

A TROUBLESHOOTING GUIDE

A Focused Explanation

My readers think that my topic seems thin, that I don't have enough to write about. (The focus is too narrow.)

- Broaden your concept by adding scientific, cultural, or historical comparisons and contrasts.
- Look up your concept using reference sources to find additional subject terms for larger concepts that include it.
- Conduct a Web search using the name of your concept and *overview* or *definition*. Use the Advanced Search feature to focus on sites with a *.edu*, *.gov*, or *.org* domain.
- If your concept comes from another course you are taking, check your textbook or lecture notes for broader, related topics.

A Focused Explanation

My readers don't find my focus interesting.

- Conduct additional research, focusing on finding information likely to be of value and interest to your readers.
- Consider how you can answer your readers' "So what?" question. Show them, perhaps, how they could use the concept; build on their interests or what they already know; or clarify their mistaken, faulty, or outdated assumptions or ideas.
- Consider using humor, anecdotes, or visuals to engage readers' interest.
- Ask yourself whether the focus is interesting to you. If it isn't, choose a different focus. If it is, ask yourself how you can communicate your enthusiasm to your readers—perhaps with anecdotes, examples, or illustrations.

A Clear, Logical Organization

My readers don't find my organization clear and logical.

- Reread your thesis statement to be sure that it clearly announces the concept and perhaps forecasts the topics.
- Outline your material to be sure that it is divided into separate topics that are presented in a logical order.

My readers say that the beginning doesn't capture their interest.

- Review your opening paragraphs to be sure that you clearly introduce your concept and your focus.
- Try starting with an anecdote, an interesting quotation, a surprising aspect of the concept, a concrete example, or a similar lead-in.
- Consider stating explicitly what makes the concept worth thinking about and how it relates to your readers' interests.

My readers feel that the essay doesn't flow smoothly from one part to the next.

- Outline your essay, dividing it into major parts—introduction, main topics, and conclusion. Reread the end of each major part and the beginning of the next to make sure you have provided transitional cues (for example, the strategic repetition of words or phrases, use of synonyms, rhetorical questions). If there are none, add some.
- Consider adding headings to make the topical sections easier to identify.

My readers feel that the ending falls flat.

- Consider ending by speculating on what the future will bring—how the concept might be redefined, for example.
- Consider relating the ending to the beginning—for example, by recalling an example or a comparison.

Appropriate Explanatory Strategies

My readers don't understand my explanation.

- Consider whether you have used the most appropriate writing strategies for your topic—defining, classifying, comparing and contrasting, narrating, illustrating, describing, or explaining cause and effect.
- Recheck your definitions for clarity. Be sure that you have explicitly defined any key terms your readers might not know.
- Add transitional cues (transitional words and phrases, strategic repetition, rhetorical questions, and so on).
- Add headings and bulleted or numbered lists to help readers follow the discussion.

My readers want more information about certain aspects of the concept.

- Expand or clarify definitions by adding examples or using appositives.
- Add examples or comparisons and contrasts to relate the concept to something readers already know.
- Conduct additional research on your topic, and cite it in your essay.

My readers think visuals would help them better understand the concept.

- Check whether your sources use visuals (tables, graphs, drawings, photographs, and the like) that might be appropriate for your explanation. If you are publishing your concept explanation online, consider video clips, audio files, and animated graphics as well.
- Consider drafting your own charts, tables, or graphs, or adding your own photographs or illustrations.

My readers think my summaries are vague, paraphrases are too complicated, or quotations are too long or uninteresting.

- Revise the summaries to emphasize a single key idea.
- Restate the paraphrases more succinctly, omitting irrelevant details. Consider quoting important words.
- Quote only a few memorable words or phrases from a source.

My readers aren't sure how source information supports my explanation of the concept.

- Check to be sure that you have appropriately commented on all cited material, making its relation to your own ideas absolutely clear.
- Expand or clarify accounts of research that your readers find unconvincing on grounds apart from the credibility of the source.

Smooth Integration of Sources

My readers think that the quotations, summaries, and paraphrases don't flow smoothly with the rest of the essay.

- Reread all passages where you quote sources. Ask yourself whether you provide enough context or clearly establish the author's credentials.
- Use signal phrases to place sources in context. Consider using descriptive verbs in signal phrases to give your readers more information about what your source is saying and why you are referring to it.
- Use appositives to integrate information about your sources smoothly and clearly.

My readers are concerned that my list of sources is too limited.

- Do additional research to balance your list, taking particular care that you have an adequate number of credible sources.
- If you have difficulty finding sources, ask your instructor or a librarian for help.

My readers wonder whether my sources are credible.

- Clearly identify all sources, and fully state the credentials of all cited authorities, using appositives where appropriate.
- Eliminate sources that are clearly identified and well integrated but that are not relevant, credible, or otherwise appropriate.