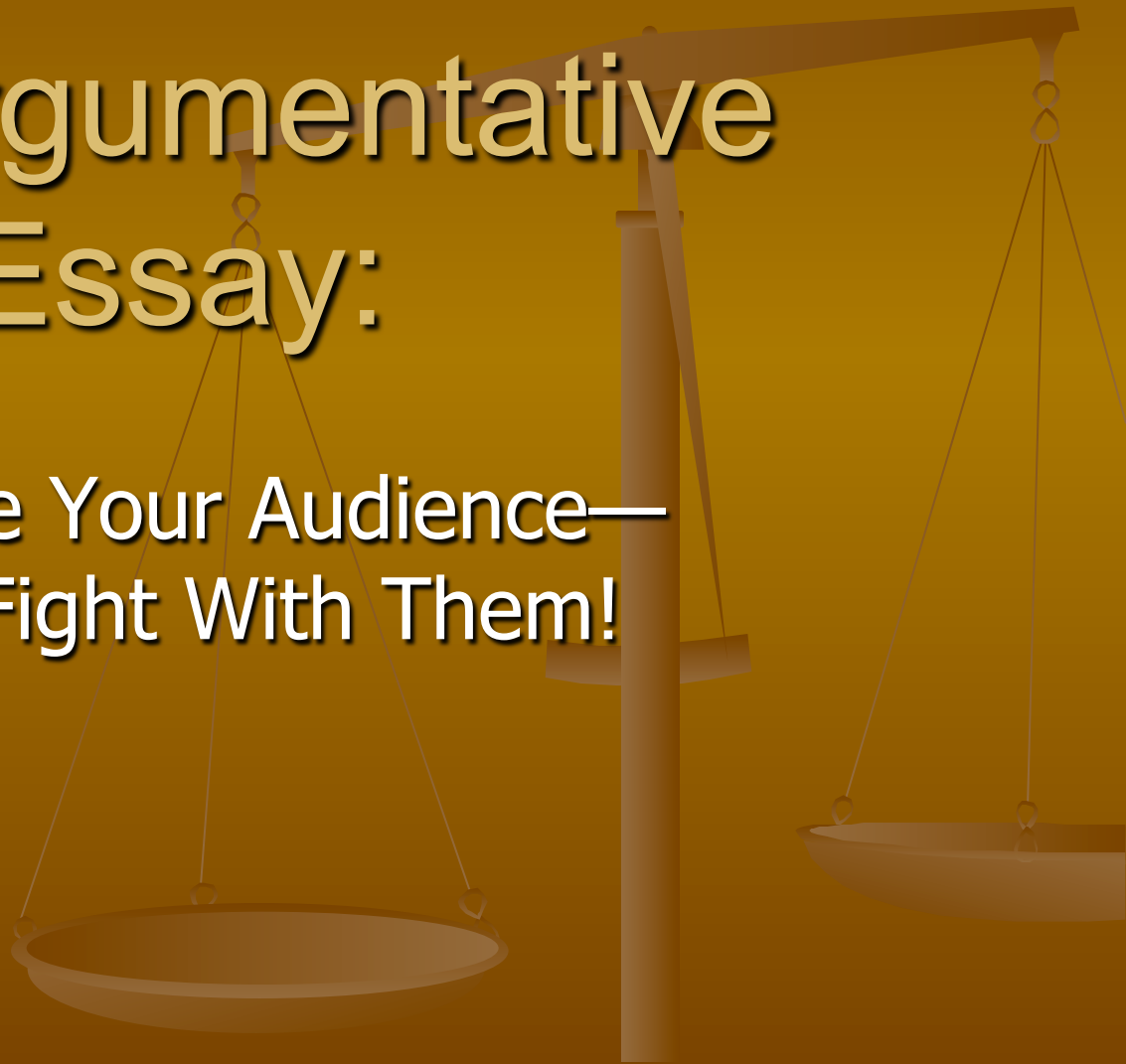
The Argumentative Essay:

Persuade Your Audience—
Don't Fight With Them!



