

Writing Advice

Effective Writing Center



UMUC

Dear Student,

Congratulations on your progress in writing this assignment!

My name is Aimee, and it's my pleasure to work with you today. ☺

You are welcome to come to the Effective Writing Center for help at any stage in the writing process, whether you are having trouble understanding an assignment or want feedback on a rough draft. At the EWC we are attentive readers who help you improve as a writer by explaining and modeling effective writing skills. For a more detailed discussion of our services, please consult the [EWC Web site](#).

PLEASE NOTE

- Advisors may not be experts in the topic your paper covers.
- Advisors will not make any judgment about the grade your paper may receive.
- Advisors do not copyedit papers. The advisor will use sections of your paper to model editing you should do.
- Advisors know only as much about the assignment as you have shared. Please provide an assignment description in the submission form.

Advice Overview

Resources to help you revise your writing assignment are hyperlinked within this letter and in the [More Resources](#) section at the end. Before reading this advice, please review your assignment guidelines and the writing that you submitted, and make sure that you have copies of both nearby, so that you can refer to them easily. We will discuss the following:

- Your **thesis statement**
- The paper's **organization**, or structure
- Your **introduction**

As we work on your draft, I will frequently quote from and demonstrate revisions to your text. Your words will appear in **blue boldface**, while my revisions will be in **red**.

Although we will discuss certain revisions and review certain rules, your **professor's instructions will always take precedence** over any other advice that you receive from the EWC, so always refer to your assignment guidelines first if you have questions. If you refer to them frequently and get to know them well, you'll have a much better chance of meeting all of your assignment requirements.

Assignment Requirements

Your **assignment description** indicates that you're responding to prompt, or question, posed by your professor. Here's a quick overview of the major requirements:

Required	Completed
3-5 double-spaced pages	✓
Introduction & thesis statement	See below
Support for the thesis	See below

As you can see, you've already made a lot of progress, and I think you'll be very pleased with what you can accomplish as you revise. 😊

Thesis & Organization

Your **thesis statement** will be your **argument** about this topic. It's helpful to think of a thesis statement as an "arguable" point about your topic. In other words, someone could potentially agree or disagree with your thesis, because you're analyzing facts in order to develop a hypothesis or argument about what those facts prove, demonstrate, or illustrate. Try to state this in one or two sentences.

At the moment, your thesis statement reads as follows:

The hopes of a new era filled with independence, opportunity, and political participation for blacks and women begun in 1865. Those hopes and dreams were crushed by 1914, when blacks and women were forced to depend on white men, denied economic opportunities, and excluded from political life.

This is a good start and it's great that you've already begun to think about your topic! I am a little concerned, however, because your thesis statement may not be as original as it could, or should, be. This seems like more of a restatement of your professor's prompt, or question, rather than your own argument about your topic. Your professor's prompt appears to read as follows:

"In 1865, both blacks and women hoped that a new era of independence, opportunity and political participation had begun. By 1914, both had been forced into dependency on white men, denied economic opportunity and excluded from political life in America."

If your professor has indicated that you are supposed to simply reword or restate the question in the assignment, then you can skip ahead to the section on your introduction. 😊 If not, however, you'll need to think about developing a more unique and original thesis statement that expresses your ideas instead of just rewording the assignment question.

It might be helpful to begin by rewording the question, since this may make it easier for you to focus on your own words and ideas. You can do this by covering up the assignment prompt/question with a piece of paper or your hand (or by minimizing the page on your computer). Then put a blank page in front of you, and rewrite the question. This will help you

think beyond your professor's words, and just focus on the idea in the assignment question. Here's an example of how you might reword this question:

Women and blacks were optimistic about the future at the end of the Civil War, and hoped that they would have more opportunities to participate in shaping America, but what happened by 1914? Did they gain the independence from white men that they fought for and hoped for, or were white men still controlling many aspects of the lives of blacks and women?

This is just an example and you can certainly reword the assignment question differently, but this gives you an idea of what I mean. Once you've reworded the assignment question—without looking at the original—try to develop an answer for this question. This will be a definite stance, or position, on this issue. It will be your argument about blacks and women's independence from white men in 1914. I think you have some pretty strong ideas on this topic, so I have absolute confidence that you'll have no problem coming up with a good thesis statement. ☺

- UNC-Chapel Hill's [Constructing Thesis Statements](#) provides an excellent overview of what a thesis statement can—and should—do for your essay, and offers some criteria for evaluating your thesis. (Also check out the link on [The Argument](#) on this page).

Once you have developed your thesis statement, it would be a good idea to think about the paper's **organization**, or structure. When writing a paper like this one, each paragraph in your paper should discuss a well-developed “reason why” your thesis statement is true or correct. This will help you to prove and support your thesis statement to your reader.

At the moment, I'm not sure the paper is as well organized as it could be, so I would like to give you a little bit of help with this. ☺ You have several very short paragraphs, and I think this causes the paper to “lose steam,” because this gives the impression that you don't have enough to say to develop the paragraph. I can tell that you have plenty of ideas, however, and if you can revise the organization of the paper to reflect this, you'll have a much better chance of proving your thesis statement to your reader.

