# Roadmaps



## The Roadmap Metaphor

Have you ever received poor directions and found it difficult to find your destination? It can be frustrating—especially if you think back to times when you received excellent directions and were able to find your way easily, each turn clearly anticipated and marked. Reading can be like that too: sometimes we don't understand where the writer is taking us, or we get frustrated when we follow the author to many long and windy dead ends that don't ultimately lead to the author's point. This handout offers suggestions for providing "roadmaps," so that readers can easily follow and anticipate your argument rather than becoming frustrated and lost, unsure of what you want to argue.

## Getting from Point A to Point B

To make a map, you need to know both the "origin" and "destination" of your argument. Destination here refers to your main argument—your main claim, your thesis, or your point. Origin refers to the assumed knowledge of the reader—in other words, what we think we can assume the reader knows. For some writers, knowing these starting and ending points is a prerequisite for drafting a paper; for others, these points only become clear during or after the drafting process.

Keep your personal tendencies as a writer in mind as you think about the roadmap metaphor. If you have time, consider experimenting with your writing process to determine whether changing or revising habits might yield positive results.

Regardless of what type of writer you consider yourself, once you have drafted a paper, double-check that you can identify the origin and destination of your argument within your text. Your instructor might have specified the origin for you by asking you to assume the reader has read all—or some or none—of the material covered in class. It is always appropriate to ask your instructor for what audience he or she wants you to write. In general, academic writing assumes an intelligent reader who is unfamiliar with the texts and arguments presented.

If you cannot immediately identify your destination, concentrate on the last parts of your essay. Often, our writing is a conversation we have with the different texts or sources we have read in research, and we reach our own conclusion—what we really think—at the end.

Once you have confirmed your origin and destination points—and confirmed, after your first draft, that you still want your argument to travel from one to the other—it's time to make sure you're conveying this sense of direction to your readers.

## Introductions as Roadmaps

Directions won't really help you if you are already lost or at the end of your trip. Because maps are generally best given to people before they set out, introductions often serve a function of providing a preview of the route the essay will follow.

Think about everything you need to explain or summarize for your intelligent but uninformed reader. This should minimally include your central claim and will likely also hint at what kind of evidence you will be

considering to support it. Introductions might also indicate why readers should care, what texts or theories you're basing your discussion on, what assumptions undergird your work, what counterarguments you'll acknowledge, etc.

Remember your goal is to tell readers where you're headed: you have the rest of the paper to enjoy the scenery along the way as you guide them to that point.

**Topic Sentences as Signposts**

Imagine you're road tripping with a friend, and she tells you she'll be driving you from Durham to Miami. Yet, somewhere in South Carolina she makes a right turn and starts heading due west. When do you start to worry?

If you happen to notice the large sign saying "Detour, 10 miles" you probably won't worry at all. Without that sign, you'll probably give your friend no more than a mile or two before asking her where on earth she's going.

Readers of American and much European academic writing generally expect writers to tell them up front where a paper will be heading. In addition to providing a roadmap in your introduction, you can also provide signposts along the way using the topic sentences of your paragraphs. Do they confirm you're on the right path, and alert readers to potential detours? Double check your draft to make sure your topic sentences provide a sense of local (paragraph-level) direction. Topic sentences can also remind readers of the connection between the local topic/scenery and your central claim. Creating a reverse outline of your paper can help you determine the local goals of each paragraph.