

Arguments and Persuasive Writing

Learning to write argumentatively is an important part of academic writing and the following section from *Rhetoric and Composition*, introduces the concept of argument and the tools to create an argumentative essay.

What Is an Argument?

When you hear the word argument, what do you think of? A shouting match or a fist fight? When instructors use the word argument, they're typically thinking about something else. What they're actually referring to is a position supported by the analysis that preceded its conception, not necessarily supporting antagonism.

More to the point, instructors are talking about defending a certain point of view through writing or speech. Usually called a claim or a thesis, this point of view is concerned with an issue that doesn't have a clear right or wrong answer (e.g., four and two make six). Also, this argument should not only be concerned with personal opinion (e.g., I really like carrots). Instead, an argument might tackle issues like abortion, capital punishment, stem cell research, or gun control. However, what distinguishes an argument from a descriptive essay or report is that the argument must take a stance; if you're merely summarizing both sides of an issue or pointing out the pros and cons, you're not writing an argument. "Stricter gun control laws will likely result in a decrease in gun-related violence" is an argument.

Note that people can and will disagree with this argument, which is precisely why so many instructors find this type of assignment so useful — they make you think!

Academic arguments usually articulate an opinion. This opinion is always carefully defended with good reasoning and supported by plenty of research. Research? Yes, research! Indeed, part of learning to write effective arguments is finding reliable sources (or other documents) that lend credibility to your position. It's not enough to say: "capital punishment is wrong because that's the way I feel."

Instead, you need to adequately support your claim by finding:

- Facts
- Statistics
- Quotations from recognized authorities, and any other types of evidence

You won't always win, and that's fine. The goal of an argument is simply to:

- Make a claim
- Support your claim with the most credible reasoning and any evidence you can muster
- Hope that the reader will at least understand your position
- Hope that your claim is taken seriously

If you defend your argument's position with good reasoning and evidence (and follow other criteria in the teacher's rubric), you should earn a high grade, even if your instructor personally disagrees with the views you are defending.

We will be covering the basic format of how to structure an argument. This includes the general written argument structure, and the position and proposal variations of that basic form. If you want to make a claim about a particular (usually controversial) issue, you can use the position argument form. Alternately, if you would like to offer a solution to a particular situation that you see as problematic, such as the rising cost of education, you can use a proposal argument. By adapting one of these three methods, you will be well on the way to making your point. Argument structures are amazingly versatile. Once you become familiar with this basic structure of the argumentative essay, you will be able to clearly argue about almost anything!

“If you can’t annoy somebody, there’s little point in writing.”

—Kingsley Amis (1922 – 1995)

Basic Argument Essay Structure

Introduction

The first paragraph of your argument is used to introduce your topic and the issues surrounding it. This information needs to be introduced using clear, easily understandable language. Your readers need to know what you’re writing about before they can decide if they believe you or not.

Once you have introduced your general subject, it’s time to state your claim. Your claim will serve as the thesis for your essay. Make sure that you use clear and precise language. Your reader needs to understand exactly where you stand on the issue. The clarity of your claim affects your readers’ understanding of your views. Also, it’s important to highlight supporting information throughout the essay. These highlights will help keep the reader engaged, add support to your claim, and allow your reader to know what direction you will be taking with your argument in the body paragraphs.

By mentioning the points or arguments you will further discuss in the body, you are outlining your paper’s goals. This part comes at the end of the thesis and can be named as the guide. The guide is a useful organizational tool for you as well as the readers. In addition, your audience will have a clear-cut idea as to what will be discussed in the body.

Body

Once your position is stated you should establish your credibility. There are two or more sides to every argument. This means not everyone will agree with your viewpoint. So, try to form a common ground with the audience. Think about who may be undecided or opposed to your viewpoint. Take the audience’s age, education, values, gender, culture, ethnicity, and all other variables into consideration as you introduce your topic. These variables will affect your word choice and could potentially open your audience’s mind to consider your viewpoint.

