

How to Write a Strong Academic Paper

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First things first, you need to know the type of assignment you're writing. Is there a word count required? What about a page number requirement? Is this a reflection or research-based assignment? All these questions, and many others, will dictate the first steps you take even before you put pen to paper or fingers to keys. Smaller assignments obviously do not require as much extensive prewriting work as a research paper, but the same basic tenets for writing should be applied to each, regardless of the project's length or depth.

****The following stages in the writing process are covered in greater detail in the Writing Center's Paper Walkthrough Guide****



Prewriting

Every assignment starts with a question or prompt that needs answering. This is where you start. For assignments that require you to develop your own topic and perspective, this means devising a question too. Regardless of whether the question you are seeking to answer was given from the assignment or was developed yourself, it's considered the essential question. The essential question is the heart of every assignment. The trick with essential questions, and why they are so crucial to the writing process, is that an essential question cannot simply be a yes or no answer, therefore it requires critical thinking and critical writing to answer it. While not always argumentative, papers involving essential questions are usually trying to provide some sort of answer or persuasive motive.

Let's say your topic is on suppressors. The instructor or assignment has not given any direction other than it must be a research paper of at least five paragraphs on the topic of suppressors. For an assignment as broad as this, you would need to develop your own essential question. There are two options at this point: Will your essential question be informative or argumentative? This question will have a big impact on decisions that come after.

When you have decided your path, argumentative or informative, the next step is to figure out your audience. Now, if you're writing for a class, despite the instructor technically being your audience in the sense that they are the ones reading/grading your work, your audience really comes down to a simple question: Who would benefit from the information you're seeking to explore in your paper? The answer to this question gives you your audience. A paper's success is dependent on whether or not it reaches the intended audience. For example, writing a paper that is against gun control but completely alienating those that are for gun control would be considered a failure, regardless of how well it was written. Another example would be a paper titled "Firearm Safety for Beginners" that used terminology, acronyms, and complex explanations that only a veteran gunsmith or firearm user would understand. You need to always be writing for your audience, no one else. Papers that ignore their intended audience miss the mark since the information being conveyed isn't being tuned to the necessary channel for those readers to grasp.

There's another simple rule for choosing an audience. If the position of the paper is one that is argumentative or persuasive, then the audience should almost always be the opposing side of that argument. To put it plainly, "There's no use preaching to the choir." Since the point of academic writing is to encourage conversation and add to a global dialogue, argumentative papers should always be geared towards persuading the opposition to understand the other side of the argument.

With position and audience determined, we can come back to the question, which in this case is, considering you've taken the argumentative approach, "Why should suppressors be easier for consumers to obtain?" Now, there's no easy answer to this question. One can't just point to this fact or that fact and have the matter be settled. When that happens, it means you have a strong essential question. This is where the real work begins. It's time we start finding a way to answer that question.



Ideation

With your essential question always in the front of your mind, it's time to start developing your answer. Now, since it's not a simple answer, it means your answer will be complex and contain a few heads of attack. The best place to start, is to take your question, and start turning it into a statement. This statement will be what is called a thesis. A thesis is a single statement that encapsulates the heart of your paper. It is the answer to your essential question, just without the support of research attached to it. In the case of the essential question we're exploring here, we could start turning the essential question into a statement as so: "Suppressors should be removed from the NFA's list." That's a simple answer to the question, but then comes the why. This is where your ideas become your paragraphs.

The easiest way to understand this process is to see how it works when it comes to a five-paragraph essay. Each paragraph, aside from the introduction and conclusion, should be employed in a way to support your question. Each body paragraph is a "why" to support your answer to the essential question. So, knowing all of that up front, when you start to generate ideas, you should be focusing on coming up with the whys that support your main idea.

