Argumentative Essays: Purpose and Organization

Inquire: How Can I Actually Persuade Someone?

Overview

An argumentative essay is one that attempts to persuade an audience to make a change or take an action. This may sound easier said than it is done. Think about how often you’ve seen two people having an argument in which one person concluded the conversation by saying, “Thank you! I’ve changed my opinion.” If you’ve ever seen it, it’s probably been rare. That’s because composing an effective argument that actually changes minds requires a lot of work and careful planning.

Big Question: What does an argumentative essay look like?

Watch: What’s in an Argument?

So, your teacher has assigned an argumentative essay for you to write. You might find yourself growing more frustrated by the minute as you stare at a blank piece of paper or a blank word document. When will you even use this? Does anyone actually change their mind from reading anything? And, either way, where should you even begin in writing an argumentative essay?

If these sound like questions you ask yourself as you begin writing an argumentative essay, it may be worth it to consider exactly what your purpose is in writing. In argumentative writing, arguments are a lot different than in argumentative speech. Writing an argumentative essay is much different than the arguments you see on TV, when talking heads debate on a 24-hour news channel. In writing an argumentative essay, you aim to persuade someone to change their mind or to take a particular action. The goal of argumentative writing is noble.

Even if you’re in, or entering, a career field that doesn’t use a lot of written communication (though most of them do), the skills you learn by writing an argumentative essay will directly transfer into your field. No matter what the path is for your life, you will likely find yourself at some point needing to persuade someone to change their mind, to alter an existing procedure at work, or to buy a new piece of equipment. The skills you learn from argumentative writing can be used in these same situations.

Argumentative essays require special consideration of your particular rhetorical situation: who are you speaking to? How should that change the way you talk? Are there any other circumstances that will impact how effective your argument is? You can see that you might ask these same questions if you were approaching an employer with an argument. Does your employer value professionalism and formal communication? If so, you should probably present your ideas as a carefully written document. Is your employer one who prefers face-to-face communication in a casual, free-flowing manner? Then you’re better off presenting your argument as such.
How can you see yourself using argumentative writing skills in your future life?

Read: Organizing Arguments

Overview
The skills you learn in writing arguments can be applied in every field of work. Whether you work as an engineer or as a doctor, you will encounter times when you need to propose a new idea or argue for an improved or changed procedure. Knowing the facets that make up an argument can help you construct your arguments in an effective and persuasive way.

Arguments
An argument is a systematic attempt to support a debatable claim using logical explanations and reliable evidence. The thesis or claim is debatable because an audience may not find it readily believable without supporting evidence. Stating a debatable claim alone is not sufficient for an argument, however. The author must also explain her reasoning and offer adequate and appropriate examples or data or other forms of evidence to support the claim.

Beginning an Argument Essay
Many students make the mistake of beginning their essays in overwhelmingly broad or obvious terms. For example, a student writing about the politics of same-sex marriage might begin a paper by saying, “People have been falling in love and getting married for thousands of years.” A sentence like this simply postpones the real work of an essay by giving its audience information that any reasonable person would already know. Students usually write overly vague introductions because they have been taught to start broad and then narrow their focus. More experienced writers understand that everything in an introduction needs to contribute substantially to their argument.

There is no strict formula for composing an introduction, but effective introductions usually do the following:

- Introduce the problem or issue;
- Explain the problem or topic’s significance to a community that may include the reader;
- Make a debatable claim about the topic or issue in a thesis statement, possibly one that includes supporting arguments; and
- Explain how the thesis contributes to the conversation in some way.

So, how should you introduce your issue? There’s no one right way to do it, although you do want to avoid clichéd methods like beginning with a quote or stating that something has occurred “since the beginning of time.” Here are three methods frequently used by writers to introduce their topic:

- Provide information or data that draws the audience’s attention to the problem or issue.
- Employ anecdotes that dramatize the problem or issue.
- Respond to a quotation that addresses the problem or issue in some way.

Argumentative Thesis Statements
You can use your thesis statement to state your main claim — the central point of the essay — but you also can use it to forecast the supporting claims that will explain and illustrate the main claim.
Here is a basic thesis statement:

Social media are useful tools for social movements.

This thesis statement, while it could be the main claim of an essay, does not hint at the path you will follow to explain and illustrate your claim.

Now look at this second, more elaborate thesis statement:

Social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have been indispensable tools to young activists from Tahrir Square to Wall Street.

Here the general claim about social media has been made more specific as you have introduced particular examples of social media and occasions when these media proved to be significant. You have given your readers a clearer picture of what the essay will be about.

