

## What is an argument?

An argument consists of:

- a **main contention**, stating the writer's viewpoint or position on an issue
- **supporting reasons, explanations and evidence**, presented in a logical, reasoned manner.

A statement of a belief or idea on its own is not an argument. For example, the contention 'It is time that Australia had a new flag' does not explain *why* Australia needs a new flag.

Similarly, an argument is not simply an opinion. The statement 'It is time that Australia had a new flag because I don't like the old one' just expresses a personal preference. It doesn't tell the reader anything about why they, too, should want Australia to have a new flag, or why a new flag would be a good thing for the whole country. An argument requires at least one supporting reason or justification; for example:

It is time that Australia had a new flag because the current one no longer reflects our identity.

This statement provides a reason that is relevant to all Australians and makes a wider point about the significance of a national flag. Importantly, it leads to questions that in turn need to be answered by further supporting reasons. These reasons could address the following points (among many possibilities):

- how and why some elements of the current flag don't reflect our identity
- which aspects of Australia's identity are not represented in the flag
- why a flag can and should reflect national identity.

### Main contention and supporting points

Usually the main contention will be clearly stated in the first or second paragraph; in a longer piece such as an editorial or feature article, the main contention might be stated in the conclusion. Sometimes the main contention is *implied* through the selection of evidence or the use of emotive language, rather than stated explicitly.

Consider this example:

Studies show that doing homework does not make children in primary school progress any faster. On the other hand, being required to do homework makes them less likely to do after-school activities such as sport, music or dance. If homework has no value in the younger years, it's time children were allowed to get on with being children and have no set homework.

give supporting points. You will need to identify and reword or paraphrase the main contention in order to analyse the writer's use of argument and persuasive language.

The writer argues that primary school children should be free of homework so that they can enjoy time to be children outside of school hours.

### IDENTIFY MAIN CONTENTION AND SUPPORTING REASONS

### ACTIVITY

The following three letters to the editor respond to an article on traffic congestion in *The Age*. Carefully read the letters then answer the questions to see how each writer expresses their main contention and uses supporting reasons.

## Traffic congestion: The deplorable state of transport planning

It is no surprise that there has been such strong traffic growth on Melbourne's freeways over the last decade ("Are we there yet?", *Saturday Age*, 20/2). With both major parties having found lame excuses for sidelining much-needed public transport projects, including rail services for Rowville, Doncaster and Melbourne Airport, and bus services lagging behind population growth, it is little wonder that freeways are congested and valuable urban space is being

claimed daily for car parking. That much of this traffic comprises cars with only one person is a measure of the deplorable state that transport planning has arrived at in Victoria. A sea change in policy is required so that, proportionately, more trips are taken by public transport. The "predict and provide" model for more road space has not worked and, as a consequence, Melbourne's future appears to be that of a smoking ruin.

Ian Hundley, Balwyn North

## Seeking an effective and integrated system

VicRoads chief John Merritt emphasises the need for public transport to get cars off the road, but has to limit his scope to buses and trains. We have no effective, overarching body with the power that VicRoads wields. Public transport is the best way to get cars off the roads, and has

major health benefits for the population, as it increases incidental physical activity. We need an effective and integrated transport system with the expertise, resources and ability to plan for the future that VicRoads has demonstrated. The current model has failed.

Margaret Beavis, Brighton



## Hit the motorists in their hip pockets

We keep hearing about the inadequacy of Melbourne's road system and the push for more freeways. A congestion tax similar to that in London would soon thin out the traffic. More people would use public transport. Less infrastructure would be needed.

