

HOW TO WRITE AN ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

The following outline attempts to show you how to construct a good essay. It represents the basic pattern to follow in putting together any **argument paper** whether this paper is a class essay, a dissertation, or an article designed for publication. An **argument paper** is best defined as a paper which states a thesis, or says something, and attempts to back up or support this thesis with evidence to convince the reader of the truth and validity of this thesis.

This kind of paper is distinct from the essay which merely describes or presents information. These instructions are here presented in outline form merely to make it more apparent that a good essay is put together step by step. If you are writing outside of class you will be able to follow this outline at your leisure; if you are writing in class, or answering an essay question on an exam, you still should mentally follow this outline to construct your essay before you start to write.

I. **Form a Good, Strong Thesis Sentence, Stating What You Propose to Show.**

This is the most important part of the whole process, the foundation upon which your whole essay is constructed. It must be the first thing done; until you have written the thesis sentence it is useless to try writing anything else. Once you have decided on a topic, assemble your material and review it until you are familiar enough with this material to form an opinion or judgement about your topic. This opinion or judgement is the stand you are taking on this particular topic and it will be the conclusion which your entire essay will try to establish and support. This is your thesis sentence; and this is why the thesis sentence has to come first when you start to construct an essay.

II. **Build Your Argument to Support this Thesis Sentence.**

Return to your assembled material. Go through it again, and this time copy down every argument, every bit of evidence, or every reason you can find in it which will support your conclusion. After you have done this you should be able to tell whether your conclusion is valid or not. If you cannot find enough support to convince you yourself of the validity of your own conclusion, you should discard your thesis sentence and form a new one. Never attempt to argue on behalf of something which you yourself do not believe; if you do, your paper will not be any good.

III. **Arrange Your Argument to Produce the Maximum Effect upon the Reader.**

Go through the evidence or separate arguments you have copied down and arrange them in the order of their strength. Usually it is best to start with the weakest and end with the strongest; this arrangement is not always possible) but when it can be done your argument will accumulate more force as it progresses. If this type of arrangement cannot be used, merely arrange the arguments in the order in which they will appear in your paper. Along with each argument, list any contrary argument. You must state these fully and fairly, but show that on balance your view is to be favoured. If you ignore them, your essay will be weak, one-sided and unconvincing.

IV. **Write Your Outline**

(a) Begin with the thesis sentence.

- (b) Always write complete sentences.
- (c) A brief introduction is needed if any questions or terms have to be defined before you start your argument; otherwise it is optional.
- (d) Organize your arguments. Roman numeral (I) will be the first argument or reason in support of your conclusion. Roman numeral (II) will be the second argument -- and so on -- as you have already arranged these arguments in order.
- (e) Just as the Roman numeral entries must support your conclusion, so must the sub-head entries under each Roman numeral support that particular argument (usually by clarifying, explaining, or the citing of examples).
- (f) Copy your thesis sentence word for word as the conclusion at the end of your outline. (This may seem a bit of an insult to your intelligence, but if your outline has gone astray you will find that your thesis sentence will no longer fit in the position it was originally created to occupy. Thus, by doing this you can sometimes save yourself time and wasted effort.)

V. Check Your Outline

- (a) Are there any self-contradictory concepts in it?
- (b) Is any of your material irrelevant?
- (c) Does each argument follow logically from everything preceding it?
- (d) Are there any gaps in your reasoning?
- (e) Are there any terms which need to be defined?
- (f) Are there any statements which are mere platitudes?
- (g) Have you made any dogmatic statements?

VI. Write the Paper Itself

About three-fourths of your work should be done before you reach this step. If steps I-V are done well and carefully, the paper should just about write itself.

VII. Proofread Your Paper

And do it at least twice **C** more times if possible. (Never write anything which will be read by others unless you proofread it to the best of your ability; this is one rule that is observed by all mature scholars and authors who have been writing for years.)

- (a) Proofread for thought and style, and again check the list in V. Also, does your paper read smoothly and easily? (Read it aloud, if possible, and you will find out.)
- (b) Proofread for mechanical errors.
 1. Check all questionable spellings.
 2. Check all the minimum standard requirements.
 3. Make sure you use references properly in your text. An important argument in your paper is useless unless you provide the source that backs it up.
 4. Make sure to provide a bibliography (a list of your sources) in alphabetical order.

VIII. Turn in the Finished Paper and Wait Patiently for Your A.