

## The Academic Paper — Overview

The American academic paper generally follows certain conventions. It is typically written “top down,” with an explicit statement of the writer’s argument presented at the outset and systematically supported throughout. In some cultures, the opposite is true: the point is revealed at the end of the essay. Citation principles also differ in various cultures. All RISD students are expected to learn and follow American academic writing standards, including proper documentation to avoid plagiarism.

### Argument Counts

Most academic papers explore a debatable issue, with the author taking an original, thought-provoking stance on that issue — forming a **thesis** or **argument** — and providing evidence to convince the reader of its worth. “Argument” should not be confused with a heated exchange between people. Rather, think of it as a means of engaging course material and attempting to raise and resolve your chosen subject of debate. Make your point as convincing as possible by carefully selecting and ordering your supporting evidence. Presenting the opposing viewpoint shows your deeper understanding of what’s at stake and may help you strengthen your argument. Remember to consider your audience, to judge readers’ level of expertise on your subject and the degree to which they may resist your argument.

### Structuring the Paper

While formats of the academic paper may vary according to discipline and assignment, most often your paper should contain the following parts: an **introduction** with an explicit **thesis statement** and **map of support**; **supporting paragraphs**, each controlled by a single idea expressed in the **topic sentence**; a **conclusion**; and **in-text citations** or **end/footnotes** and a **works cited** page or **bibliography**.

### Meeting Outside Expectations

These conventions are not just abstract ideals, they are specific grading criteria. Professors will look for a **clear, debatable, convincing**, and **original** thesis, for **thorough supporting evidence**, for logical and **coherent organization** and transitions, and for **careful documentation** of research sources. In addition to these rhetorical and citation criteria, they will value well-written prose that is relatively free of typos and grammatical errors. Remember that achieving these goals takes time and happens in stages — brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, and proofreading are all part of the writing process.

Remember, too, that academic papers come in many forms. Different disciplines have different conventions. English classes, for example, focus on literary analysis; in Art History classes, formal analysis papers are the first step in learning to respond to art in writing. Various modes of rhetoric, such as exposition, narration, and comparison, are practiced across the disciplines. Writing assignments will usually specify disciplinary and rhetorical expectations. When in doubt, ask your professor.

### Meeting Your Own Expectations

Learning and practicing rhetorical conventions in writing is not only an academic expectation, it will make you a more effective communicator and a strong critical thinker. Enjoy the challenge of conceiving and presenting a unique and compelling idea. Creative investigation is central to your work as an artist and designer; it can be equally so in your work as a writer.