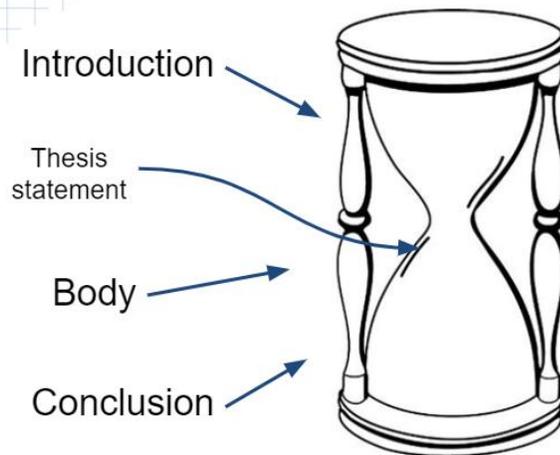


# The Structure of an Academic Paper

Academic papers are like hourglasses.

The paper opens at its widest point; the **introduction** makes broad connections to the reader's interests, hoping they will be persuaded to follow along, then gradually narrows to a tight, focused, **thesis statement**. The argument stays relatively narrow and focused on the thesis throughout the **body**, or the middle paragraphs. Like an hourglass, the **conclusion** broadens once more, reinforcing connections to the larger context.

## Shape of an academic paper



This model is standard in the U.S. social sciences and at HGSE, so we will focus on it for the rest of the tutorial. That said, writing conventions vary widely across countries, cultures, and even disciplines. For example, although the hourglass model introduces the most important point right from the beginning as a guide to the rest of the paper, some traditions build the argument gradually and deliver the main idea as a punchline.

Scholars in the U.S. sometimes joke that the style is to "tell your audience what you are going to tell them, tell it to them, then tell them what you told them." This seems repetitive, so why do it?

- The reader knows your position and can easily decide whether to read further.
- Once you're familiar with the model, you can read academic papers more efficiently. It would be challenging to use some of the critical reading strategies from Unit 1 if every writer developed a unique structure.
- A standard structure provides a template to help writers organize ideas and keep track of all the components required in an academic paper.

## Writing the introduction

As we've discussed, all introductions begin broadly. The audience, format, and purpose of your paper influence how broad it should be. You can expect more background knowledge from readers of a technical journal than you can from readers of a popular magazine.

### Use a 'hook' to capture readers' interest.

The **hook** refers to the first sentence of your introduction, which is what you'll use to spark curiosity and entice readers to carry on. It should be concise and relatively simple. For example:

*The prevalence of suicide thoughts and attempts among transgender adults is significantly higher than that of the U.S. general population" (Herman, Brown, & Hass, 2019).*

*In 1989, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to refer to the idea that dimensions of identity such as race, sex, and class overlap and affect each other.*

*When I started my career at an almost all-Black elementary school in my home city, I was the only teacher of color.*

Each of these examples is specific enough that we already have a sense of what the paper might discuss, but simple enough for most readers to quickly understand. Try one of the following to catch the reader's eye:

- An eye-catching, startling fact or statistic.
- An interesting or provocative question
- A definition of a key term or concept
- An overview of a debate, the positions on both sides
- A question, puzzle, or surprise
- An apparent problem or paradox
- An intriguing anecdote, quote, or observation

### The 'so what': Why is this important?

After you've hooked your readers, keep them by presenting your thesis clearly and persuasively. Set the context of your paper, situating your topic in the context of other research in the field. Why are you making this argument in the first place? What is the problem? Why is this work important? If a reader asks you "So what?", you'll want to be able to say why your thesis matters.

Sometimes it's hard to articulate why the reader might care. If you're stuck, think about what led you to the idea in the first place. Return to the purpose of the paper (as we discussed in Unit I). When you were first learning about the topic, what did you hope to understand, or what did your professor hope to teach you? Describe to your reader what they will know and/or be able to do after having read your paper, and you may discover why it is important.

## Thesis statement

The thesis is generally the narrowest part and last sentence of the introduction, and conveys your position, the essence of your argument or idea. See our handout on Writing a Thesis Statement for more.

## The roadmap

Not all academic papers include a roadmap, but many do. Usually following the thesis, a roadmap is a narrative table of contents that summarizes the flow of the rest of the paper. Below, see an example roadmap in which Cuevas (2019) succinctly outlines her argument. You may also see roadmaps that list the bodies of literature that the author will review, or key points from the study design and procedure.

*"In examining the experiences of fifteen undocumented Latina/o parents whose children were successfully admitted and matriculated to a prestigious public university, I present the concept of sacrificios (sacrifices) as a lens through which to understand undocumented Latina/o parents' engagement in their children's postsecondary aspirations. I define sacrificios as the conscious decisions and investments undocumented Latina/o parents make to support their children's educational attainment, which comes at a very high personal cost due to the sociopolitical context they face as undocumented immigrants. Specifically, I reveal how undocumented Latina/o parents' day-to-day sacrificios, or their quotidian sacrifices of money, effort, time, and safety, are forms of engagement in their children's education...these are intentional parenting decisions that are similar to ones the literature identifies as "concerted cultivation," strategies belonging to upper- and middle-class White and Black US citizens (Lareau, 2003). But because of the constraints they face as undocumented immigrants, these parental investments come at a very personal cost, reconceptualizing these day-to-day sacrifices as concerted sacrificios. Undocumented parents' intention to sacrifice for their children's education despite the consequences of their undocumented status is what differentiates their actions as concerted sacrificios. Thus, when day-to-day sacrificios are made for their children's academic future in particular, they are also concerted sacrificios."*

Cuevas, Stephany (2019). 'Con Mucho Sacrificio, We Give Them Everything We Can': The Strategic Day-to-Day Sacrifices of Undocumented Latina/o Parents. *Harvard Educational Review*: Fall 2019, Vol. 89, No. 3, pp. 473-496.

## Writing the body

The body is the bulk of the paper, where the 'convincing' takes place. Each paragraph focuses on one piece of your argument, building on what you've already written and flowing logically to the next step. Ultimately, the body should fully persuade your reader that your thesis (which you have already provided) is substantiated by evidence and sound reasoning.

Most paragraphs have four components:

- Topic sentence
- Evidence
- Analysis
- Transition

## Topic sentence

The **topic sentence** is usually the first in the paragraph. As the name implies, it tells the reader your main point, and should connect to the thesis stated in your introduction. Subsequent sentences in the paragraph should relate back to this topic.

## Evidence

Ideas, facts, or information from external sources that support your claims – either data you collect yourself, or the research and writing of others.

## Analysis

You should never present evidence without some form of analysis, or explaining the meaning of what you have shown us. Even if the quote, idea, or statistic seems to speak for itself, you must offer the reader your interpretation of how it supports your topic sentence.

Although they are separate concepts, it can be hard to separate analysis from evidence in practice. They are closely linked, and often occur in the same sentence.

---

The district is primarily made up of White (63.2%) and Asian (35.5%) students.

**Evidence.** We may believe this statement, but don't know what it signifies unless the author writes another sentence.

---

Because the district was primarily White (63%) and Asian (35%), leaders saw no urgent reason to incorporate Black Studies into the curriculum.

**Evidence with interpretation/analysis.** The author interprets the evidence as relevant to a lack of urgency for Black studies.

---

The school district is 63% White and 35% Asian, with standardized test scores similar to the national averages for those groups.

**Evidence with interpretation/analysis.** The same evidence is used here to help the reader understand the district's performance.

---

## Transition

At the start of each paragraph, consider how it relates to the previous one. Also consider how the last sentence sets up your next point. A short transition phrase like "In contrast," or "Similarly," can guide the reader from one idea to the next. Too many transition words make writing clunky and hard to read, but they are handy for shifting between paragraphs.

## Writing the conclusion

The conclusion is the last section of your paper. It should briefly review the argument you've built, but it's **not a summary – it's your final pitch** to the audience for your main idea. A conclusion should:

- Remind the reader what you have just told them, clarifying the key ideas to ensure there is no misunderstanding.
- Return to the hook used in the introduction
- Return to a broader lens, reminding readers how the thesis applies to your context.
- Suggest what the reader should take away from your paper.
- Pose questions for future study, actions to take, policy interventions, or other implications of your ideas.

Take care not to repeat your words exactly in the conclusion. At the same time, you should not introduce any major new concepts or parts of your argument in this section. You are synthesizing and commenting on the ideas you've presented, but not making any substantially new points. By the end of your paper, readers should already understand your position and the evidence used to support it. The conclusion provides readers a sense of completion, a reminder why your paper was worth reading.