Charles Naughton, Princes Hill

1. Write the main contention of each letter in a single sentence.
2. In each letter, is the main contention stated explicitly or is it implied? What is the effect of the writer presenting their contention in this way?
3. For each letter, write down at least two supporting points.
4. Discuss the effects of the following phrases used in the letters. How does each phrase help to position the reader to agree with the writer's point of view on traffic congestion?
  - a. 'a smoking ruin' (Ian Hundley)
  - b. 'effective and integrated transport system' (Margaret Beavis)
  - c. 'soon thin out the traffic' (Charles Naughton)

## Rebuttal

Rebuttal is an important element of a fully developed argument. It involves the logical explanation of why opposing viewpoints are weak, flawed, or simply inferior to the writer's own view. It can involve criticising a range of elements in an opposing argument, such as:

- underlying assumptions
- the use of logic or reasoning
- the selection of evidence and examples.

In addition, rebuttal can involve an attack on the groups or even individuals who promote the opposing point of view. It will often use strongly emotive language in order to characterise opposing viewpoints and/or groups in a negative way.

Writers vary in how and where they use rebuttal. In a longer piece, opposing viewpoints might be dealt with towards the end, after the writer has established a strong case for their own position. In this case, the rebuttal serves to consolidate or 'clinch' the writer's argument. In a short piece such as a letter to the editor, however, the writer might begin with a strong rejection of another point of view – gaining the reader's attention with some colourful, emotive language – before establishing their own as a superior alternative.

Structural decisions and strategies such as these are an essential part of an argument's construction, and are discussed further in Chapter 12 (see pages 186–9).

## ANALYSE ARGUMENT AND REBUTIAL

ACTIVITY

This letter from *The Age* argues in favour of childhood vaccinations, largely by rebutting an opposing viewpoint. Read the letter, then answer the questions to gain a better understanding of how the writer constructs her argument.

## Outbreak of ignorance

It is many years since I worked as a trained nurse, but there is one patient whose memory still remains vivid. A beautiful young girl was admitted to the hospital after developing panencephalitis, a rare complication of measles, caused from the virus remaining dormant in the spinal canal – in her case for years. She was a school captain, a high achiever with the world at her feet. Within a matter of days, she was dead.

I am appalled at the ignorance of the administrator of closed Facebook page Anti-Vaccination Australia who considers measles a “not deadly” disease (“Hot spot:

measles outbreak still spreading”, 25/2). There are many other ways for children to develop a healthy immune system other than foolhardy exposure to such viruses. If the complications are not deadly, they can be highly damaging, affecting hearing and sight, at the very least. Such attitudes are irresponsible and highly reprehensible, and I sympathise with the despair the medical profession must feel in being confronted by such ill-informed and dangerous views, let alone the researchers who have worked so diligently to provide such simple and effective treatment.

Christine Harris, Mordialloc

1. Does the writer state her main contention explicitly or is it implied by her use of evidence, reasoning and rebuttal? Explain your answer.
2. What is the effect of the writer beginning with a personal anecdote? How does this position the reader to see the writer's point of view as informed and credible?
3. How does the writer rebut the viewpoint of those who oppose vaccinations? You could consider whether she uses some or all of these strategies: providing a counter-example; questioning an underlying assumption; questioning logic or reason; using emotive language; personal attack. Explain your answer and include brief quotations from the letter as examples.
4. What is the effect of ending the letter with a positive reference to researchers who have developed vaccines? How does this support the writer's main contention and/or position the reader to agree?

## Audience and purpose

The **audience** is everyone who reads, views or listens to a text. For a persuasive text, the writer or speaker is likely to have a good idea of the sort of people who will be reading or listening, and they will select their language and shape their arguments with this audience in mind. Some audiences are very broad and can number in the thousands or (through electronic media) even millions; other audiences are narrower and can have specialised knowledge, such as those attending a professional conference.

Consider, for instance, the differences between these audiences for some typical persuasive texts:

- readers of the opinion pages of a weekend broadsheet newspaper
- listeners to a morning radio talkback program
- readers of a daily blog on fitness and nutrition
- local community members attending a forum on a proposed building development.

For each of these text types and contexts, the writer or speaker will need to tailor their language and arguments to the particular expectations and interests of their audience.

