

- a. Health care insurance should be the right of every citizen.
- b. Health care insurance should be a private matter.

## Assumptions, Incongruities, and Thinking

First we have to be alert enough to recognize incongruities; then we need to do the thinking needed to unravel them.

**Incongruity** is something that does not meet our expectations about what is correct, appropriate, logical, or standard. The word comes from the Latin *incongruent*, meaning “not in agreement.”

In this photo, we see two little girls dressed up in their Sunday best to have their picture taken; we expect to see happy smiling faces as well. But, instead, what we see challenges a stereotypical assumption. At first we may not be aware that we have made an assumption, only that the picture makes us feel uncomfortable. We may even dismiss it as a poor



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photo. Yet, should we become curious, we might then return our attention to the photo, considering it as an interesting puzzle.

This topic brings us back to Chapter 1 and the ideas of psychologist Jean Piaget about learning. Piaget says that when we have experiences that we cannot easily fit into the familiar, we are provoked to think.

To return to the picture of the little girls, you might imagine some explanations for their frowns. You could infer (1) they were given dolls they didn't like; (2) they did not want to pose for the picture; (3) the picture was taken when they were off guard; or (4) the photographer only wanted to make a statement of ironic contrasts. If this last explanation seems the most promising, you might wonder if perhaps the photographer was purposely playing with some incongruities. Perhaps the whole composition was intentional: to contrast Hollywood play dolls against two girls dressed up as dolls; to contrast a false concept of little girls with real little girls; to contrast false faces with real faces reflecting the stresses of life.

Sometimes before we can reach an explanation that reconciles all our facts, or until we can bring our information into a satisfying pattern of order, we have to go through some discomfort and confusion. And although we may never be able to confirm the final truth of our explanation, at least we have the satisfaction of having reconciled all the available information. Piaget tells us that persistence through discomfort in such a process develops our thinking skills. And the more we think, the more willing, open, and able we are to accept life's challenges of our assumptions.

### Discussion Break Questions

1. Give an example of some incongruity that you have experienced that challenged you to recognize one of your assumptions.
2. Describe the discomfort you felt before you could resolve the problem.
3. How did you feel once it was resolved?

### Composition Writing Application

#### Expository Essay: Solving a Problem by Uncovering Assumptions

Think of a major problem from your own life (or someone else's) that involved the discovery of one or more hidden assumptions. If you prefer to use historical examples from the lives of explorers, artists, or scientists, do

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some research on the kinds of problems they succeeded in solving. Write in sketch form your basic findings, searching for the following elements to develop and emphasize:

1. What particular problem concerned your subject?
2. What assumptions were embedded in the problem?
3. How were these assumptions discovered?
4. What restraints did these assumptions impose?
5. What, if any, wrong assumptions were made?

Prepare a working outline for an essay of about three typewritten pages. Then begin your essay with a thesis statement that explains what you concluded from your research and analysis.

**The thesis statement**, also called the *thesis*, has some similarity to the topic sentence in that it states a generalization. However, as it is introduced, it may be stated through several sentences instead of one, as it proposes an idea that will be developed, explained, and illustrated over many paragraphs and pages. By definition, the thesis is the idea that the essay intends to prove. Again, in the process of thinking, the thesis, like the topic sentence, may only be mentally formulated after some time has been spent studying the subject. However, when the essay is written in an academic style, the thesis is stated in the first paragraph. A thesis is also called the *controlling idea* because everything written in the essay is based on the dictates of its objective. We can visualize the thesis as a frame, like a picture frame; everything that will appear in that picture—the essay—is contained in and limited by the thesis (see Figure 5.3).

The act of stating the thesis helps us organize our thoughts around one main purpose; it can also serve as a magnet to help us decide what information is relevant for support. Every statement and every fact appearing in the essay should either support or develop the thesis.

Let's look at an example of a thesis. Suppose you decided to write an expository essay to explain a problem you faced at work that involved a hidden assumption. After an introduction, your thesis might be stated in this manner:

- 1) I was in the Air Force for ten years before I was medically retired in 2010.
- 2) I started work as a dental assistant, progressed to become a supervisor, and reached the rank of staff sergeant by the time I was twenty-five.
- 3) As a sergeant, I was put in charge of a team of subordinates who relied on my experience and direction to supply them with the skills necessary to make the best of their Air Force career.
- 4) For me this was a big undertaking: to prepare young adults to assume responsibility for their own and other people's lives before they had lived their own.
- 5) This is a story about a major wrong assumption I made at that time, one I will never forget.
- 6) This was how I learned that false assumptions damage interpersonal relations.

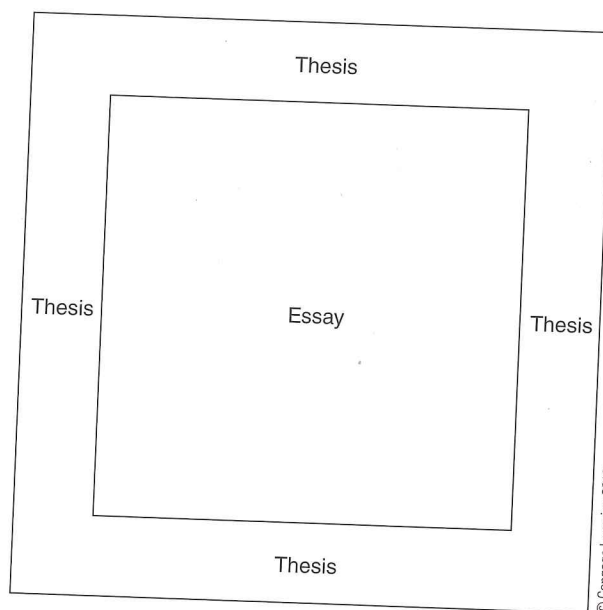


FIGURE 5.3 Thesis as a Frame

The first four sentences prepare the way for the thesis statement. They set up the situation and invite reader interest. The fourth states a principle that narrows the focus. The fifth makes the transition to a personal incident that will illustrate this principle. And the sixth sentence states the thesis that the narrative will develop, support, and illustrate.

