

9.b.

Making the Case: Sample Essay

The following example of a student paper helps illustrate the points made in talk.

“Nineteenth-Century Chinese America: Labor Unrest and the Role of Merchants”

All Chinese immigrants to northern California in the mid-nineteenth century, impoverished laborers and the wealthier class of merchants alike, faced a gauntlet of legal, social, and political hostility. Chinese Americans responded to the hostilities of Euro-American society through organizations based on ethnic solidarity, called district associations. Nearly all Chinese Americans belonged to district associations, which sought to protect the civil rights of immigrants, supply them with employment opportunities, and adjudicate conflicts between them. The Chinese Six Companies, which was composed of the leaders of the district associations, claimed to represent the interests of all district associations, and thus all Chinese immigrants. The Chinese Six Companies spearheaded organized and often successful campaigns against legal and social discrimination. But, significantly, it launched no such campaigns against the economic hostility to which all Chinese were subjected, particularly by working-class Chinese laborers. By not supporting an organized response to economic hostility, merchants constrained the possibility of an effective Chinese-American labor movement which could protect Chinese workers from exploitation.

Important questions to ask of the first paragraph:

1. What is the thesis question?
2. What are the premises underlying it?
3. What is the thesis?
4. What are the separate claims in the thesis?
5. What is the road map?

Now, let's work through the questions.

Thesis question: Given that the Chinese Six Companies charged themselves with the protecting the interests of all Chinese immigrants, why did it not more effectively champion the economic (as opposed to legal and social) interests of working-class Chinese immigrant laborers?

Components of the thesis question (i.e., thesis question premises):

1. There were Chinese immigrants in America, some of whom were working class.
2. There was an institution known as the Chinese Six Companies which claimed to represent the interests of all Chinese.
3. The Chinese Six Companies effectively championed the legal and social interests of Chinese immigrants.
4. But it did not effectively champion their economic interests.

These are all premises to your thesis question. They are often (though far from always) expressed in the form of "given that such and such was the case, why or how did something happen in the past. Their truth must be demonstrated simply in order for you to ask your question. If even one of the premises to your thesis question is proven false, critics may claim that you are asking a bad or wrong question.

Why bother trying to add thesis premises at all? Why not just ask a broad, simple question that contains fewer premises? For two reasons. First, good problems are only problems when there are premises to the thesis question. One might ask, "why did the United States drop the atomic bomb on Japan in 1945?" An easy answer here might be "to win the war." If we ask a more tightly focused question – "given that Japan was militarily defeated and that the Soviet Union had just entered the war against Japan, why did the United States drop the atomic bomb on Japan in 1945?" – we are guaranteed a much more focused, and more provocative, discussion.

Second, we should bother with thesis premises because by adding these "given that"s to your question, you actually make your job easier. You narrow your focus and make your problem tighter. It is always better to have a tighter problem than a looser one. A loose problem does not give you a structure for working out the answer. A tight one does, by giving you a clearer, more full "road map." It also demonstrates to your reader that you have a solid, sophisticated understanding of your topic.

Thesis: The Chinese Six Companies did not effectively protect the interests of Chinese immigrant workers because it was dominated by a merchant class which forestalled formation of a Chinese labor movement. It did this by stressing cultural solidarity among all Chinese people, by asserting merchants' experience as the norm for all, and by putting the interests of the merchants ahead of the interests of Chinese laborers.

Components of the thesis (i.e., stepping stones toward the conclusion):

5. The Chinese Six Companies was dominated by a merchant class.
6. This merchant class forestalled the formation of a Chinese labor movement.
7. It did it by stressing the cultural unity of all Chinese people (and thus muting class differences among Chinese immigrants).
8. It did it by asserting merchants' experience as the norm for all.
9. It did it by putting the interests of the merchants ahead of the interests of Chinese laborers.

These are the logical steps necessary to prove that your thesis is correct. If you fail to demonstrate the validity of any of these, critics may rightly claim that you have failed to make your case.

As you see, there is often a chain of logic. In this example, it will be impossible to prove step four (that the Chinese Six Companies asserted merchants' experience as the norm for all) unless step one has been proven (that the Chinese Six Companies was dominated by a merchant class).

Road map: The “road map” for the paper should look something like this:

1. There were Chinese immigrants in America, some of whom were working class.
2. There was an institution known as the Chinese Six Companies which claimed to represent their interests.
3. The Chinese Six Companies effectively championed the legal and social interests of Chinese immigrants.
4. But it did not effectively champion their economic interests.
This is the “fulcrum” around which the paper turns. It is the point at which the paper moves from setting up the problem to moving toward the solution. It is the best point for re-stating the thesis question.
5. The Chinese Six Companies was dominated by a merchant class.
6. This merchant class forestalled the formation of a Chinese labor movement.
7. It did it by stressing the cultural unity of all Chinese people (and thus muting class differences among Chinese immigrants).
8. It did it by asserting merchants' experience as the norm for all.
9. It did it by putting the interests of the merchants ahead of the interests of Chinese laborers.

