

Writing Academic Papers
Gary E. Schnittjer

What is an academic argument?

Academic writing needs to make an argument. It is the student's opinion, but it is not about what a student feels or prefers. It is about what can be proven using evidence, reliable research, and sound reasoning.

Encyclopedia articles describe information. That is not the purpose of academic writing. Academic writing needs to make a point. State the point in a thesis and argue the point in the paper.

The explanation of information in the paper is not merely descriptive, but it is an explanation of the accuracy of the thesis statement. Explanation of evidence needs to be compared and contrasted to other ways to interpret the evidence. If no one disagrees with the thesis then there is no need to write the paper, since there is no argument to make.

Developing an academic argument¹

- Select a topic.
- Initial research. If the topic is a passage of scripture begin by studying the passage itself. Take notes and work with standard reference works (whether working in translation or original biblical languages). Then see how the passage has been handled in leading commentaries, and recent scholarship in journals, monographs, and books.
- Determine your claims. Write a working thesis statement (for help see link below).
- Consider rhetorical stance: investigator, examine evidence and draw conclusions; critic, explaining problems with a view; advocate, promoting a viewpoint based on evidence.
- Consider audience: instructor, fellow classmates, people discussing and/or influenced by the issues in the larger academic community and general readership.
- Research. Locate evidence. Summarize competing interpretations of the evidence. Evaluate competing claims and approaches. Consider the bases and implications, merits and liabilities of alternate approaches and conclusions. The paper's argument will only be compelling to the level which the student takes seriously competing claims.
- Do more research (for help see link below).
- Document everything correctly.
- Consider the weaknesses and limitations of the argument. Why do others disagree? What is legitimate about these criticisms? A strong argument will acknowledge its limitations. (But what if the argument does not have any weak spots or limitations? Then the student probably does not fully understand the issue and should start over.)
- Organize the argument. Create an outline. Decide if charts, tables, diagrams, or other visual devices would streamline presentation of evidence, and interpretation of evidence.

¹ This list is loosely based on but significantly abbreviated, expanded, and modified from Andrea A. Lunsford, John J. Ruszkiewicz, and Keith Walters, *Everything's an Argument*, 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/New York: St. Martin's, 2013), chap 16. This chapter offers much help on making academic arguments. It is recommended for further help.

- Consider tone. Do not use second or first person pronouns. Be dispassionate. Do not use sarcasm, rhetorical questions, colloquial language, or ridicule. These have no place in worthwhile academic argument.
- Proofread carefully and edit. Eliminate anything unclear or off-topic. Get response(s) and feedback on the argument, by talking about it, and asking for feedback on the paper. Does the argument say what it should say? Is the argument compelling? Can anything be said more clearly?
- Proofread it again.

Making an academic argument—the shape of an academic paper

Begin a paper with a **short and direct introduction** which includes a clear **thesis statement**. Everything in the entire paper should be about demonstrating the thesis statement. If there is anything in the paper not about the thesis statement, take it out. The purpose of the paper is to explain and demonstrate the viability of the thesis.

The body of the paper needs to demonstrate the accuracy of the thesis statement. Be sure to **provide evidence**. Critically **interact with the other approaches to and interpretations of** the evidence. **Avoid direct quotation unless necessary**. It is best to use the student’s own words and cite sources in footnotes. Provide compelling reasons with supporting evidence to explain why these other interpretations are inadequate, and the thesis being argued in the paper is correct.

If the thesis relates to an interpretation of a passage of scripture, the evidence needs to show what makes the proposed interpretation true. It is helpful to provide research showing how scholars agree and disagree with the thesis, and how they approach the passage or passages differently. Be sure to explain how those with different viewpoints handle the evidence differently. Present their case without prejudice, showing the reasons they do not agree. If opposing viewpoints are not presented in their best light, the student’s own argument is not compelling.

The conclusion should briefly explain implications. After having made an argument in favor of the thesis, explain what difference it makes. For example, if the thesis concerned an interpretation of scripture, explain how this interpretation can be applied to other biblical, theological, and/or ministry contexts.

Appendix A: Advice on Handling Scholarship

Kibbe explains **ten things never to do** in research papers.² Here is an abbreviated version:

- | | |
|---|---|
| • Suggest you are breaking new ground | • Misrepresent scholars’ viewpoints |
| • Use debated buzz words without being aware of the debates | • “Adjectivize” scholarship whether “robust,” “reductionistic,” or the like |
| • Personally attack scholars with whom you disagree | • Write paper without a thesis statement |
| • Explain how you “feel” about issues | • Ignore style guide formatting |
| • Commit logical fallacies | • Plagiarize |

² See Michael Kibbe, *From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research* (IVP, 2015), 93–96.