Goals

- Understand what an argumentative essay is
- Learn argument strategies:
  - Summary
  - Quoting
  - Agree or Disagree
  - Gray Areas
  - Make use of counterarguments
- Some mistakes to avoid
- Practice creating argument statements

What is an Argumentative Essay?

The purpose of an argumentative essay is to organize and present your well-reasoned conclusions in order to persuade the audience to accept—or at least seriously consider—your point of view.

Begin at the End!

A “well-reasoned conclusion” is
one that is arrived at step by step,
guiding the reader through
your logic with illustrations
and explanations,
until your conclusion seems inevitable.

Think Before You Write

- Make your reasoning clear to yourself BEFORE you write your final draft.
- State your ideas step by step before trying to draw the conclusion.
- There has to be evidence for each premise (step) and an explanation of how you arrived at your conclusion.

Strategy Depends on Audience

Which steps you take toward the conclusion of your argument depends on your audience and the goals you have for your writing.

Profile Your Audience

This is not “profiling” with intent to discriminate against anyone.

Instead, you are making sure you reach your audience without offending them!

Five Key Questions

1. Do you have a specific intended audience?
2. Who is your intended audience? What are their personal characteristics?
3. What is their job, profession, or field of expertise?
4. What does your audience know about your topic? What could they NOT know about your topic, considering their personal characteristics?
5. What is their level of need/interest regarding your writing? How will your audience use your writing?

The Audience Is Skeptical

Your audience has thoughts, beliefs, assumptions, and values. Anticipate them.

Did they use different premises to come to a different logical conclusion? Did they use intuition or emotion in developing their beliefs or assumptions?

Take care to consider their opposition to your argument and be sure to address possible criticism while you support your claims.

An Argument = A Conversation!

The act of arguing in academic writing is the act of entering a conversation (Graff and Birkenstein ix).

In any conversation, you need to know what others have said before you can respond.

The same is true in academic writing. You have to establish for your readers what has been said about your topic before asserting your own claims about it.

Strategies

The book *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein features numerous phrases and examples of "templates," or models of expressions and strategies for exploring your academic arguments.

Here are just a handful of strategies to put forth an argument . . .

Summary First

What has been said may be

- other written works
- a bill being debated in the legislature
- your audience's preconceptions
- or a film you just watched

—whatever it is, you must first summarize it so that your readers know why you will be arguing about it.

This summary may be a few sentences of your introduction, or it may be part of the step-by-step logic of your reasoning toward your conclusion.

Example of Summary and Response

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

In 1963, eight religious leaders issued a public statement against the protests King was leading. King responded to their statements and the kinds of notions their sympathizers might have been thinking, arguing against each one as he built his case for the justness of his actions and his cause.

In one passage, King writes, "You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations" (King qtd. in Graff and Birkenstein 5).

While King uses the word "you," because he was directly addressing his audience, he might just as well have used "they"—*they* say such-and-such, but *I* say this.

This is the essence of academic argument.

Summarizing

Setting up a challenge to common beliefs:

- Americans today tend to believe that _____.
- The standard way of thinking about topic X has it that _____.
- It is often said that _____.
- My whole life I have heard it said that _____ (22).

Summarizing

Challenging a belief of your own:

- Although I should know better by now, I cannot help thinking that _____.
- At the same time that I believe _____, I also believe _____ (23).

Summarizing

Go beyond what was literally said and summarize an implication:

- Although none of them have actually said so directly, my teachers have often given me the impression that _____.
- [While] X does not say so directly, she apparently assumes that _____ (23).

Unless satirizing, suspend your own opinions as you summarize what "They" believe in order to represent it accurately. At the same time, focus your summaries on what pertains to *your* arguments. Avoid lists: e.g., "First the author says . . . Then he says . . . Next, . . . etc."

Summarizing

Discussing an issue with many sides in a debate:

- In discussions of X, one controversial issue has been _____. On the one hand, [Author A] argues [position statement]. On the other hand, [Author B] contends ____. Other [authors] even maintain _____. My own view is _____ (24).

Note: the contents following “My own view is” are all that is necessary in a third-person argument statement.