There are a variety of strategies out there that can be used to develop your ideas, which strategy you use is really dependent on what works best for you. Regardless of which strategy you employ, the main thing is to always keep your thesis statement / essential question in mind. There are a huge variety of strategies, below is a brief overview of a few strategies:

- **Listing:** Just as the strategy's name entails, you create a bulleted list where you write down every idea, every possible answer to that essential question.
- **Free Write:** This means writing without worrying about grammar or any structural restraint. This strategy is meant to just run straight at the subject without making sure it's pretty. This strategy can be very effective for exhausting the subject early, but can only really work if you don't hold yourself back with worrying about proper grammar or those other elements of writing etiquette.
- **Brainstorming:** For a visual learner, brainstorming is a great strategy to use. You start with the essential question in the middle of the page or notebook. Circle it. From there, create bubbles off that main bubble with any ideas that spring to mind when you explore that essential question.
- **Clustering:** This strategy is just a larger, more complex form of the brainstorm. Instead of just creating bubbles off that center bubble, you expand the clustering off of each of the other bubbles as well. It's basically taking what you made with the brainstorming and developing it more.



Whichever strategy you use, or even if you have a method all your own, the main point is to squeeze every last bit out of that topic during this process. You want to get it all on the table now, every idea you can possibly come up with, no matter how off-the-wall it is, because the hardest thing to do when writing a paper, is to be almost done, only to notice there's a brilliant idea you left off the table. Make sure you give this stage plenty of time and energy before moving on.

By the time you're done, you should have a clear understanding of everything you know about the topic, as well as what you don't know or need to know. Use that prewriting to help focus your research.

Research

After you've gathered your ideas, it's time to follow up on those ideas with some research. Strong research is all about reliable and authoritative sources. It's always best to start with the [LIRN library resource](#) from SDI when you start doing your research, as sources from the LIRN will be reputable, authoritative, and reliable from the get-go. If those searches yield little, you can always use other internet search engines to continue your search.

Regardless of what search engine you employ, whether it's through the databases in the LIRN or Google Chrome, there's a test you should run on each of the sources you plan to use in your paper. It's called the CRAAP test. Since your argument and research paper's success is dependent on strong sources, it's crucial that you find sources that have the strength to hold up your thesis.

Currency: Is the source current, up to date? Is it more than five years old? Always try to stick to sources that aren't older than five years, as data and information change rapidly.

Relevance: Does the source relate to your topic? Does it fit the audience you're also trying to reach? You want to make sure that the source not only relates to your topic, but that the perspective of the paper aligns with your own, i.e. you don't want to quote from a source that is in opposition of your own, unless there's a strategy behind it.

Authority: Who is the author? Do they have the credentials or expertise to write on the subject? If there is no author, is the website or publisher credible (.org, .gov, .edu)? The old adage that you're only as strong as your sources is the main point here. You want to make sure that it's a trusted source with a good track record and the credentials to back it up.

Accuracy: Does the source support their ideas with research of their own? Does it feel biased? Is it factual, or just personal experience? You want to make sure the source has information that is true, has been reviewed in some capacity, and is well-researched. Make sure the source hits some of those qualities.

Purpose: What's the source attempting to get across? Is the intention of the source/author obvious? Is it argumentative? Explanatory? Basically, you want an understanding of the source's overall reason for being. This helps you differentiate biases the source/author may have.



Thesis

Before we get to the outline, let's look at the thesis. The thesis isn't a stage of the writing process on its own. It can be developed any time between ideation and drafting, but should definitely be completed before you would consider your outline finished. To put it simply, the thesis is the heart of your paper in a single sentence. Within the thesis, we should not only know what the purpose of your paper is, but also how you're going to support it. It can come in many shapes and sizes, but an easy formula to follow to make sure you're hitting the thesis' purpose would be the XYZ thesis. This type of thesis is usually employed when writing five-paragraph essays, but can be used in other situations as well. The XYZ are the reasons or "whys" that support your purpose. The formula looks like this:

Purpose of the essay + X, Y, Z = Thesis.

So, if you were writing a paper on why one firearm is better than another, it could look like:

Firearm 1 is greater than firearm 2 due to its versatility, speed, and power.

The X, Y, Z would be versatility, speed, and power. From this sentence alone, we know the paper would argue that firearm 1 is better than firearm 2 because of those reasons listed. Each of those reasons would have their own body paragraph to support the main purpose. Again, this isn't always the type of thesis you'd want to use, but the idea is always the same; give the reader the purpose and basic supporting topics in a sentence or two before we get to the body paragraphs.



