

CPR: Help for Your Critical Essay

Academic essays take many styles. Usually, they present a thesis, a central idea. Giving the thesis is only one part of the challenge, though. You must prove it through a well-ordered discussion of compelling evidence.

Do not underestimate strong structure—if your readers feel as though the essay has no direction, or that they have to “work too hard” to follow your train of thought, they will become tired and frustrated. As a result, your thesis, no matter how powerful, beautiful, and interesting it is, will not come through. Readers want to know that you are staying on track and not wasting their time.

Writing cohesive paragraphs helps to establish a piece’s flow and creates a sense of organization. Paragraph unity is not always so easy to achieve, however, especially if you are in the beginning stages of the writing process. So if you get stuck, use the following model:

- **Claim:** The specific point the paragraph needs to make.
- **Proof:** The evidence that supports your claim, such as a direct quotation, paraphrase, or reference.
- **Relationship:** The connection or relation between your claim and your essay as a whole. In other words, how does this claim help to support your thesis?

When done right, CPR helps both you AND the reader. It forces you to sharpen your thesis, and it insists you pay attention to paragraphs.

Imagine you are writing an essay about Bruce Weigl’s poem, “Shelter.” Here is your thesis:

Through details that merge ordinary things with extraordinary ones, “Shelter” explores how people understand trauma.

Here is what a body paragraph in this essay might look like:

[*Claim*] Some of the poem’s images blend what is comforting and normal with what is dark and tragic. [*Proof*] For example, Weigl devotes the ninth line of the poem to the poet-speaker’s description of the grandmother’s “Sunday black silk dress.” The reader cannot tell whether the dress signals funeral wear because it is black, whether it signals everyday wear because it is labeled a “Sunday” dress, or both of these. [*Relationship*] The double nature of the dress shows how a catastrophe can cause a person to squash different experiences together into a single memory.