HOW TO WRITE AN ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

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In history courses, your professors will most likely want you to write in an argumentative style. This style differs from other kinds of writing. There is a place in this world for playful and informal styles of writing, but that place is typically not in your formal college assignments. Instead, you should use college essay assignments to sharpen your skills in argumentative prose. Improving your ability to write argumentative essays will pay off in college and later in life. After you graduate, you will find many occasions when you need to use writing to persuade others of a particular point of view.

Good argumentative writing depends on three specific qualities:

-precision in argument and use of terms
-grounding in evidence
-clarity and concision in prose.

The following advice comes in two parts. The first section provides an outline of what a good argumentative essay should look like when it is done. The second section provides a step-by-step process that can lead you to this happy result.

But first, some words of wisdom:

“You don’t start out writing good stuff. You start out writing crap and thinking it’s good stuff, and then gradually you get better at it. That’s why I say one of the most valuable traits is persistence.”

— Octavia E. Butler
-award-winning science fiction writer and Cal State LA student
-1968 AA degree in history from Pasadena City College

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PART ONE: THE ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY IN OUTLINE FORM

For starters, here's a very brief outline. Read further to find fuller descriptions of each section.

0. TITLE
1. INTRO: explain your thesis (be precise but do not present evidence yet)
2. BODY
    -Paragraph #1
        -Topic sentence argument (main argument of the paragraph)
        -Specific examples to support the topic sentence argument
    -Paragraph #2, and so on for other body paragraphs
        Same as Paragraph #1
3. CONCLUSION: quick summary of your thesis; then muse on implications of the thesis

The Title:

The best titles provide a brief and catchy summation of your essay's argument. Suppose your essay will argue that cats make great house pets. A title that conveys your argument might be something like this: "The Hidden Genius of the Playful Cat." This title communicates more than a title that merely conveys your topic, such as "Are Cats Good Pets?" or "Assessing the Merits of Cats." Even these topic-conveying titles, however, are better than "Midterm Essay #1." Because your title will depend on your final argument, create your title *after* you have drafted the essay.

The Introduction (first paragraph)

• Start with an **opening hook** to catch your readers' interest. You might pose a puzzle or question that your essay will then resolve. You might lead with a striking quotation or scene. Whatever you do, keep it brief, and make sure that your opening hook provides a bridge to your thesis statement. Avoid general statements that make sweeping and unsupportable claims (e.g. "Since the beginning of time, people have wondered…" or "Americans have always valued their material possessions."). Another common flaw in introductions is the empty "warm up" sentence. These sentences appear at first glance to have substance, but they really contribute nothing to your argument (e.g. "In order to assess the causes of the revolution, it is important that we carefully consider numerous factors.")

• Your **thesis statement** should be one or two sentences long, and it should at minimum present your thesis to readers. Ideally, you can also briefly explain your main reasons behind the thesis. For instance, if your thesis will argue that "Cats are better than dogs," include in the thesis a brief explanation of your main sub-arguments: "Cats are better than dogs because they possess a sense of

independence, dignity, and hygiene that dogs lack." As with the opening hook, keep the thesis statement brief. In a short essay (i.e. anything under ten double-spaced pages), the introduction should be just one paragraph total, about a half-page in length. Save specific evidence for the body.

The Body:

• Each paragraph in the body of the essay should start with **a topic sentence argument (TSA)**. The TSA should announce the argument of the paragraph and make clear how the paragraph's evidence will support the essay's overall argument. The rest of the paragraph should then present and explain evidence that will support the TSA. In a sense, the phrase "topic sentence" is little misleading, because this sentence should convey the paragraph's argument, not simply its topic.

• Resist the temptation to cram too much into one paragraph. Each paragraph should develop one distinct idea. If you squeeze too many different ideas into one paragraph, your TSA will become muddled or it will introduce only one of the paragraph's several ideas. When you see this happening, split the paragraph into two, each one starting with its own TSA.

• Although you can make exceptions to this rule, each supporting body paragraph should be about a half-page in length. This length usually provides enough space for supporting evidence, without cramming too many ideas into one paragraph.

The Conclusion (last paragraph)

• Some professors want the conclusion to provide a simple summary of your main argument. Other professors (like me) find this approach repetitious and boring. By the end of the body, a good essay will already have established its core argument. Use the conclusion to raise broader ideas that flow from your argument and evidence. Perhaps you can offer some lessons that people today should draw from your argument. Perhaps you see interesting parallels to another time, place, or issue. Perhaps you have found an interesting personal or emotional reaction to the material. Feel free to be speculative and thoughtful. After presenting careful evidence in the body of the essay, you have earned the right as an author to share broader ideas with your readers in the conclusion.