Outlining

Once your research has been completed, with your prewriting in hand, it's time to outline your paper or writing assignment. Though it's often overlooked, and therefore unfortunately ignored, the outline is crucial to making the next steps of the process as smooth and easy as possible. An outline, simply put, is a blueprint for your paper. Just as you'd be hard pressed to build a house without a blueprint, writing a paper without an outline can be quite a headache in the long run. The usual format for an outline is the roman numeral format:

- I. Introduction: Thesis
- II. Main Idea 1
 - A) Supporting Detail 1
 - B) Supporting Detail 2
 - C) Supporting Detail 3
- III. Main Idea 2
 - A) Supporting Detail 1
 - B) Supporting Detail 2
 - C) Supporting Detail 3
- IV. Main Idea 3
 - A) Supporting Detail 1
 - B) Supporting Detail 2
 - C) Supporting Detail 3
- V. Conclusion: Restate thesis

Each roman numeral stands for a paragraph in your paper. This is the basic set-up for a five-paragraph paper, but it can be modified to fit any paper length required. When it comes to filling out the supporting details for each paragraph, you can be as detailed as you want here. The more detailed you are, the easier it will be to draft your paper when the time comes for it.

When it comes to ordering your paragraphs, meaning picking what comes first, second, third, etc., it really depends on the topic. For the most part, especially if it's an argumentative paper, the best ordering would be from least emphatic to most emphatic. This means start with your least compelling point of the argument and lead up to your most compelling. This is a way to leave your reader with your strongest point to close things out. Always remember with ordering paragraphs, that you need to build. If there's certain information the reader needs in order to understand another point of the paper, make sure they get that initial information first.

Drafting

Style / Voice / Tone

Before we even begin to draft the paper, it's important to keep the voice or style of the paper in mind. Voice and style refer to the writing itself, regardless of content. It's how you present your ideas, the way you pass on information. It's your chance to put some of you in the paper. That being said, there's a few key elements you want to keep in mind when writing an academic paper.



Voice, style, tone, etc., all depend on the type of writing in question. If you were writing a reflection piece, using first-person pronouns (I, me, my, mine) for point-of-view (POV) would make sense, since you're writing about your own experience. When it comes to academic papers though, you really want to steer clear of the first-person as much as possible. The main reason for keeping the "I, me, my," out of your paper, is that with academic papers, the content should be the main focus beyond anything else. When we start bringing ourselves into it in such an obvious way, we become the subject of the paper, and the purpose of the paper thus gets lost behind us. Stick with the third-person for a POV in an academic paper to ensure the content remains front and center. Here's an example of how strong a sentence can sound when we remove the "I" from it.

First-person: I believe that strict gun control would cause more harm than good.

Third-person: Strict gun control would cause more harm than good.

It may not seem like much, removing the "I", but in the end, it makes the sentence stand on its own. The "I" can weaken a lot of our writing because inevitably we need to follow up the "I" with, "believe, feel, think, etc." These verbs weaken our writing, but when we don't use the first-person, we don't have to run that risk. What was once a belief, feeling, or thought becomes a sentence on its own without those weak verbs, which makes it stand out stronger.

Tone is tied to voice, but this time, this quality is more about your audience. Depending on who your audience is, your style and tone will be affected greatly. Purpose also has a huge impact on this quality, but the audience choice is too often overlooked as being an important part of deciding tone and style. While it's fairly straightforward if you're writing an informative paper (style and tone are dictated by the level of knowledge your chosen audience already has on the subject), it becomes a bit more nuanced and infinitely more important when writing an argumentative paper.

