

Argumentative and Persuasive Writing



Everything we say or do present some kind of argument. In other words, it takes some kind of position. For example, *the government needs to ensure that all people who live in America have affordable health care. Cellphone towers should not be allowed near schools and densely populated areas.*

Many assertions that are worth making are debatable at some level – whether over with facts on which the assertions are based or over the values they imply. *For instance, two politicians cannot agree on what is best for our economy. Two doctors may have a strong disagreement of another's suggestion of keeping a virus from spreading.* We see such disagreements play out in writing and in the media on a daily basis. Argument and persuasion is also an ideal method for presenting an opinion or a proposal on a controversial topic, making it a natural choice for academic and professional writers.

Argument and persuasion have two different processes:

- Argument appeals mainly to the audience's sense of reason in order to negotiate a common understanding or to win agreement with a claim. *For instance, it is the method of a columnist who defends a politician's foreign policy plan on the grounds of economics and defense strategies.*
- Persuasion appeals mainly to the audience's feelings and values in order to compel some action, or at least win support for an action. *For instance, it is the method of a political candidate who urges voters to support her because she grew up in a lower-socioeconomic neighborhood, so she is sensitive to the needs of this community.*

However, these two processes are often present to support the claim, so we use the term argument to mean a deliberate appeal to an audience's reason and emotions in order to create compromise, win agreement, or compel action. Making an effective case for an opinion requires upholding certain responsibilities and attending to several established techniques of good argumentation. Good argumentation involves the presentation of well-chosen (effective) evidence and the artful control of language. Writers have nobody around to dispute their words directly, so they must imagine their probable audience (their readers) to predict the sorts of objections that they may have or consider. Therefore, written arguments must be much more carefully planned – the writer must settle (in advance) on a specific position which is clearly stated in their thesis statement (main claim). There is also greater need for organization, for choosing the most effective types of evidence, and for determining the strategies of rhetoric, language, and style that will best support the main claim and persuade the intended audience.

Elements of Good Argumentation

- **A Clear and Arguable Position** – The core of the argument is a debatable claim about the subject. In other words, ask yourself the following questions: What is your topic (subject)? AND What is your position about this topic? This assertion (main claim) is clearly stated in the thesis statement (the last sentence in your formal introduction paragraph). It might defend or attack a position, suggest a solution to a problem, recommend a change in policy, or even challenge a value of belief.

Examples:

- *The college should give priority for on-campus jobs to students who need financial aid.*
- *Cellphones emit harmful radiation; therefore, they need to be sold with a protective case.*
- *The first amendment must be ratified to exclude any form of “hate speech.”*
- *Overuse of smartphones is slowing the maturation of Generation Z, which will have serious consequences for this generation.*

- **Necessary Background Information** – We need to provide background information about the topic, so readers can understand what is being argued. *For instance, to argue that cellphone towers should not be allowed near schools, you might begin by describing and providing evidence of the rise in placement of these towers in our communities.*
- **Solid Reasons** – A strong position does not make a strong argument; it’s just an opinion. A solid argument must offer strong (well-thought-out) reasons to support the position. *For instance, if you are arguing against the continued legalization of marijuana, you might base your argument on the rise of traffic accidents related to marijuana use. You could also focus your argument on the increase of marijuana use in children and adolescents.*
- **Convincing Evidence** – For each strong reason you provide, you must support each with specific evidence: facts, statistics, testimony, anecdotes, and textual examples (quotes and paraphrases). *For example, to support your position why cellphones should not be sold to minors, you might use Dr. Jean Twenge, a psychologist at San Diego State University whose research shows the increase of poor mental health which is linked to overuse of smartphones and social media in adolescents.*
- **A Trustworthy Tone** – Readers need to trust the person who is making the argument. There are several ways to establish yourself as a trustworthy persuasive writer. Provide facts that demonstrate your knowledge of the topic (subject), indicate your relationship with the topic, demonstrate that you have considered other opinions (perspectives) other than your own, and show that you are fair and honest.
- **Careful Consideration of Other Positions, the Counterargument** – In regards to arguing your position on a controversial topic, others may disagree or hold other positions. Therefore, you need to acknowledge any likely counterarguments, and if possible, refute them. *For example, if you are arguing against the use of technology in the classroom because it has a negative effect on the children’s brains, you might recognize others who disagree and refute this with specific evidence from Nicholas Carr’s essay “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”*

Appeals to the Readers

Effective argumentation appeals to the readers: they ask others to listen to what someone has to say, judge the words fairly, and agree with the writer (as much as possible). Most good arguments combine three kinds of appeals to their readers: ethical (ethos), emotional (pathos), and rational (logos).

