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9-Making an Argument
The Purpose of Academic Argument

Scholarly conversation makes an argument for a given point of view.

Nearly all scholarly writing makes an argument. That’s because its purpose is to create and share new knowledge so it can be debated in order to confirm, dis-confirm, or improve it. That arguing takes place mostly in journals and scholarly books and at conferences. It’s called the scholarly conversation, and it’s that conversation that moves forward what we humans know.

**TIP: Prezi on Scholarly Publishing**

View an overview of the different ways in which scholars share their work with each other and the public.

Open in a web browser. | Alternate text version.

Your scholarly writing for classes should do the same—make an argument—just like your professors’ journal article, scholarly book, and conference presentation writing does. (You may not have realized that the writing you’re required to do mirrors what scholars all over the university, country, and world
must do to create new knowledge and debate it. Of course, you may be a beginner at constructing arguments in writing, while most professors have been at it for some time. And your audience (for now) also may be more limited than your professor’s. But the process is much the same. As you complete your research assignments, you, too, are entering the scholarly conversation.

Making an argument means trying to convince others that you are correct as you describe a thing, situation, relationship, or phenomenon and/or persuade them to take a particular action. Important not just in college, that skill will be necessary for nearly every professional job you hold after college. So learning how to make an argument is good job preparation, even if you do not choose a scholarly career.

Realizing that your final product for your research project is to make an argument gives you a big head start because right off you know the sources you’re going to need are those that will let you write the components of an argument for your reader.

Happily (and not coincidentally), most of those components coincide with the information needs we’ve been talking about. Meeting an information need by using sources will enable you to write the corresponding argument component in your final product.
Components of an Argument

Making an argument in an essay, term paper, blog post or other college writing task is like laying out a case in court. Just as there are conventions that attorneys must adhere to as they make their arguments in court, there are conventions in arguments made in research assignments. Among those conventions is to use the components of an argument.

NOTE:
This section on making an argument was developed with the help of “Making Good Arguments” in *The Craft of Research*, by Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, and Joseph Williams, University of Chicago Press, 2003.

The arguments you’re used to hearing or participating in with friends about something that is uncertain or that needs to be decided contain the same components as the ones you’ll need to use in academic writing. Arguments contain those components because those are the ones that work—used together, they stand the best chance of persuading others that you are correct.

For instance, the question gets things started off. The claim, or thesis, tells people what you consider a true way of describing a thing, situation, relationship, or phenomenon or what action you think should be taken. The reservations, alternatives, and objections that someone else brings up in your sources (or that you imagine your readers logically might have) allow you to demonstrate how your reasons and evidence (maybe) overcome that kind of thinking—and (you hope) your claim/thesis comes out stronger for having withstood that test.

**ACTIVITY: Labeled Components**

Read the short dialog on pages 114 and 115 in the ebook *The Craft of Research* by Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, and Joseph Williams. The components of an argument are labeled for you.

**EXAMPLE: Argument as a Dialog**

Here’s a dialog of an argument, with the most important components labeled.

*Jerald:* Where should we have my parents take us for dinner when they’re here on Sunday? [He asks the question about something that’s unsettled.]
Cathy: We should go to The Cascades! [She makes her main claim to answer the question.] It's the nicest place around. [Another claim, which functions as a reason for the main claim.]

Jerald: How so? [He asks for a reason to believe her claims.]

Cathy: White table cloths. [She gives a reason.]

Jerald: What's that have to do with how good the food is? [He doesn't see how her reason is relevant to the claim.]

Cathy: Table cloths make restaurants seem upscale. [She relates her reason for the claims.] And I've read a survey in Columbus Metro that says the Cascades is one of the most popular restaurants in town. [She offers evidence.]

Jerald: I never read the Metro. And Dino's has table cloths. [He offers a point that contradicts her reason.]

Cathy: I know, but those are checkered! I'm talking about heavy white ones. [She acknowledges his point and responds to it.]

