

## Crafting Your Argument

In many academic disciplines, a clear argument is the most important part of your paper. Making and substantiating a definitive claim about a particular issue or subject shows that you have familiarized yourself with relevant facts and existing discourse. This article is designed to provide both a starting point for crafting your argument and a checklist to make sure you have fully imbued your paper with your undoubtedly brilliant conclusion.

Because every discipline has its own standards, your first step is to ask your professors what they look for in a thesis. You need not have an argument ready (or do any research) to ask this question, so ask early.

### Researching Under the Influence (of an Argument)

When presented with a paper that requires any research or analysis, many students face a dilemma: do I read all the texts first and then create a thesis, or do I select my resources based on an argument? The answer to this question depends entirely upon the subject and the nature of the assignment. If you are writing a literary analysis of a novel, of course you would read the novel first and then craft your subject and argument based on what interests you. If you are writing a paper that takes a definitive side on a topic, however, it might be easiest to take a side first and then look for support for your side and evidence against the opposite side.

Many assignments fall in between these two scenarios. An effective way to deal with those assignments (short ethnographies, reviews of literature or theory, historical research papers, case studies for economics, you name it) is to borrow from high school science and enter your research not with a thesis, but with a hypothesis about your topic. This can be a controversial statement that you intend to prove or disprove (*Capitalism is inherently corrupt*), or a research question that you aim to answer (*What are the reasons for New York City's declining homicide rate?*).

If you feel most comfortable starting off with a broad statement or question (e.g. *Is torture bad, and why?*) you can talk to professors, preceptors, or your friendly neighborhood MAX Center tutor to narrow it down to fit the assignment (e.g. *Is torture bad for American national security, and why?*).

In addition to developing a clear, concise, and contestable thesis, formulating a specific research question or statement will make finding sources easier and limit your reading load to only the most relevant sources.

### The Most Important Sentence You Will Ever Write: Your Thesis

Chances are, you have at some point in your academic career read a book or article that attempted to summarize itself in one paragraph-long, semicolon-ridden, jargon-heavy sentence. Assuming you do not want to inflict a similarly confusing and jam-packed sentence on your own readers, ask yourself these questions to keep your thesis erudite, relevant, and snappy:

#### 1. Is the sentence specific and substantive?

Avoid broad, non-contestable statements and focus on the **why** and **how**:

Broad statement: [Light rail is affecting downtown businesses.](#)

Specific thesis: [Downtown businesses will not suffer when the light rail is installed.](#)

The second example is clear and concise and sets the stage for greater elaboration. In this case, the writer could take it a step farther and substantiate the claim:

Substantive thesis: **If downtown businesses plan ahead and use local resources, they will survive and maybe even thrive when the light rail is installed.**

One good way to make your thesis more substantive is to use **concrete language** that describes **things**, not **ideas**. For example, the broad statement above contains the word **affecting**, a relatively vague verb. But the specific thesis uses the word **suffer**, a much more evocative verb. Avoid abstract words like **have, interesting, idea, think, make,** and **do**—there's nothing inherently wrong with these words, but there's almost always a more precise, concrete alternative that suits your context.

If you can picture it in your mind and feel it in your gut, it's a concrete word.

The substantive thesis leaves little doubt in the reader's mind regarding your argument, but saves the proof for the body of the paper. Consult the ["Thesis Statement"](#) section of this document for more thorough guidance.

## **2. Can I memorize this statement?**

If not, rephrase it until it is clear and concise. Remember, you have the rest of the paper to elaborate and prove the argument. Making your thesis short and memorable will make it easier for your reader to check your argument against the claims in the body of the paper.

## **3. Am I trying to lay out both my argument and the structure of my paper in the same sentence?**

If you are, consider dividing your statement into a sentence devoted to briefly substantiating your argument and a separate "roadmap" sentence that addresses what you will say when. It's perfectly okay to fall back on a concise thesis followed by a more specific road map in your first draft.

If your instructors prefer another structure in your introduction, they will generally say so. Your thesis is your moment to integrate your voice, your research, and your thought process into an existing debate. Everything you have to say afterward will be judged on whether or not it supports your argument. Thus, at the end of your writing process, make sure your thesis is saying what you want it to.

## **Two Arguments are NOT Better than One**

Now that you've polished the rough concepts of your argument into a clear, shimmering thesis, you should take care to make sure that this thesis a) matches the examples you have chosen, and b) is reflected in and substantiated by the body of your paper. When dealing with complicated subjects, it is easy to have a "hidden argument," a major point you make in the paper that is omitted from or entirely different from the thesis itself.

Sometimes this is an unaddressed theoretical underpinning, but more often it is an unplanned conclusion the writer draws through the process of actually writing the paper. Constantly checking in with your thesis statement at the end of each section or body paragraph—to make sure your thesis reflects your proof—will help you find and address a hidden argument before it undermines your thesis.

Problems with thesis/body unity can occur when the reader is not clear how the body of the paper relates to or supports the thesis. It takes good judgment to select examples that prove an

argument. Substantiating your argument with these examples is tied to the nature of the assignment and how you have chosen to structure your paper.

One tenet of thesis/body unity, however, applies regardless of the length or discipline of your paper: How your examples support your thesis is not automatically evident to your reader, even if it might be to you. Just as the thesis is an extension of your voice, your body paragraphs and how they support the argument are extensions of your unique thought process.

Though your peers and professors are (like you) all bright people, they do not connect the dots the same way that you do. Use strong **transitions** to take your reader from one point to the next and to reinforce the points of the thesis. Consult the "[Transitions](#)" section of this document for more thorough guidance.

The end of a paragraph or section is the best place to emphasize that the paragraph/section supports your thesis. Even if you have already provided examples to support the thesis earlier in the paragraph/section, reiterate them at the end.

### Restating Your Argument in the Conclusion

The conclusion confirms the introduction and body of the paper, and then eases you out of the nitty-gritty of proving the thesis and back into the application and relevance of the thesis. Restate your thesis differently in the conclusion; it can be longer and more complex, it can include keywords from the body of your paper, and it can be applied to larger issues, not just to your specific points. Now is the time to answer "so what?" to speculate about the implications of your research, or to raise new research questions. If the introduction points inward toward the paper, the conclusion points out and forward.

Crafting your argument takes time, thought, research, and organization, but it's an investment that will pay off in the form of a solid, convincing piece of writing.

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