



Tip Sheet for Writers # 9

How to Develop an Idea

One of the most common (and probably unhelpful) comments on student papers is something like the following: “This is an important point, but you need to develop this idea.” What exactly this statement means is often a mystery. It helps if we remember that the reader does not share our thought processes; often we simply need to make those thoughts explicit, laying out the details and ramifications of our statement. Below are two versions of a statement from a paper, one not developed at all, one more fully developed.

ORIGINAL

In this section of Oliver Sacks' *Seeing Voices*, we learn that the Deaf actually have a culture of their own.

REVISION

In this section of Oliver Sacks' *Seeing Voices*, we learn that the Deaf actually have a culture of their own. They are not simply a group of unrelated people who happen to have in common just one thing: that they cannot hear. That is, they are not, perhaps, like paraplegics, who beyond their disability and the attitudes and struggles connected with it (which of course may be a great deal in common), have little in common as individuals. Rather, those who are deaf, because they use a language different from ours, and one that is not shared by many outside their group, are effectively a separate cultural group as surely as African Americans or Asian Americans. The culture of the Deaf comes with a separate language, with customs, with social norms and rules, and most important, with a sense of its own separateness.

The first version assumes that the reader knows what it means to have a unique culture. The second one lays out the elements clearly. In fact, the first statement has now become the topic sentence for the whole paragraph. In order to expand on the idea, the writer has done several things:

1. Contrasted the Deaf with other, seemingly similar, groups that do not constitute a culture (that is, paraplegics).
2. Compared the Deaf with other, seemingly dissimilar, groups that do constitute a culture (that is, African Americans or Asian Americans).
3. Explained what some of the elements of a culture are (that is, customs, language, and so on).

It is important to note that the revision contrasts, compares, and explains without using phrases such as “They can be compared to...” or “The elements of a culture are....” Such phrases are OK, but they hit the reader over the head, and as we see, we can often eliminate them.

This revision has not exhausted the possibilities for expansion of the idea. Contrasting, comparing, and explaining are just some of the ways to expand. Providing an example, telling a short anecdote, and giving a definition are a few other ways. Here, more could be said about language as the key element. Or perhaps the paragraph could lead to discussions in further paragraphs about the civil rights struggles of the Deaf and its similarities to other civil rights struggles.

These are just a few of the ways you can take a little idea and expand it into something that will satisfy the reader's greatest desire—to learn something.