Your assignment description lists several points that the paper needs to consider:

You must consider the questions of dependency, economic opportunity and political rights for both blacks and women in your essay.

If you organize your paper around these points, you can both make sure that you cover all of the requirements for the assignment, and present your ideas in a clear way. Here's an example of what I mean:

- I. Introduction
- II. Dependency among black Americans
- III. Economic opportunity among black Americans
- IV. Political rights among black Americans.
- V. Dependency among women
- VI. Economic opportunity among women
- VII. Political rights among women

VIII. Conclusion

Each of the Roman numerals in the sample outline would represent one paragraph in your essay. This is only a model, so you should feel free to modify or play with a little bit. For example, if you wanted to emphasize comparisons between black Americans and women, you could organize the paper like this:

- I. Introduction
- II. Dependency among black Americans
- III. Dependency among women
- IV. Economic opportunity among black Americans
- V. Economic opportunity among women
- VI. Political rights among black Americans.
- VII. Political rights among women
- VIII. Conclusion

Each paragraph should be about 150-250 words. By following this type of outline, each paragraph will have a clearer, and more specific, focus, or purpose. I think some attention to this will have a huge, and very beneficial, impact on the paper!

- You can also check out UNC-Chapel Hill's handout on [Reorganizing Your Draft](#), which contains extremely helpful information for writers in your stage of the process.

Development & Research

It doesn't look like your draft and has a formal **introduction** paragraph, so I'd like to give you a little bit of advice on this. Your introduction should consist of more than your thesis statement, because this is your chance to "introduce" both the topic and the thesis to the reader, and give her the information she needs to understand your essay.

It's helpful to begin with very **broad**, or very **general**, information about the topic, and then gradually "narrow" the focus to your most specific point about the topic (your thesis statement). Here's an example of how you might restructure your introduction:

1. **What is the most surprising fact, anecdote, or statistic about your topic?** This will help to "grab" the reader's attention, which will make her more inclined to keep reading.
2. **What kind of important background information, history, or definitions will the reader need to understand your paper?** This kind of context will help the rest of the paper to make sense to the reader.
3. **What is your specific main idea or main point about this topic?** (This is usually your thesis statement.)
4. **How will you "prove" or support the thesis?** (Avoid statements that begin like this: "This paper will..." or "In this paper, I will..." Instead, just focus on giving the reader an idea of what you will discuss in the paper: "The lack of independence, limited economic opportunities, and legal and illegal restrictions on political rights made it...")

If you can “answer” each of these questions in a sentence or two, you’ll have a well-developed introduction to your topic and thesis statement. You can also “flip” points three and four; sometimes your thesis will be last, after the overview of what you will discuss in the paper.

- Literacy Education Online’s site on [Developing an Introduction: The Top-Down Model](#) has a fantastic diagram of how an introduction should develop, so this might also be useful as you revise.

Formatting & Citations

If I was really pleased to see that you had included **in-text citations** for the information that you incorporated from your textbook! You will be very happy to learn that I only have four tiny revisions to suggest! 😊

First, when using “et al” to indicate that a work has multiple authors, you will also include the “et al” in the in-text citations.

Second, when the parenthetical citation occurs at the end of the sentence, you will place the period after the parentheses. I find it helpful to remember that the citation is part of the sentence. Here’s an example of what I mean:

The “black codes” law was passed giving blacks the rights to own property, marry, make contracts, and testify against other blacks (Boyer et al, 470).

Third, you do not need to place periods after the “et” or the “al,” since these are Latin words rather than abbreviations.

Finally, on your Works Cited page, you will want to italicize or underline the title of your textbook. Check your citation guide or handbook to see which one it recommends.

Grammar & Mechanics

- You use the **passive voice** a lot in the paper, and I think this makes you sound less sure of yourself than you actually are! 😊 **Passive voice** occurs when the “doer” of the action in a sentence is unclear:

The monkey was fed

It can also occur when the subject “doing” the action comes after the object:

The monkey was fed by the Man in the Yellow Hat.

Active voice is specific about who is doing the action:

The Man in the Yellow Hat fed the monkey.

Active voice is clearer than passive, and also helps you to state your idea in a more concise way. When trying to eliminate the passive voice, try to identify the “doer” of the sentence. Then see if you can get rid of the “to be” verb (is, are, were, etc.) in the sentence and replace it with an active verb. The change in your writing will amaze you! This will get easier with practice (I promise!), so here are a few examples to get you started:

Passive:

Segregation **was becoming more accepted** by many and whites were beginning to enforce it.

This meant that all people that were born in the U.S. were natural citizens and **were given** the rights as citizens.

Active:

Many accepted segregation and **whites began** to enforce it.

The Fourteenth Amendment gave all people born in the U.S. the rights of citizens.

- Purdue’s Online Writing Lab has a very helpful guide to [Active and Passive Verbs](#).

Summary

Here’s a reminder of what we covered:

- Develop an original thesis statement that makes an argument about your topic
- Organize the paper according to the point that your paper must consider
- Develop an introduction to your paper
- Make minor adjustments to your citations
- As you revise, work on using the active, rather than the passive, or it's

Good luck with your assignment! I’ve enjoyed working with you! 😊

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More Resources

[The Effective Writing Center](#)