Blueprinting: Using the Thesis Paragraph to Plan Your Essay

Just as the blueprint of a building is the specific plan that will be used to guide construction efforts, the blueprint of an essay is a tool that an author uses in order to define structure. It’s a lot easier to add a new door, move a room from one side of the house to the other, or replace a whole storey if you do it on the blueprint. When writers create a specific plan for their paper before they start churning out paragraphs, they save themselves time that they might otherwise have to aspend frantically crossing out and rewriting just before the due date.

The blueprint is a brief list of the points you plan to make, presented in the same order in which they appear in the body of your paper. The blueprint would ordinarily be found in the thesis paragraph, where you introduce all the major points your paper will cover; this page uses examples such as A, B, and C, but your paper might instead refer to “the economic, racial, and religious messages in Huckleberry Finn” or “the Great Depression’s lasting impact on the structure of the working class family, the goals of public school education, and the social attitudes of a whole generation”.

The list of topics you plan to address in the body of your paper is important, but I’m using letters so that you can focus more closely on the structures that link those ideas.

This paper will talk about A, B, and C.

That’s a very weak reasoning blueprint; this paper lacks a purpose. All it does is introduce a list of subpoints. An academic paper has do more than “talk about” a string of topics. A strong reasoning blueprint will knit those topics together in order to defend a claim.

X is better than Y.

That’s kind of stark; this paper has a purpose, but the thesis statement doesn’t really help the reader figure out what is going to happen on the journey you’re about to embark on together. A good reasoning blueprint will at least mention the important landmarks you’re going to see on your way to your paper’s conclusion.

Examples of thesis statements with a reasoning blueprint:

Note that the reasoning blueprint introduces subpoints that the reader will expect you to cover in the same order.

For reasons A, B, and C, X is better than Y.
(Readers will expect the paper to have sections on A, B, and C, and they will expect each of those sections to talk about both X and Y. Or, you might have an X section that covers sections A, B, and C, then a Y section that covers the same points.)

Because of problems P and Q, Smith’s plan X will not actually deliver all the benefits that Smith promises when he rejects Y.
(Likewise, your reader will expect a section on P and Q, then a section on why Smith rejected Y and preferred X, then probably another section in which you explain why your solution will avoid the problems Smith’s solution would cause.)
Although Jones is right to point out that X does a better job than Y does when it comes to A, in truth A is so rare that we should still stick with Y, because only Y will help us avoid common problems B and C. (The body of this paper would need a section in which you explain what Jones said about X and Y in situation A, then it would need a section supporting your claim that A is rare, and then a section on how Y will help us avoid B and C.)

While experts Smith, Jones, Brown, and Lee all support X instead of Y, they all fail to account for special case W, which would cause big disasters A, B, and C if exposed to X, and which will provide huge benefits P and Q if exposed to Y. Although X is still a good option in most cases, no solution will be complete unless people affected by W have the freedom to choose Y. (The above is a very complex blueprint; as you can see, the idea here is so complex that the author has split the thesis statement and the reasoning blueprint up into separate sentences. That’s perfectly fine.)

For a very short paper (2 pages or less), the blueprint may be part of the thesis statement. No matter how long your paper, as you introduce each major new point, remind the reader of your thesis (see “Reminders of Thesis” for tips on how to do that without being redundant).

**Sample of a good thesis statement, with the blueprint highlighted:**

Black Elk Speaks accurately represents Indian lifestyle through its attention to cultural detail, its use of Indian words, and its direct quotes from Black Elk.

Note about “accurately represents”: After I started assigning this handout, I started seeing the phrase “accurately represents” in a large proportion of student papers. There is nothing magical about the words “accurately represents.” You might instead want to argue that some text “borrows ineffectively” or “forces us to question our assumptions” or “provides a useful contrast” or “invites thoughtful comparisons.”

A reader who encounters the “attention to cultural detail, use of Indian words, and direct quotes from Black Elk” will expect your paper to treat each of those subjects, in that order. A five-paragraph paper might have an introduction, one supporting paragraph on each topic, and a conclusion. A longer paper might devote several pages to each supporting point.

If, instead of a clear reasoning blueprint, your paper begins with a rambling introduction that serves up chunks and nuggets that you remember from lectures, the reader will have a hard time picking out just what it is you plan to talk about.