Examples

Click “Writing Exercises, “cancel” the registration option, then select “Model papers”:

http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/writersref6e/Player/Pages/Main.aspx

Practice: Work Backward

Make up summaries of what “They Say” that would lead to these “I Say” argument statements:

- My research indicates that there are dangerous levels of Chemical X in the Columbia River.
- The novel by Author W has critical flaws.
- Female students get shut out of class discussions by male students.

(Graff and Birkenstein 26-27)

Quoting

Besides summary, use a more direct approach:

- Choose quotes that support your argument—not necessarily agreeing, but *about* what *you* are saying.
- Introduce each quote with who said it and how it was said. (Dr. Whiplash contends . . .)
- Follow EVERY quote with explanation of the meaning of the quote and how it relates to your argument.
- Make sure the quote is really about what you are discussing—wanting their words to mean as you wish doesn't make it so!

(Graff and Birkenstein 40-41)

Quoting

Use vivid “signal verbs”

Rather than simple, dull verbs like “says,” “states,” and “talks about”—which are required in journalistic reporting—characterize the nature of the author’s purpose for writing (35).

Making a claim: claim, argue, insist, observe

Expressing agreement: support, recognize, do not deny,

Questioning or disagreeing: contradict, deny, refute, reject

Recommending: advocate for, demand, urge, warn (37).

Avoid Quoting Mistakes

- Don’t underquote, misquote, or overquote.

  Underquoting is leaving out too much of the text of a passage to understand it. Overquoting usually results from not understanding a text well enough to explain it (Graff and Birkenstein 40).

  If you’re stumped by what you’re reading, try using your social networks—ask what other readers are making of a text to gauge your gut reaction.

Introductions to Quotes

- Writing in the journal *Commentary,* X complains that "_____."
- In X's view, "_____."
- X agrees when he writes, "_____."
- X disagrees when she writes, "_____."
- X is alarmed when she finds "_____" (43).

(MLA, APA, and CMS use different tenses in their signal phrases.)

Explaining Quotes

- Basically, X is saying _____.
- In making this comment/remark, X argues that _____.
- X's point is that _____ (44).

While every quotation situation is not the same, it is better to risk "overexplaining" than to do too little. Even an audience that knows the full context of the material you are quoting needs to be told what *you* make of the text (44).

I agree/disagree/a little of both/neither

Go ahead and say “I agree,” or “I disagree” or “I agree that ____, but I cannot agree that ____.” Then you can launch into however complex your argument (Graff and Birkenstein 52).

If agreeing or disagreeing cannot apply, you still need a strong, driving idea to motivate your choices of summary and quotation in your argument (53).

Disagreeing—Explain Why

- X's argument fails to take relevant factors into account
- " " is based on faulty or incomplete evidence
- " " rests on questionable assumptions
- " " misses the real problem altogether!

You can even argue that what one person thinks is new and revelatory is actually old news (54).

Agreeing—Then Adding to It

- I agree that _____ because my experience [of] _____ confirms it (57).
- Though her remark was a humorous aside, her comedic intuition is supported by research that states "_____."

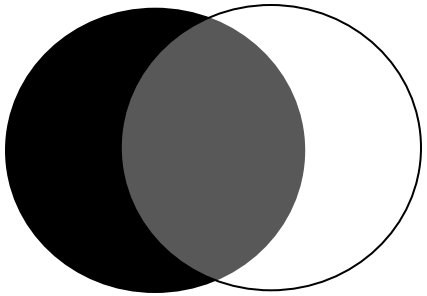
Nuanced Approach

- Yes, but . . .
- Although I agree up to a point, I still insist . . . (59).
- X is right that _____, but she seems on more dubious ground when she claims that ____ (60).

Go For the Gray Areas!

An argument may be disagreeing or agreeing. You just have to say to what and why.

You can also both agree and disagree with aspects of the same thing.



That is not being wishy-washy or flip-flopping.

Rather, it is engaging in a nuanced, thoughtful argument.

Two Minds?

When genuinely ambivalent—feeling two ways about something—it is intellectually honest to say so.

- I do support X's position that _____, but I find Y's argument about _____ and Z's research on _____ to be equally persuasive (61).