The **purpose** of persuasive texts is, on the most obvious level, to persuade the audience to agree with the writer's point of view. Within this, though, a writer might hope to achieve a number of **outcomes** by influencing the way the audience *thinks, feels and acts*.

The writer might seek to:

- lead the audience to reflect on the complexity of a moral or ethical issue
- influence the audience to take a side on an issue
- convince the audience to take action (such as signing a petition, voting in a particular way, or changing their lifestyle).

For example, in the point-of-view response on pages 222–3, the speaker argues in favour of a ban on the sale of disposable plastic water bottles. The speaker hopes that, after hearing the speech, the audience will not only agree with this point of view, but will also reflect on their behaviour and stop buying plastic water bottles.

## Tone and style

Tone and style are important features of any piece of written or spoken language. Although they are not inherently persuasive, they can contribute significantly to the impact of persuasive language. All writers make particular choices about tone and style to convey their attitude or position on the subject matter.



## Tone

Tone is the mood or feeling of the language used by a writer or speaker. It conveys the writer's attitude towards an issue, argument, individual or group.

In a piece of writing, tone is created by word choices, especially the use of emotive or colourful language. In a speech, the speaker's voice can also convey the tone of words and phrases.

There is a wide range of possible tones, including the following.

**SERIOUS** optimistic  
confident thoughtful

**ANGRY** PROUD  
sarcastic amused

calm CONCERNED mocking

**OUTRAGED**

Some tones, such as sarcastic or mocking, are obviously suited to an attack or critique. On the other hand, a calm or optimistic tone would help to present a viewpoint in a positive way.

### IDENTIFY POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE TONES

1. Create a table with three columns, with the headings 'Positive', 'Negative' and 'Neutral'. Sort the above words into the three columns.
2. Add two words to each column in your table to give you a compact word bank of adjectives for describing tone.
3. Select one of the three letters on traffic congestion on pages 142–3 and write a sentence about how the writer uses tone to express their point of view.

ACTIVITY

Clearly, most pieces of persuasive writing will use more than one tone, as they will generally use different tones for arguments supporting the writer's point of view than for the rejection (or rebuttal) of opposing viewpoints.

A shift in tone can be an essential part of the construction of a writer's argument and can have a strong persuasive effect. For example, the tone could initially be humorous but become more serious, to suggest that the issue is more important than it might have seemed at first. Or the writer might begin with a tone that is angry and sarcastic while discussing an opposing viewpoint, then shift to a tone that is earnest and sincere when presenting their own viewpoint.

**ACTIVITY****IDENTIFY A SHIFT IN TONE**

Re-read the letter 'Outbreak of ignorance' on page 144 and answer these questions, to understand the impact of a shift in tone.

1. Describe the writer's tone at the start of the letter. Which particular word choices help to create this tone?
2. Describe the writer's main tone in the second paragraph of the letter. Which particular word choices help to create this tone?
3. At which sentence do you think the tone begins to shift? Explain your answer.
4. What is the effect of this shift in tone?
5. In the last sentence of the letter, the phrase 'I sympathise with the despair ...' creates another shift in tone. Describe this new tone. What is the effect of this final shift in tone?

**Style**

**Style** is the way in which language is used. It refers to both the selection of individual words, and to the way in which words are combined to form phrases and sentences.

For example, the language style can be formal or informal; it can be simple and direct, or poetic and highly descriptive.

**Register**

Register – an important aspect of style – refers to the complexity of the language. There are three main registers.

- A **formal language** style generally uses longer, more complex sentences and a varied, sophisticated vocabulary. It avoids the use of slang or colloquial terms and contractions such as *I'm* or *it's*. Formal language isn't necessarily serious in tone, though it often is. In persuasive writing and speaking, a formal style can be used to help convey authority and expertise.
- An **informal language** style is that of casual, everyday conversation. Contractions are relatively common, and slang or colloquial words and phrases are often used. Informal language can suggest a down-to-earth, no-nonsense approach to a topic or issue.

