

Writing an Argument

The purpose of argument writing is to present a position and to have an audience adopt or at least seriously consider your argument.

The Writer:

Perhaps more than any other kind of writing, argument writing demands a serious commitment from the writer. Many effective rhetorical tools in oral argument (arguing against an individual instead of an issue, inflaming the audience) will not work in a written argument. Your reader has the luxury and responsibility of analyzing your reasoning carefully. Therefore, one of the most important elements of argument is presenting yourself as logical and reasonable about your issue—no matter how volatile the subject or how passionately you feel.

Good argument writing is critical, assertion-with proof-writing. It should reflect a serious attempt on the writer's part to have considered the issue from all angles—to have analyzed and synthesized all arguments on the subject, and having done so, chosen the most logical and reasoned position.

A good argument writer does not always have to choose the side he/she believes in—he/she chooses to write on the side that affords him/her the best, most effective argument.

Above all, you should take a reasonable tone in your writing. The best argument writing is objective writing. First person almost inherently (and unintentionally) reflects bias or personal opinion. Present your argument in the more objective, third person to suggest that any reasonable writer or thinker could take and accept your position. Be confident and assertive without sounding self-righteous or closed-minded.

The Audience:

Knowing your audience is crucial in argument writing. Of course, it is best if you can anticipate the position your audience already takes on your subject. The language and tone of your essay may change depending on whether you have a friendly audience who already supports your position, or if you have either a neutral or hostile audience.

It is imperative that you do not insult or judge your reader by suggesting that he/she is somehow less intelligent or knowledgeable if he/she does not accept your position.

Avoid making absolute statements that could somehow exclude your particular reader (“Anyone with even a high school education must believe . . .”).

Try to anticipate your audience's objections to your position. Acknowledge these opposing arguments and, if you can, refute them.

The Opposition:

It is always best in argument that you consider all sides of your issue. If you show your audience that you have considered all opposing points of view before you chose your own side, you look as if you have made an impartial, fair evaluation of your whole subject.

When writing, it is often effective to let the audience know you are aware of opposing arguments—we call this **bowing to the opposition**. There are a few ways to do this:

--You may list in the introduction the opposing arguments before advancing your own.

--You may present an opposing position and refute it within each paragraph.

--You may present your entire argument logically and effectively, and then bring up and refute opposition at the end of the essay.

The Writing:

Introduction: You must accomplish two important tasks in the introduction of argument writing—defining your issue and making your stance clear.

You may define your issue by offering historical background, listing the pros and cons, etc., but it is imperative that you make your position clear. The reader must know by the end of the introductory section the argument you will advance and the direction you will take.

Some writers try to engage the audience by offering compelling statistics, an intriguing story, or a rhetorical question. These are excellent tools to draw the reader into the argument, but do not over-rely on gimmicks to engage the audience. Your job is not to ask many rhetorical questions; your job is to anticipate and answer audience questions.

When you first begin to craft a **thesis statement** for argument writing, think of creating a mathematical equation. Let your reader know that by considering $a + b + c + d$, he or she will be able to accept your conclusion. Of course, your thesis does not have to be so rigidly constructed, but the equation offers you a good example of how to give your reader both your argument and its direction early in the essay. The equation will also serve as a good check during revision for the writer; that is, the writer can go back and see whether he/she has actually done effective paragraphs on all parts of the equation promised in the introduction.

Sample Thesis Paragraphs:

Thousands of Americans suffer daily from depression and anxiety, and without some kind of help these illnesses can be unbearable. In 1987, Eli Lilly and Co. presented to Americans what they and many others believed to be a miracle drug, the antidepressant, fluoxetine, commonly called Prozac. Prozac was designed to be the optimal solution to mental distress. It was marketed as having less side effects than other antidepressants, and as being effective in

treating patients suffering anything from anxiety to depression to bulimia and obsessive-compulsive disorders (“Singing” 76). From the beginning of its use, however, the drug has been surrounded by controversy. Many doctors and patients blame Prozac for terrible side effects and mind altering experiences. Violent behaviors, including murder and suicide, have been directly linked to Prozac use. Therefore, while the drug may be useful in isolated cases, overwhelming medical evidence suggests that Prozac is potentially dangerous to one’s mental and physical well-being, and should thus be banned from use in the mental health profession.

In 1995, three Southern states reinstated the use of chain gangs as part of their new prison reform systems. The reappearance of chain gangs in this country has rekindled strong objections from people who believe that this is a form of cruel and unusual punishment and that chaining human beings together violates the civil rights of our inmates. Advocates of the chain gang, however, believe that the American prison system is in dire need of reform. They argue that prisons are no longer places of punishment and reform, but are places where prisoners can receive free medical care, free college education, and even free cable television. Indeed, there is a strong case to be made that chain gangs, when executed humanely, will serve as a valuable deterrent to crime by making the prison experience more rigorous. Chain gangs may also play an important part in rehabilitating criminals by putting them to work and offering some kind of restitution to the community they victimized.

