

IDEA AND ESSAY

An idea that shapes an essay (also known as a thesis) is a statement that generalizes:

“Loneliness” is not an idea—it’s a topic (What *about* loneliness? *That’s* your idea.)

“I feel lonely in New York” is not an idea.

“Loneliness is a strange gift” (E.B. White, “Here is New York”) is an idea worth writing and reading about, because it is unexpected. (“No one likes to be lonely” is an idea, but not a promising one for an essay because it is so commonplace.)

. . . and it is a statement that has consequences for the way we understand the world and our lives:

“Supermarkets are bigger than delis,” while it is a statement that generalizes, is not an idea. It is a fact. Statements of fact are too narrow in scope to be ideas.

A statement that’s an idea posits a connection, a relationship, between two or more things:

“Uncertainty in life is like ambiguity in art.” (Student essay, my re-phrasing of the student’s idea)

This kind of idea, or thesis, is always arguable. “Creativity comes in many forms,” like “War is Hell,” makes a poor thesis—Who would find this idea unexpected? It is the work of an essay to argue or explore an idea, to try* to prove it or help us see it more clearly. *In your essay’s main idea something must be at stake.* (**Essay* comes from the French *essayer*, to try.)

How you state your idea matters. State it differently, and it becomes a different idea, with different implications. That is, words, phrases, syntax—the way a thesis sentence is structured—contain the germ of your whole essay. Unlike a topic, an idea is not a “ballpark” thing—it is a very specific thing. For example, “Ambiguity in art is like uncertainty in life” shifts the emphasis of the idea stated above—now art seems to be the primary area of concern, whereas in the original statement life seems to be the primary area of concern. Similarly,

“Swearing an oath of allegiance to a new country can create conflicts.”

or

“Consumption is sometimes a good thing and sometimes a bad thing.”

is not incompatible with

“Becoming an American citizen makes you a new man; it can also make you feel like a traitor.” (Student essay, my re-phrasing of the student’s idea)

or

“People who live to shop, rather than shop to live, may be creating more problems for themselves than they are solving when they set out for the mall.”

But note how the second statements are more vivid and suggest certain lines of argument, even a tone, while the first statements are bland. Would you want to read an essay whose thesis was one of the first statements? Not likely.

To sum up: When we talk about figuring out what our idea is in a given essay, we don’t mean settling on the essay’s topic. We mean articulating a relationship between two or more things in a way that holds the potential for a lively exploration or argument. We want our idea statement to be clear but also to be suggestive—it is a seed, a kernel, that already has packed within it all the meaning that sprouts, branches, and flowers through the rest of your essay. This is true even if we are writing an exploratory essay that doesn’t contain a traditional thesis statement. We should still be able to express our idea in this clear and complete way, as many of you do on the cover sheets for your drafts.

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