Argumentative Essays: Technique, Topic, and Style

Inquire: Defining Your Argument

Overview

One of the first hurdles in writing an argumentative essay is choosing a topic. Sometimes, this can feel like a terrible chore. What if you don’t have anything to write about? Taking a minute to open your eyes to the world around you can help you identify a topic you’re excited to write about. Of course, you’ll need to understand and consider the fact that there are plenty of people who will disagree with your conclusions; you’ll have to take the time to respond to their counterarguments, which can be difficult if you feel strongly about your topic.

Big Question: How do I choose a topic for my argumentative essay, and how will the kind of topic impact my paper’s structure?

Watch: Daily Arguments

Think back through your day. Can you think of every little thing that annoyed you? Every little thing that got you worked up? Or maybe you spent time thinking about big things: major political issues or social justice issues. Even if you can’t call every one of them to mind in specific detail, it’s safe to assume that you devoted a fair amount of your day thinking about solutions to problems big and small. Or maybe you didn’t think of problems and solutions, but you instead thought about major issues and wondered why everyone doesn’t feel the same way you do.

We spend a large portion of our days thinking about concepts that would make excellent topics for argumentative essays. It’s common, however, for all these things to leave our minds the moment we’re given an essay prompt. It’s important, then, for you to give yourself plenty of time to think of these things when you’ve been assigned an argumentative essay. Spend some time listing out things you often argue about or things you feel passionate about. It’s easiest to write an argumentative essay over a topic you feel passionately about.

That passion can get you in trouble, though, when you have to consider the counterarguments your resistant audience will have. Obviously, we know that there will always be people who disagree with our strongly held opinions and beliefs, but do we really take the time to sit down and understand their position? This is an important part of the argumentative essay writing process. You need to understand all opposing positions and be able to respond to them in a thoughtful and considerate way.

One way to practice thinking about and considering your audience is by writing a Rogerian argument, which focuses on understanding your opposition’s side. Of course, you can always write a Toulmin
argument instead. These two forms of argument have different organizational structures, so you’ll need to make a decision about what kind of argument you’re writing before you begin.

What kinds of topics might you like to write about? How well do you think you’ll be able to anticipate potential counterarguments?

Read: Topic Selection and Organization for Argumentative Essays

Overview
Writing a good argumentative essay is entirely dependent on having a good topic. However, one of the most fervent complaints from students in a composition class is the difficulty encountered in trying to pick a topic. It seems like something that should be so easy! Ultimately, though, picking a topic for an argumentative essay can be a bit like when someone asks you to name your favorite song: if they hadn’t asked you to do it, you probably could have. If you spend some time thinking about your topic, you can probably find one fairly quickly. Argumentative essay topics are all around you.

Choosing a Topic
If your teacher has given you a topic, you are ahead of the game, but if not, you’ll need to find a way to search for inspiration. You can look for it in many places:

- Think of something you’re passionate about. It can be a future career field, parenting, a hobby, a sport, etc. Anything you care about is a goldmine for paper topics.
- Think about problems you wish could be solved. Whether you’re thinking about something you’re passionate about or something else, consider problems — big or small — that deserve the world’s attention. These can be great paper topics.
- Consider the course theme. Does the class have any overarching theme? Social justice? Historical movements? Advertising? If it does, you could consider that theme and whether you have any issues with aspects of the theme.
- Flip through class readings. Review some of the assigned readings from the course. Did anything stand out as interesting to you? Did you disagree with anything?

The above bullet points are simply a few ideas that can get you thinking. Really, inspiration is all around you, as long as you are looking for it. Try to keep a list somewhere of all the issues you hear about during the day or the problems you see that need solving. All of these would make excellent paper topics.

Overview: Types of Argumentative Essays
There are several types of argumentative essays: classical arguments, Rogerian arguments, and Toulmin arguments. Rogerian and Toulmin arguments require very particular structures.

Rogerian arguments are named after psychologist Carl Rogers, who espoused non-confrontational principles of argument. Mostly, Rogers believed that all conflict was best resolved when both parties could fully understand and clearly state the position of their opponent. The general philosophy behind this form of argument is that the opposition will be more likely to entertain your position if they feel you have fairly entertained theirs.
Another form of argument is named for Stephen Toulmin, a British philosopher who wrote a book called *The Uses of Argument*. Toulmin’s system of argument is more focused on the fact that no argument is ever completely airtight, but carries with it assumptions that require further backing.

So, to begin your essay, you’ll need to have a clear idea about what your argumentative philosophy is, as it will dictate the kind of organizational structure you need. Take a look at the two structures below, and decide which one is best for your topic.

**Structuring Your Essay**

Rogerian arguments all follow the same general structure:

1. **Introduction:** Describe the issue at hand. Be sure to illustrate that you understand and appreciate all valid alternative positions.
2. **Opposition’s Position:** Take the time to outline the ways in which the opposition’s positions are valid and worthwhile.
3. **Your Position:** Here, state your own position on the issue. Take the same care to explain why your position is valid as you did in the above section.
4. **Benefits to Opposition:** Finally, conclude your essay by discussing the ways in which the opposition would benefit by adopting your position. Why should they take on your position?

