

Motive: Making it Work for You
(Faye Halpern, University of Calgary)

Motives answer the rude question readers—damn them!— always bring to a new essay: “So What?” The motive makes your essay appeal to other minds (essays, unlike diaries, are public documents). It shows why your thesis should interest a reader (other than your instructor).

Motives establish that there’s a problem here, one which your essay will try to solve:

- The truth isn’t what one would expect, or what it might appear to be on first reading
- There’s an interesting wrinkle in the matter, a complexity
- A simple or common or obvious-seeming approach to this topic has more implications, or explains more, than it may seem
- There’s an ambiguity, something unclear, that could mean two or more things
- The standard opinion of the text, or a certain published view, needs challenging or qualifying
- There’s a contradiction or tension here
- There’s a mystery or puzzle or question here that needs answering or explaining
- This seemingly tangential or insignificant matter is actually important or interesting.
- There’s an interpretation that needs to be challenged, corrected, or completed
- Here are some published views that conflict, leaving an issue unresolved
- Here’s an issue that hasn’t yet been treated or treated sufficiently by scholars
- What the scholars say theoretically doesn’t match up with what actually happens in the texts