

ENGLISH: UNDERSTANDING THE RESEARCH PAPER ASSIGNMENT



The research paper is usually the final assignment in ENGL 135. There is some variation between instructors with regard to this assignment, so it is important to follow your instructor's guidelines. Nonetheless, this handout offers some general tips about how to come up with an argument and organize your paper.

The Argument (including the Thesis Statement)



Your argument is the most important part of your research paper. Developing a compelling argument is a difficult process; it requires starting with a topic, then narrowing down the topic, and finally developing an argumentative position in relation to this topic.

A strong argument is both *specific* (not too broad or general) and *controversial* (it is not truly “an argument” if most people already agree with you—generally, the less obvious and intuitive, the better 😊).

🌟 **Example topic:** *The increasing popularity of Hollywood superhero movies with North American audiences.*

🌟 **Example argument:** *I argue that audiences are attracted to these mainstream superhero films because viewers subconsciously enjoy an initial identification with the villain (who engages in chaos and destruction) before re-identifying with the hero (who restores dominant order and the status quo).*

The example argument is presented as a **thesis statement**, which is (generally) a one-sentence declaration of the position you will be arguing throughout the paper, and it appears at the end of your introduction.

Organization & Structure



Probably the most difficult aspect of the research paper is developing some sort of organization or structure. Creating an outline before writing is helpful (like having directions and a map versus wandering aimlessly). There is no fixed template or singular way to organize a research paper, which is part of the challenge.

Basically, **the introduction paragraph** begins with the topic, and ends with the thesis statement (i.e. your argument about the topic).

The first paragraph following the introduction sometimes provides context (if necessary), such as historical or theoretical background; the former might give a brief description of the time period, whereas the latter might define key concepts. Essentially, you set up your paper by providing any information your reader should know beforehand in order to follow your argument.

All of the **other body paragraphs** work toward proving your thesis. You want to convince your reader that you are correct. You can persuade your reader using a combination of different tactics, including:



- 🌟 Using rhetorical strategies: ethos (ethical appeals), pathos (emotional appeals) & logos (logical appeals)
- 🌟 Providing supporting evidence: summarizing or paraphrasing arguments of scholars who agree with you, and/or giving examples that back up your claims
- 🌟 Refuting counter-evidence: critiquing scholars who disagree with you & arguing why they are incorrect

The conclusion paragraph often starts by restating the thesis using different words (explaining the same argument in a slightly new way), and ends by answering the “so what?” question (suggesting why this topic is significant or important to think about).