Developing Your Argument

Back up your thesis with logical and persuasive arguments. During your pre-writing phase, outline the main points you might use to support your claim, and decide which are the strongest and most logical. Eliminate those which are based on emotion rather than fact. Your corroborating evidence should be well-researched, such as statistics, examples, and expert opinions. You can also reference personal experience, and it’s a good idea to have a mixture. However, you should avoid leaning too heavily on

personal experience, as you want to present an argument that appears objective as you are using it to persuade your reader.

There are a couple different methods of developing your argument. Two variations of the basic argument structure are the Position Method and the Proposal Method.

Position Method

The position method is used to try to convince your audience that you are in the right, and the other view of your argument is wrong.

Introduce and define your topic. Never assume that your reader is familiar with the issues surrounding your topic. This is your chance to set up the premise (point of view) you want to use. This is also a good time to present your claim statement.

Background information. Do your research! The more knowledgeable you are, the more concise an argument you will be able to give. You will now be able to provide your reader with the best information possible. This will allow your audience to read your paper with the same knowledge you possess on the topic. Information is the backbone to a solid argument.

Development

You have your argument, and you may have even stated your claim. Now, start developing your ideas. Provide evidence and reasoning.

Be prepared to deal with the opposition. There will be those who oppose your argument. Be prepared to answer those opinions or points of view with knowledgeable responses. If you have done your homework and know your material, you will be able to address any opposing arguments with ease and authority.

In conclusion... Now is the time to drive home your point. Re-emphasize your main arguments and claim statement.

Proposal Method

The proposal method of argument is used when there is a problematic situation, and you would like to offer a solution to the situation. The structure of the proposal method is similar to the above position method, but there are slight differences.

Introduce and define the nature of the problematic situation. Make sure to focus on the problem and its causes. This may seem simple, but many people focus solely on the effects of a problematic situation. By focusing on the actual problem, your readers will see your proposal as a solution to the problem. If you don't, your readers might see your solution as a mere complaint.

Propose a solution, or a number of solutions, to the problem. Be specific about these solutions. If you have one solution, you may choose to break it into parts and spend a paragraph or so describing each part. If you have several solutions, you may instead choose to spend a paragraph on each scenario. Each additional solution will add both depth and length to your argument. But remember to stay focused. Added length does not always equal a better argument.

Describe the workability of the various solutions. There are a variety of ways that this could be done. With a single-solution paper you could break the feasibility down into short- and long-term goals and plans. With a multiple-solution essay, you may instead highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the individual solutions, and establish which would be the most successful, based on your original statement of the problem and its causes.

Summarize and conclude your proposal. Summarize your solutions, re-state how the solution or solutions would work to remedy the problematic situation, and you're done.

Dealing with the Opposition

When writing an argument, expect that you will have opposition. Skeptical readers will have their own beliefs and points of view. When conducting your research, make sure to review the opposing side of your argument. You need to be prepared to counter those ideas. Remember, in order for people to give up their position, they must see how your position is more reasonable than their own. When you address the opposing point of view in your essay and demonstrate how your own claim is stronger, you neutralize their argument. By failing to address a non-coinciding view, you leave a reason for your reader to disagree with you, and therefore weaken your persuasive power. Methods of addressing the opposition vary. You may choose to state your main points, then address and refute the opposition, and then conclude. Conversely, you might summarize the opposition's views early in your argument, and then revisit them after you've presented your side or the argument. This will show how your information is more reasonable than their own.

Conclusion

You have introduced your topic, stated your claim, supported that claim with logical and reasonable evidence, and refuted your opposition's viewpoint. The hard work is done. Now it's time to wrap up your argument. By the time readers get to the end of your paper, they should have learned something. You should have learned something, too. Give readers an idea to take away with them. The conclusion should end the paper and support your position and the significance of your argument. One word of caution: avoid introducing any new information in your conclusion. If you find that there's another point that you wanted to include, revise your essay. Include this new information into the body of your essay. The conclusion should only review what the rest of your essay has offered.

Strengthening Your Argument

In argumentative writing, it is important to clearly state and support your position. However, it is just as important to present all of the information that you've gathered in an objective manner. Using language that is demeaning or non-objective will undermine the strength of your argument. This destroys your credibility and will reduce your audience on the spot. For example, a student writing an argument about why a particular football team has a good chance of going to the Superbowl is making a strategic error by stating that "anyone who doesn't think that the Minnesota Vikings deserve to win the Super Bowl is a total idiot." Not only has the writer risked alienating any number of her readers, s/he has also made the argument seem shallow and poorly researched. In addition, she has committed a third mistake: making a sweeping generalization that cannot be supported.