Here is a quick look at the basic structure of a Toulmin argument:

1. **Claim** - What you want to prove
2. **Conditions** - The limits you impose on your claim
3. **Reasons/Evidence** - Support for your claim
4. **Warrants** - Underlying assumptions that support your claim
5. **Backing** - Evidence that supports your warrant(s)

This terminology and these new categories can be a lot to take in. However, you’re probably more familiar with the concepts themselves than with the terminology.

Your claim, for example, is basically your underlying argument. It will be a very bold claim, as the other elements of the Toulmin schema will help make it a more swallowable argument.

A **warrant** is an underlying assumption in your reasoning that supports your claim. Your warrants are often where resistant readers will take issue with your argument.

For these warrants, especially if you know your audience disagrees with them, you will need to provide **backing**, which is evidence that supports the warrants that are present in your essay.

**Reflect Poll: Rogerian or Toulmin?**

Which kind of essay are you more likely to write?
- Rogerian
- Toulmin
Overview

Counterarguments are a vitally important consideration in writing argumentative essays. A counterargument is the argument your opposition will likely make in response to your essay. As the name suggests, it is the argument that would be used to counter your own. You will need to identify and respond to as many potential counterarguments as possible. This can be a difficult process, as it requires you to think as your opposition would think. You will have to put yourself in their shoes in order to anticipate their counterarguments.

Responding to Counterarguments

In responding to counterarguments, your method of delivery can be just as important as your methods. As you consider and respond to counterarguments, be sure you do the following:

- **Use a Respectful Tone**: To say that writers ought to use a respectful tone in writing seems like a common sense, no-brainer suggestion. However, when you’re talking to someone or about someone whose opinion you consider to be offensive, insensitive, or ill-conceived, it can be difficult to practice self-restraint. Even if you think someone’s viewpoint is dumb, stupid, or idiotic, the moment you say that in an essay, the opposition will have stopped listening to you.

- **Accurately Represent their Opposition**: In order to truly talk to your opposition, you need to understand their position just as well as (if not better than) you understand your own. If you fail to accurately represent the position held by your opposition, you are likely to lose them as readers for your essay. Worse still, you have tarnished the reputation of your own position as uninformed and reductive.

- **Use Qualifying Words**: Qualifiers have also been called “conditions” or sometimes “hedges.” Qualifiers are simply words that soften your claim like sometimes, often, rarely, occasionally, many, most, some, etc. You can see how these terms can take a major claim and make it a lot harder to argue.

- **Use Reliable Information**: It is of paramount importance that you carefully check the claims, ideas, and supporting evidence you use as you respond to counterarguments. Particularly if you feel confident that you know a lot about a subject, you might be inclined to use claims you’ve heard elsewhere before. You might, though, be misremembering or misrepresenting those remembered claims, or they might have been shared by an unreliable source themselves.

To draft a counterargument, first you need to know how resistant your audience is, then you need a solid idea of how you’re going to respond. It can be helpful to think of a sliding scale of resistance. On one side, you have agreement, and on the other side, you have disagreement. Every reader will fall somewhere on this scale, and you will need to respond differently depending on whether they fully disagree, or whether they are somewhere in a gray middle-section.

There are several commonly accepted strategies for refuting a particular counterargument:

- **Cite counter testimony**: Use examples and testimony that call the claim into question.

- **Question the data**: If anything about the data is suspicious (sample sizes, recency, etc), you can call it into question.
- **Question credibility**: You can always question the credibility or authority of a leading figure of the opposition, though you’ll want to be careful that your questioning has merit. Don’t attack someone’s character just because you can.
- **Question context**: Finally, you can question the way quotations were presented by calling the context into question.
- **Deny the truth**: The phrasing here sounds suspicious, but if you think that a claim made by the opposition is purely untrue, you should deny it and call it into question. If you think that data or facts presented by the other side are inaccurate or untrue, you should make a point to refute the argument by pointing out those observations.

**Lesson Toolbox**

**Additional Resources and Readings**

A collection of videos to aid with choosing an argumentative essay topic
- Link to resource: http://guides.skylinecollege.edu/c.php?g=279231&p=1860879

More information providing guidance from topic selection to research
- Link to resource: https://lcubbison.pressbooks.com/chapter/core-102-research-narrative/

More information exploring the relationship between essay structure and logic
- Link to resource: https://lcubbison.pressbooks.com/chapter/core-201-logical-structure-arguments/

**Lesson Glossary**

- **counterargument**: the argument your opposition will likely make in response to your essay
- **warrant**: an underlying assumption in your reasoning that support your claim
- **backing**: evidence that supports the warrants that are present in your essay

**Check Your Knowledge**

1. Which of the following words is a qualifier?
   a. some  
   b. however  
   c. but  
   d. and

2. Rogerian arguments include warrants, backing, and grounds.
   a. True  
   b. False

3. Choosing a topic is a common struggle for composition students.
   a. True  
   b. False

**Answer Key:**

1. A  
2. B  
3. A