

Argumentative Essay

Taking and Supporting a Position



One key skill to composition is learning how to make a successful argument. The argumentative essay brings all of the argument-related skills – research, support, critical thinking – together into one project. The argumentative essay is one of the most important essays in college composition because it develops skills that will be used frequently in other classes and even beyond the college classroom.

This is because argument and persuasion are part of everyday life: advertisers try to convince you to buy their products, political candidates try to convince you to vote for them, and that one friend on Facebook tries to convince you that vaccines are some deep-seeded government conspiracy. Winning an argument or debate is not a matter of who's smarter: it's a matter of authoritative, well-supported presentation. It is a matter of not simply having a strong opinion, but being able to support that opinion.

For instance, some argue that the earth is only a few thousand years old. People who present this viewpoint are not taken seriously by mainstream culture – not because they're unintelligent, but because they simply do not have any authoritative evidence to support their claims.

Choosing a Topic

Although argument and attempts at persuasion are everywhere, relatively few are successful. This is because, as explained in the "young earth" example, the people attempting to persuade have no solid evidence to support their claims. People hold opinions for a variety of reasons; sometimes opinions are rooted in your family's beliefs, or in information you've seen somewhere, or any number of other factors and influences. Unfortunately, your opinions aren't always supported by facts. It's easy to become defensive when your personal beliefs and opinions are challenged – it's a natural human reaction, in fact. Instead of becoming defensive, however, the best way to handle these challenges is to answer them with logical arguments – or, if that isn't possible, recognize the fact that you may need to re-evaluate *your* stance.

Grounded arguments are always rooted in fact. This is the difference between a logical argument and merely a difference in opinion. For an argumentative essay, however, you should choose a topic that has generated significant debate and has considerable discussion on both sides of the issue. Here's a good example of such a debate:

- Side A: Citizens should be required to obtain a firearms license before purchasing a gun.
- Side B: Citizens should be able to purchase a gun with no license requirements.

Neither of the above statements is an argument just yet; neither side has provided any support for its case. Adding "because it's what I believe" or "because they just should" is not going to make the above statements any more convincing, no matter how forcefully they are stated. However, with this debate, it cannot be left as a simple difference in opinion; one side or the other *must* be acted upon (even if "acting upon" one side means

leaving things as they are), and the two positions are mutually exclusive (that is, if one position is correct, the other cannot be). In an argumentative essay, your primary purpose is *not* simply to compare the two sides: you must choose one side or the other to support.

Examining the Evidence

Before you can begin writing an essay on an argumentative topic, you have to examine the evidence and choose a side. In the complex issue of gun control, many people already have deep, preconceived opinions on both sides – sometimes influenced by their peers, their upbringing, or even their religious beliefs. However, an argument grounded in critical thinking means you need to form your opinions – and sometimes reconsider your long-held beliefs – based on objective, reliable sources.

The sources of information that you choose in your research can make or break your argument, so it's important to stick to sources based in fact; you're not going to run a convincing argument simply by citing sources that share your opinion. There must be some factual basis for your opinion. This means that ideally, your main sources of support should be

- **Non-religious.** When you bring religion to an argumentative essay, you're superimposing preconceived notions onto the argument. Argumentative essays should be grounded in facts that will be equally verifiable by anyone who reads your essay. Religious texts like the Bible are based on culture and tradition, not on observable fact. Therefore, they are thoroughly unconvincing and should be avoided as sources.
- **Non-political.** Argumentative sources with political affiliations are tricky because they usually have a heavy confirmation bias – meaning they present facts that support their opinions while ignoring or dismissing important evidence to the contrary.
- **Supported by facts.** Fact-driven sources are the best places to get information. They make it very clear how they obtained their facts.

Building the Argument

As you look at your sources and examine people's opinions on both sides of the argument, you can begin to see what people say about the issue and what the main reasons are. Take another look at the gun control example, this time adding some reasons to support both sides.

- Side A: Citizens should be required to obtain a firearms license before buying a gun.
 - Support 1: Gun licensing requirements would make gun-related crime easier to prosecute.
 - Support 2: Gun licenses would make guns easier to track and curtail the flow of illegal arms.
 - Support 3: Gun licensing requirements would make it much more difficult for potentially dangerous criminals to obtain guns.
- Side B: Citizens should be able to buy guns without having to obtain a license.
 - Support 1: The Second Amendment guarantees that the government will not infringe the right to bear arms.
 - Support 2: A license requirement would make it easier for the government to start a large-scale seizure of weapons.

- Support 3: Requiring a license would only prevent people from defending themselves and would not keep guns out of criminals' hands.

From the above example, you can see that people on both sides of the issue can raise strong arguments, even without invoking religion or strong personal beliefs. For organizational purposes, assume that you're working with Side A for this paper.