If something is complex, don't oversimplify it just to make it easy for you or your audience to choose sides.

Clarify Theirs From Yours

Signal idea ownership:

- X overlooks what I consider an important point about _____.
- I wholeheartedly endorse what X calls _____.
- These conclusions, which X discusses in _____, add weight to the argument that _____ (70-71).

Strengthen Your Argument by Inviting Your Enemies

Discuss the objections your harshest critics might level against your claims.

> Although some readers might object, saying _____, in fact, it is the case that _____ (75).

By entering into a serious dialogue with your opponents, you will come across as an open-minded, more confident critical thinker.

If you can't imagine any opposition, either you're not trying, or your thesis is not an argument.

Point Your Finger

- (Group identity label) would probably argue that _____. However, they are failing to realize that _____.

  "Group identity label" refers to names given to or adopted by groups of a common point of view, for example, conservatives, liberals, skeptics, true believers, sociologists, men, women, Americans, Asians, or researchers.

But Don’t Be Rude!

Employing a label can drift into the territory of slurs, but it more often helps the reader know who you see specifically as your opponents.

To avoid stereotyping, use qualifiers like “most” or “not all” to recognize the realistic variation within groups (79-80).

Likewise, if you skip over details to make a quick joke about your opponents, then those who don’t already agree with you will likely resist your ideas (83).

Respond to Counter-Arguments

You can overcome fair representations of your opponents' views by giving a well-developed "yes, but . . ." response.

- Yes, criminals who threaten the community should be punished, but not all who break the letter of the law are violent or dangerous. People who steal cable TV are breaking laws, but it causes far more harm to society to pillage retirement accounts or foreclose on homes.

However, if "their" opposing argument is more persuasive than yours, you should revise your argument and your thinking. Grasping onto beliefs that don't stand up to the light of reality aren't worth holding on to.

Your Argument Matters

Show why your argument matters—answer the "Who cares?" and "So what?" questions (88-91).

- Who your claims pertain to
- The real-world effects of your claims

Who Cares?

Who your argument pertains to may not be your literal audience. Rather, it may be another group they are interested in learning about.

> What do geneticists think is new and exciting research these days?
>
> What do teenagers really think of fast food?

Your audience probably isn't geneticists or teenagers, but readers would want to know they are to whom your argument matters.

Indicate Who Cares

- X used to think _____. But recently _____ suggests that _____.
- This interpretation challenges the work of those critics who have long assumed that _____.
- But who really cares? At the very least [_____] who assumed [_____] should care. (91)

You can be as specific as you see fit.

So What?

So what if one group thinks A and another thinks Z? Appeal to something your audience does care about!

You can move from what may seem like a petty dispute or an obscure object of fascination for a few to the broader implications of the matter:

- In a world increasingly _____, this is _____. (94)
- While_____ may seem silly, it is important to realize ____.
- These conclusions/This discovery will have significant applications in ____ as well as in ____. (95)

What if Audience Already Cares?

You still need to answer the “So what?”

Remind readers who may be experts why what you are presenting matters. It will support your argument and engage your readers better.

Remember, if you don’t care about your argument, your audience won’t, either.

Practice

Invent an argument statement for an audience

- Topic: pet ownership
- Audiences:
  - Middle-class elementary school-age kids
  - 25-y.o. Indian women in Seattle
  - Dog show enthusiasts

What might each group care about? Already know? Need to know? What points could you make about owning a pet?

Mistakes to Avoid

- “Only idiots believe . . .”
  Those believers may be your audience!
  Analyze and criticize ideas, not people.
- Failure to reread leads to self-contradiction.
  Revise with a critical eye on content before all else.
- “They Say/I Say” conversation-type structure is not the same as conversational tone or style.
  Be conscious of the purpose of your argument and your audience’s expectations then choose appropriate words.

In Conclusion

- Have a point to your argument—make *your own* decisions about your topic
- Identify your audience
- Explain what “They” say about your topic
- Respond to what “They” say with *your* argument
- Address potential objections with respect
- Show why your audience should care

Suggested Reading

Graff, Gerald and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing.* New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.

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