PART TWO: THE PROCESS—FROM START TO FINISH

1. Your work begins well before you receive the assignment instructions. **Keep up with your readings** every week, and do not miss class. You will understand much more when you come to class having done the readings. Identify the big questions and issues the professor emphasizes in the course. Then **take clear notes** on your readings and from class lectures/discussions that will help you quickly identify examples relevant to those big themes and issues. If you have trouble identifying the professor's big themes, **visit office hours** as soon as possible. Ask the professor to check your notes to ensure that you are catching the right big ideas and themes. Most teachers are very happy to do this.

2. **Read the assignment handout carefully.** Make sure you understand the question or writing prompt and make sure that you follow *all* the directions provided. Talk with the professor if you have any questions or doubts.

3. Gather evidence and build your outline. Review your notes and readings to locate evidence that is relevant to the assignment. As you identify examples, sort them into categories. Create a spatial environment that will allow you to see each category as it fills up with evidence. Some people write each idea and piece of evidence on a 3x5 card and then stack the cards in piles, one pile for each big idea. Others sort examples into t-charts on a sheet of paper or computer screen. Experiment with different methods of sorting until you find one that works for you.

-As you gather and sort sources, you should see clusters of evidence appearing around certain ideas and topics. As these clusters form, think about how they help answer the assignment's main question. As clusters form, you can start drafting a tentative thesis statement. Do not worry about perfecting the thesis yet. You will revise it after you draft the essay.

-Think about how each cluster of evidence can evolve into a paragraph. Big clusters might need to be split into two or three more manageable paragraphs. Small clusters should be combined or, if not crucial to your argument, abandoned. On a sheet of paper or a blank computer screen, arrange your clusters/paragraphs into a tentative order.

-Given computers' "copy-and-paste" ability, be sure to keep careful tabs on which phrases and sentences are your own and which came from another writer. Some cases of plagiarism begin when writers, at this early stage, fail to keep track of who wrote what. Remember that plagiarism is always a serious offense, regardless of whether the violation was intentional or accidental.

4. **Write a rough draft.** Now at last you are ready to start writing your paper. Start with a short introduction paragraph and then use your outline to draft the body and conclusion. Don't forget to begin each paragraph in the body with a topic sentence that conveys the main argument of that paragraph.

More Advice on Drafting:

• **Do not aim for perfection**. The process of writing usually helps reveal which ideas from your outline are compelling and which ones are confused or irrelevant. Use the writing process to test out ideas and examples, and do not be afraid to make adjustments to your outline as you go along. Sometimes, your essay will be stronger if you simply delete a paragraph that no longer helps make your argument. In case you change your mind, create a separate section of "scraps." That way, if you decide you really did want to use a troublesome paragraph, you can easily bring it back into your essay.

• **If you get stuck while writing the draft**, reread the assignment instructions and your outline. If you encounter writer's block sitting at your computer, switch to a blank sheet of paper and write by hand. Try talking out loud to yourself or to a friend. If that doesn't work, take a walk or get some exercise to clear your head. Do not panic. Even the best writers experience these roadblocks.

• Once you finish drafting your body and conclusion, quickly **revisit your introduction** to make sure that your initial thesis corresponds to what your essay's body actually argues. Often, arguments evolve in the process of drafting.

6. **Create your title**. See above for advice on good titles.

7. **Take a break.** Do something else. A day spent away from your draft gives you time to reflect on your ideas. You will obtain "fresh eyes" useful for editing. If you do not have a full day, take whatever time you can afford. Even a few hours' pause will help.

8. **Revise the draft.** Start with **a clean printed copy** of your draft and get ready to cover it all over with editorial marks and rewrites. Take pleasure seeing your ideas emerge in clearer form.

As you revise, pay particular attention to these questions:

-Does the introduction clearly establish and explain the essay's main argument? Is the introduction brief (i.e. a half-page or less in length)?

-Do the supporting paragraphs appear in a logical order that will help readers easily understand your overall argument?

-Does each supporting paragraph start with a clear topic sentence argument (TSA) that announces the paragraph's main idea? Does that TSA idea provide clear support for your essay's overall thesis?

> Tip: In many first drafts, we write the key idea at the end of the paragraph. That's because we weren't sure of the paragraph's main point when we started writing it. Only by the end of the paragraph do we know for sure

what the paragraph really argues. When this happens, move the late-blooming topic sentence argument to the very start of the paragraph.

-Does each paragraph have enough evidence to support its TSA?

-Is each sentence clear and grammatical?

Tip: Read your essay aloud. This will help you catch awkward phrases, grammatical errors, and missing words. If you are working in a library, even silently mouthing the words will help. This seems silly, but it works. You can also have a friend read the draft to make sure your ideas come across clearly. Just check with your professor before sharing your draft with another student in the same class.

-Which sentences need trimming? Delete any words or phrases that consume space without adding any meaning or substance to your essay. Replace long-winded formulations with shorter, more forceful phrases or words. If your draft exceeds the assignment's page limit, decide which examples are the most relevant or persuasive. Removing less effective evidence can improve an essay.