Organizing Your Argument

While your main claim should guide the entire argument, key ideas included in the thesis statement can be used in topic sentences to guide your paragraphs.

Using the sample claim, “Social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have been indispensable tools to young activists from Tahrir Square to Wall Street,” the argument might be outlined as follows:

1. Introduction: Social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have been indispensable tools to young activists from Tahrir Square to Wall Street.
2. Twitter contributed to
   a. Arab Spring
   b. Occupy Wall Street
3. Facebook contributed to
   a. Arab Spring
   b. Occupy Wall Street
4. YouTube contributed to
   a. Arab Spring
   b. Occupy Wall Street
5. Conclusion: The Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movements may not have happened without the use of social media.

In the above outline, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are used to divide the body of the essay into three main sections, and then those sections are subdivided into Egypt and the United States. Alternately, you could divide the body of the essay into two main sections — one for Egypt and the other for the United States — and then subdivide by Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. The resulting outline would look like this:

1. Introduction: Social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have been indispensable tools to young activists from Tahrir Square to Wall Street.
2. Arab Spring
   a. Twitter
   b. Facebook
   c. YouTube
3. Occupy Wall Street
   a. Twitter
   b. Facebook
   c. YouTube
4. Conclusion: The Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movements may not have happened without the use of social media.

Either of these outlines would be a clear progression from the thesis statement and would help the reader to see how each key idea furthers the main claim.

Purpose and Structure of Body Paragraphs

As with a personal essay, a body paragraph in an argument essay should be organized around a single point or supporting claim that furthers the thesis. It should also be fully developed with evidence (such as illustrations or examples), contain a transition from the paragraph that precedes it, and prepare the way for the paragraph that will follow it.

An acronym that can help you remember how to structure the content of an argumentative body paragraph is I.C.E., which stands for introduce, cite, and explain. You should use evidence throughout your body paragraphs to support your overall claim, whether that evidence is paraphrased or directly quoted. No matter what kind of evidence you use, you should always begin by introducing it: who is the speaker? What is the context of the passage? In other words, share with your reader everything they need to know in order to fully understand the passage. Next, include your quote or paraphrase with a citation. Finally, you should explain your supporting evidence and be clear about its link to your overall argument. Just because something is clear to you doesn’t mean it will be clear to your readers.

Reflect Poll: Everyday Arguments

Where do you most often use argumentative skills?
- the workplace
- the classroom
- at home

Expand: The Rhetorical Situation in Argument Writing

Overview

The rhetorical situation is one of the most important components of writing an argument. Understanding your audience, how to speak to them, and what biases they bring to the table can help you be sure that your argument doesn’t fall on deaf ears. Before you begin, you need to take special consideration of your rhetorical situation.

The Rhetorical Situation in Argumentative Writing

Firstly, you need to identify your audience. In an argumentative essay, your audience is the group of people that you need to convince. Specifically, it may be a group of people who needs to change their position or opinion, or it may be a group of people or person who has the power to make significant change.
Either way, you need to know to whom you are writing, so you can identify some important components that will shape your argument:

- What opinions or beliefs does your audience hold about your topic?
- Why do they hold those beliefs?
- What would prevent your audience from accepting your argument?
- What does your audience value?
- How familiar is your audience with your topic?

Answering these questions will give you the guidance you need to construct an ethos that works for your audience. Do you need to appeal to credible authorities to win over your audience? Do you need to cater to a more conservative or liberal viewpoint? Do you need to avoid any hot-button issues? Do you need to speak in elevated and formal diction, or casual and informal diction?

You can see that to consider your essay’s rhetorical situation means to ask a lot of questions, but, for an argumentative essay, it’s important to do a lot of planning before you write. Asking these questions can help you be sure that you’re not alienating your audience before you even begin writing. You want to make sure that your argument actually reaches your audience.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A handout reviewing how to structure an argumentative essay

A review over general essay paragraph structure
- Link to resource: https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/essay-structure

A quick review of the rhetorical situation
- Link to resource: https://www.mesacc.edu/~paoih30491/TheRhetoricalSituationPurdue.pdf

Lesson Glossary

**argument**: a systematic attempt to support a debatable claim, using logical explanations and reliable evidence  
**main claim**: the central point of an essay

Check Your Knowledge

1. Examining your essay’s rhetorical situation in advance can be a helpful planning tool.  
   a. True  
   b. False

2. Argumentative writing is very similar to spoken arguments we see every day.  
   a. True  
   b. False

3. There is only one structural method for organizing an argumentative essay.  
   a. True  
   b. False
Answer Key:

Citations

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