

Basic Paper Organization

Professors and TAs want you to make a clear and effective argument in your paper. To do this you need to organize your thoughts. Here are some important components of social science papers:

A Strong Introduction

- *A Thesis Statement*

A well-developed thesis statement is one of the most critical components of a strong paper. The thesis is located in your introductory paragraph, and puts forth the claim or argument your paper will explore. It should be clear, concise, and specific about the points you will make in your paper.

Cardinal rule of thesis statements: Make sure your thesis is not a statement of fact or simply an assertion of your opinion; it needs to be something that someone could reasonably disagree with. It should include words like “because” or “since.”

- *A Roadmap that Previews the Rest of the Argument/Overall Paper*

Touch upon the sub-arguments that you will use to support your thesis. This clarifies your argument and lets the reader know right away how you intend to back up your thesis statement with evidence. For shorter papers, the roadmap can be one sentence or incorporated into your thesis statement. For longer papers, the roadmap can be a couple of sentences or stand alone as its own short paragraph.

The Body of the Paper

- *Topic Sentences*

Each paragraph should have a “topic sentence,” or a mini thesis statement for the paragraph. The topic sentence will indicate what the paragraph is about and how it relates to your argument as a whole. Think of the topic sentence as playing the same role in each paragraph that the introduction plays in the whole paper.

- *Effective Paragraphs*

Each paragraph should advance your thesis, address only one topic, and be logically ordered within the paper.

- *Transitions*

If the organization of your paper is clear, the transitions between paragraphs should come naturally. The transitions indicate to your reader when you are changing topics. Try reading your paper out loud to get a feel for how well one paragraph leads into the next.

Cardinal rule of paragraphs: Don’t start a paragraph with one topic and then stray into other, unrelated topics. Stay on track!

The Conclusion

Think of the conclusion as similar to the introduction, except that instead of saying “this is what I’m going to show and this is how I’m going to show it,” you want to say “this is what I have effectively demonstrated, using this evidence.” It should contain a rephrasing of your thesis statement and, briefly, the key elements you used to support your argument. You want your conclusion to leave the reader with a solid sense of your paper’s overall purpose and main argument, and to remind the reader what evidence you used to support your argument.

Cardinal rule of conclusions: No new ideas! If you come to a different conclusion than the one presented in your thesis, you may need to rework the thesis (and probably the rest of the paper).