

Argumentative Research Topics and Theses

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the intersections between argumentative writing and academic research. We will examine how to find topics appropriate to a research paper and turn them into valid research theses, and explore some examples of these.

Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. Research and Argumentative Writing
2. Research Topics
3. Argumentative Research Theses
4. Argumentative Research Theses: Example

1. Research and Argumentative Writing

It's entirely possible for writers to make argumentative essays using only their own logic, experience, and emotional appeal, but going beyond your personal experience gives you as a writer a huge advantage. Incorporating research adds credibility to argumentative essays by showing the writer's engagement with a topic that allows the writer to explore the topic and learn, beyond his or her personal opinion.

Research can also help writers make unique and valuable contributions to the conversation by showing how their ideas bring new knowledge or perspectives to the topic. This innovation can come about through distinguishing the writer's ideas from those in the secondary sources, or through original research and analysis--or both.

2. Research Topics

Similar to other kinds of writing, when beginning an argumentative research paper, writers should try to find a topic that interests them personally and which is also narrow enough to discuss effectively in the time and space allowed for the essay. The other important restriction that all writers should follow is to only choose research topics that are debatable. They should focus on questions which have not already been proven and

do not already have agreed-upon answers to, whether as a society as a whole or as a specific field of study.



DID YOU KNOW

The reason there's such an emphasis on making sure research questions are debatable is that the priority of academic writing is to participate in the broader conversation and contribute to the pool of knowledge, neither of which is possible if the question being answered isn't debatable.



HINT

One easy way to make sure your question is debatable is to choose one for which there are at least two clear sides. After all, if others are debating it, then you can, too.

Of course, many topics and many questions will encompass far more than two perspectives and so, just like avoiding yes or no questions, it is a good idea to select topics with multiple, nuanced perspectives. This will most likely lead you to writing a more dynamic essay and it is almost certainly going to teach you something.



EXAMPLE For example, a subject like animal abuse would be a hard topic to write an effective research paper on, because without more focus, there aren't a lot of positions available--either it's bad and unforgivable, or it's bad, but not *that* bad.



HINT

Broad topics don't necessarily make for a broad range of positions.

Obviously, this is an oversimplification, but compare this broad topic to a more specific one of animal cruelty as regards to the food industry. Now it becomes a little more complicated and as such, there are more positions to hold, from those who believe in eating meat but refuse on principle to fund factory farms that treat livestock as less than even an animal for slaughter, to those who will eat anything but would still like to see farm conditions improved, to the vegetarians-- and the many intersections of these three.

As you can see, the topic chosen makes a huge difference, not only for the arguments that can be made and the positions that can be taken, but for the kinds of argumentative research essays that might come of them.

3. Argumentative Research Theses

As with other forms of academic writing, argumentative essays must also include a clear, focused thesis--one that ideally takes a strong position or makes a specific and debatable claim. There are many ways to bring a research topic to this point, but here are some questions that writers often ask at the beginning of the writing process:

- What kind of question is it--a question of fact, definition, interpretation, or policy? These are the most common forms of thesis questions, being questions that seek to either understand a thing, explain what exactly it is to the reader, state how the reader should understand it, or seek the best course of action for a particular group or about a particular issue.
- Could the question be more complex? Ask yourself if it's a yes or no question and if so, how you could complicate it and in doing so, generate a more complicated answer.
- What is the overall purpose of the essay? Ask yourself what impact you want your essay to have and what

its overall purpose is.

↪ **EXAMPLE** For example, do you want your readers to take an action or just to know or understand something they might not already know or understand?

- What is your claim or position, and why do you believe your claim is true, and important? Can you write an entire essay proving this primary reason as opposed to several scattered reasons? If not, should your focus be expanded or narrowed?
- What model of argumentation would be best for the essay, its thesis, and your purpose in writing? It's a good idea to consider the models of argumentation and which would best suit your essay's purpose.

↪ **EXAMPLE** For example, would the rationalism of the Toulmin model work better or worse than the consensus-building emphasis of the Rogerian model?

Once you've brainstormed through these questions, draft a working thesis and let it guide your research, outlining, and drafting processes.



Remember to feel free to adjust the thesis as needed. This is not a sign of a faulty thesis, but of your developing ideas and opinions about the subject.

4. Argumentative Research Theses: Example

Suppose you've just been assigned an argumentative research paper on something within the topic of animal abuse, to continue the theme mentioned previously. You've already seen how that topic, broad as it is, can be honed down into manageably focused areas. Let's assume you've come up with three questions that you might want to try to answer in your upcoming essay. Here is the first question:

Question 1: What penalties should be put in place to prevent abuse of animals?

