

Leah's Patented Guide to Good Paper Writing

What elements does a good academic paper have?

A Strong Thesis Statement

Every academic paper needs to make an **argument**. An argument is not your opinion. It is not a summary of something you read in a source. It is not a statement of fact. It is a specific, evidence-based claim you came up with on your own. A good argument is something that can be *contested*. You should be able to make your argument in **one sentence**. That sentence is your thesis statement.

“*The Soviet Union was a communist country*” is not a good thesis statement, because it is a historical fact.

“*Stalin was a terrible person*” is not a good thesis statement, because it is an opinion.

“*Soviet society was complicated and had many features*” is not a good thesis statement, because it is too vague.

“*The Bolshevik Revolution was the greatest upheaval in the entire history of humanity*” is not a good thesis statement, because it is not based in historical evidence. (We do not have evidence about the entire history of humanity!)

“*Stalin's economic transformation of the Soviet Union during the First Five-Year Plan was hard on citizens, but justified by its success*” is a good thesis statement, because it is specific, evidence based, and contestable.

Good Use of Evidence

Once you've got your thesis statement, you need to substantiate it with **evidence**. Here are some examples of evidence:

- Direct quotations from a primary or secondary source. When quoting an author in this manner, make sure your quotation is long enough to demonstrate the author's idea. A word here or there can't reliably convey the author's thoughts. Most quotations consist of a full sentence, or at least a complete phrase of a sentence including subject and verb.
- Information about historical context that you have learned through secondary source research or inferred from a primary source itself. If you are inferring your evidence from a primary source, you must demonstrate how you derived it. (For example, “Before Peter the Great's reign, the Russian gentry did not socialize in mixed company, as is evident from Peter's repeated insistence in the ‘Decree on Noble Assemblies’ that the decree applied to women as well as men.”)

Clear, Concise Argumentation

Quoting or summarizing sources is a good start, but it's not enough! You also need **argumentation**, to explain specifically how your evidence helps you prove your argument.

Before you start writing your paper, it's always a good idea to make an **outline**. Don't shy away from outlines because you used them in high school. The most complex thinkers of our era use outlines to help organize their thoughts and ensure the logical flow of their arguments. Put your thesis statement at the top. Then make a list of the main points you plan to use to substantiate your claim. Three points is usually a good number. (Two or four is okay. One is too few. Five is getting to be too many.) Under each point, write at least one piece of evidence you will use to support that point. Finally, write down for yourself in a couple sentences *how* each piece of evidence helps you prove the point it's connected to, and how each point helps you prove your thesis statement. Now you can use this outline to structure your paper.

As you write your paper, read back over it periodically to make sure everything ties back to your thesis statement. It's easy to get sidetracked without realizing it. And sometimes as you write, your argument changes. That's okay! But before you turn your paper in, you should go back through it and make sure that in the final version every piece of evidence still belongs in the paper, and that it is clear how each piece of evidence helps you prove your argument.

Regardless of the type of evidence you use, *make sure you explain how this evidence helps you prove your argument*. Your reader (me) is not inside your head and will not immediately understand why you have chosen a particular piece of evidence. Show the reader your thought process! If it's good evidence, it should be easy for you to explain how it helps prove your argument. Then you and your reader will both be satisfied.

Good Logical Flow

A history paper has three parts: introduction, body, and conclusion. The format of a 5-paragraph essay is somewhat useful here, but don't be limited by it. Take as many paragraphs as you need to make your argument, always working for clarity and concision in your writing.

- The **introduction** sets up what your paper is about and states your main argument. Give your reader enough information to understand the basic context, but don't go into depth. Your introduction should be short and sweet, and it should consist of four parts, which ideally fit into a single paragraph:
 - Setting up the question or problem
 - Previewing the argument (briefly!)
 - Explaining the stakes why the argument matters)
 - The **thesis statement**
- The **body** of your paper is the vast majority of what you will write. This is where you lay out your evidence and explain how it proves your argument, point by point. Make sure your writing **flows** from paragraph to paragraph. If you can switch the paragraphs around and the paper makes as much sense as ever, you haven't given the reader enough direction. Each point you make should flow directly from the previous point and feed directly into the next one. Help your reader understand how the order in which you have structured your paper is the strongest for proving your argument.

- The **conclusion** can be a bit tricky. Its function is very similar to the introduction, but you need to make sure it doesn't just repeat the introduction word for word. In the conclusion, give your thesis statement again. This time, as you review your evidence, indicate clearly how each piece of evidence helped you prove your argument. Finish off with a strong statement, so it sounds like a real ending. **Do not** finish off with a grandiose statement about all of history. There's a fine line between good style and pretention.

Proper Citations and a Bibliography

Each time you use a **quotation**, you must **cite it properly**. Within the paper, you should use **footnotes**. At the end of your paper, on a separate page, you must include a **Bibliography**.

Make sure every source in your **footnotes** also appears in your **Bibliography**. Please follow the *Chicago Manual of Style* for formatting. You can access it [for free on the Library website](#).

If you use a web source (including audio, video, film, and image sources), you must provide the URL and date of access in your bibliography. In a footnote, you must also include the **time code** for the clip you are referencing.

When you summarize an idea that is unique to a particular source, you must also cite it. In this case, you don't need to use quotation marks, but you **do** need to provide a citation.

No Plagiarism!

Be very careful to avoid plagiarism!!! Plagiarism is a serious offense and can jeopardize your academic career. **If you plagiarize, you will automatically fail my class.** All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the Administration. Plagiarism can take two forms:

1. Using a direct quote from a source without citation.
2. Using an idea unique to a book, article, or website without citation. (This usually happens when summarizing)

How can you be sure you're not plagiarizing? In the first case, it's pretty easy: use quotation marks and give a proper citation! The second case is a little tougher. As a rule, when you write down an idea, ask yourself, How do I know this? If you remember it from a specific source, you should give a citation just to be safe. It's far better to cite something unnecessarily than to leave out a citation that should be there.

If you have any further questions about plagiarism, please feel free to email me or visit me in office hours. You should also review W&J's Academic Dishonesty Policy, here:

<https://wiki.washjeff.edu/display/CATALOG2018/The+Principle+of+Academic+Honesty/>

You are responsible for knowing and abiding by these policies. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please come talk to me before you turn in your paper.

Good Grammar and Spelling

If I can't figure out what you're trying to say, I can't give you credit for completing the assignment. It's definitely worth your while to make sure your paper reads clearly, thanks to good grammar and spelling. Use your spell-checker, but don't stop there! In addition, **read your paper out loud**, or **give it to a friend to read**. That's the only reliable way to catch grammar and spelling mistakes your computer won't catch. Don't fall into these traps:

Example 1: Let's eat, Grandma!
Let's eat Grandma!

Example 2: You know your shit.
You know you're shit.

What if I'm still confused?

I can help you! Please email me at any point in your writing process if you have a question about something. I would rather answer zillions of questions and have you turn in a very good paper than not answer any questions and find out too late that your paper is on the wrong track. Even better, come see me in my office. I am always glad to meet with you during my office hours.