Microthemes

Ecology
Biology 3370
Dr. William E. Ensign

Microtheme Guidelines

Format:
Microthemes must be typed and limited to 250 words.

Writing Tips:
Think extensively about what you want to say, and outline it before you start to write. Feel free to discuss the assignment with other students before you write your microtheme. Your theme should be written independently.

Evaluation Criteria:
A microtheme should be directed toward imagined readers who are not familiar with the issue. The purpose of the microtheme is to develop a thesis statement about an issue and offer clear and logical support for your thesis statement. A good microtheme will enable the reader to clearly understand the issues being discussed, as well as your position on the issue.

The criteria for a microtheme are (1) accuracy of content, (2) comprehensiveness and balance, and (3) clear sentence structure with good transitions.

Accuracy of Content

This refers to facts presented in the microtheme. Unless explicitly stated in the microtheme instructions, you do not need to cite specific literature in microthemes. However, you must be sure that the information is factual, based on credible sources of information. It is suggested that items you state as facts be checked in at least two credible sources to be sure there is agreement on the issue.

Comprehensiveness and Balance

Comprehensiveness refers to the thoroughness of coverage of the issues, presence and clarity of the thesis statement, and how convincingly you support your thesis statement. Microthemes must address the major issues related to the microtheme topic. That does not mean that a microtheme considers every possible facet of an issue. There is not enough space for minor or tangential issues. The writer must decide what is important and write succinctly about those issues.

Balance has 2 components: 1) how much space (i.e. how many words) is allotted to each of the
major issues that are covered in the body of the paper, and 2) how much space is allotted to the introduction, body and conclusion. Writers must judge the importance of each issue or concept and apportion space proportional to their importance. Writers must also make certain that the introduction, body, and conclusion are appropriate in length. The body should comprise the majority of the microtheme because that is where the issues are laid out and the supportive arguments developed. The arguments must convincingly support the thesis statement. The introduction must be brief, but provide an adequate introduction to the issues. Lastly, the conclusion is typically the shortest section. A good conclusion should provide a terse and unambiguous close to the essay, which is easier said than done.

Clear Sentence Structure with Good Transitions

Because microthemes are short in length, each sentence must be carefully arranged and edited for maximum clarity. This will not happen on your first attempt. It takes much editing to produce a succinct and clear microtheme. Concepts in microthemes should flow smoothly from one idea to the next. Therefore, good transition sentences are essential. Keep in mind that smooth transitions result more from clear organization than writing prowess. If an essay is well thought out, the ideas will naturally follow each other.

Microtheme Grading

45 A "45" microtheme meets all the criteria for accuracy, comprehensiveness and balance, and clear sentence structure. The writer should understand the issue(s) thoroughly. The major concepts of the issue(s) should appear in the microtheme, with all main points proportionately developed (that is, the writer should not spend excessive time on one main point while neglecting other main points). The microtheme should be as comprehensive as possible and should read smoothly from beginning to end with appropriate transitions between ideas. The sentence structure should be clear and varied, without vagueness or ambiguity and without grammatical errors. A "45" microtheme has a clear thesis statement and logically develops support for the thesis statement.

40 A "40" microtheme should still be excellent, but it can be weaker than a "45" microtheme in one area. It may have excellent accuracy, comprehensiveness, and balance but show occasional problems in sentence structure. Or it may be clearly written but somewhat unbalanced or less comprehensive than a "45" microtheme or it may show a minor misunderstanding of the issue.

35 An "35" microtheme is one that is good but not excellent. It will reveal a generally accurate understanding of the issue with a clear sense of the main points, but it will be noticeably weaker than a "45" microtheme in one of the areas of criteria or somewhat weaker in two areas.

30 A "30" microtheme must have strength in at least one area of competence, and it should still be good enough to give a reader a fairly clear and accurate overview of the issue. A "30" microtheme is generally either seriously unbalanced or fuzzily written and lacks the clarity and precision of a top-rated microtheme. The sentence structure of a "30" microtheme frequently prevents inclusion of enough ideas for good comprehensiveness.

25 A "25" microtheme is weak in all areas of competence, either because it is so poorly written that the reader cannot understand the content or because the content is inaccurate or seriously disorganized.
20 A "20" microtheme meets format expectations, but fails to meet any of the areas of competence.

Additional information to help you understand microthemes and improve your microthemes:

**Analogy to help understand the nature of microthemes:**

1) A microtheme is akin to a lawyer’s closing argument where the defendant’s lawyer must state that their client is not guilty and then briefly review the most important facts that support his/her client’s innocence.

2) Microthemes are also like an opening statement in a debate where the debater states their position on an issue and then mentions the most important evidence in support of their position. In both of these cases the last statement will be some variation of the thesis statement because that is the final idea that they want to leave with their audience.

**Some hints and tips for writing microthemes:**

1) Be sure you have a clear and obvious thesis statement. Make it very straightforward and clear. Do not beat around the bush and force the reader to assume what your thesis statement is. Hypothetical Example: The greatest problem that ecologists will face in the next 150 years is the difficulty implementing scientifically-based management due to social and political forces.

2) Avoid general statements that may or may not be true due to ambiguity or lack of specifics. For example, Forests are in decline. Which forests do you mean? All forests? Temperate forests? Tropical forests? Georgia pine forests? Does in decline mean decreasing in forested area or in the health of the forest?