For argumentative papers, you always want to make sure you're chosen audience is those who are against your stance. The reason for this, is that the point of an argumentative paper is to sway minds and get people thinking. It would therefore make little sense to gear the paper towards those that already agree with you; no use in "preaching to the choir". Since you are writing to an audience that disagrees with you, and there are strong feelings from both sides of the argument, your tone becomes even more important. You never want to alienate your audience or attack their ideas. This is where tone becomes important. You need to be able to transfer a tone of openness, a tone that doesn't seem defensive or offensive. This is crucial, because if you're writing on a hot topic like gun control and immediately come out of the gates belittling the other side's view, your reader will stop reading. An argument is not about winning, it's about getting the opposition to see your side of things, which can only occur when the tone is more neutral and open.



Introduction

With the outline all set, it's time to start putting it all together. We'll start with the introduction. At this point, the thesis should already be completed. Since the thesis is done, the introduction comes down to writing towards the thesis. The thesis should be the last sentence of your introduction. Since that last sentence is figured out, the first sentence of the introduction needs to be developed. We call this first sentence the hook. The hook does exactly as the name entails, it hooks the reader.

There are a few types of hooks to use:

- Start with a bold statement to grab your reader's attention.
- Start with a comparison that any reader can connect to in relation to your topic.
- Starting with a staggering statistic.
- Start with a vivid description that paints a picture for your reader visually.
- Start broad and get narrow.

*** Do not start your introduction with a question: questions don't work well in essays as you can't force the reader to pause and actually dwell on the question.***

Do not start out with a quote. While many writers may go in this direction, it's always best that the first words the reader reads are your own and not someone else's

Body Paragraphs

Since each body paragraph has its own subtopic that supports the main topic, think of each body paragraph as its own entity. Each body paragraph should start with a topic sentence that introduces that subtopic. The standard breakdown of a body paragraph is sometimes referred to as the MEAL format.

Main idea: The main idea of the paragraph is explored in the topic sentence.

Evidence: Evidence is introduced that supports that main topic.

Analysis: The evidence that has been introduced is then analyzed by the writer.

Lead out: Subtopic is closed out and a transition is put in place to the next paragraph.

You want each of your body paragraphs to be doing their own job, but have each contribute to the main purpose of the paper. You want to make sure there's not too much overlap, that each body paragraph is distinct with their subtopic.



Conclusion

Here's where we end the paper. Start off with a restatement of your thesis; put your original thesis from the introduction into new words. From there, we hit on our main points again briefly. The conclusion shouldn't be introducing new information. It's like the final statement of a course hearing where you drive home the major point of your paper once more before closing it down.

Revision

Before you go through your rough draft with a fine-toothed comb looking for grammar issues, you want to focus on big picture issues. Revision is all about the big picture of the paper. It's here where you review the paper's content, the paragraph ordering, and the overall effectiveness of the paper.

Some things you should be looking for when revising your writing:

- **Cohesion:** Does the paper fit together? Does it follow a stream of logic through the paragraphs that build up to a clear conclusion?
- **Purpose:** Does the paper achieve the purpose it set out for? Does the evidence and body paragraph support the overall thesis? Is the essential question answered?
- **Audience:** Is the writing, both in word usage and tone, fit for the audience of the paper?
- **Sentence Usage:** Is there a flow between sentences? Are there transitions? Are there varied sentence lengths?

Read through your paper and ask yourself the questions above. This is a crucial part of the process, as a rough draft will never be as strong as a revised draft. Think of the rough draft as a slab of marble, and it's the revising where we sculpt the marble into the true picture we imagined from the start. Make sure all the answers to the questions above are positive before moving onto the final stage of the process.

Proofreading

With proofreading, the paper itself is complete regarding content, form, and other big picture issues. It's here where we are looking to correct any grammar, any awkward language or sentences, and any typos. Besides using grammar checkers like the spell check feature in Microsoft Word or other programs like Grammarly, the best method for proofreading is to read your paper out loud. The reason for this is that our ears can catch awkward moments and poor grammar better than our eyes. Don't trust those grammar checkers to find everything.

It's also helpful to get another set of eyes on it. Sometimes, when you spend so much time with something and are so close to it, it's difficult to find some of those errors. Get a friend, a family member, a tutor, a fellow classmate, etc. They don't need to be expert English practitioners, just someone who is willing and openminded to give an honest review.