Jerald: My dad loves Italian food. I guess he's kind of a checkered-table-cloth kind of guy? [He raises another reservation or objection.]

Cathy: Yeah, but? Well, I know The Cascades has some Italian things on the menu. I mean, it's not known for its Italian food but you can order it there. Given how nice the place is, it will probably be gourmet Italian food. [She acknowledges his point and responds to it. There's another claim in there.]

Jerald: Ha! My dad, the gourmet? Hey, maybe this place is too expensive. [He raises another reservation.]
Cathy: More than someplace like Dino's. [She concedes his point.]

Jerald: Yeah. [He agrees.]

Cathy: But everybody eats at The Cascades with their parents while they're students here, so it can't be outlandishly expensive. [She now puts limits on how much she's conceding.]

**ACTIVITY: Components of an Argument**

Open activity in a web browser.
Order of the Components

The order in which the components should appear in your argument essays, papers, and posters may depend on which discipline your course is in. So always adhere to the advice provided by your professor and what you learn in class.

One common arrangement for argument essays and term papers is to begin with an introduction that explains why the situation is important—why the reader should care about it. Your research question will probably not appear, but your answer to it (your thesis, or claim) usually appears as the last sentence or two of the introduction.

The body of your essay or paper follows and consists of:

- Your reasons the thesis is correct or at least reasonable.
- The evidence that supports each reason, often occurring right after the reason the evidence supports.
- An acknowledgement that some people have/could have objections, reservations, counterarguments, or alternative solutions to your argument and a statement of each. (Posters often don’t have room for this component.)
- A response to each acknowledgement that explains why that criticism is incorrect or not very important. Sometimes you might have to concede a point you think is unimportant, if you can’t really refute it.

(Again, posters often don’t have much room for this part of an argument.)

After the body, the paper or essay ends with a conclusion, which states your thesis in a slightly different way than occurred in the introduction. The conclusion also may mention why research on this situation is important. (Posters often don’t have much room for this component.)

A Blueprint for Argument

It’s no accident that people are said to make arguments—they’re all constructed, and these components are the building blocks. The components are important because of what they contribute. The components generally, though not always, appear in a certain order because they build on or respond to one another.

For example, the thesis or claim is derived from the initial question. The reasons are bolstered by evidence to support the claim. Objections are raised, acknowledged and subsequently responded to.
The components of argument build on each other.

**ACTIVITY: Order of Argument Components**

Open activity in a web browser.
Where You Get the Components

This section will help you figure that out which components may come from your professor, which you just have to think about, which you have to write, and which you have to find in your sources.

Here, again, are the components we'll cover:

- The research question you (or your professor) wanted answered.
- Your claim or thesis.
- One or more reasons for your thesis.
- Evidence for each reason.
- Others’ objections, counterarguments, or alternative solutions.
- Your acknowledgment of others’ objections, counterarguments, or alternative solutions.
- Your response to others’ objections, counterarguments, or alternative solutions.

The Question You Wanted Answered

Sometimes your professor will give you the research question, but probably more often he or she will expect you to develop your own from an assigned topic. You learned how to develop research questions in another section. Though vitally important, they are often not stated in essays or term papers but are usually stated in reports of original studies, such as theses, dissertations, and journal articles.

EXAMPLES: Research Questions for Hypothetical Essays or Term Papers

- How do at least some animals’ bones help control their weight?
- Did the death of his beloved daughter have any effect on the writings of Mark Twain?

Your Claim or Thesis

You write the claim or thesis—it doesn’t come directly from a resource. Instead, it is the conclusion you come to in answer to your question after you've read/listened to/viewed some sources. So it is a statement, not a question or a hypothesis that you plan to prove or disprove with your research.

After you've read/listened to/viewed more sources, you may need to change your thesis. That happens all the time—not because you did anything wrong but because you learned more.
EXAMPLES: Claims (or Theses) for Hypothetical Essays or Term Papers

- Bone cells monitor whether more or less weight is pressing down on the skeleton and send biochemical signals to appetite centers in their brains to turn appetite down or up, accordingly.
- Mark Twain wrote more urgently and with less humor during the four years immediately after the death of his daughter.