The Great Depression was an important time in our nation’s history. Unemployment, urban decay, and a sense of hopelessness filled almost every part of human life. Yet, even in the midst of great misery, people needed to entertain themselves. People tried many different ways to relieve their tensions, from religious revivals, to Jazz music, to membership in the Communist party. But a whole lot of average people who were suffering in their daily lives often sought escapist entertainment in the form of movies. One such movie was Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*. In *Modern Times*, “The Little Tramp” symbolizes the simple human values that are threatened by industrialism.

The author of the above passage not only wastes time composing six sentences before getting to her thesis (the very last sentence), she also clouds the issue by bringing up topics (religion, music, and Communism) that she has no intention of ever mentioning again.
In Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, “The Little Tramp” symbolizes the simple human values that are threatened by industrialism – *leisure, self-reliance, and compassion*.

The revised example is simply the [slightly edited] last sentence of the original wordy and vague paragraph. This clear, direct thesis statement helps the student and reader focus on the task at hand. The blueprint is very short — just a list of three terms; but even that is enough to communicate how the author is going to try to support these claims.

**Varieties of Blueprints**

These are all acceptable ways to blueprint in a thesis statement.

- Renting a new apartment during college is exciting because it *promotes independence, rewards responsibility, and allows creativity*.
  
  *This is one sentence, with commas separating each blueprint item.*

- Going to college is a good idea; *it is intellectually stimulating, it creates responsibility, and it will provide security for the future*.
  
  *This is one sentence with a semicolon to separate the thesis from the blueprint.*

- Taking Professor Jerz’s Technical writing course is a wise choice. *It focuses on correct grammar. It allows students to gain experience in the outside world. And it permits students to budget their time*.
  
  *This example is a bit choppy — here, having a separate sentence for each point is pretty much a waste of words. (But see revision, below.)*

- Taking Professor Jerz’s Technical writing course is a wise choice. *It focuses on one of Jerz’s favorite things: correct grammar. It amplifies textbook knowledge by providing students with valuable experiences outside the classroom. And it forces students to learn time management — a skill that many college students lack*.
  
  *This example is a bit more complex — the sentences which introduce the blueprint items are actually delivering some of the paper’s argument; hence, there’s a reason why each point needs a separate sentence. A student who has nothing more to say about a point than, for instance, “time management is a skill that many college students lack” is not going to want to give away that one idea in the blueprint; instead, he or she will try to create an entire paragraph around that one idea. The result will be wordy and boring. By contrast, a student who can slip an interesting observation into the blueprint, and then follow up with even more intelligent and insightful things in the body of the paper, is demonstrating much more advanced academic writing skill.*

**Use Parallel Structure**

The *order of the points* in the blueprint should perfectly parallel the points in the essay.

If you say you are going to talk about “ships, shoes, and sealing wax,” but your essay starts with “sealing wax,” then your blueprint is distorted.

*Note: I am amazed at how many students make this easily-correctible mistake. –DGJ*

The *phrasing of the points* in the blueprint should all follow the same pattern.

Here is an example of a distorted (or *unparalleled*) blueprint structure:
Taking Professor Jerz's Technical Writing course is a wise choice because it focuses on correct grammar and allowing students to gain experience in the outside world. Students are also permitted to budget their time.

What is wrong with this example? How could it be fixed? Here are a few reasons the above example is inappropriate:

- The number of ideas the writer wants to portray is unclear (does "correct grammar and allowing students..." count as one point or two?).
- Nothing stands out as a main idea. The sentence could easily confuse the reader, because the main focus is unclear.
- Faulty parallelism is a grammatical error. Flaws in the grammar of your thesis statement can be devastating to the overall effectiveness of the essay.

**Note:** A thesis statement amounts to nothing if the paper is not completely focused on that main point. Proper blueprinting facilitates the **coherency** of the thesis throughout the rest of the essay.

**Thesis Statements**

A thesis statement is the main idea that your essay supports. The thesis statement has 3 main parts: the **limited subject**, the **precise opinion**, and the **blueprint**. Hochstein, Jordan, and Jerz

**Thesis Reminders**

A thesis reminder is a direct echo of the thesis statement. In a short paper, the topic sentence of each paragraph should repeat words or phrases from the thesis statement.

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