Ethical Appeal

Ethos is a Greek word meaning “character.” In terms of persuasive language, it is an appeal to authority and credibility. Ethical appeal is a means of convincing an audience of the reliable character or credibility of the

writer, or the credibility of the argument. It is the sense a writer conveys of his or her expertise and character, projected by the reasonableness of the argument by the use of strong evidence and tone. A rational argument shows that the writer is thinking logically and fairly. Using strong evidence establishes credibility. A sincere tone demonstrates balance and goodwill. This is an important tool of persuasion because if you can get your audience to see you (or your argument) as credible and trustworthy, it will be much easier to persuade them.

In her essay “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” Dr. Jean Twenge, a San Diego State University psychology professor, claims, “Eighth-graders who spend 10 or more hours a week on social media are 56 percent more likely to say they’re unhappy than those who devote less time to social media” (2).

Emotional Appeal

Pathos is a Greek word meaning “suffering” or “experience,” and it is used in persuasive writing as an appeal to the emotions of the audience. Emotional appeal is the way of creating a persuasive argument by evoking an emotional response in the audience/readers. You can use emotional appeal when trying to persuade, by appealing to an audience’s hopes and dreams, playing on their fears or worries, or appealing to their particular beliefs or ideals. Emotional appeal aims directly at your readers’ hearts, targeting their beliefs, values, and feelings that are deeply embedded in each of us. *For instance, the willingness of a nation’s citizens to go to war may result more from their patriotism and loyalty rather than from their reasoned considerations of risks, gains, and possible death.*

Therefore, if we, as parents, value education, we should encourage our children to open a book instead of Instagram. If not, our children will not develop proficient reading skills that are necessary to succeed in college. Our children may struggle in their classes, resulting in poor performance and critical thinking skills, which could easily lead to dropping out of their educational goal altogether.

An emotional appeal attempts to tap into such feelings to:

- heighten the responsiveness of readers
- inspire readers to new beliefs
- compel readers to take action
- assure readers that their values remain unchallenged

A writer’s use of *pathos* may be explicit, as when an argument against capital punishment appeals to readers’ religious values by citing direct references from the Bible or another holy book. But an emotional appeal may also be less obvious because individual words may have connotations that elicit emotional responses from the readers. *For example, one writer may characterize an environmental group as “a well-organized team representing diverse interests,” while another may call the same group “a mishmash of nature lovers and profit-seeking businesspeople.”* The first appeals to readers’ preference for order, balance, and goodwill, and the second appeals to the readers’ fear of extremism and greed.

- An emotional appeal must be directed at the audience’s actual beliefs and feelings.
- An emotional appeal must be presented calmly enough that readers have no reason to doubt the fairness in the rest of the argument.
- An emotional appeal must be appropriate to the subject and to the argument.

Rational Appeal

Logos is a Greek word meaning “logic or reasoning.” Persuasive writers use *logos* to address the rational faculties of the readers – their capacity to reason logically about a problem (argument). It establishes the truth of a position or claim by moving through a series of related sub-claims (mini-claims), each supported by strong specific evidence (examples, facts, statistics, professional opinions, etc.). Good arguments make assertions about which there is a legitimate and recognized difference of opinion. *For instance, it is unlikely that anyone will ever need to convince a reader that crime rates should be reduced; however, not everyone will agree that reinstating the death penalty will reduce the incidents of crime. In addition, everyone agrees that digital communication is changing the way we communicate; however, not everyone will agree that dependency on technology is destroying a generation.*

Rational appeals use two important reasoning strategies:

Inductive Reasoning moves from a set of specific examples to a general statement, from evidence to a generalization or conclusion about the evidence. *For example, a recent study might offer data to show that two hundred patients in the psychiatric ward received prescription drugs but not therapy; therefore, we can conclude that this hospital relies exclusively on administering prescription drugs to treat mental illness. Another might have examined the ages of 2019-2020 college drop-outs in California community colleges, and the evidence showed that 85% were GenZ. Therefore, GenZ’s might be the majority of students leaving college nowadays.* When using inductive reasoning, the writer provides enough strong evidence to make a generalization (supporting main claim) probable.

The evidence used with inductive reasoning includes:

- Facts, statistics and other data that are verifiable and from reliable sources, *for instance, the types of drugs administered in a particular psychiatric ward or registration records from community college in California.*
- Opinions of recognized experts on the subject. These are often conclusions based on actual research and observations (including anecdotes), *for instance, a psychiatrist’s observation or opinion regarding the overprescribing of drugs for mental health patients instead of providing therapy and suggesting lifestyle changes.*
- Specific examples are necessary to illustrate and support the evidence. *For example, a writer may use her own experience (an anecdote or observation) as a parent of an adolescent who suffers from anxiety and depression to support the evidence from a psychiatrist about the over-prescription of medications, instead of providing therapy or suggesting lifestyle changes.* A writer may also back-up statistics from one professional source and then use similar findings from another study. A writer can also back-up evidence using quotes and paraphrases from other experts.