You can see here that a road map is not the traditional outline. It is a practical, working scheme which tells you what you must do in order to make your case. Each one of these “stepping stones,” or points in your road map, is a “mini-thesis,” and thus may serve as the topic sentence of a paragraph. There is some flexibility in how you arrange your road map, but the possibilities are finite. This is actually the great virtue of this system – that once you prepare a good road map, you will know what you need to do. Your work will become more focused, and you will spend your energy more efficiently.

The other great virtue of a well-prepared road map is that your argument is broken down into discrete steps. Your paper no longer feels like a single intimidating eight-page argument; instead it feels like a series of rather short “mini-arguments,” each of which may be tackled on its own. If you make your case in each mini-argument, you will automatically make a good overall argument.

Getting real: I do not suggest that everyone adopt this model wholesale. The writing and thinking process often is not neat enough to quickly fit into the model I have propounded. It is often so difficult and so important to start putting ideas down on paper that I do not want you to feel unnecessarily constrained. But I do suggest that this is a useful way of thinking about the writing process. You may find it easier to apply this model in evaluating your first drafts rather than in preparing them. It makes sense to apply it at some point in your writing process. This, after all, is the model I use to evaluate papers. I ask these same questions of your paper that I am suggesting you ask yourself: What is the thesis question and what are its premises? What is the thesis and its

stepping stones? What is the chain of reasoning necessary to make the author's case? Good luck with your writing!

Now, here is the essay. I've included just the first and last paragraph, and the topic sentences in between. Does it adhere to the road map we constructed?

“Nineteenth-Century Chinese America: Labor Unrest and the Role of Merchants”

All Chinese immigrants to northern California in the mid-nineteenth century, both impoverished laborers and the wealthier class of merchants, faced a gauntlet of legal, social, and political hostility. Chinese Americans responded to the hostilities of Euro-American society through organizations based on ethnic solidarity, called district associations. Nearly all Chinese Americans belonged to district associations, which sought to protect the civil rights of immigrants, supply them with employment opportunities, and adjudicate conflicts between them. The Chinese Six Companies, which was composed of the leaders of the district associations, claimed to represent the interests of all district associations (and thus all Chinese immigrants) before the dominant white society. The Chinese Six Companies spearheaded organized and often successful campaigns against legal and social discrimination. Significantly, no such campaigns emerged against the economic hostility to which all Chinese were subjected, particularly by working-class Chinese laborers. By not supporting an organized response to economic hostility, merchants constrained the possibility of an effective Chinese-American labor movement which could protect Chinese workers from exploitation.

Chinese American merchants and laborers experienced the brunt of political, legal, and social hostility equally.

While many white Americans indiscriminately expressed their hostility at Chinese Americans, some legal measures disproportionately burdened laborers.

Operating on the premise of ethnic solidarity, merchants spearheaded and achieved most of all the political and legal successes of Chinese Americans in the nineteenth century.

Although merchants often acted in the interests of the entire Chinese American community, they did mobilize on behalf of laborers exclusively.

While a concerted protest voice in the Chinese American community emerged against legal and political discrimination, no such legacy of economic protest exists.

Economic hostility was of a different nature than legal and social hostility.

Beginning in the 1860s, and growing in the 1870s, Chinese-American laborers increasingly found themselves as wage earners dependent on white and Chinese-American employers.

The introduction of Chinese-American laborers into economic spheres traditionally dominated by organized white laborers signaled the bubbling up of economic hostility towards Chinese-American laborers.

Active labor unrest in the Chinese-American community did take place, but the strikes which did occur were only anomalies in a larger trend toward passive labor unrest.

The historiography of labor unrest in nineteenth century Chinese America is scant, and perhaps understandably so considering how little agitation Chinese-American laborers caused.

While Mei presents compelling reasons for a lack of active labor unrest, she fails to address the responsibility merchants owed to Chinese-American laborers.

However, historians have failed to propose a nuanced understanding of merchant-labor relations in light of the economic transition laborers faced as they responded to white hostility.

Historians have stripped laborers of agency in the face of economic pressures.

The merchant economy operated in a vacuum. It was impervious to white economic hostility and competition.

Moreover, sources of patronage different for both merchants and laborers.

Chinese-American laborers may have been encouraged to pursue entrepreneurial ventures when they saw the financial success which merchants enjoyed from avoiding white economic hostility.

The role merchants played in the recruitment of laborers fostered the development of a labor force which would remain compliant to the structure of leadership and representation in the Chinese-American community.

It is insufficient to remark that the merchants did not foment labor unrest merely because it was not in the best interest of the merchants. Merchants clearly exhibited that they could act in the interests of laborers in some instances. By studying more closely the role which merchants played in reference to economic transition and unrest amongst Chinese-American laborers, one gains a sense of a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the Chinese-American merchant class.