

Making An Argument

Despite everything we have said about the importance of concrete writing, it's also true that writing about ideas is the most exciting task. It can be a lot easier to describe your high-school soccer coach than to portray the way he thinks. It can be easier to profile your street than to muster your arguments about a political issue during a campaign season.

Ideas do not float in the air around us. Human beings carry them in their heads.

When you sit down to write about your ideas, you want to persuade your reader that you are right. But ideas are flimsy, squishy things sometimes, hard to get your hands on.

Be readable and concrete

When you set out to write about ideas, think first of concrete objects and active verbs. Objects and actions serve not only to interest your reader, they keep you interested also. Use all the rules of readable writing.

For instance, if you are writing about the nature of kindness and you want to contrast two different styles of kindness, perhaps “the gruff” and “the sweet,” you might want to introduce your grandfather and your high-school art teacher, Miss Gagnon. Show your reader Grandpa Davis. Show also Miss Gagnon. Show them with objects, and talking, and in a setting. Your reader will see each idea of kindness more clearly because he or she sees the person most clearly.

Make Your Point Clearly

In a persuasive argument, you want to convince the reader that the way you see something is the right way to see it. How to do it? Start with a strong statement of your point of view.

Don't apologize for having ideas

Make direct assertions of your opinion. Be very simple about stating what you believe. Be neither flowery nor over-polite. The danger is over-polite or tentative or mealy mouthed language.

Explain your thinking simply. If your writing is in the first person, you can say, “I came to belief X because of these three experiences in my life,” and then go on and narrate them. If you are writing in the third person, you can still strive for simplicity.

Then make a list of your opposition's good points and state where you agree with them. This is called “conceding your opponents' good points.” Here are some examples of how it's done:

“Those who oppose my position take the understandable stance that...”

“I must admit the opponents of this position have a good point when they say...”

“I concede that my opponents are right to bring up the matters X, Y and Z about his topic.”

“Admittedly, the opposition has a reasonable point when it says X.”

How much should you do this? People disagree. Some editors want a quarter of a paper to be devoted to dealing with the opposition and stating its points as clearly as possible. Others would say a small nod to your opposition is enough. However much space you use, make sure to give your opposition's points as strongly as possible and give them the benefit of a fair presentation. Ask yourself, would a member of the opposition say that you were fair to him or her, after reading your paper?

Do not mock your opponents

Mockery of your opponents feels good—especially when your insults are witty or inventive—but it's not convincing. Insult someone among your readership and he is going to close his mind to you and write you off. Avoid any kind of mockery, insult or gibe in persuasive papers. Don't slam anyone. Focus your efforts on intelligent analysis of the arguments at hand.

Summarize as you go

If the chain of reasoning is long enough that a reader might get lost, summarize as you go.

Use these phrases, if you need them:

“In short”

“For example”

“To summarize my reasoning”

“So there are six points to this argument”