

How to Write an Argument Paper

Most material you learn in college is or has been debated by someone, somewhere, at some time. Even when the material you read or hear is presented as a simple fact, it may actually be one person's interpretation of a set of information. Instructors may call on you to examine that interpretation and defend it, refute it, or offer some new view of your own. You will need to develop a point of view on or interpretation of that material and provide evidence for your position.

Making a Claim / Forming a Thesis Statement

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. In the majority of college papers, you will need to make some sort of claim and use evidence to support it.

When beginning to write a paper, ask yourself, "**What is my point?**" If your papers do not have a main point, they cannot be arguing for anything. **Instructors are usually looking for two things:**

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

Arguments in academic writing are usually complex and take time to develop. Your argument will need to be more than a simple or obvious thesis statement such as "August Wilson's characters in "Fences" suffer because of their lack of communication." Such a statement might capture your initial impressions of Wilson as you have studied him in class; however, you need to look deeper. Your instructor will probably expect something more complicated, such as "Troy was tormented through his life by the actions of his father and in turn, the cycle is repeating with Cory who fails to come to terms with his relationship with Troy." To develop your argument, you would then prove your claim with evidence from Wilson's play and sources your research has uncovered.

Evidence / Proving Your Point

After you make your point, you then have to back up your point with evidence. Here's where your research comes in. The strength of your evidence, and your use of it, can make or break your argument. You already have the natural inclination for this type of thinking, if not in an academic setting. Think about how you talked your parents into getting you a cell phone. Did you present them with instances of your past trustworthiness? Did you make them feel guilty because your friends' parents all let them have phones? These are all types of argumentation, and they exist in academia in similar forms.

Be consistent with your evidence. Stay on track! Make sure that within each section you are providing the reader with evidence appropriate to each claim. So, if you start a paragraph or section with a statement like "Putting the student seating area closer to the basketball court will raise player performance," do not follow with your evidence on why the university should let more students go to games for free. It's not related. Instead, provide information about how increasing the number of student fans raises player morale, which then results in better play. That would be a better follow-up. Connect the dots – don't assume your teacher knows what point you are trying to make. Be clear. Your

next section could offer reasons why undergraduates should go to games for free—but this information would not go in the same section as the information on increasing player performance. Separate your points by paragraphing.

Counterargument

One way to strengthen your argument and show that you have a deep understanding of the issue is to anticipate and address counterarguments or objections. By considering an opposing viewpoint, you show that you have thought things through, and you dispose of some of the reasons your audience might have for not accepting your argument. Recall our discussion of increasing student seating closer to the basketball court. To make the most effective argument possible, you should consider not only what students would say about free seating but also what paying members of the public might say.

You can generate counterarguments by asking yourself how someone who disagrees with you might respond to each of the points you've made or your position as a whole. **If you can't immediately imagine another position, here are some strategies to try:**

- **Do some research.** It may seem to you that no one could possibly disagree with the position you are arguing, but someone probably has. For example, some people argue that the American Civil Rights Movement never ended. If you are making an argument concerning, for example, current episodes of racism, you might wish to cite some examples of present day discrimination.
- **Talk with a friend, teacher, librarian or tutor.** Another person may be able to imagine counterarguments that haven't occurred to you.
- Consider your argument and **imagine someone who takes the opposite side.** For example, if you argued, "Snakes make the best roommates. This is because they stay in cages and don't make the room a mess," you might imagine someone saying, "Snakes do not make the best roomies. They eat mice, escape their cages and gross out friends."

Once you have thought up some counterarguments, consider how you will respond to them—will you concede that your opponent has a point but explain why your audience should nonetheless accept your argument? Will you reject the counterargument and explain why it is mistaken? Either way, you will want to leave your reader with a sense that your argument is stronger than the opposite.

When you are summarizing opposing arguments, present each argument fairly and objectively rather than trying to make it look foolish. You want to show that you have considered many sides of the issue. If you simply attack, your argument becomes weak.

It is usually better to consider one or two serious counterarguments in some depth. Be sure that your reply is consistent with your original argument. If you find that a counterargument changes your position, you will need to go back and revise your original argument.

Audience

Audience is a very important consideration in argument. It's usually wise to think of your audience in an academic setting as someone who is perfectly smart but who doesn't necessarily agree with you. You are not just expressing your opinion ("It's true because I said so") so you will need solid proof. At the

same time, do not think of your audience as capable of reading your mind. You have to come out and state both your thesis and your evidence clearly. Do not assume anything.

Critical reading

Critical reading is a big part of understanding argument. Remember that the author of every text has an agenda, some point of view that he or she wants you to believe. This is OK—everything is written from someone’s perspective—but it’s a good thing to keep in mind when presenting your own side.

Take notes while researching. Whether the source supports your point or disputes it, both sides are necessary to understand your issue fully. Consider both sides of an argument and analyze their rationale so you can write knowledgeably.

When you read, ask yourself questions like “**What is the author trying to prove?**” Do you agree with the author? Does the author adequately defend her argument? What kind of proof does she use? What is the author not saying? As you get used to reading critically, you will start to see the (sometimes) hidden agendas of other writers, and you can use this skill to improve your own ability to craft effective arguments.