

Thinking about A *Motive*

Have you ever started reading something and found yourself wondering, “Why is the writer telling me this?” The answer to this question lies in understanding the *motive* of the essay. The *motive* of a paper essentially answers the reader’s question, “Why should I care?” To ensure that your readers will know why you are writing, tell them clearly why you think your writing matters. Address questions such as:

- *Why is your argument not already obvious?
- *Why have others reached different conclusions?
- *Why is the material you are writing about interesting to you?
- *Why should your writing be important to other people working in the academic subject?
- *Why should your writing be important to people outside the academy?

Solidify your motive with a suggestion such as:

- *Knowledge on the topic is limited.
- *There is a mystery, puzzle, or question here that needs answering.
- *Published views of the matter conflict.
- *We can learn about a larger phenomenon by studying this smaller one.
- *This seemingly insignificant matter is actually important or interesting.
- *There is an inconsistency, contradiction or tension here that needs explaining.
- *The standard opinion(s) need challenging or qualifying.

Examples of motives from a variety of disciplines:

(Sociology) How does one explain the seeming inconsistency between the responses of 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.

(History/English/Humanities) The play is built on Hamlet’s hesitations over fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him; but the text itself offers no reasons or motivations for these hesitations, and an immense variety of attempts at interpreting them have failed to produce a result.

(Humanities) Scholars have argued that this text is a sideline in Freud’s career; but it actually reveals something crucial about his mindset in this period.