

Writing an Argument

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Often students coming to college believe the myth that writing is either opinion or fact. Actually, an argument is not a statement of facts alone or a statement of personal taste; it is both and neither! **An argument is an opinion supported with persuasively-stated evidence.**

Key Features of Arguments

- A clear and arguable position
- Necessary background information
- Persuasive points for your argument
- Convincing support for each point
- Acknowledgement of the counterargument
- Explanation of importance and relevance

Preparing to Write

Choose a Topic

Ideally, your topic should be something that interests you and has some personal connection to your life. Consider asking your professor about how you can find a topic within the assignment that appeals to you and/or connects with your pursuits.

Brainstorm potential topics by making lists like these:

My Roles i.e. daughter, sister, Christian, college student, voter, resident of California

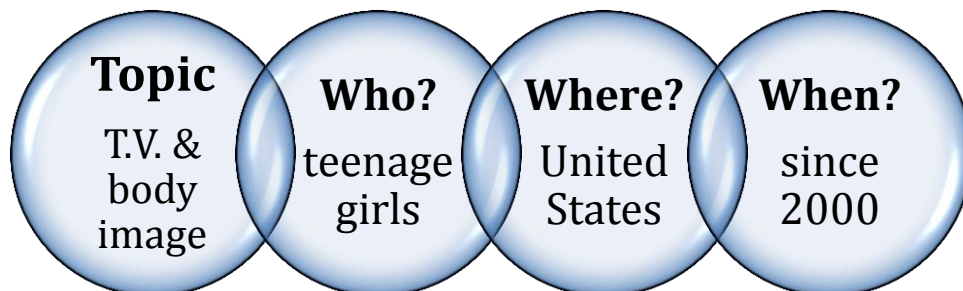
My interests i.e. Disneyland, hockey, fishing, politics, media, movies, charity work

Events/issues that have affected me or my relationships, i.e. Christian rebirth, body image, imprisonment, texting while driving, writing award, Grand Canyon vacation

Circle the words that spark something in you and decide on a possible topic, for instance, *the media and body image*.

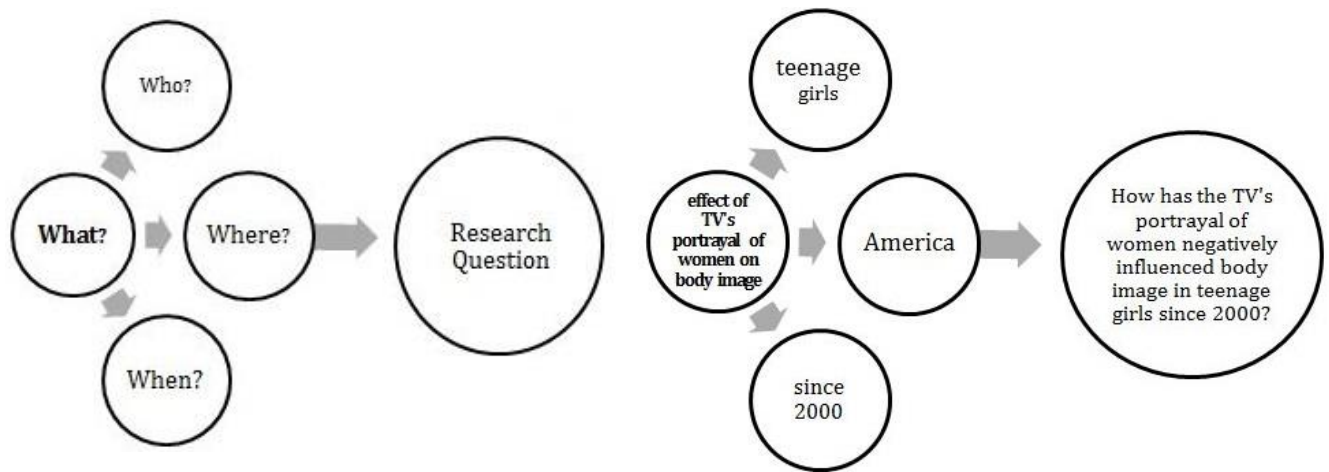
Narrow your Topic to an Issue

For example, “media and body image” is a great start, but it’s too broad. It’s important to limit the topic with the *who*, *where*, and *when*. For this example, a specific type of media, such as television, might help.



Write a Research Question

When you combine your specific topic with your *who*, *what*, and when, they will lead you to a specific research question, which will help you focus your research in one particular direction.



Creating Your Argument

Research

Use your research question to guide your research. Collect as much information on your topic as you can. Don't be afraid to skim or scan through resources in order to find the most relevant information, but also be sure to pay attention both sides of your particular issue. Try to avoid making a decision about your topic until you have looked closely at it from every angle.