Here is a summary of the parameters for this assignment:

1. Topic: a) How one creative individual solved a problem by breaking through a major assumption or b) how a person discovered one or more mistaken assumptions that were creating a problem.
2. Objective: To describe and explain, through a narrative, the role of assumptions in working through an achievement.
3. Form: Essay using personal or researched information for illustration and exposition to support the thesis statement.
4. Length: At least three typed pages.

Submit your working outline with your paper if your instructor requests that you do so. To follow up in class, read your essays to one another in pairs or small groups. Check over one another's work to see whether the

parameters were followed. Critique each essay with the following scoring questions:

### Scoring for Expository Essay on Assumptions

1. Does the writer state the thesis clearly and develop it through narrative and exposition? *40 points*
2. Does the essay really stay with the topic of illustrating how an individual discovered and worked through a major assumption? *25 points*
3. Is the length at least three typed pages? *10 points*
4. Is the thesis supported with personal or researched information? *15 points*
5. Is the work free of distracting errors in punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure? *10 points*

### ● STUDENT WRITING EXAMPLE

#### WHAT I LEARNED FROM MY ASSUMPTION

*Jennifer Takacs*

I was in the Air Force for ten years before I was medically retired in 2010. I started work as a dental assistant, progressed to become a supervisor, and reached the rank of staff sergeant by the time I was twenty-five. I was put in charge of a team of subordinates who relied on my experience and direction to supply them with the skills necessary to make the best of their Air Force career. For me this was a big undertaking: to prepare young adults to assume responsibility for their own and other people's lives before they had lived their own. This is a story about a major wrong assumption I made at that time, one I will never forget. This was how I learned that false assumptions can damage interpersonal relations.

One day I had to discipline an individual for being caught drinking underage in his dorm room on the military base. On Monday morning, my supervisor told me I was to write a letter of reprimand, and then counsel my airman on the repercussions of his actions. I had been in this clinic for a while and this individual came across as very aggressive and confrontational. He wouldn't look at me when I spoke to him, he frequently came to work a few minutes late and always left early, used foul language and put down those who couldn't do things as well as he could. These were actions I couldn't necessarily reprimand him for, but they were enough to give me an impression of his attitude. And I was not the only one who had come to this

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conclusion. Thus I approached our meeting with the assumption that he would make excuses and even openly flout my authority.

I prepared myself for the attitude I would most certainly need to exhibit in order to make sure he knew I was serious and that he was in trouble. I called him to my office and shut the door. I sat behind my desk and made him stand at attention in front of me as I read aloud my very assertive letter of reprimand. He stood there and let me berate him for reckless irresponsibility and how I didn't have room for careless airmen in my Air Force. That's what every twenty-year-old boy does right? Act irresponsible and careless with their friends not caring who and what they are affecting?

After I was done reprimanding him, I asked if he had anything he would like to say. I fully expected a bad attitude about this, as well as a hostile response to my admonitions. "Ma'am," he said, "Permission to stand at ease." "Granted." "Ma'am, I'd like to offer an explanation of my actions and I'm really not trying to make a stupid excuse. Ya know, I really have no excuse, but this is how it went down. My sister came into town on an emergency visit. I haven't been home in five years because my parents booted me out when I was fifteen years old, leaving me to bounce around from shit hole to shit hole thereafter. That is why I joined the Air Force. I figured then I wouldn't end up like my parents. They're drug addicts and spent most of their money on booze and meth. That's why they kicked me out because they couldn't afford to feed me anymore and they said I was a 'grown-ass-man' and should be out on my own anyway. So my sister showed up to my dorm with a bottle of vodka in her hand and the news that our mom had died from an overdose." He paused here because his voice became shaky, his face turned red and he put his head down. He stopped breathing for a long time, and then shook his head and looked at me. This was the first real eye contact we'd had, and his eyes were glassed over and grey. I knew immediately that he was telling me the truth. He continued with his explanation. "I'm sorry 'bout that. Honestly I really don't feel like I should give a shit, but she's mom, ya know? Whatever, anyway, when my sister drinks, she get's loud and I did have a couple shots with her which was stupid, and I know that but I was pissed . . . I probably shouldn't be pissed . . . so that's when I was caught because some jerk filed a noise complaint with the cops and they showed up to my room. They found the bottle and then gave me a breath analyzer test. I don't normally drink, Staff Sergeant Takacs, I promised you that when you became my supervisor, and I know the rules on this base. Anyways, like I said, it's not an excuse but I at least wanted to give you some sort of an explanation so that you don't think I'm some stupid kid who doesn't give a shit about my career. I highly respect you and I think you're one of the best NCO's in the clinic. Everyone else has already written me off."

After a brief hesitation I said "Okay." Then I dismissed him from the room. When he shut the door, I put my head in my hands to feel my grief and let the weight of my action affect me. I knew I had severely misjudged the situation because of my preconceptions.

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