

Some thoughts on your first papers

1. *Take time to carefully choose an argument which is defensible in the amount of space you have available.*

Every piece of academic writing should have an *argument* at its core—a statement which you’re trying to prove. Different lengths of writing assignments demand different “sizes” of arguments. An argument which is too big may be either too vague or too difficult to defend in a short space. On the other hand, an argument which is too small may not bear enough significance to make it interesting. Consider these (fabricated) examples:

Francis Higginson included many metal tools on his list.

→ *This is a description, not an argument, and requires no proof.*

The English had an effect on seventeenth-century New England.

→ *Yes, but this is so broad and self-evident that it doesn’t need proving.*

Different economic ideologies were the primary drivers of environmental change in colonial New England.

→ *Great argument for a book, but difficult to prove in two pages.*

Since English settlers arrived in North America with many heavy objects, they had to settle in fixed locations, and this immobility influenced how they modified the environment.

→ *A good argument: precise and concise.*

I’ve tried to place < angled brackets > around the sentences which seem to best encapsulate your arguments. Look at what I’ve bracketed, and think about the claim that structures your paper. A good argument prompts the reader think to him or herself “I wonder if that’s really true.” Ultimately you want your reader to conclude by thinking “that *is* true, how interesting!”

Choosing a good argument is extremely difficult (I struggle with it myself!), but it is foundational for strong academic writing. There is no better guide to developing an argument than *The Craft of Research* by Booth et al., which is on your syllabus. I highly recommend taking a look at Chapter 7 of that book if you’re having trouble honing your arguments.

2. *Don’t make assertions without using evidence to prove why those assertions must be true.*

To prove an argument, you need to line up evidence which shows *why* your readers ought to believe what you’re saying. If your evidence is something you read in a book or heard in lecture, document the source rather than just repeating the statement. For primary historical evidence, explain how and why a particular fact backs up your claim. Be extremely cautious of building sentences on a “because I said so” basis.

Colonists were eager to cut down the New England forests.

→ *Says who? Prove it!*

As William Cronon observes in *Changes in the Land*, English colonists shipped lumber back to Europe as a trade good throughout the 17th century. The emphasis on axes and saws in Higginson’s packing list suggests that the colonists did indeed believe that felling trees would be an important occupation in the New World.

→ *Now I believe you; this enlists a primary and secondary source as proof.*

3. *When pressed for space, cut the fluff first.*

In a long piece of writing, you can afford to slowly build up to your main point, but if you have limited space, don't pad your writing with fluff. Never needlessly duplicate a point if you can effectively and compellingly state it once. By working economically with space, you'll free up room to work with more evidence and examples and develop the core of your essay more thoroughly.

The colonists brought the idea of private property to North America. Private property was one of the concepts which the colonists carried with them.

→ *The second sentence is just a rephrasing of the first sentence. Cut it.*

4. *Replace vague, weak words with specific, strong words.*

Words like "have," "is," "thing," and others like them obscure meaning because they weaken the force of sentences. Wherever possible, find words which point the reader towards specific objects and strong actions.

Colonists brought things that were unnecessary. Hunger and death were the result of this.

→ *Lots of vague language leaves these sentences almost devoid of content.*

Because the colonists often chose to prioritize items of little utility, such as a suit of armor, they found themselves ill-equipped to face the challenges of winter in New England.

→ *By choosing stronger words, we've told a more specific story.*

5. *Use a consistent tense throughout your writing.*

Verb tense can be difficult when you're working with mixed documents and events from the past and present. If you're unsure about how to effectively manipulate tense, it's usually best in history to default to the past tense.

Higginson tells the colonists to bring butter. He knows that there are no cows in New England, and he was understanding that they would be having to bring dairy products from England.

→ *Multiple tenses create confusion.*

Higginson told the colonists to bring butter. He knew that New England had no native cows, and understood that the first wave of settlers needed to import their dairy products.

→ *This sentence sticks to the past tense.*

6. *Don't approach writing as a solitary pursuit.*

Writing is a form of communication, and one of the best ways to improve your writing is to share it with others. Show drafts to your friends, roommates, or family members and test whether your arguments make sense in someone else's eyes. The Writing Center (<http://www.writing.wisc.edu>) is an incredible resource for writers of all skill levels. I'm also always available to help you think through strategies for producing a successful paper. Finally, these two books should be on the desk of every writer:

Booth, W., et al. *The Craft of Research*, 3rd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008.

Strunk, W. and White, E. B. *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1979.