

# Visual Hierarchy: when design guides a reader through a document and helps them recognize the important information

## Before

**Argument Synthesis Essay**  
Instructor: Anne Anonymous

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In the Argument Analysis, you explained how an individual argument “hangs together” to create agreement between a writer and a reader. For this next major writing assignment you will need to analyze how a field of arguments might “hang together” along particular lines of argument or sets of assumptions. In some fields this kind of task is called a Research Summary, while in other fields, this task is called a Synthesis of Research or a Literature Review. Researchers use a synthesis to create “exigency” for their own research and to interpret a series of arguments that have been made about the issue they are researching.

Your task is to synthesize a field of arguments around an issue from our readings. In the past, some students have thought of this assignment in different analogies: Proposing new research to a group of researchers with a common interest; Telling a story of how prior research has responded to a problem; Constructing a “conversation” among researchers concerned with a common problem. All of these analogies suggest a need for particular rhetorical moves. The next section describes some of the rhetorical moves that will help you get started.

**1) Pose a Research Question** A research question will allow you to explore an issue raised by the essays we have been reading. One good way to generate ideas is to think of a question that one author would want to ask another author. For example, if you are focusing on the role of amateurs in participatory media, your first priority might be to work out what issues are at stake in this topic, and what questions come up around it that your essay will attempt to work out, and answer. A good research question might ask, “how do economic pressures relate to the rise of citizen journalism?” A poor research question might ask “What role does the Internet play in society?”

**2) Incorporate a Paradigm Case**—a case that, for you, sums up or epitomizes the issue. A case can be an effective way to begin integrating perspectives that answer your question and to grab your reader’s attention. Referring to it throughout your paper can strengthen your evaluation of positions on the issue. For example, A specific political event such as Occupy Wall Street, or a specific public incident (such as the Boston Bombings) might help you talk about problems or questions that arise when we think about the role social media plays for journalism.

**3) Analyze Major Approaches to Your Question** An approach is “a belief, goal, or method that a large group of authors adopts for handling similar problems” (Charney & Neuwirth, 349). You’ll need to analyze the 2-3 major approaches to handling the problem, using a minimum of 5 sources from the syllabus. For example, one approach to understanding the role of participatory media in political change is to focus on causes of political change, and such complex events can have multiple significant factors that affect them.

**BOLD HEADINGS**  
help to group similar information

**INDENTATION**  
shows information on the same “level”  
of generality or specificity

**BULLETS**  
indicate items of similar importance

**NUMBERING**  
indicates items of  
chronological or hierarchical  
importance

**REPEATED FEATURES**  
help readers group two pieces of  
information as being related

## After

**Argument Synthesis Essay**  
Instructor: Debra Doe

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**Background**  
In the Argument Analysis, you explained how an individual argument “hangs together” to create agreement between a writer and a reader. For this next major writing assignment you will need to analyze how a field of arguments might “hang together” along particular lines of argument or sets of assumptions. In some fields this kind of task is called a Research Summary, while in other fields this task is called a Synthesis of Research or a Literature Review. Researchers use a synthesis to create “exigency” for their own research and to interpret a series of arguments that have been made about the issue they are researching.

**Overview of Goals**  
Your task is to synthesize a field of arguments around an issue from our readings. In the past, some students have thought of this assignment in terms of:

- Proposing new research to a group of researchers with a common interest
- Telling a story of how prior research has responded to a problem
- Constructing a “conversation” among researchers concerned with a common problem

All of these analogies suggest a need for particular rhetorical moves. The next section describes some of the rhetorical moves that will help you get started.

**Rhetorical Moves to help you get started:**

1) **Pose a research question:** A research question will allow you to explore an issue raised by the essays we have been reading. One good way to generate ideas is to think of a question that one author would want to ask another author.

**EXAMPLE:** If you are focusing on the role of amateurs in participatory media, your first priority might be to work out what issues are at stake in this topic, and what questions come up around it that your essay will attempt to work out, and answer.

Good	Poor
“How do economic pressures relate to the rise of citizen journalism?”	“What role does the Internet play in society?”

2) **Incorporate a paradigm case:** This is a case that, for you, sums up or epitomizes the issue. A case can be an effective way to begin integrating perspectives that answer your question and to grab your reader’s attention. Referring to it throughout your paper can strengthen your evaluation of positions on the issue.

**EXAMPLE:** A specific political event such as Occupy Wall Street, or a specific public incident (such as the Boston Bombings) might help you talk about problems or questions that arise when we think about the role social media plays for journalism.

**FONT SIZE & TYPE**  
to show  
information  
hierarchy

**WHITE SPACE**  
to separate  
information

**TEXT BOX**  
for  
supplemental  
information,  
such as

The “After” assignment prompt uses:

1. **contrast** (bolding, font size and type)
2. **grouping** (numbers/bullets, white space and text boxes) to help readers efficiently find information