

ADEQUATE AND APPROPRIATE SUPPORT

How will I know if my support is complete and relevant?

In deciding on the support for any message, you face a dual challenge: on the one hand, you want to give enough information to convey your exact meaning; on the other hand, you want to include only what directly advances your meaning.

As a guide to developing complete and relevant support, anticipate readers' questions about your topic statement. Assume, for instance, that a friend now living in another state is thinking of taking a job similar to one you held last summer. Your friend has written to ask how you liked the job and will base his or her decision on your information. Here is your first-draft responses:

My job last summer as a flagger for a road for a road construction company was boring, tiresome, dirty, and painful. All I did was stand in the road and flag cars. Every day I stood there for hours, getting sore feet. I was always covered with dirt and breathing it in. To make matters worse, the sun, wind, and insects ruined my skin. By the end of the summer, I vowed never to do this kind of work again.

The above paragraph tells but does not show. It doesn't get readers into the experience, doesn't make them feel a part of it all. Granted, the topic statement expresses the main point, and the remaining sentences provide a glimpse of the writer's ordeal; but a glimpse is all we get. Because its details are too sketchy, the paragraph fails to answer the obvious questions.

Can you show me what the job was like?

What exactly made it boring, tiresome, dirty, and painful?

The following revised version includes details that show, that make readers feel as if they were actually there:

My job last summer as a flagger for a road construction company was boring, tiresome, dirty, and painful. With nothing to do but to wave a red flag at oncoming traffic, I stood like a robot, the deafening roar of road machinery at my back, each day dragging by more slowly than the last. My feet would swell and my legs would ache from standing on the hard-packed earth for as long as fifteen hours a day. And the filth was overwhelming. The fumes, oil, and grime from the heavy machines and the exhaust from passing cars became my second skin. Each breath was filled with dust, clogging my sinuses, irritating my eyes. But the worst part of all was my poor body's exposure to the ravages of the weather. If I was not blistering all over from

severe sunburn, or being pounded by hail, my skin was being sandblasted and rubbed raw by windstorms, or chewed and bitten by mosquitoes and horseflies. By the end of the summer, I was a mess: swollen feet and ankles, the skin of a leper, and a chronic case of sinusitis. I vowed to starve before taking that kind of job again.

This version on what the topic statement promises. Compare the columns below to see how the writer made the paragraph concrete and specific.

First draft

Revision

I stood there for hours.

I stood like a robot, the deafening roar of road machinery at my at my back, each day dragging by more slowly than the last.

getting sore feet

My feet would swell and my legs would ache from standing on the hard-packed earth for as long as fifteen hours a day.

I was always covered with road dirt and breathing it in.

The fumes, oil, and grime from the heavy machines and the exhaust from passing cars became my second skin. Each breath was filled with dust, clogging my sinuses, irritating my eyes.

The sun, wind, and insects ruined my skin.

If I was not blistering all over from severe sunburn, or being pounded by hail, my skin was being sandblasted and rubbed raw by windstorms, or chewed and bitten by mosquitoes and horseflies.

By the end of summer, I vowed never to do this kind of work again.

By the end of the summer, I was a mess: swollen feet and ankles, the skin of a leper, and a chronic case of sinusitis. I vowed to starve before taking that kind of job again.

The support above can be considered complete and appropriate for the writing situation. More specific treatment (say, a day-by-day description of every event) would only clutter the message. In this situation the reader needed and wanted just enough information to make an informed decision, not a diary of your summer on the road. Readers are busy and impatient people; so think hard about how much your reader can tolerate. Don't make the mistake of confusing needless details with legitimate support.

Developing support does not simply mean adding words. Anything that merely fills the page is puffery. Every item of legitimate support serves to advance the writer's exact meaning. Consider, in contrast, this puffed-up version of our original paragraph.

My job last summer as a flagger for a road construction company was boring, tiresome, dirty, and painful. Day in and day out, I stood on that road for endless

hours getting a severe case of sore feet. My face and body were always completely covered with the dust blown up from the passing cars and various other vehicles, and I was forced to breathe in all of this horrible junk day after day. To add to the problems of boredom, fatigue, and dirt, the weather did the most horrible things to my skin. Let me tell you that by the time the summer ended, I had made myself a solemn promise never to victimize myself by taking this kind of awful job again.

Although this version is almost twice the length of the original, it adds nothing to the writer's meaning. Make every word, phrase, and sentence carry its weight. Replace all puffed-up expressions with sharp details.