Write a Preliminary Thesis

Once you have collected and read through significant amounts of research, and you have become a bit of an expert on your topic, it is time to take a position. Your thesis is the answer to your Research Question. It should be clear. It should be arguable. And someone should disagree.

Remember that your thesis can (and likely will) change during the writing process. Write a tentative thesis that includes both the *what* and the *why*. The *what* should now explain you're your paper is going to argue, not just the topic at hand. This part of the thesis should be specific. The *why* explains why this topic is significant—why the idea being argued matters long term. For example:

The portrayal of women on television since 2000 has significantly impacted the body image of American teenaged girls [*what*] which has led to an increase in related diseases including anorexia and bulimia [*why*].

Bilingual education should be reintegrated into the public school system [*what*] in order to help English Language Learners better master state objectives and integrate into a new culture [*why*].

*See the Writing Center's Thesis and Research handouts for more information.

Consider Your Audience

- Decide who needs to hear your message. That is your audience. Be sure to ask your professor if they have a particular audience in mind for your assignment.
- Your goal is only to persuade your specific audience.
- Decide what background information your audience needs on your topic.
- Establish trustworthy, authoritative, and assertive tone: not too aggressive or passive.

Persuade Your Audience with Premises (Major Points)

Make a preliminary list of the premises you want to use to support your argument. Make sure you don't include too many points because then your argument will not delve deep enough. Choose points supported by your research that have refuting points you can argue against later.

Find Support and Evidence for Your Points

Sort through your research and file supporting evidence underneath your major points so you can keep all of your research organized. If you come across refuting arguments, include those under your major points as well. Remember that specifics are persuasive.

- | | | |
|-------------|------------------------|--------------|
| ○ Facts | ○ Textual Evidence | ○ Personal |
| ○ Examples | ○ Statistics (be fair) | ○ Experience |
| ○ Anecdotes | ○ Expert testimony | ○ Visuals |

Analyze Your Support

- Always analyze, interpret, and/or comment on the evidence you include.
- Remember that there is an important difference between data and an argument. Quote only in order to support your argument. Cite data in order to support your argument. Don't include anything just to fill space.
- You need to remain in charge of your argument. You are the puppet master. Let the experts speak, of course. Respond to them. Engage with them. But don't let their voices take over. Be sure to comment on everything they say. Yours should always be the last voice to speak in a paragraph. (Even if you're not using the first person, you are still using your own voice in an argument.)

Address the Counterargument

Remember that you are writing for a living, breathing audience who will be actively thinking up arguments that oppose yours. Anticipate those arguments so that you can address them before your reader dismisses your side. You can address counterarguments in two ways:

- You can **concede** elements of the counterargument: "While it's true that not all teenage girls who watch television become anorexic..."
- And you can **refute** elements of the counterargument: "Some psychologists believe that television consumption has been positive for teenage girls because it has given them self-confidence, but this is false because..."

Put it All Together – The Parts of a Paragraph

Topic Sentence	Give the purpose for the paragraph and how it relates to the previous paragraph and back to the thesis.
Support/ Evidence	Include evidence (facts, examples, anecdotes, quotes, statistics, expert testimony, etc.) to support your point.
Analysis	Explain how the evidence supports your claim.
Transitions	A paragraph may include one, two, three, or more pieces of evidence to support the main premise. If you include two or more pieces of evidence, help your reader move between them by demonstrating how they build on each other and making clear connections. Transitions within a paragraph may only be a word or short phrase long: “In contrast,” “As a result,” “accordingly,” “similarly,” etc. <i>See our transitions handout for more.</i>
Purpose Sentence	Conclude the paragraph with the reason it is important and how it supports your thesis.

Writing Your Argument

- Start with your body paragraphs. Try to write quickly without self-censorship or perfectionism. Remember that you will have plenty of time for revision later.
- Once you have a rough draft, do a reverse outline (see handout). You’ll start to find your argument’s pattern of organization. There are **many** ways to organize an argument. Here are two basic possibilities:

Introduction Counterargument Premise A Premise B Premise C Premise D Premise E... Conclusion

Introduction Counterargument A Premise A (Rebuttal) Counterargument B Premise B Counterargument C Premise C Counterargument D Premise D ... Conclusion

- Revise your body paragraphs, adjusting your thesis as necessary.
- Make sure you have clear topic sentences for each paragraph that help your reader transition from the last paragraph and understand what to expect in this paragraph.
- Write your conclusion, and then write your introduction (now that you know what you’re introducing!).
- Finally, revise, edit, and proofread.
- Move back and forth through these steps as you see fit. These are simply basic guidelines, not strict rules.
- Make appointments at the Writing Center for more help!