Appendix B: Classical Rhetoric and Academic Argument

Broadly, three aspects of producing academic argument (research, writing, presentation) correspond to five aspects of classic rhetoric: Invention, Arrangement, Style, Memory, Delivery (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 1.iii).³

RESEARCH

Invention or discovery relates to uncovering and evaluating evidence which forms the basis of an academic argument. Ideally this includes mastery of the primary evidence and competence with leading scholarly interpretations and views on the evidence.

WRITING

Arrangement or disposition relates to organizing and presenting the argument. Academic writing ordinarily begins with a thesis statement. A clear thesis statement goes a long way to organizing the argument itself. The shaping of papers will vary depending on the evidence, associated controversies and issues, and aims of the argument. Two classic examples here are simply for illustration.

introduction
statement of facts
proof
conclusion (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 3.13)⁴

introduction
statement of facts
division [outline of point]
proof [evidence]
refutation [of opposing views]
conclusion (*Rhetorica*, 1.iii)

Viable argument requires evidence. Presentation of evidence might be characterized by “brevity, clarity, and plausibility” (*Rhetorica* 1.ix.14). A disciplined writing should stay on point with “no digressions and do not wander from the account we have undertaken to set forth” (1.ix). “Proof” and “refutation” relate to positively presenting a probable account of the evidence and acknowledging and other approaches and demonstrating their inadequacy (1.x-xi). Presentation of competing interpretations of the evidence puts the present argument into framework for judgment by readership. Competing views should always be presented in their best light, without any kind of disparagement or sarcasm. A derisive presentation of opponents’ viewpoints signifies both the weakness of one’s own argument and the likelihood that the student does not understand the issues.

³ See [Cicero], *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan, Loeb Classical Library 403, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), <https://archive.org/stream/adcherenniumdera00capluoft#page/n5/mode/2up> [7.26.16]. Though *Rhetorica* was attributed to Cicero, it is anonymous from c. 80’s BCE.

⁴ Aristotle, *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese, Loeb Classical Library 193 (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1926), <https://archive.org/details/L193AristotleXXIIArtOfRhetoric> [7.26.16].

Classic rhetoric thinks in terms of calibrating **Style** to grand, middle, and simple (*Rhetorica*, 4.viii). For academic argument, clarity and rhetorical objectivity are required. Every person's argument, of course, reflects the biases and limitations of the person. Rhetorical objectivity includes not using first person pronouns, since one's own preferences are not relevant to an argument. Rhetorical objectivity excludes using second person pronouns, or being "preachy" in any way. Suitable arguments are based on evidence and presented in as straightforward and dispassionate a manner as possible. Handling implications, and, when appropriate, emotional responses and/or cultural contingencies, should not be bound up in an argument itself, but placed in a concluding section.

Better writing uses active voice verbs, while limiting adjectives and adverbs. Whenever possible personal deadlines should be well ahead of actual due dates to allow for editing and revisions. A prerequisite of one's best work includes securing critical feedback on a working draft from an associate, as well as carefully reading and editing shortcomings oneself. If research concerns finding something worth saying and that needs to be said, then writing involves saying it well.

PRESENTATION

In classical rhetoric, preparing to present an argument relates to **Memory** (*Rhetorica*, 3.xv). Students do well to prepare for presentations by putting talking points and notes on index cards. Those who are new to public speaking should consider drafting out every word of presentation, as a basis to make an outline of talking points. Ideally, presentations will be practiced in advance to develop pacing, tone, and discover elements that can be improved. Presenters do well to have notes in outline form on notecards or the like, even for a thoroughly memorized presentation, which may be consulted in the event they are needed.

Delivery should begin with a thesis statement and entire presentation should directly relate to thesis statement. Presentations may use visual complements, like images and/or captions. Presenters should avoid unprofessional, trendy, or complicated media complements. All visual and other elements used should be clear and straightforward both complimenting and strengthening oral presentation itself. Common problems include unclear thesis statement, visuals with too many words, talking down to auditors, too much detail, and especially lack of preparation.

What's next?

For help writing a thesis statement see:

http://scriptureworkshop.com/researchandwriting/w/thesis_statement.pdf

For help with research see:

http://scriptureworkshop.com/researchandwriting/w/academic_level_research.pdf

For help with originality and plagiarism see:

http://scriptureworkshop.com/researchandwriting/w/plagiarism_defined.pdf