



## Writing an Analytic Research Paper

An analytic paper demands that you perform many tasks: formulate a thesis, gather sources, evaluate them, use them to support your original ideas, meticulously document everything you've done. You can save yourself a great deal of time, however, by doing a few simple things before you begin writing. We'll use a 1991 assignment about the Gulf War to illustrate how this works.

### Analyzing the Assignment

Read the question carefully, and never be afraid to ask questions about the assignment. Never "second guess" your instructor; ask her when you are not certain about the assignment.

Note any words or phrases in the question that seem to demand a certain type of writing or thinking activity, especially words such as "compare," "discuss," or "evaluate." Be alert to other phrases that limit the scope of your research.

*Here is a sample research assignment, with key terms in bold type:*

The events that led up to the Gulf War included a spirited debate in both houses of Congress about whether or not to authorize President Bush to use military force in the Persian Gulf. That debate continues today, since the American military victory neither toppled Saddam Hussein nor removed all threats to America's Mideast oil supply.

Do you think that the military option achieved the best possible results in the Gulf? Could another option, such as a continuation of the UN's economic sanctions, have done a better job of countering Iraq's aggression and securing the Gulf's oilfields? In a paper of at least 12 pages, **discuss** your answer and **provide ample support** for it from a **range of scholarly articles and books**. You should **generally avoid** newspaper editorials, newsmagazines, and television broadcasts other than special documentaries.

Note that the first paragraph here basically discusses the background for the question, whereas the second paragraph delineates the writer's tasks. Note the key words and phrases in the second paragraph; each of these limits your task and specifies how you are to go about fulfilling it.

Prepare a prewriting exercise such as [brainstorming](#) or [clustering](#) to help you focus the ideas. By doing this, you will have a better idea of a thesis and of the scope of your library research.

### Developing a Draft of Your Thesis

Assume that you generally agree with the use of military force in the Gulf. Your prewriting brings out four possible arguments for military action against Iraq:

- the need to support Saudi Arabia and other gulf states opposing Iraq,
- the slow effect of sanctions,
- the ability of a military strike to "take out" Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, and
- Desert Storm's "deterrence value" to other aggressors.

Other reasons exist for not using military force; but given the nature of the original question, you must make a choice.

*Narrow the thesis.* Not even a twelve-page paper could address all of these issues. Look how the previous

arguments can be grouped:

- Argument 1 is primarily a political issue, 3 is a military issue, and 4 seems to straddle both military and political concerns
- Argument 2 might lead you into a discussion of the UN, or into a discussion of "standing up" to aggression (and argument 4)

To answer the question effectively, you would probably need to determine which focus you would select, be that the military or political benefits of a military strike, and develop your thesis there. Using our examples, you might decide to focus upon arguments 3 & 4, which could lead to this tentative thesis:

Even if the US could have liberated Kuwait without a military strike, no other option would have been as effective in wiping out Iraq's deadliest weapons, nor in deterring other nations who might want to use force against their neighbors.

Want to try this process for your own thesis statement?

### **Reconsidering the Thesis**

At this point, you might start your work in the library; be ready to modify your tentative thesis!

Is your thesis unworkable? Assuming you knew something about the topic before you began your research, this may not happen. But even in that case, you'll sometimes find that your thesis just does not line up with the opinions of most "experts."

Weigh the evidence you'll use to support your arguments. You may need to do more extensive prewriting to figure out how you'll use all of your evidence, such as preparing another [Brainstorming list](#). For a topic such as Desert Storm, you'll probably find more than enough sources; don't try to use them all!

Students often get confused about a controversial topic because the experts don't agree. That can make your task easier, since your paper could find strong evidence on either side of the topic.

Weigh the authority and expertise of the sources at this point. Who wrote your articles? An editorial writer for the "Cornville Hooter" usually won't have the expertise of one who writes for "The Christian Science Monitor," nor of a political scientist who publishes in a professional journal. For our hypothetical assignment, remember its call for you to use "scholarly" sources. But you might also include the writings of important eyewitnesses such as General Schwarzkopf; although Schwarzkopf is neither a political scientist nor an historian, his status as an "insider" lends observations value.

Reconsider your thesis again. Even if you no longer agree with your original thesis, research and reading may nudge your thesis in a new direction. It is not unusual for writers to begin a paper with one thesis and then go on to prove another.

You are now ready to begin the first draft, or you are very close to that point.

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