Creating an Introduction and Thesis Statement

Presumably, you've arrived at your three support points by doing research of credible sources. This means you can provide supporting details from cited sources for all of your support points. You'll do that in the body of the essay, but in the introduction, you shouldn't include too much detail. The introduction is a three-step process:

- Get the reader's attention.
- Introduce the issue being discussed.
- State where *you* stand on the issue and why (thesis statement).

The thesis statement is just a simple matter of stating which side of the argument you're taking and why.

Citizens should be required to obtain a firearms license before buying a gun because it would make gun-related crime easier to prosecute, it would make guns easier to track and curtail the flow of illegal arms, and it would make it much more difficult for potentially dangerous criminals to obtain guns.

The Body: Supporting the Argument

The body is where you'll make your key points and support them with research. You need a transition of some kind so the reader knows exactly which point you're discussing. This transition sentence functions as the topic sentence for a body paragraph.

One of the main reasons gun owners should need a license is because it would make it much easier for the state to prosecute gun crime.

From that sentence, your reader knows exactly what the next paragraph or two will discuss. From there, you have to support your statement. The first thing to do is present research.

An article in the *Chicago Tribune* describes the difficult legal challenges, saying that Congress often fails to create gun legislation because it would be too complex to enforce without substantial legal hurdles (Ingram).

Simply stating the research, however, is not enough. You also have to explain how it applies to the argument.

Requiring a gun license would solve this problem because it would substantially answer the question of whether the offender had a right to a gun. If there were a federal gun license that everyone had to go through the same process to get, it would get rid of the state-level patchwork of regulations that makes gun crime so hard to prosecute.

The above example doesn't need; the previous example already had a sourced statement with a citation, and this example is the writer's analysis. When research and statistics are used to support a point, every cited statement needs to be similarly analyzed and deconstructed.

Rebuttal and Refutation: Addressing the Other Side

Usually when you are assigned to write an argumentative essay, one of the requirements is that you have to "give at least one opposing view." Writers often mistakenly believe this to mean they have to give *support* to the other side or "play fair," but that's not the case. The reason for presenting an opponent's viewpoint in your essay is so you can explain why it doesn't work. You have to show your readers that you have examined both sides of the argument, but you also have to explain why your opponents have not changed your mind about the topic. The best way to begin is by simply and briefly presenting the other side's argument.

Opponents of stricter gun control laws argue that making guns harder to obtain will endanger law-abiding citizens because only criminals would have guns.

The reason for presenting the above statement is *not* to support the other side, but to explain it. At this point, you have to explain why you don't agree. Deconstruct the argument and point out the flaws in it, using research as needed.

The problem with this thinking is that it assumes guns will be easy to get illegally. This isn't true; when Australia banned firearms, the black market costs for semi-automatic handguns went from \$2000 to over \$15000 (Tanquintie-Misa), meaning that criminals will need large amounts of money to purchase a gun, making crimes of passion much less likely.

You can also acknowledge some validity in your opponent's argument while still rejecting it. For instance:

Even though it's true that stricter gun laws would just create a criminal atmosphere around guns, that's no reason not to introduce these measures. If a driver disobeys a stop sign, for example, the law punishes the driver instead of removing the stop sign.

Conclusion: Tying It All Together

Once you've supported all your main points with research and personal analysis, you have to bring everything back together and leave *all* of your points fresh in the readers' minds. This is your last chance to make an impression on the audience, so you want to make the conclusion especially convincing. However, there is a balance in this; writers often make the mistake of including overt moralizations or introducing new points that weren't discussed anywhere in the body. Another frequent mistake is being repetitive. Because of the nature of the conclusion, it frequently mimics the introduction in form, but it is completely different in function.

Just like the introduction, the conclusion shouldn't include any details; presumably, all of the important details have already been given in the body. This means that you should not need to include any sourced information. The conclusion should take on a tone that provides a sense of resolution. You know what this tone sounds like: you've likely read a magazine article or listened to a public speaker (such as a politician or a preacher), and you

can usually tell when they're almost finished saying what they're going to say. Your conclusion needs to take such a tone.

Most importantly, the closing sentence needs to leave the readers with your full sentiment. This could be in the form of an historical observation, a sense of hope, an observation of irony, or a combination of conclusion devices. For example:

Guns are designed to kill, and in recent days, they have performed far too well at just that; unregulated gun ownership was originally intended to keep citizens safe, but now it endangers them.

The above portrays the full purpose of the essay. It doesn't include overused expressions like "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" or "the Founding Fathers intended..." because such expressions have become trite through overuse, and because of the way those expressions have been often wrongly used to support or oppose virtually every hot-button topic, they are seen as "preachy" and have very little relevance to the matter at hand. Instead, pick statements like the one above that are meaningful and passionate, but not overly emotional.

Additional Writing Center Resources

- The Writing Process
- Using Sources
- Citing Sources

Further Reading

- Argumentative Essays (Purdue University Online Writing Lab)
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/685/05>
- The Argument Essay (Aims Community College Online Writing Lab)
<http://www.aims.edu/student/online-writing-lab/assignments/argument>