

THE WRITING PROCESS

Argumentation

All of us like a good argument. We enjoy the confrontation of an intellectual exchange that allows us to test our ideas and see how they stand up. However, there is a difference between an argument and an exchange of opinions, or for that matter a bout of name-calling. Arguments follow rules designed to ensure that ideas are presented fairly and logically. Consequently, argumentation is one of the most common and most important organizational patterns utilized in academic writing.

An argument is a reasoned, logical way of demonstrating that your position, belief, or conclusion is valid. One purpose of argument is to persuade reasonable people to agree with your position. Another is simply to defend your position, to establish its soundness even if others cannot be persuaded to agree. A third purpose of argumentation is to attack some position you believe to be misguided, untrue, or evil, without necessarily offering an alternative of your own. (You could, for example, attack the president's budget without presenting your own version.)

Although argument and persuasion are related, they are not the same. **Persuasion**—getting other people to change their minds—is one purpose of argument but not the only one. And although argument, the appeal to reason, is one means of persuasion, there are others: appeals to the audience's self-interest, to their moral sense, or to their emotions. You could, for instance, use all three of these appeals to argue against lowering the drinking age in your state from eighteen to sixteen years of age. Appealing to your audience's self-interest, you could point out how an increased number of accidents involving drunk drivers would cost taxpayers more money and could cost some of them their lives. You could state, if you believed it to be true, that teenage drinking is morally wrong and should not be condoned by the state. And finally, you could appeal to your audience's emotions by telling a particularly sad story about a sixteen-year-old alcoholic. All of these appeals are relevant and fair, and any of them might succeed.

What appeal you choose depends partly on the results you want to achieve as well as your perception of your audience. However, there is also an ethical question involved: whether and when the end justifies the means. Most people would agree that lies and threats are unacceptable means of persuasion among rational people, yet they are commonly used in politics and nearly everyone resorts to them from time to time. But it is unquestionably true that in college, and outside of it as well, the most acceptable form of persuasion—arguably the only acceptable form—is argument, **the appeal to reason.**

CHOOSING A TOPIC

In argument, as in all writing, choosing the right topic is important. It should be one that you care about, one in which you have an intellectual or emotional interest. But you should not be pig-headed. If the evidence goes against your position you should be able to change your thesis or even the subject. And you should be able, in advance, to consider your topic from other people's view-points so that you understand what they believe and can build a logical case that appeals to their sense of reason. If you think you cannot do this, then you should abandon your topic and pick another one that you can deal with more objectively.

Besides caring about your topic, you should be well informed about it. Opinion unsupported by evidence is not persuasive. Furthermore, you should select a limited issue, one narrow enough

that it can be treated properly in the space available to you, or confine your discussion to a particular aspect of a broad issue. You should also consider your purpose—what you expect your argument to accomplish and how you wish your audience to respond. If your topic is so far-reaching that you cannot specify what you want to persuade a reader to think and to do, or so idealistic that your expectations are impossible or unreasonable, your essay will not be effective.

TAKING A STAND

After you have chosen your topic and completed your preliminary research, you are ready to take your stand—to state the position you will argue in the form of a **thesis**.

Example: Solar power is the best available solution to the coming energy crisis.

This thesis says that you believe there will be an energy crisis in the future, that there is more than one possible solution to the crisis, and that solar energy is a better solution than any other. In your argument you will have to support each of these assertions logically and persuasively. Here is an example of an opposing thesis on the same topic: **If there is to be an energy crisis, solar power is not the solution to it.**

This thesis questions, by its use of the word “if,” whether there will be an energy crisis, and it states that solar power, even if it is a promising alternate source of energy, could not solve such a crisis, at least not by itself. This is a simpler position to argue, with only one assertion that requires support. That is not to say, of course, that it is more true.

Before going any further, you should examine your thesis to make sure that it is debatable. There is no point in arguing a position that everyone already agrees with or that cannot be settled through logic. It is also wise to test your own attitude toward your thesis. If you are so convinced you are right that you cannot understand or respect opposing views and the people who hold them, then you probably do not have the objectivity you will need to develop a sound and persuasive argument. Argument is demanding, and it particularly demands clear thought and a reasonably cool head. The strength of your conviction does not guarantee that your argument will be strong.

GATHERING EVIDENCE

Evidence is information that supports or opposes your thesis. While **opinion** is evidence, it is a personal judgment that may or may not be verifiable. Similarly, **experience** is evidence, but it is limited since it is personal. On the other hand, **fact** is hard evidence, independent of who says it. Therefore, using a fact to support your opinion strengthens your argument. For example, your opinion might be that the installation of automatic seatbelts on all cars could dramatically reduce the number of deaths due to car accidents. The fact that ever since 1965 over 45,000 people a year have been killed on the nation's highways is a very convincing piece of information for your audience to know. Remember, if you use a fact to support your opinion, to make it into evidence, you would have to show your readers why that fact makes your opinion more likely to be true. After deciding on a topic and generating a preliminary or open thesis, you should gather as much evidence as you can. Brainstorm to think of experiences and examples that would support your thesis. If your topic is technical or demands specific knowledge, go to the library and research

the topic by using the appropriate databases, periodical indexes, and reference books to locate the information you need. In addition, you can research the topic online by searching the Internet.

When selecting and reviewing material, remember three things. First, read selections or consider positions that represent the full range of opinions on your subject, not just one side or another. Look especially hard at those that disagree with the position you plan to take. Then you will understand their position and be able to refute it effectively when you write your paper. Second, keep in mind the limits of your paper. You will need fewer facts and examples for a brief essay than you will for a term paper. Finally, review all your material to see whether it connects with your thesis in such a way that you may be able to use it as evidence.

ANALYZING YOUR AUDIENCE

Before writing any essay, you should analyze the characteristics, values, and interests of your audience. When writing an argument, however, certain questions require special attention. Once you know who your audience will be, you need to assess what beliefs or opinions they are likely to hold and whether they are friendly, neutral, or hostile to your thesis. It's probably best to assume that some of your readers, if not the majority, are at least skeptically neutral and possibly hostile. That assumption will keep you from making claims you can't support. If your position is really controversial, you should assume that many people will disagree with you and will look for holes in your argument.

Often you begin with a purpose in mind but must decide on an audience. If you want to make something happen, who has the power to do it? Whom do you have to persuade, and how would those readers respond to your efforts? Sometimes you will need to appeal to several different audiences, tailoring your persuasive method and approach to each.

Each of these considerations influences your approach to your subject. It would be relatively easy to convince college students that tuition should be lowered or instructors that salaries should be raised. You could be reasonably sure, in advance, that each group would be friendly and would agree with your position. But argument requires more than telling people what they already believe. It would be much harder to convince college students that tuition should be raised to pay for an increase in instructors' salaries or to persuade instructors to forgo raises so that tuition can remain the same. Yet these are the kinds of challenges that a successful persuasive argument should meet.

What kind of evidence might change a reader's mind? That depends on the reader, on the issue, and on the facts at hand. For example, why would a student agree to pay higher tuition? You might concede that tuition is high but point out that it has not been raised for three years, while the college's costs have kept going up. Heating and maintaining the buildings cost more and professors' salaries have failed to keep pace with the cost of living, with the result that several excellent teachers have recently left the college for higher-paid jobs. Furthermore, cuts in government funding have already caused a reduction in the number of courses offered. As you can see, the evidence and reasoning you use in an argument depend to a great extent on whom you want to persuade and what you know about them.