3) Treat the body as if it is the proof of your thesis statement. The body is where you give evidence and support for your thesis statement. Your support should be logical and as carefully developed as the space allows. Do not expect the reader to be able to make logical leaps that you have made in your head. Be sure that your evidence actually supports your thesis statement. Think about each example you use. Ask yourself Does this really support my thesis statement?

4) For conclusions:
   a) Succinctly summarize why your thesis statement is true. It should be obvious by this point in the essay.
   b) Do not bring in new ideas or issues into the conclusion. It should be very straightforward.

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**Microtheme 1**

One of the requirements for obtaining a master’s degree in most scientific disciplines is writing and defending a thesis. The thesis is based on research that the student conducts during their time in the master’s program. My master’s project addressed interactions between brook and rainbow trout in streams in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee. In the introduction to the first draft of my thesis, I made the following statement:

http://science.kennesaw.edu/~bensignlEcology/themes.htm
"The Great Smoky Mountains National Park provides an ideal setting to conduct research on trout in southern Appalachian streams. The Park, although extensively logged during the first decade of the 20th century, has had sufficient time to recover from these activities. Therefore, it is perhaps the only large, contiguous area in the eastern United States where we can observe stream fish in a pristine state similar to that existing prior to European settlement."

The draft came back from one of my committee members with this paragraph circled in heavy red ink. He demanded I either remove the paragraph from the thesis or rephrase it in such a way that it more realistically reflected the nature of my study area. In your microtheme, I would like you to develop an argument that does one of two things. Your first option is to defend my statement and make a case for leaving the paragraph as it is. Your second option would be to defend my committee member, and provide evidence why his demands were justified. Your major source of information for the development of your argument will be the material contained in the article entitled "Landscape History and Ecological Change" on the class web page. The url for the article is: http://science.kennesaw.edu/~bensign/Ecology/read1.htm.

Your microtheme must be written using the format given to you in class. This microtheme will be due at the beginning of class on Monday, September 20. Class begins at 11:00.

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**Microtheme 2**

Imagine that you are the Director of the Georgia Natural Heritage Program, an agency within the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. The Natural Heritage Program's main objective is to document the distribution and abundance of rare plants and animals within the state. As Director, you are required to comment on proposed development projects that could impact these rare organisms.

A proposal just came in from a landowner in southern Georgia who wants to build a 1500 unit subdivision on a 5000 hectare farm just outside of Valdosta. In addition to the housing units, he has also attracted industrial and commercial investors who would provide jobs, services, and infrastructure (roads, schools, etc.) for people living in the subdivision. A portion of the land proposed for development lies within the flood plain of the Withlacoochee River, but civil engineers have assured the landowner that channel modifications, including levees and construction of upstream flood storage reservoirs, will allow him to safely build adjacent to the river.

The proposal has appeared on your desk because the Withlacoochee River is one of only four known localities in the state where a small species of fish (the bluenose shiner, *Pteronotropis welaka*) occurs. The population in the Withlacoochee was identified recently, so many older range maps do not indicate its presence in this portion of the state. The bluenose shiner is found only in warm, slow-moving, coastal streams, usually in areas with large amounts of brush and vegetation. Although not federally listed as an endangered species, your agency is considering listing it as threatened within the state of Georgia due to its limited distribution.

The landowner has recognized that his project will alter the habitat in the Withlacoochee River. He also has admitted that habitat alterations will eliminate the river's bluenose shiner.
population. He considers himself to be environmentally sensitive and wishes to do everything within his power to prevent the loss of the species from Georgia (short of stopping his development project). In addition to the 5000 hectare piece of land he owns near Valdosta, he also owns a 25,000 hectare tract in the mountain headwaters of the Chattahoochee River near Dahlonega. In order to prevent the loss of the species from the state, he proposes to transplant the bluenose shiners from the Withlacoochee to the portions of the Chattahoochee headwaters on his property. Furthermore, he has agreed to set the land in North Georgia aside in trust as a conservation area, eliminating any potential for future development.

Your task for this microtheme is to respond to the landowner's transplantation proposal. Your response should address only the potential success or failure of the transplant as a way of preserving the bluenose shiner. Your response should be based on ecological principles that have been covered in class and in the Ricklefs text, as well as the information presented on the attached sheet. Finally, your response is being written for the landowner, not a fellow ecologist, so avoid using ecological jargon that he might not understand. All of the other requirements for microthemes apply (word limit, thesis statement, etc.)

This microtheme is due at the beginning of class on Wednesday, October 20, 1999. You must include the attached (completed) Microtheme Cover Sheet with your completed microtheme.

Microtheme 3

The attached article appeared in the first issue of Conservation Ecology, an on-line electronic journal published by the Ecological Society of America. After reading the article, write a microtheme that either supports or opposes the following statement:

"Ecological systems are extremely complex. To understand them, we must isolate individual factors of interest for experimentation and develop single testable hypotheses related to these factors. It is only through this process of isolation and testing that we can come to understand, and ultimately manage ecological systems."

You should use the article to develop your argument. Although you may use examples drawn from the Ricklefs text or lecture notes, the major points should be based on information presented by Holling. Your microtheme must be written using the format given to you in class, with one exception. Given the complexity of the issues involved, I will give you an additional 100 words, so the word limit for this microtheme will be 350 words, not 250. This microtheme will be due at the beginning of class on Monday, December 6. Class begins at 11:00.

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http://science.kennesaw.edu/~bensign/Ecology/themes.htm