Paragraphing: Every paragraph should begin with a clear **topic sentence**—one that specifically considers one aspect of the argument. Every sentence in the paragraph should relate to the topic sentence. The legitimacy of any argument depends on the **evidence** offered for each point the writer advances. Each point should have substantial, convincing detail and evidence. The more evidence you offer, and the better the experts you cite, the more winning the argument. If you are doing secondary research, try not to rely on just one outside source for evidence—the more experts you consider, the more well-rounded your argument.

Organization: Try to outline your argument before you begin writing. This will help you discover the most effective plan of organization. Should you go from strongest point to weakest or from simplest to most complex? Remember, by nature, the reader usually remembers what he/she reads last. No matter what the order you decide to present your points, you must create a logical progression and smooth transitions between paragraphs.

Conclusion: Be sure to include some kind of final statement that gives the reader a sense of closure to your argument. Some writers deal with opposition in the conclusion; others restate the thesis and summarize the argument. Some even use the conclusion to encourage the audience to take some action. But you must remember not to introduce new, unsubstantiated arguments in

the conclusion. This is the place to remind the reader of the position you now take on your subject.

Reasoning: Before completing your final draft, you will want to check each of your arguments for sound reasoning. Below is a list of common logical fallacies (taken from Axelrod and Cooper's The Concise Guide to Writing) that can jeopardize the soundness of your argument and can alienate your audience. Be careful to avoid them.

1. *Failing to accept the burden of proof:* when the writer asserts a claim but provides no support for it.

The prophet Ezekiel's encounter with a U.F.O. is paraphrased in the first chapter of Ezekiel. This is not the only encounter in the Bible but the most obvious one to be recognized by modern man as an alien encounter.

2. *Hasty generalization:* when the writer asserts a claim on the basis of an isolated example.

Bob is left-handed. He is very creative. Left-handed people are creative.

3. *Sweeping generalization:* when the writer fails to qualify the applicability of the claim and asserts that it applies to "all" instead of to "some."

All people are bad drivers.

4. *Overgeneralization:* when the writer fails to qualify the claim and asserts that "it is certainly true" rather than "it may be true."

It is certainly true that men perform better in high stress jobs.

5. *Begging the question:* when the believability of the support itself depends on the believability of the claim—circular reasoning.

Women do not belong in military schools because they were designed exclusively for men.

6. *False analogy:* when two cases are not sufficiently parallel to lead readers to accept the claim.

What the police force did to frame O.J. Simpson was exactly like what the Nazis did to the Jews during the Holocaust.

7. *False use of authority:* when the writers invoke as an expert in the field being discussed a person whose expertise or authority lies not in the given field but in another.

If Oprah recommends *She's Come Undone*, it must be a great novel!

8. *Non sequitur*—“*it does not follow*”: when one statement is not logically connected to another.

Many people question the legitimacy of the stories in *The National Enquirer*—but they must hold some truth since over 3 million people buy it every week.

9. *Red herring*: when a writer raises an irrelevant issue to draw attention away from the central issue.

Marijuana smoking is not very harmful. I'd rather ride in a car driven by a pot smoker than someone under the influence of alcohol.

10. *Post hoc*—“*after this, therefore because of this*”: when the writer implies that because one event follows another, the first caused the second. Chronology does not equal causality.

Before uniforms were introduced at Will Rogers Middle School, Rogers ranked 14th out of 19 district schools on a statewide algebra test, but the following year when they wore uniforms, their ranking jumped to 4th.

11. *Slippery Slope*: when the writer argues that taking one step will lead inevitably to a next step, one that is undesirable.

The legalization of euthanasia will ultimately lead to our killing the homeless, the handicapped, and the elderly.

12. *Equivocation*: when a writer uses the same term in two different senses in an argument. To equivocate is to use ambiguous words purposely to mislead or deceive or hedge.

People say that sexism and racism are forms of discrimination. But what's wrong with discrimination? We discriminate all the time in our choices of food, homes, and friends.

13. *Oversimplification*: when an argument obscures or denies the complexity of the issue.

The welfare system's problems can be solved if we enroll its recipients in job training programs.

14. *Either/or reasoning*: when the writer reduces the issue to only two alternatives that are polar opposites.

Either we choose democracy or we choose anarchy.

15. *Ad hominem*—“*against the man*”: when the writer attacks his or her opponents personally rather than arguing the issues.

The president, who was little more than a draft dodger, sent our troops into Iraq yesterday.