Use phrasing that does not:

- Alienate any part of your audience
- Make an argument that is poorly researched or shallow
- Make an unsupported generalization
- Contain mistakes that could ruin your argument
- Contain objective language

In argumentative writing, your instructor may ask you to avoid using *I* and *My* (subjective) statements. You should only use *I* or *My* if you are an expert in your field (on a given topic). Instead choose more objective language to get your point across. Consider the following:

I believe that the United States Government is failing to meet the needs of today's average college student through the under-funding of need-based grants, increasingly restrictive financial aid eligibility requirements, and a lack of flexible student loan options.

"Great," your reader thinks, "Everyone's entitled to their opinion."

Now let's look at this sentence again, but without the *I* at the beginning. Does the same sentence become a strong statement of fact without your *I* tacked to the front?

The United States Government is failing to meet the needs of today's average college student through the underfunding of need-based grants, increasingly restrictive financial aid eligibility requirements, and a lack of flexible student loan options.

"Wow," your reader thinks, "that sounds like a problem."

A small change like the removal of *I* and *My* can make all the difference in how a reader perceives your argument— as such, it's always good to proofread your rough draft and look for places where you could use objective rather than subjective language.

The Fallacies of Argument

Now your paper is filled with quality research. You're feeling good about your paper. But when you get the paper back your instructor has left a comment like, "This is an argument fallacy". So now you're left wondering what is "false" about the argument; and what is this "argument fallacy"?

Argumentative fallacies are sometimes called logical fallacies. Usually these fallacies are created when the reasoning behind the argument lacks validity. A lack of validity weakens your argument, and then leads to a failure to provide a sufficient claim.

Don't feel badly if your instructor writes argumentative fallacy on your essay. This is a common error in argumentative papers. An argumentative fallacy can be caused by your negligence or lack of rigor and attention while making a certain argument. In other words, an undeveloped argument can resemble an argumentative fallacy. So, never generalize; don't just say and leave — pursue your point to its logical termination.

A Side Note

Many topics that are written about in college are very controversial. When approaching a topic, it is critical that you think about your argument's implications. If, for example, you are writing a paper on abortion, you need to think about your audience. There will certainly be people in each of your classes with a different relationship to this topic. While you shouldn't let readers' feelings sway your argument, you should approach each topic with a neutral mind and stay away from personal attacks. Keep your mind open to the implications of the opposition and formulate a logical stance considering the binaries equally. People may be offended by something you write, but if you have taken the time to think about the ideas that go into your paper, you should have no problem defending it.

What is Persuasion?

The success of an argument can be measured by its persuasiveness. In the previous section, we discussed the basics of structuring argumentative essays. In this section, we hone in on some strategies of persuasion that can improve your argumentative writing.

Students often feel overwhelmed by the thought of writing persuasively, but persuasive writing techniques are present in many of the documents and images students review. The purpose of persuasion in writing is to convince, motivate, or move readers toward a certain point of view or opinion. The act of trying to persuade automatically implies more than one opinion on the subject can be argued, so it's important to understand that persuasive writing requires writers to take a stand on debatable topic.

The idea of an argument often conjures up images of two people yelling and screaming in anger. In writing, however, both the development and goal for an argument is different. A written argument requires a reasoned opinion supported and explained by evidence. To argue in writing is to advance knowledge and ideas in a positive way. Written arguments often fail when they employ ranting rather than reasoning.

Most of us feel inclined to try to win the arguments we engage in. On some level, we all want to be right, and we want others to see the error of their ways. More times than not, however, arguments in which both sides try to win end up producing losers all around. The more productive approach is to persuade your audience to consider your opinion as a valid one, not simply the right one.

