

Motive

Gordon Harvey on *Motive*

The intellectual context that you establish for your topic and thesis at the start of your essay, in order to suggest why someone, besides your instructor, might want to read an essay on this topic or need to hear your particular thesis argued—why your thesis isn't just obvious to all, why other people might hold *other* theses (that you think are wrong).

Your motive should be aimed at your audience: it won't necessarily be the reason you first got interested in the topic (which could be private and idiosyncratic) or the personal motivation behind your engagement with the topic. Indeed it's where you suggest that your argument *isn't* idiosyncratic, but rather is generally interesting.

The motive you set up should be genuine: a misapprehension or puzzle that an intelligent reader (not a straw dummy) would really have, a point that such a reader would really overlook. Defining motive should be the main business of your introductory paragraphs, where it is usually introduced by a form of the complicating word "But."

Motivating Moves

**Match the “motivating moves” at right
with writing samples from the disciplines at left.**

Please note that each writing sample makes more than one motivating move.

Good news: There are no wrong answers!

Published Writing from the Disciplines

Sociology: How does one explain the seeming inconsistency between the responses by the Hispanic community to the 1992 poll, on the one hand, and the general pride that most Americans express about their immigrant roots, on the other?

History: New York’s American Art-Union offers an opportunity to examine, in one significant context, the struggle that defined the social role of art and artists in the antebellum North.

Environmental Science: Although the origin of these sources [of oxygenated organic compounds] is still unclear, we suggest that oxygenated species could be formed via the oxidation of hydrocarbons in the atmosphere, the photochemical degradation of organic matter in the oceans, and direct emissions from terrestrial vegetation.

Psychology (Freud, in fact!): The play is built on Hamlet’s hesitations over fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him; but its text offers no reasons or motivations for these hesitations, and an immense variety of attempts at interpreting them have failed to produce a result.

Some Motivating Moves

1. The truth isn’t what one would expect, or what it might appear to be on first reading.
2. The knowledge on the topic has heretofore been limited.
3. There’s a mystery or puzzle or question here that needs answering.
4. Published views of the matter conflict.
5. We can learn about a larger phenomenon by studying this smaller one.
6. This seemingly tangential or insignificant matter is actually important or interesting.
7. There’s an inconsistency, contradiction, or tension here that needs explaining.
8. The standard opinion(s) need challenging or qualifying.