Sustaining an argument across chapters

The main thread or flow of your dissertation or thesis is provided by your research questions and the answers you find to them. Keep your research questions visible (e.g. on your wall). If you feel you are going off track, refer back to them. If you are not sure whether a point is relevant, ask yourself how it helps you to answer your questions.

Keep referring your reader back to your research questions, especially in a long thesis. For example, use phrases like “These results provide a partial explanation for the patterns mentioned in the second aim of this research study (see Chapter 1 p.19).” Make sure your concluding chapter shows how your research questions have been answered.

Each chapter will also have its own arguments which all contribute to answering your research questions. Identify these, and use the introduction and conclusion of each chapter to link back to your overall research questions and to provide links forward to the next chapter.

Top tip: It is easier to see how each chapter fits together once you have a full draft. When you have drafted all your chapters, read them through as a whole and use a highlighter pen to mark where you need to add in signposting back to your research questions or links between chapters.

For more information....

See Postgraduates 1. Time management for postgraduates
See Postgraduates 3. Working with your supervisor

Developing your writing

Postgraduates 2

This guide for postgraduate students covers how to develop your writing for the demands of more advanced study. It includes advice on:

- Communicating your argument
- Finding your voice
- Integrating theoretical perspectives
- Sustaining an argument across chapters

Communicating your argument

In postgraduate writing you will be expected to produce more sophisticated arguments; to set them in a much wider context than at undergraduate level; and to balance a variety of viewpoints from other researchers. Communicating all this is not an easy task, and you may find you are writing long, complicated sentences that are difficult for your reader to understand.

A good piece of advice is to “write to express, not to impress”. Avoid jargon, and if you need to use technical terms, make sure you understand them. Try reading your work aloud to see if your sentences feel too complicated. Use the full range of punctuation (commas, semicolons, colons, parentheses) to organise ideas within your sentences – see our online and paper study guides to Academic Writing.
Remember that the evidence you refer to is there to build your argument. Give the relevant amount of detail and don’t use up your precious word count on repeating other people’s words. If it is only partially relevant to your argument, just mention briefly that there has been debate about this topic and summarise if necessary.

If you are having trouble identifying your overall argument, you may need to spend more time planning and thinking about what you are researching. This may not mean more reading! Rather, do more creative thinking and look for connections in what you have already read.

Top tip: If you can’t identify your argument, try doing some free writing. Give yourself, say, 20 minutes and write about what is puzzling you or what you want to find out. Keep writing without worrying about exact choice of words or phrasing. Writing things down forces you to develop the ideas in your head and gives you something concrete to work with.

Finding your voice

“If I have to analyse the findings of other researchers, and reference all ideas from other sources, where does my own voice come in?”

The more you write, the more your individual writing style will develop. However there are also many opportunities to display your own thinking. Although your subject may have been researched previously, other researchers will not have reached their conclusions in the same way as you.

Your unique voice is demonstrated in:

- Your choice of research questions
- How you structure your writing
- Your choice of methods and data analysis
- The evidence you select, and how you interpret it
- How your findings link to your research questions and previous research
- How you show that you have answered your research questions

Top tip: Start each paragraph with the point YOU want to make, then find evidence from your reading to support this, and analyse the evidence. This prevents your writing from being led by everyone else’s views and becoming just a summary of perspectives.

Be aware of the choices you make and be able to explain and justify them: these will express your unique contribution and perspective.

Integrating theoretical perspectives

Integrating theory into your work can seem daunting. However, theories are just another form of evidence to help you support your points.

You might think of a theory like a framework or scaffolding which you can use to structure your own thinking on a subject. The theory provides a general pattern or outline which you use and develop. This framework may not be an “exact fit” with what you want to investigate, so you might need to adapt it or combine theories to get the tools you need to investigate your research questions. Of course you need to justify your choice of a certain theory, or why you needed to adapt or combine it.

Using a theory to help you structure your research is like looking through a coloured lens. Each theory “colours” your view in a different way by emphasising certain elements over others. For example, a Feminist theory may foreground the representation of women, whereas a Marxist theory may emphasise economic and power relations. Your analysis of the topic will differ depending on the theory you use.

If your degree requires professional placements, you may be asked to refer to theoretical perspectives when writing up your reflective accounts and work placements. Again, this sounds daunting, but it just involves comparing two different types of evidence: 1) The observations you make on placement are practical evidence based on experience; 2) The theory is abstract evidence based on academic research.

Both types of evidence are important – you need to compare them to get the full picture. Ask yourself whether your practical experience fits with the theory. If yes, then why, and if not, why not – what are the limitations of the theory?