One or More Reasons

You write what you believe makes your claim or thesis (the answer to your research question) true. That's your reason or reasons. Each reason is a summary statement of evidence you found in your research. The kinds of evidence considered convincing varies by discipline, so you will be looking at different sources, depending on your discipline. How many reasons you need depends on how complex your thesis and subject matter are, what you found in your sources, and how long your essay or term paper must be. It’s always a good idea to write your reasons in a way that is easy for your audience to understand and be persuaded by.

EXAMPLES: Reasons in Hypothetical Essays or Term Papers

- Animals (including humans) have a biological tendency to regain any weight that they lose and lose any weight that they gain, seemingly in an effort to maintain whatever weight they have sustained for some time. Skeletons are logical places where any gains or losses could be noted, and recent studies seem to show that osteocytes (a kind of bone cell) are involved in whether appetites go up or down after weight gain or loss.
- My content analysis and a comparison of publication rates four years before and after Mark Twain’s daughter died indicate that his writing was more urgent and less humorous for four years after. It is reasonable to conclude that her death caused that change.

Evidence for Each Reason

You write this also. This is the evidence you summarized earlier as each reason your thesis is true. You will be directly quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing your sources to make the case that your answer to your research question is correct, or at least reasonable.
EXAMPLES: Evidence for Reasons in Hypothetical Essays or Term Papers

- Report the results of studies about osteocytes’ possible effect on weight gain or loss.
- Report the results of your comparison of writing content and publication rate before and after Twain’s daughter’s death.

Others’ Objections, Counterarguments, or Alternative Solutions

Do any of your sources not agree with your thesis? You’ll have to bring those up in your term paper. In addition, put yourself in your readers’ shoes. What might they not find logical in your argument? In other words, which reason(s) and corresponding evidence might they find lacking? Did you find clues to what these could be in your sources? Or maybe you can imagine them thinking some aspect of what you think is evidence doesn’t make sense.

EXAMPLES: Objections, Counterarguments, or Alternative Solutions in Hypothetical Essays or Term Papers

- Imagine that some readers might think: The hormone leptin is released by fat cells when they are added to animals’ bodies so it is leptin that tells appetite centers to turn down when weight is gained.
- Imagine that some readers might think: Computerized content analysis tools are sort of blunt instruments and shouldn’t be used to do precise work like this.

Your Acknowledgement of Others’ Objections, Counterarguments, or Alternative Solutions

So what will you write to bring up each of those objections, counterarguments, and alternative solutions? Some examples:

- I can imagine skeptics wanting to point out...
- Perhaps some readers would say...
- I think those who come from XYZ would differ with me...

It all depends on what objections, counterarguments, and alternative solutions your audience or your imagination come up with.
EXAMPLES: Acknowledgement of Others’ Objections, Counterarguments, or Alternative Solutions in Hypothetical Essays or Term Papers:

- Some readers may point out that the hormone leptin, which is released by fat cells, signals appetite centers to lower the appetite when weight is gained.
- Readers may think that a computerized content analysis tool cannot do justice to the subtleties of text.

Response to Others’ Objections, Counterarguments, or Alternative Solutions

You must write your response to each objection, counterargument, or alternative solution brought up or that you’ve thought of. (You’re likely to have found clues for what to say in your sources.) The reason you have to include this is that you can’t very easily convince your audience until you show them how your claim stacks up against the opinions and reasoning of other people who don’t at the moment agree with you.

EXAMPLES: Response to Others’ Objections, Counterarguments, or Alternative Solutions in Hypothetical Essays or Term Papers:

- But leptin must not be the entire system, since many animals do keep on the new weight.
- Unlike other content tools, the XYZ Content Analysis Measure is able to take into account an author’s tone.

ACTIVITY: Quick Check

Open activity in a web browser.