Elements of the Academic Paper

Question: The specific thing your paper is trying to figure out. It should be narrow enough to be engaged fully within the paper, with broader implications for our understanding of the field. Your question might be practical (arising from trying to make something happen) or conceptual (arising from something we don't yet understand). A question motivates the research process, though your question may grow and shift as you learn more. The question is typically presented early in the paper, perhaps after some initial context to help the reader understand it. It might originate from a gap in what we know, a disagreement among scholars, a wish to make something happen, or a fact that doesn't fit our current understanding. Because it sets you on a path to new knowledge, your question is the biggest single determinant of the impact of your paper. A clear question helps keep your paper on topic. You can assess the relevance of each part of your argument by asking "What does this contribute to answering my question?"

Main Claim: The central point you are trying to convince your reader of. Sometimes called your *thesis*, your main claim makes an assertion about the truth—what the data suggest, our understanding of the field, a proposed course of action, how to interpret a text, topic, or event. Your claim typically appears in the introductory section of your paper as a response to your *question*. It should be the product of research and interpretation, not a preconceived idea you gather evidence for. Your claim should be specific enough to be unique to your essay. It should be narrow enough to be demonstrated convincingly in the space allotted, and also complex enough to evolve in complexity and nuance over the course of your paper.

Stakes: The broader implications of your question for the topic, the field, or the world. Sometimes called *significance* or *motive*, stakes draw the reader into your paper by highlighting not what your paper will show them, but why they should care. Stakes allow for a deep investigation into a focused question by showing how your findings contribute to a larger context beyond the question itself. The stakes of your argument may be conceptual (impacting our understanding), practical (impacting the world), or both. Stakes are typically presented early in a paper, linked to your *question*. A question with stakes is often referred to as a research *problem*.

Evidence: The facts, details, data, or text you offer to show that your claims are true. Evidence can be quoted, summarized (condensed in your own words), or paraphrased (rewritten using different language). Evidence typically supports smaller, paragraph-level claims that develop the argument for the paper's main claim. In some fields, these claims are typically presented before evidence (i.e. in topic sentences) to allow readers to assess the claim while reading the evidence. In other fields, these claims are typically presented after the evidence so readers can make up their own mind about what the evidence suggests before seeing the author's conclusions. How evidence supports a claim is not self-evident, and typically needs to be explained with *analysis*.

Analysis: Your explanation for how a piece of evidence supports a claim. Analysis typically calls attention to relevant details in a piece of evidence, and then interprets those details—explaining how they give us reason to believe a broader, more far-reaching claim. Analysis typically appears immediately after the piece of evidence being interpreted and culminates in a claim or conclusion about what the evidence suggests, thereby connecting evidence to claim. Analysis is where you, the writer, are most present in a paper—in control of the ideas and guiding the audience to a deeper understanding. It is usually significantly longer than the evidence being interpreted, though how thoroughly you analyze your evidence will depend on how much explanation your audience needs to fully understand your reasoning.

Structure: The sequence of ideas that guide your reader through your paper. Your structure should tell a story that begins with a problem (*question* + *stakes*), adopts a *methodology* to confront that problem, grapples with *evidence* and *analysis* on the path to resolving the problem—responding to complications as they arise—and, finally, arrives at some new understanding (your *main claim*). Your structure should be developmental, with each successive idea drawing from and building on the idea that came before it. Your structure should be made visible to your reader through effective *stitching*.

Stitching: Words or moves that make the connections between parts of your paper clear to your reader and help them follow your logic from one idea to the next. Stitching can be linguistic (using language to connect ideas) or structural (ordering ideas to flow clearly from one to the next). Stitching is most visible in transitions that link one idea to another, but it should operate on some level in every sentence of your paper. It is a core element of clarity. Effective stitching makes it easier for readers to follow your argument, increasing their capacity to engage with your ideas.

Methodology: How your paper makes visible the steps you took to investigate your research question. Because the reliability of your findings is based on how you carried out your research, methodology is the foundation of a convincing argument. Your methodology might include how you gathered data, your analytical framework, where you chose to look (and not look) for sources, and why you drew from some areas of research over others. It should acknowledge the limitations of your approach and any potential biases. While some disciplines have more formal conventions for presenting your methodology, your paper should convey what you did to achieve your findings to help convince your audience that those findings are reliable.

Orienting: Short pieces of additional context your audience needs to follow your argument. Orienting clarifies the meaning, implications, connections, or authority of a component of your paper. It includes brief explanations, short definitions, and bits of background that appear immediately before or after the component they're clarifying. Orienting can be used to sharpen your reader's understanding or establish what a slippery concept means within your paper. To avoid confusing readers with non-essential information, orienting should be as brief and unobtrusive as possible, though how much you need will depend on your *audience*.

Audience: The content, tone, register, and structure that reflect who you are addressing in your paper. Audience informs both how you write and what you say. To establish your authority for an audience of experts you might need to use insider references and terminology that would confuse a non-expert audience. Non-experts will need information that might make experts feel talked down to, while experts might appreciate details that would bore a more general audience. As you write, your guiding question should be: “What does my audience need—linguistically, contextually, structurally—to understand the ideas and significance of my paper?”

Keyterms: Recurring words that capture the major concepts your argument is built upon. Keyterms typically serve as shorthand for a larger set of ideas. They should contribute meaningfully to the paper's argument, either by supplying ideas that it draws upon or by acquiring an expanded meaning or purpose within the argument itself. They should be clearly defined and present throughout the paper.

Research Context: The body of other scholars’ work that your paper draws upon and contributes to. In your research context you (a) summarize the arguments other scholars have made about your subject to (b) highlight gaps, disagreements, opportunities to build, &c. that (c) justify your own study and its methods and (d) demonstrate its potential contribution to the field. You should present the sources in your research context grouped into different schools of thought and *in conversation* with one another (even if they don’t know they’re talking to each other). The research context typically appears in the first half of a paper and is recalled in the conclusion to demonstrate the impact the paper has made on that body of knowledge.

Style: The choices you make about language, sentence structure, and paragraph construction that shape how a reader experiences your text. Your style should invite engagement from the reader with its tone, liveliness, and presentation of your content. Some of your style choices will reflect the conventions for communicating in your field, while others will reflect your voice, establishing a connection with the reader by affirming that the paper was written by a unique, engaging human being. Your stylistic choices should prioritize clarity. They should be intentional, precise, and made with the reader in mind.

Title: A concise summary that communicates the topic of your paper to potential readers. Readers will encounter your title (a) without any other information about your subject, and (b) while deciding whether your paper is worth their attention. Titles have their own field-specific conventions, including length, format (e.g. “title: subtitle”), and prioritization of general vs specific keywords. Including terms an interested reader would enter into a search engine to find your paper can help you reach your intended audience. The best titles capitalize on the familiarity of standard title conventions in their field while also doing something creative to make them stand out.