

Arguments

After reading this article, you should be able to understand arguments, evidence, counterarguments, audiences, and critical reading. You should be able to create an argument for a specific audience, using evidence and counterarguments to support your claim.

Arguments

An argument is a main idea (often referred to as a “claim” or “thesis statement”) that uses evidence to support it. An argument describes a specific point of view or analysis, showing the audience why a particular topic is relevant. Most academic writing assignments require an argument, so it’s important to know how to create one.

College professors will ask you to defend, oppose, or by offer your own point of view to an interpretation of information. For most writing assignments, you will need to go beyond summarizing what you have learned in class. You will need to develop an analysis or interpretation of that material and provide evidence for your claim.

While creating a claim may seem intimidating at first, we all use argumentation on a daily basis. You probably already have some skill at crafting an argument. The more you practice your skills, the better you will be at thinking critically, reasoning, making choices, and weighing evidence.

Crafting an Argument

An argument always takes a specific position on an issue by making a claim. The more specific your claim is, the better your paper will be. Arguments can simple, such as “Protons are positively charged and electrons are negatively charged” with evidence such as, “In this

experiment, protons and electrons acted in such and such a way.” Claims can also be as complex as “The end of the South African system of apartheid was inevitable,” using reasoning and evidence such as, “Every successful revolution in the modern era has come about after the government in power has given and then removed small concessions to the uprising group.” Both papers will explain their arguments in more detail.

A strong argument demonstrates that you understand the material, but it also shows your ability to apply it in ways that go beyond what you have read. For example, you might critique the material, apply it to something else, or explain it in a different way. In order to do this, you need a particular point to argue.

Your claim should be more than a simple statement. For example, the sentence “Frank Lloyd Wright was a great architect” does not explain why Wright was great. In order to be more specific, you might say something such as “Frank Lloyd Wright’s architecture combines elements of European modernism, Asian aesthetic form, and locally found materials to create a unique new style,” or “There are many strong similarities between Wright’s building designs and those of his mother, which suggests that he may have borrowed some of her ideas.” The rest of the paper should use evidence to prove your argument.

Evidence

Evidence can make or break an argument. For example, consider convincing your parents to let you borrow their car. You might use evidence to highlight your trustworthiness, make them feel guilty because your friends’ parents all let them drive, use driving statistics to demonstrate your responsibility. In academia, an argument also needs strong persuasive evidence.

Every field has different requirements for acceptable evidence, so it is best to familiarize yourself with that particular discipline. For example, an English professor might expect different forms of evidence than a sociology instructor would. Find out what counts as proof for your field.

Be consistent with your evidence, making sure it supports your claim. If you are arguing that student seating should be moved closer to the basketball court in order to improve players' performances, do not use evidence that argues players should attend games for free. The less confusing your argument is, the more effective it will be.

Counterarguments

One way to strengthen your argument is to consider what someone who disagrees with your position might have to say. By addressing objections, you can prove that your argument is logical and well researched. A counterargument should address some of the reasons your audience might not accept your argument, giving you a chance to be more persuasive.

For most academic assignments, it's better to focus on one or two counterarguments. That way, you have time to explain them in depth instead of using a lot of time and space to describe a lot of points at once.

To create counterarguments, consider how someone who disagrees with you might respond to each of the points you have made or your position as a whole. **Try these strategies:**

- **Do research.** It may seem as though no one could possibly disagree with your argument, but your topic likely has opponents. For example, some people claim the American Civil

War never ended. Doing research will strengthen your counterargument by giving you ideas that you may not have considered otherwise.

- **Talk with friends and teachers.** Another person may be able to imagine counterarguments that have not occurred to you.
- **Imagine someone opposing each claim you make.** For example, if you argued, “Cats make the best pets because they are clean and independent,” you might imagine someone saying, “Cats do not make the best pets. They are dirty and needy.”

Once you have some counterarguments, imagine responding to them. Why should your audience accept your argument? Will you mention that the counterarguments are valid but the audience should still accept your argument? Will you reject the counterargument and explain why it is mistaken? Either way, your argument needs to be stronger than the opposing arguments. You will also want to be sure that your counterargument is consistent with your own claim. If a counterargument changes your position, you might need to revise your original argument.

When using counterarguments, be sure to present each argument fairly and objectively, rather than attacking your opponents or trying to make them look foolish. You want to show that you have seriously considered all sides of a complicated issue.

Audience

Know your audience when you are building a claim. For example, your family members are probably persuaded by different types of arguments. While whining may work with one parent, the other may prefer statistics. Your siblings may be convinced with money. In college, your audience is someone who is educated and intelligent but who does not necessarily agree

with you; therefore, your argument needs to be convincing. It's best to steer away from stating your opinion without strong evidence (i.e., "It's true because I said so").

It can be helpful to imagine your audience consists of a small group: your professor and TA, who are likely familiar with the subject, and someone from another planet who has never heard of the subject you are describing. To appeal to this audience, you will want to use concise language that is as specific as possible in order to state your claim and your evidence clearly. Never assume your audience knows the material, understands what part you are using, what you think about it, or why you have chosen a particular position.

Critical Reading

Critical reading is essential to understanding an argument. Although some of the material you read will be very persuasive, very few of your instructors think of the texts they assign as the last word on the subject. Remember that the author of every text wants you to believe something. While this is OK (everything is written from someone's perspective), it's important to read sources carefully, being aware of objectivity and bias.

To read more critically, take notes either in the margins of your source (if you are using a photocopy or your own book) or on a separate paper. Try putting the author's ideas in your own words. This will help you stop thinking of these ideas as facts and start thinking of them as arguments. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the author trying to prove?
- Is the author assuming I will agree with something? What is it?
- Do I agree with the author?
- Does the author defend his/her argument in a convincing way?

- What kind of proof does he/she use?
- Is there something the author leaves out that I would put in? Does putting it in hurt his/her argument?

As you practice reading critically, you will begin to see writers' hidden agendas. This will improve your own ability to craft effective arguments.

This information originally appeared in a handout from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center.