The Structure of a Persuasive Essay

The following five features make up the structure of a persuasive essay:

1. Introduction and thesis
2. Opposing and qualifying ideas
3. Strong evidence in support of claim
4. Style and tone of language
5. A compelling conclusion

Creating an Introduction and Thesis

The persuasive essay begins with an engaging introduction that presents the general topic. The introduction should create a foundation of knowledge for the reader, so you want to add any information or descriptions the reader will need to understand as they read the rest of the essay. The thesis typically appears somewhere in the introduction and states the writer's point of view.

Avoid forming a thesis based on a negative claim. For example, "The hourly minimum wage is not high enough for the average worker to live on." This is probably a true statement, but persuasive arguments should make a positive case. That is, the thesis statement should focus on how the hourly minimum wage is low or insufficient.

Acknowledging Opposing Ideas and Limits to Your Argument

Because an argument implies differing points of view on the subject, students must be sure to acknowledge those opposing ideas. Avoiding ideas that conflict with your own gives the reader the impression that you may be uncertain, fearful, or unaware of opposing ideas. Thus, it is essential that you not only address counterarguments but also do so respectfully.

Try to address opposing arguments earlier rather than later in your essay. Rhetorically speaking, ordering your essay so that your opposing argument appears at the beginning allows you to better address ideas that conflict with your own, so you can spend the rest of the essay countering those arguments and introducing ideas that support your position. This way, you leave your reader thinking about your argument rather than someone else's. You have the last word. Acknowledging points of view different from your own also has the effect of fostering more credibility between you and the audience. They know from the outset that you are aware of opposing ideas and that you are not afraid to give them space.

Another helpful technique is to establish the limits of your argument and what you are trying to accomplish. In effect, you are conceding early on that your argument is not the ultimate authority on a given topic. Such humility can go a long way toward earning credibility and trust with an audience. Audience members will know from the beginning that you are a reasonable writer, and audience members will trust your argument as a result. For example, in the following concessionary statement, the writer advocates for stricter gun control laws, but she admits it will not solve all of our problems with crime:

Although tougher gun control laws are a powerful first step in decreasing violence in our streets, such legislation alone cannot end these problems since guns are not the only problem we face. Such a concession will be welcome by those who might disagree with this writer's argument in the first place. To effectively persuade their readers, writers need to be modest in their goals and humble in their approach to encourage readers to listen to the ideas. See Table 1 below for some useful phrases of concession.

Phrases of Concession

Granted that	Although
Still	Of course,
Yet	Though

Table 1 Phrases of Concession

Bias in Writing

Everyone has various biases on any number of topics. For example, you might have a bias toward wearing black instead of brightly colored clothes or wearing jeans rather than formal wear. You might have a bias toward working at night rather than in the morning or working by deadlines rather than completing tasks in advance. These examples identify minor biases, of course, but they still indicate preferences and opinions.

Handling bias in writing and in daily life can be a useful skill, and it will allow you to articulate your own points of view while also defending yourself against unreasonable points of view. The ideal in persuasive writing is to let your reader know your bias, but do not let that bias blind you to the primary components of good argumentation: sound, thoughtful evidence and a respectful and reasonable address of opposing sides.

The strength of a personal bias is that it can motivate you to construct a strong argument. If you are invested in the topic, you are more likely to care about the piece of writing. Similarly, the more you care, the more time and effort you are apt to put forth and the better the final product will be.

The weakness of bias is when the bias begins to take over the essay—when, for example, you neglect opposing ideas, exaggerate your points, or repeatedly insert yourself ahead of the subject by using / too often. Being aware of all three of these pitfalls will help you avoid them.

The Use of / in Writing

The use of / in writing is often a topic of debate, and the acceptance of its usage varies from instructor to instructor. It is difficult to predict the preferences for all your present and future instructors but consider the effects it can potentially have on your writing.

Be mindful of the use of / in your writing because it can make your argument sound overly biased. There are two primary reasons:

1. Excessive repetition of any word will eventually catch the reader’s attention—and usually not in a good way. The use of / is no different.
2. The insertion of I into a sentence alters not only the way a sentence might sound but also the composition of the sentence itself. It is often the subject of a sentence. If the subject of the essay is supposed to be, say, smoking, then by inserting yourself into the sentence, you are

effectively displacing the subject of the essay into a secondary position. In the following example, the subject of the sentence is underlined:

Smoking is bad.