Deductive Reasoning moves from a general statement to a specific conclusion. We start with a generalization and apply it to a new situation in order to draw a conclusion about that situation. We can see this process in the following examples:

- **Major Premise:** Hospitals rely exclusively on prescription drugs to treat patients with mental illness.
- **Minor Premise:** Prescription drugs do not cure mental illness.
- **Conclusion:** Therefore, the hospital does not cure patients with mental illness.

- **Major Premise:** Several students from the elementary school with a cellphone tower became cancer victims due to exposure to radiation.
- **Minor Premise:** Cellphone towers emit radiation.
- **Conclusion:** Radiation caused the cancer in these students; therefore, cellphone towers should not be placed near schools.

- **Major Premise:** The state may imprison only those who are a certain danger to society.
- **Minor Premise:** a man who is too poor to pay a fine is not a certain danger to society.
- **Conclusion:** As a result, the state should not be imprisoning people just because they are too poor to pay a fine.

Developing an Argumentative and Persuasive Essay

Getting Started

To choose a topic for argumentation essay, you should consider a behavior or policy that irks you, an opinion you want to defend, a change you would like to see implemented, or a way to solve the problem. The topic should meet certain criteria:

- It should be something you have knowledge about – from your own experience, observations, class discussions, readings and other media sources; it should also be something you could do more research to provide strong evidence for your argument, your opinion.
- It should be limited, however, to a topic that you can treat thoroughly in the space (number of pages) and time available to you. Therefore, it should not be too broad or too narrow, for instance, *the quality of writing instruction in your school* rather than *the whole nation* or *the necessity for parents to control their children's use of Smartphones* rather than *everyone in the world*.
- It should also be something that you have a passionate feeling about, so you can make a convincing case in your essay.

Note: It's best to avoid topics that you cannot view with some objectivity, seeing the opposing side as well as your own. Otherwise, you may not be open to weaknesses in your own argument, and you may not be able to present the opposing side fairly.

Once you have decided on a topic and viewpoint, you should begin your research to make sure you have enough solid evidence to support your claim (position). Your instructor may provide you with articles, essays, and other sources. You could also use library databases at the LRC for books and other research materials. Personal interviews are also another great resource as long as the information is gathered from credible sources (experts about your topic).



Forming a Main Claim – Thesis Statement

With your topic and opinion, or position, you should develop a tentative thesis statement (main claim). However, don't feel you can't change it slightly as you progress with your research and drafting. You can always alter or reshape it if further research, topic expansion, evidence, and audience prompt you to alter it a little.

- If you are persuading your audience (*all citizens*) to vote for stronger gun control in our nation, you might decide, after more research, to focus a more specific community like *senior citizens*.

In order to be arguable, your main claim (your position on the topic) must be stated clearly and directly. In other words, make this sentence as clear and specific as possible. Don't resort to a vague generality or a non-debatable statement of fact. Instead, state the precise opinion you want your readers to accept or the precise action you want them to take or support.

- ☹ Vague ~ Computer instruction is important.
- ☹ Non-arguable ~ Our school's investment in computer instruction is less than the national average.
- ☺ Arguable/Precise ~ Money designated for athletic facilities needs to be diverted to provide laptops and internet access in the classrooms.

- ☹ Vague ~ Smartphones have several advantages for adolescents.
- ☹ Non-arguable ~ Psychologists have been studying how smartphones have a negative effect on mental health.
- ☺ Arguable/ Precise ~ Smartphones are responsible for the increase of poor mental health in teens.

- ☹ Vague ~ Vaping has caused major health problems for teens.
- ☹ Non-arguable ~ Adolescent smokers often turn to vaping as an alternative to cigarettes.
- ☺ Arguable/ Precise ~ Those who promote vaping should consider the serious health problems caused by this multibillion dollar industry.

Because an argumentative thesis (main claim) is essentially an opinion (a position) reached by examining evidence, it will be necessary to ensure that you have done enough reading and research to present a convincing argument using a broad range of evidence (facts, statistics, studies, etc.) from credible sources. You should also provide evidence to support opposing views too. Although it is often tempting to ignore your opposition, acknowledging and refuting significant opposing views will actually strengthen your argument by enhancing your credibility. You are illustrating that you have done your research thoroughly, and you have considered both sides.

Organizing

Once you have developed your thesis statement (main claim), you should review and evaluate your reasons and evidence of support (credible sources). You must consider which will be the strongest and most persuasive to influence and persuade your target audience, and you must plan how you will arrange your argument. In other words, which point you will present first, second, third, etc. You must also decide what other rhetorical strategies you will use to influence your readers.

