

Argumentative Essays

Argumentative essays often deal with complex and controversial issues, where choosing a side is not just a matter of common sense or easy moral judgment. It differs from an opinion (or expository) essay in that you cannot rely on widely held assumptions or personal experience to argue your points. When writing this type of essay, you must clearly state a position and defend it using evidence obtained through extensive research. Your task, therefore, is to persuade the reader that your position, or thesis, is valid through your **analysis of evidence** from a variety of sources.

Structure

Your position must be boiled down into a single sentence called the thesis statement in your essay's **introduction**. Your introduction should also list the main arguments you'll use to prove your thesis, thus conveying a sense of your essay's organization and development. The **body** of your essay does the heavy lifting by providing relevant evidence and, most importantly, your analysis. Never present quotes or figures on their own and assume that the evidence will speak for itself. The **conclusion** plays a vital role in persuading the reader. By the end of your paper, your claim will have been supported with ample evidence, so restate your thesis with a confidence that reflects this. Succinctly summarize your main points and, in the last sentence of your paper, "zoom out" to reveal your topic's importance in a wider context. Your conclusion should not convey any new information or arguments.

Don't inform, persuade! Don't describe, argue!

Keep in mind that while the reader should come away from your essay knowing more than s/he did before, your job is not simply to inform her/him about your topic. Before you begin writing, ask yourself questions such as "how and why would someone reject my position and how might I respond?" and "what types of evidence are most likely to persuade my reader?" As your goal is to influence the reader's view on your topic, use a strategic approach to obtain the desired result.

Persuasion through refutation

To appear credible, ethical and unbiased (and therefore persuade your reader), you must be able to 1) fairly evaluate arguments that contradict your thesis and then 2) refute those arguments. One or more of your body paragraphs can be committed to this task. Be careful not to be dismissive towards opposing points of view. Your essay should give the impression that you've considered all sides of an issue and that, in light of your research, have chosen the stronger position.

Consider your audience

While you can generally assume your reader is your teacher or a well-informed peer, you may be asked to write an argumentative paper for a specific audience. For example, if you are trying to convince an expert as opposed to someone with only casual knowledge of your topic, the types of evidence and even the terms you use will differ. If writing for a hostile audience (people who you expect will disagree with you), you have to work harder to anticipate counter-

arguments and focus on establishing common ground between your diverging positions. In short, tailoring your essay to its audience will help make it more persuasive.

Become an expert: research

Many topics worthy of discussion have been debated at length for generations. Keep in mind you are joining a conversation, not beginning one; before you contribute your ideas, you need to know what has already been said. If you're arguing for or against the legalization of euthanasia, for example, you should have a grasp of the issue's historical context, recent developments, ethical and moral considerations, case study findings, legal status, etc. Even if you don't include all of the background information in your essay, your research will help you come across as knowledgeable and credible. Ask a librarian or your teacher for help in finding suitable sources.

Sources and Citation

While true of all research assignments, the kinds of sources you choose are of particular importance in an argumentative essay. Don't make your position vulnerable by relying on a single source or by citing outdated studies (if arguing that modern video games cause violent behaviour, don't use case studies based on Pac-Man). Your choice of current and varied sources should convey dutiful scholarship. Be sure to properly cite all of your sources using the format assigned by your teacher (APA, MLA).