What is an argument? In academic writing, an argument is usually a main idea, often called a "claim" or "thesis statement," backed up with evidence that supports the idea. Ninety-nine percent of the time you will need to make some sort of claim and use evidence to support it, and your ability to do this well will separate your papers from those of students who see assignments as mere accumulations of fact and detail. In other words, gone are the happy days of being given a "topic" about which you can write anything. It is time to stake out a position and prove why it is a good position for a thinking person to hold.

Claims can be as simple as "protons are positively charged and electrons are negatively charged," with evidence such as, "In this experiment, protons and electrons acted in such and such a way." Claims can also be as complex as "the end of the South African system of apartheid was inevitable," using reasoning and evidence such as, "Every successful revolution in the modern era has come about after the government in power has given and then removed small concessions to the uprising group." In either case, the rest of your paper will detail reasons and facts that have led you to believe that your position is best.

When beginning to write a paper, ask yourself, "What is my point"? For example, the point of this handout is to help you become a better writer, and we are arguing that an important step in the process of writing argumentation is understanding the concept of argumentation. If your papers do not have a main point, they cannot be arguing for anything. Asking yourself what your point is can help you avoid a mere "information dump." Consider this: Your instructors probably know a lot more than you do about your subject matter. Why, then, would you want to provide them with material they already know? Instructors are usually looking for two things:

1. Proof that you understand the material, AND
2. A demonstration of your ability to use or apply the material beyond what you have read or heard.

This second part can be done in many ways: You can critique the material, or apply it to something else, or even just explain it in a different way. In order to achieve this second step, though, you must have a particular point to argue.

Arguments in academic writing are usually complex and take time to develop. Your argument will need to be more than a simple or obvious statement such as, "Frank Lloyd Wright was a great architect." Such a statement might capture your initial impressions of Wright as you have studied him in class; however, you need to look deeper and express specifically what caused that "greatness." Your instructor will probably expect something more complicated, such as, "Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture combines elements of European modernism, Asian aesthetic form, and locally found materials to create a unique new style," or "There are many strong similarities between Wright's building designs and those of his mother's, which suggests that he may have borrowed some of her ideas." Then you would define your terms and prove your argument with evidence from Wright's drawings and buildings and those of the other architects you mentioned.