The introduction paragraph should draw the readers into your topic, provide background information, and make them see how the subject affects them, and therefore, consider your argument. You can provide an anecdote to connect the readers to your subject, a dramatic fact or statistic to shock them, or even a direct quote from a credible source. Your introductory information should connect logically and clearly to your main claim (thesis statement), which is the last sentence in your introduction paragraph.

The body paragraphs (there should be several in a solid argumentative essay) provide reasons (or strong points) with strong evidence to support them. In other words, each body paragraph will focus on one major point (strong reasons, mini-claims) that support your main claim. Your mini-claim should be stated in the first sentence (topic sentence) using transitions to connect smoothly and logically from one paragraph to the other. You can also use a direct quote or paraphrase from a credible source as long as it states your mini-claim clearly for the body paragraph. When developing these mini-claims, you will use inductive and deductive reasoning (as explained earlier). These points must be supported with specific evidence from credible sources, using logical transitions to connect the evidence provided to your mini-claim (topic sentence/point of body paragraph) and your main claim (thesis statement) of your essay. Do not assume that evidence supports your main claim without explanation. You must connect it using inductive and deductive reasoning as well as other persuasive sentences (rhetorical devices).

Unless mini-claims form a logical chain, with each link growing out of the one preceding it, their order should be determined by their potential effect (influence) on your readers. For instance, you may choose to start developing your main claim with the first body paragraph developing your strongest point or you may choose to save the strongest point as your last body paragraph. In general, it is most effective to arrange the order of your body paragraphs to demonstrate the points in order of increasing importance or strength, so you can finish with a powerful ending. However, to engage readers in the argument, you should try to start with a reason/mini-claim that you think they will find compelling or that they already know and accept. Then, you can continue to build up your claim until you reach your stronger, final point (in your last body paragraph that supports your main claim).

Counterarguments (opposing views) can be raised and refuted wherever it seems most appropriate to do so. You decide! Include counterarguments with your stronger mini-claims and those that you think the reader may be reluctant to accept or agree with. You can also use the last body paragraph for counterarguments; however, they must be refuted with your main claim. **NOTE: Please review the example on CANVAS provided by the instructor.** Counterarguments can also be included in your conclusion paragraph, but once again, they must be refuted with your main claim, so you do not leave the reader with any other choice but to accept your position on the subject.

The conclusion paragraph should provide a summary of your mini-claims from each body paragraph (not specific evidence), a thesis (main claim) restatement, and concluding thoughts you want to leave your readers with about your subject and position. You can also use a powerful direct quote from one of your sources, an appropriate emotional appeal, or even a call to action.

Drafting

While you are drafting your body paragraphs, work on making your reasoning clear by showing how each bit of evidence relates (connects) to the reason (mini-claim) and how each mini-claim relates to your main claim (thesis statement). Therefore, you should be repeating certain words and phrases from your topic sentence as well as those in your thesis statement. You should also ensure that you are using words and phrases that are related to those in your topic sentence and thesis statement. In this way, you can ensure you are connecting all evidence and discussion to your position about the subject.



Revising and Editing

When your essay is complete, use the following questions to guide your revision and editing process.

- Is your thesis statement debatable, precise, and directly stated? Readers must know from the beginning what you are trying to convince them of or persuade them to do.
- Is your argument unified? Does each mini-claim (reason, point) for each body paragraph support your thesis statement? Do all opinions, facts, and examples provide evidence for the mini-claim (for each body paragraph) and support and connect to your main claim (thesis statement) clearly and persuasively?
- Do your paragraphs have coherence? In other words, do your ideas connect well and logically? Do you use transitions to connect ideas to your mini-claims and main claim (thesis statement)? This is an excellent rhetorical strategy to convince your readers of your opinion.
- Is the structure of your argument clear and compelling? Readers should be able to follow easily, see when and why you move from one idea to the next.
- Do you have adequate and solid evidence in each body paragraph? Facts, examples, quotes, paraphrases, and expert opinions should be well-detailed, explained, and connected to your mini-claims and main claim. Remember, each body paragraph should support ONE mini-claim (reason, main point), which is supported with specific evidence using credible outside sources. These must be properly introduced (when appropriate) and cited accurately using MLA (2016) guidelines to avoid plagiarism. One source is not adequate to support your mini-claim. You should back up one source with at least another. Don't forget that personal experiences and observations can provide solid evidence to back up a credible source. Make sure all examples have enough details to show your point clearly.
- Do you use formal language throughout your essay? Remember, informal language is not appropriate for academic writing.

Adapted from the following sources:

The Little Seagull Handbook - 3rd Edition - R. Bullock, M. Brody, and F. Weinberg

The Compact Reader – 11th Edition – J. Aaron and E. Kuhl-Repetto