maintains;  reports;  claims;  states;  suggests;  proposes; | Expressing great confidence:  surely;  obviously;  evidently;  certainly;  clearly;  Expressing some but not great confidence:  probably;  presumably;  should;  Expressing more doubt:  seem;  could;  may;  might;  possibly;  perhaps;  conceivably; |

**III. Signaling argument:**

Let us turn next to how it is we establish belief and knowledge. We do this typically by *argument*, that is, by offering reasons (that is, evidence, justification, backing, or warrant) for our claim in a given context. Arguments are the currency of knowledge. What eventually elevates a mere belief to the status of knowledge is the amount of evidence that can be given for it. We call the claim you (or someone else) are attempting to support “the conclusion,” and the reasons offered “the premises.” If you reflect upon it a bit, you see that arguing is a peculiar form of social performance. ‘Social,’ meaning something you do primarily for others—you rarely if ever argue to convince yourself of something.

Once again, English (and all other natural languages of which I am aware) have indicator words that signal when someone is arguing. Table 4 below lists some of the most common premise and conclusion indicator words. By using these, you help alert your readers that you are giving (or reporting) an argument, and what the evidence or conclusion is.

**Table 4**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Premise indicators | Conclusion indicators |
| for  since  because  due to  as  inasmuch as  as indicated by  after all  for the reason that  considering that  in view of the fact that  as shown by  follows from  may be deduced from  may be concluded from | thus  therefore  so  hence  it follows that  accordingly  ergo  we may conclude that  which entails that  which means to  which implies that  which means that  demonstrates that  shows that  proves that |

Use of the worse words help the reader/listener understand what you are trying to prove. For example, “Fred is stupid. He believes whatever he is told” can be read two quite different ways. First, I might be asserting “Fred is stupid” as a fact, and concluding with the prediction that he will believe whatever he is told. Then again, I might take it as a fact that Fred believes anything he is told, and then conclude as a diagnosis that he is stupid. Indicator words would clear this up. The former could be expressed as, “Because Fred is stupid, we can conclude that he will believe whatever he is told.” The latter could be expressed by, “Fred is stupid. This is shown by his believing whatever he is told.”