I think smoking is bad.

In the first sentence, the rightful subject, *smoking*, is in the subject position in the sentence. In the second sentence, the insertion of *I* and *think* replaces *smoking* as the subject, which draws attention to *I* and away from the topic that is supposed to be discussed. Remember to keep the message (the subject) and the messenger (the writer) separate.

Ultimately the use of *I* in writing will be determined by your genre, instructor's preference, and the essay's goals.

Checklist

Developing Sound Arguments

Does my essay contain the following elements?

- An engaging introduction
- A reasonable, specific thesis that can be supported by evidence
- A varied range of evidence from credible sources
- Respectful acknowledgement and explanation of opposing ideas
- A style and tone of language that is appropriate for the subject and audience
- Acknowledgement of the argument's limits
- A conclusion that will adequately summarize the essay and reinforce the thesis

Fact and Opinion

Facts are statements that can be definitely proven using objective data. The statement that is a fact is absolutely valid. In other words, the statement can be pronounced as true or false. For example, $2 + 2 = 4$. This expression identifies a true statement, or a fact, because it can be proved with objective data.

Opinions are personal views, or judgments. An opinion is what an individual believes about a particular subject. However, an opinion in argumentation must have legitimate backing; adequate evidence and credibility should support the opinion. Consider the credibility of expert opinions. Experts in a given field have the knowledge and credentials to make their opinion meaningful to a larger audience.

For example, you seek the opinion of your dentist when it comes to the health of your gums, and you seek the opinion of your mechanic when it comes to the maintenance of your car. Both have knowledge and credentials in those respective fields, which is why their opinions matter to you. But the authority of your dentist may be greatly diminished should he or she offer an opinion about your car, and vice versa.

In writing, you want to strike a balance between credible facts and authoritative opinions. Relying on one or the other will likely lose more of your audience than it gains.

The word prove is frequently used in the discussion of persuasive writing. Writers may claim that one piece of evidence or another proves the argument, but proving an argument is often not possible. No evidence proves a debatable topic one way or the other; that is why the topic is debatable. Facts can be proved, but opinions can only be supported, explained, and persuaded.

Using Visual Elements to Strengthen Arguments

Adding visual elements to a persuasive argument can often strengthen its persuasive effect. There are two main types of visual elements: quantitative visuals and qualitative visuals.

Quantitative visuals



Quantitative visuals present data graphically. They allow the audience to see statistics spatially. The purpose of using quantitative visuals is to make logical appeals to the audience. For example, sometimes it is easier to understand the disparity in certain statistics if you can see how the disparity looks graphically. Bar graphs, pie charts, Venn diagrams, histograms, and line graphs are all ways of presenting quantitative data in spatial dimensions.

Qualitative visuals



Qualitative visuals present images that appeal to the audience's emotions. Photographs and pictorial images are examples of qualitative visuals. Such images often try to convey a story and seeing an actual example can carry more power than hearing or reading about the example. For example, one image of a malnourished child will likely have more of an emotional impact than pages dedicated to describing that same condition in writing.

Tips for Writing a Persuasive Essay

- Choose a topic that you feel passionate about. If your instructor requires you to write about a specific topic, approach the subject from an angle that interests you. Begin your essay with an engaging introduction. Your thesis should typically appear somewhere in your introduction.
- Start by acknowledging and explaining points of view that may conflict with your own to build credibility and trust with your audience. Also state the limits of your argument. This too helps you sound more reasonable and honest to those who may naturally be inclined to disagree with your view. By respectfully acknowledging opposing arguments and conceding limitations to your own view, you set a measured and responsible tone for the essay.
- Make your appeals in support of your thesis by using sound, credible evidence. Use a balance of facts and opinions from a wide range of sources, such as scientific studies, expert testimony, statistics, and personal anecdotes. Each piece of evidence should be fully explained and clearly stated.
- Make sure that your style and tone are appropriate for your subject and audience. Tailor your language and word choice to these two factors, while still being true to your own voice.
- Finally, write a conclusion that effectively summarizes the main argument and reinforces your thesis.

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