-**Can you shorten any long quotations?** Lengthy quotations consume space while silencing your own voice and analysis. Quote just the best parts of a primary source, perhaps even as little as four or five words. Then embed the quoted material in your own analysis. Quotations work best when the material to be quoted is elegant or memorable. If the material is dull, you are better off putting it in your own words (paraphrasing).

-Are your citations accurate and adequate? As a general rule, you do not need to provide a citation for facts so generic that someone could find it almost anywhere. For instance, the idea that the U.S. Civil War ended in 1865 requires no citation. However, you must provide a citation for all quotations and statistics and for all facts and ideas that reflect the work of another writer. You can thus pay your intellectual debts, and readers can see where you found your material.

Final Inspiration: The German novelist Thomas Mann once observed, "A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people." Good writing requires time and concentration, and even great writers struggle. But the rewards are considerable. Strong writing can allow you to express ideas with more clarity and force than possible through spoken words alone, and it allows you to reach a wider audience. Becoming a good writer takes time and practice. Step-by-step progress is more common than dramatic overnight transformation. However, if you follow the steps above, and give yourself enough time for the task, you will almost certainly see yourself become a better writer.

Stylistic problems to avoid when writing history papers

These writing problems are not ungrammatical, but they do weaken historical analysis and deprive your prose of clarity and vigor, which is almost as bad as being ungrammatical:

1. Avoid unattributed quotations. Always identify the speaker or author of your quotations. Also try to provide brief context such as the year and the original audience intended by the author. Otherwise, readers will not have the context needed to understand the words that you are putting in quotation marks.

BAD: *Idealism soared in 1898. "Our purpose is noble."*
BETTER: *Idealism soared in 1898. As President McKinley told Congress that year, "our purpose is noble."*

2. Avoid passive voice sentences, especially ones that obscure the real person or force doing the action**.** Historians, like most people, are deeply interested in WHY things happen. Passive voice sentences often give readers no sense of who or what made something happen, leading to sloppy and imprecise analysis.

BAD: *The movement <u>was accused</u> of being communist.*
BETTER: *Truman's <u>White House accused</u> the movement of being communist.*

BAD: *By 1942 the unemployment problem <u>was solved.</u>*
BETTER: *By 1942 <u>military spending solved</u> the unemployment problem.*

3. Use the past tense when writing about past events or statements. Some writers outside the field of history use the present tense regardless of the time frame, under the belief that that this tactic enlivens one's prose. Most historians, however, find this a tiresome gimmick that at times creates confusion over chronology.

BAD: *In his 1898 letter to Congress, President McKinley <u>writes</u> that "our purpose is noble."*
BETTER: *In his 1898 letter to Congress, President McKinley <u>wrote</u> that "our purpose is noble."*

<u>Other stylistic or grammatical pitfalls that might distract your readers:</u>

-Avoid **casual language and slang**.

-Avoid excessive use of the **thesaurus**. A thesaurus will often suggest words that do not fit your exact needs. If you do not really know the word, be careful. Better

yet, consult a good dictionary or search reliable websites to read how other writers use the word. Then decide if it fits your needs.

-Do not **end a paragraph** with a sentence that introduces the topic of the next paragraph. Some students learn this habit in middle school or high school, but it is best to leave it behind at the college level. This habit violates the writing principle that each paragraph should contain just one main idea and topic. A more effective strategy is to simply conclude one paragraph and then start the next one with a topic sentence announcing the main point of that paragraph. So long as your paragraphs all advance the same larger argument, your readers will be able to follow your train of thought, and you will benefit from tighter prose and presentation.

-Write with **parallel structure** (i.e. the same patterns of words) when making lists of actions or abstract things:

> BAD (not parallel): *The president failed because he listened poorly, talked too much, and his manners were awful.*
> BETTER (parallel structure): *The president failed because he listened poorly, talked too much, and behaved awfully.*

-**who vs. that**: Remember that "who" refers to people, while "that" refers to things.

> BAD: *"the man that shot Kennedy" "the politicians that won the election"*
> BETTER: *"the man who shot Kennedy" "the politicians who won the election"*

-"**However**" cannot connect two sentences the same way that conjunctions such as "and," "but," or "or" can.

> BAD (run-on sentence): *He was wrong, however he escaped punishment*
> BETTER: *He was wrong. However, he escaped punishment*
> or) *He was wrong, but he escaped punishment.*

Resources
Take advantage of the **University Writing Center**'s free one-on-one advice services. Their tutors can work with you on an upcoming assignment to help on some of these issues. The Center is in JFK Library Palmer Wing, Room 1039A Phone: 323-343-5350. Website: http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/write_cn/

You can also find some helpful advice at this **valuable website:**
https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/