

# Guide for Writing an Argumentative Paper

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There are many mistakes students make when writing argumentative papers as opposed to research papers. The most important of these mistakes is a failure to recognize that an argumentative paper is not fundamentally based on fact (i.e. documented events, statistical data) but on reasoned argument. The following tips should be helpful when constructing your essay.

### Argument

Arguments are distinct from assertions. An assertion, such as “Plato was wise,” stands or falls on its own. It may be true or false, but it is NOT an argument. Arguments require premises that rationally support an assertion as a conclusion. Think of your premises as reasons why a reader would have to agree with your conclusion. This implies that arguments have a certain structure: namely, they are collections of premises that reasonably support conclusions (and maybe some sub-conclusions along the way). An argument is NOT a collection of facts, each on its own.

### Thesis

Any good paper will have a clearly demarcated centre of argument. It will be a specific point for which you will argue. As such, your thesis gives structure to the rest of your paper. It succinctly tells the reader what to expect, and sets up the rest of the paper as an argument – an argument whose end goal is to give support to your main point, stated explicitly in the thesis. It is perfectly acceptable, indeed quite clear and concise, to flag your thesis with the following prefixes:

*I will argue that.... OR*

*It is my thesis that... OR*

*It is my contention that... etc.*

1. Your thesis should be at the beginning of the paper, in the introduction.
2. Do not make your thesis overly complex. Especially in short papers, it is best to have a focussed thesis. The best papers usually stick to arguing for one point. Do not spread yourself too thin! (**Avoid “three prong” theses**, which are really just lists, not a focus of argument.)
3. Make sure your thesis is at least somewhat contentious, i.e. something that others could reasonably disagree with. “I will argue that the French Revolution began in 1789,” or “It is my thesis that there is a difference between Romantic and 20<sup>th</sup> Century poetry” are boring theses. They cannot possibly lead to interesting papers.
4. Avoid what is called the “So what?” problem. You do NOT want to hand in a nicely structured and written paper that supports a point of view that nobody finds interesting. Strike a balance between a point you can argue for and a point that will turn heads.

*Bad thesis:* “In this paper I will show that same sex marriage is a contentious issue.”

*Better thesis:* “The controversy surrounding gay marriage is telling of a deep-seated heterosexism in North-American society.”

*Even better thesis:* “Since it has been shown that serious same-sex relationships last longer than serious straight relationships, and since marriage is considered an immensely important institution in North America, I will argue that these premises lead one to conclude that allowing same-sex marriage is necessary for the salvation of the institution of marriage.” (Now that’s a thesis that will turn some heads!)

## Introductions

Avoid meandering at the beginning of papers, which is a very common mistake. Your high school teachers might have told you to start with the general, and move to the specific in your intro, but this is a bad idea. Here are examples of bad and better starts to the paper:

*Bad start:* “Since the beginning of time, mankind has...”

*Still bad start:* “Kant was born in...”

*Better start:* “In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that...”

The idea is that you should jump right in. Avoid excessive stage-setting. Make your aims and claims clear, and justify them without too much hot air. Your introduction should do 3 things:

1. Clearly state the issue/controversy/problem your essay will address.
2. Mention the range of current views on the issue (but leave the bulk of the details as regards these views for the body of the paper).
3. State your thesis (i.e. your position within a debate, or your take on the problem and how it should be solved, etc.)

## Body and Structure

The paper should have an organic structure. The sooner you drop the classical “5 paragraph paper” from high school, the better. Arguments are not served by being forced into a mechanical writing procedure or artificial structure. Most papers progress like this:

1. *Intro:* good papers usually start off with introductions that motivate the discussion to come. If there is a major point you are addressing in the paper, it should be in the introduction. The reader should know what is coming in the paper after reading your intro! For other specifics, see above.
2. *Definitions:* After your introduction, you can take a paragraph or two to define key technical terms if your essay contains a number of such terms. If it does not, then do **not** include a definitions section. Also, try **not** to use overly technical language. Sometimes it is necessary, but plain English is always preferred.
3. *Exegesis/Exposition:* This is where you offer your charitable interpretations of the other positions you’re addressing, e.g. from course authors or your own independent research. Stick to only those parts of each author’s position that you will be addressing in the critical part of your paper.
4. *Critical Argument:* finally, the bulk of your paper should be devoted to a critical discussion of the various points in the debate, giving the reader reasons why he or she should agree with your thesis, and not the positions of those with whom you disagree. If you have done a good job characterising their arguments, then you can now point to any inadequacies with those arguments. Are any of the essential premises false? Is the argument poorly structured, such that even true premises do not support the conclusion? Is the argument relevant to the debate? Etc.
5. *Counter Argument:* Because argumentative papers never let the facts speak for themselves, there may be more than one plausible argument that is consistent with the facts. The best argumentative papers will address not only the possible flaws in other positions, *but possible flaws in your own argument!* If you can address these possible problems, and show your reader how your argument can ultimately handle them, this greatly strengthens the paper. You need to do this to get an A or A+ grade.
6. *Conclusions:* over-rated, and best avoided in most papers. If you have nothing else of substance to say after you discharge counter-arguments, then just end it there.

## Remarks on Content and Form

- This is worth repeating: *lots of disciplines can be a jargon-laden discipline. Try not to involve yourself in the jargon unless it makes your paper clearer.* Sometimes technical jargon is necessary, but your paper will quite often be better served by just using plain English. If you do use special terms, make sure you know what they mean. Consult specialty dictionaries (e.g. philosophical or sociological dictionaries) as most standard dictionaries do not adequately define technical terms.
- Don't be overly hostile. The best papers might be presented passionately, but they are making arguments, and treating opponents as rational interlocutors, worthy of respect.
- FOLLOW THE GUIDELINES ON YOUR ESSAY HANDOUT!!! Essays almost always come with rules for citation form, title page form, etc. FOLLOW THEM!!! If citation form is not explicated on the assignment, once you are working within a given form (be it MLA or old-fashioned footnoting), make sure you choose one of the accepted styles, and use it consistently. Also, give all of the data necessary so that your reader can find the source, but don't repeat this information over and over.
- It seems simple, but...PARAGRAPHS SHOULD CONTAIN ONE AND ONLY ONE IDEA!!! If you are saying something new, move on to a new paragraph. This will avoid massive 2 or 3-page paragraphs. On the other side of the spectrum, make sure that your paragraphs do contain at least one full idea. This cuts down on the number of short paragraphs that don't really have a point. Remember: you are not writing for a newspaper. You are writing a paper; proper paragraphs are required.
- DO NOT wait until the night before. Give yourself a bit of time, even for short papers. Sometimes, the shorter papers require judgment about what needs to be excluded, and they can take longer to edit.
- DO NOT hand in your paper without editing it at least once yourself, **and** (not "or") have a fellow student edit it too.