What you need to do now is ask yourself some of the questions explored above, starting with what kind of question is it? Upon further examination, you can see that it is a question of policy and is fairly complex, as the answers you might make for it are varied and would need nuance to make complete.

Regarding purpose of the essay, you want this essay to have the effect of convincing readers to take the specific action of pushing for animal abuse legislation on the federal level, likely, and you could definitely write an essay, if not a book, on the answer to this question. In fact, now that you're looking at it, you can see that there are probably too many facets to this question. Even though you thought you had already narrowed it down, you can see now that this question and any thesis developed to answer it would have to encompass a huge range of issues, from abuse of pets to livestock, from negligent or accidental abuse to deliberate cruelty. What seemed like a specific question at first is actually hiding a huge range of assumptions about what animal abuse really means. Therefore, a more specific question might be something like this:

Question 1: What penalties should be in place to punish those who deliberately and cruelly abuse animals?

This would narrow your focus to a particular kind of abuse and allow you to focus your answer on arguing for the creation of a special category of abuse reserved for deliberate or egregious cruelty to animals. Based upon this, consider this working thesis:

Thesis 1: We should create a new category of abuse, reserved for deliberate or egregious cruelty to animals, and have harsher punishments for those who commit it.

Now, moving on to the second question, consider this:

Question 2: What industrial controls should be enacted to govern the food industry's handling and treatment of animals?

It's another question of policy and is already fairly complicated. There are two possible effects you might want an essay answering this question to have: one, to convince readers that the food industry can and should be doing more to treat the animals it uses with compassion, if not necessarily kindness or dignity; and two, to change their eating habits in order to only support companies and individuals who treat food animals this way.

As you can see, for this question and this essay, the policy in mind is a personal policy, and as such, one you'd likely want to share with the readers and perhaps convince them to adopt. It is based upon a belief that this policy is morally correct, but to be effective, you would likely have to bring in outside sources and use the high rationalism of the Toulmin model of argumentation and avoid the emotional appeals that tend to be overused, as far as this topic is concerned.

The second question is already working fairly well, but since the focus appears to be more on the personal intersections of food and animal rights, let's reword it to reflect this difference:

Question 2: What food choices can and should an American consumer make to avoid supporting animal cruelty as an industry standard?

Based on our questions, here is a revised working thesis:

Thesis 2: We should all go through the extra process of knowing where our food comes from, especially when that food was once a living, breathing being, and as such should take responsibility for knowing what process we're buying into when we buy meat or other animal products.

Now, consider this third question:

Question 3: What are a human's moral responsibilities regarding animals?

This question is obviously taking a different angle, questioning the nature of the overall subject. This is a question of interpretation since any answer to this would have to make some kind of analysis of human morality in general and then apply that to our treatment of animals. Depending on the answer's direction, it

might also be a question of definition, as some thesis statement seeking to respond to this question might go about outlining and creating a set of rules literally defining a human's moral responsibilities regarding animals.

For this exercise, let's assume the purpose of any essay written about this research question would be more about interpretation, focusing on how we can apply the rules and taboos that all people seem to share to some extent--at least regardless of ideology or religion--to the case of animals. You could even debate whether you'd want to define animals as non-human people, as I know some writers do, although this question is already focused enough. It just requires some rephrasing to ensure that your answer would only have to be applied to animal cruelty and not, for example, to whether a human should be morally obligated to risk injury to save an animal, or other questions related to morality and animals. Therefore, consider this revision of the third question:

Question 3: What are our moral responsibilities regarding cruelty to and abuse of animals?

Based on this, your final working thesis would likely be something to this effect:

Thesis 3: As creatures capable of conscious thought and empathy, we are morally obligated not to participate in any avoidable cruelty or abuse of an animal and to prevent it when possible.

As you can see, within this single topic lie an uncountable number of possible questions to ask, and even within each question are multiple answers that could be put forth. However, by analyzing the questions you ask, you can make sure that whatever your answer or thesis, it will be both searchable and debatable.



SUMMARY

Today we learned about the intersections of academic research and argumentative writing. We focused on research topics and how to utilize certain questions to generate an argumentative thesis with the research in mind. Lastly, we explored an example of taking a broad research topic and narrowing it down to form a clear, focused, debatable thesis.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall