

# The Research Essay

For individualized help with your research essay, visit us at the Writing Center:

<https://brandeis.mywconline.net>

# I've finished my Research Proposal... now what?

- Consider your claim [the best answer to your Big Question]
- Consider holes in present scholarship [remember how/why your Big Question wasn't answered in the first place]
- Consider what you need to support your claim [Resources/Research]
- Consider why answering your Big Question matters

# Building your Argument

If the reader is going to accept your answer...

- What smaller concepts will need to be accepted first?
- What contrary claims will have to be discounted?

Ex: *The world will be destroyed within the next 20 years.*

- What other evidence might a reader want before jumping on board with this claim?

# Outlining – Establishing the Form

- The beginning of your essay will probably be very similar to the beginning of your Research Proposal.
- The body paragraphs will be the site of most development.
- The conclusion will be similar to the Significance portion of your Research Proposal, but this time with more emphasis on your claim rather than your question.

# Form Overview

- Motive/Claim [Thesis]
- Critical background [condensed literature review]
- Evidence
- Evidence
- Etc.
  - Possible counterargument(s)
- Synthesis/Conclusion

# Developing an Argument: The Thesis

Already have a working thesis? Let's make sure it's a strong one!

- **Specific:** Does your thesis clearly make a specific claim about a specific topic?  
Is it your own?
- **Complex:** Is this claim commonly understood? Why do you need 10-12 pages to support it? Does it account for possible counterarguments?
- **Arguable:** Could there be another answer to your Big Question besides the one you are supporting?
- **Risky:** Is it an extraordinary claim? Does it move beyond the conventional wisdom or comfortable status quo? “Oh really?! Prove it!”

# Sample Weak Theses (from papers on African Literature)

- “This paper will explore the similarities and differences between Okonkwo and Obierika.”

**Thesis makes no claim**

- “Achebe’s novel deals with the trials and tribulations of the Igbo people in precolonial Nigeria.”

**Thesis is a statement of fact**

- “Aidoo’s play demonstrates that it is human nature to be fearful of cultural difference.”

**Thesis is based on a cliché**

- “The novel *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates the Western imperialism destroys everything it touches.”

**Thesis is based on personal conviction**

- “Achebe’s novel illustrates the timeless struggle between the races.”

**Thesis is overly broad**

(Credit: Anna Jaysane-Darr and Faith Smith. Developed at Brandeis University through a grant from the Davis Educational Foundation.)

# Necessary Background

- Primarily in the first few body paragraphs, but can occur throughout
- Similar to the literature review from the Research Proposal, but more persuasive/argumentative
- Only what the reader will need to understand your argument
- Only what is useful for your argument
- Do not ignore literature that seems contrary to your thesis: this will be useful for a counterclaim. [Also, ignoring such sources will be a point of attack for a skeptical reader.]
- This is an objective assessment of previous material, but it works rhetorically by providing a carefully designed frame for your evidence.



# Evidence [supporting your claim]

- These are the body paragraphs.
- Begin each evidence area with a mini-thesis/a topic sentence.
- Transform this sentence into a question.
- Answering this question will drive your writing in this paragraph.
- Beneath that question, everything you write should work towards supporting that topic sentence.
- Just before finishing the area, remind the reader why this mini-thesis matters in the context of your Thesis.
- Inform the reader what we still need to be sure of before we can agree fully with the Thesis [transition]
- Each “Evidence Area” might occupy multiple paragraphs
- 2-4 evidence areas is typical, but there are no set rules! Do what makes sense for your argument!

# Synthesis/Conclusion

- As was done at the end of each evidence area, we must remind the reader how all your evidence works together to support the Thesis.
- Briefly remind us what the topics of each evidence are, then clearly explain how these factors combine to support your primary claim.
- If something still needs further study for an even stronger conclusion to be reached, tell the reader plainly “such-and-such still needs to be done/proven/established/etc.”

# Form Recap

- Motive/Thesis
- Critical Background
- Evidence Areas
- Synthesis/Conclusion

## BEST PRACTICES

It's not always necessary to write the essay straight through/in the order it appears:

1. Establish a Thesis Sentence
2. Establish the necessary Topic Sentences
3. Turn each topic sentence into a question.
4. Answer the questions
5. Synthesize your evidence
6. Background Review/Intro/Conclusion

I like this order, as it allows me to write what I feel up to during each session without risk of repeating myself or getting unorganized. The order is up to you; but, be sure to stick to your outline!

# Q&A / Test a Thesis

Schedule an appointment at the Writing Center for more personalized assistance!

Consultants are happy to help with essays at every stage in development, from brainstorming to the final draft.

Sign up for an appointment at: <https://brandeis.mywconline.net/>