

## Writing an Argument

Writing an argument—clearly outlining a claim and supporting it with evidence—is one of the most important skills you will develop as a college student. You will practice this skill informally during class discussion and formally through written argument essays.

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### Choosing a Topic

Choosing a strong topic helps lay the foundation for a strong argument.

#### *Suggestions for Choosing a Topic*

- **Read the assignment prompt carefully.** Before you begin, check if the assignment prompt tells you what topic to argue or if it limits the topics you can address. While most professors want you to be able to choose your own, they may be tired of reading essays on overused topics like gun rights and social media. Make sure you adhere to the specific criteria that your topic must meet in order to fulfill the assignment.
- **Consider your own experiences, interests, and concerns.** One of the best things you can do for yourself and your argument is to choose a topic that you care about. If you care about it, you will be more inclined to do the work that is needed to fully develop it. Start by asking yourself a few questions. What major events have happened in my life that have affected or fundamentally changed me or people I know? What hobbies, organizations, issues do I care about? What is happening in the world that worries me? Create a list and make notes about how each of the topics and issues relate to the assignment prompt.
- **Do research.** Reading books and articles in the course's discipline can help you test a topic you have already chosen or find a topic if you are stumped. It allows you to see what conversations are already happening that you could join or where there may be gaps that you could help fill.
- **Choose a topic with multiple sides.** An argument is not an argument if everyone already agrees on the answer. Make sure that you choose a topic where something is in contention. That does not mean you can't write about a topic that seems settled. Often, there are details that are still in dispute. You just have to find them. For example, it is widely believed that recycling is a great way to help the environment. However, there are questions about how helpful it really is. Some people argue that corporate and industrial waste are a larger problem than individual household waste. Some people argue that the recycling process creates its own pollution that may negate the good. Clearly, the conversation is still ongoing. Most issues are more complex than a typical black-and-white, for-or-against argument. Search for the nuances.
- **Narrow your focus.** Some topics may have too many sides or moving parts to address in their entirety. Trying to do so can lead to an essay that skims over important information and doesn't really seem to say anything. To avoid this, choose one major aspect of your topic and focus on it. For example, a five-page argument focused on "the negative byproducts of the recycling process in the US" will be a stronger argument than one that more generally addresses "the problems with recycling."

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### Writing a Thesis Statement

Consider the thesis statement as a kind of contract with your reader. It outlines your argument and lets your reader know what to expect from your essay. Most thesis statements are only one sentence long; however, they can be longer. Thesis statements are made up of three parts: the claim, the evidence, and the warrant.

#### *Parts of a Thesis Statement*

- **Claim:** The claim is a statement of your position, your argument. It must be **debatable**. That means that someone somewhere has to hold a different view than the one you put forward. Remember, an argument is not an argument if everyone agrees; that's just a statement of fact.

- **Evidence:** Evidence is a brief outline of the support you will use to defend your claim. The evidence outlined in the thesis forms the backbone of your essay.
- **Warrant:** Warrant is a little more difficult to understand. Basically, the warrant is all of the information that both you and the reader must already agree on in order for your evidence to be successful. It is what allows your audience to make a logical leap from the evidence to the claim. This part is almost never included in the written thesis.

## Example Thesis

Here is an example of a successful thesis:

*Recycling is not as environmentally friendly as many people believe because the process of recycling results in the creation of harmful emissions, recycling requires a lot of energy, and many “recycled” materials still end up in landfills.*

- **Claim:** *Recycling is not as environmentally friendly as many people believe*  
This claim is debatable. Since many people have been taught to recycle since childhood by their schools and governments, it is very likely that someone would disagree with this statement.
- **Evidence:** *the process of recycling results in the creation of harmful emissions, recycling requires a lot of energy, and many “recycled” materials still end up in landfills*  
This thesis statement provides three major pieces of evidence to support the original claim and acts as a roadmap for the essay. Your thesis could provide more or fewer pieces of evidence, but there must be at least one. Based on this evidence, the reader will expect one or more paragraphs addressing each piece.
- **Warrant:** The warrant for this argument is not explicitly stated; however, the author clearly makes several assumptions about their audience’s beliefs. Specifically, the author thinks the audience will agree that emissions, excess energy use, and recycled materials ending up in landfills are *bad things* for the environment. If the audience does not see these as bad things, then the argument will fail. Even if the audience already agrees, the author may still include information in the body paragraphs of the essay to help show how these things are bad.

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## Supporting Your Claims

The main purpose of making an argument is to convince people who disagree with you that your claim has merit. If you are not able to provide evidence for why they should agree with you, your argument will be unsuccessful.

## Use Your Own Experiences

Depending on the formality of your argument and your authority on the topic, it is possible to pull from your own experiences as a form of evidence. In informal writing, you can include anecdotes (stories) and examples. In formal writing, you may have to be more strategic to avoid sounding biased.

- **Couch your experience in the research and findings of others.** Rather than using your experience as the only piece of evidence, begin by providing information from an authoritative book or article in the discipline. Then, use your experience as an example to help clarify the point.
- **Remove emotion:** People tend to be suspicious of emotionally written arguments since your feelings on an issue are unlikely to be shared by everyone in your audience. When you write about your experience, try to be matter-of-fact. State the events that occurred but avoid hyperbole (exaggeration) and leave out your feelings.
- **Remove “I”:** Removing yourself from an experience can be difficult (even impossible) if you were directly involved. However, if you were merely a witness, you can write about it as an external observer using third person. For example, let’s say you work at a recycling facility and know that a lot of recycled material gets thrown out, you could say, “Workers at Local Recycling Plant tend to throw out twenty pieces of recycled material every hour because they were not cleaned thoroughly enough or were made of composite materials that cannot be recycled.”

## Conduct Research

Research is the collection of information from outside sources. There are two types of research that you can conduct to find evidence for your claim: primary and secondary.

- **Primary Research:** Primary research is research that you design and execute yourself. It includes data collection through surveys, interviews, observations, experiments, analyses, etc. This type of research may require you to get permission from the school's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the safety of your participants. Talk to your professor before you begin.
- **Secondary Research:** Secondary research is research that you do by reading. It is important to choose the right kinds of sources to lend credibility to your argument. Sources fall into two categories: popular and scholarly.
  - **Popular:** Popular sources are books, articles, videos, etc. that are written for an everyday audience. These include articles in newspapers, magazines, books written for entertainment, and most internet sources. Popular sources can be useful because they can be produced quickly. If your topic is new, you may be able to find well-written news articles to include in your essay.
  - **Scholarly:** Scholarly sources are books and articles written for an academic audience (i.e. researchers) in a specific discipline. These sources undergo a process called **peer-review**, which means they have been read by other scholars in the field and were found to be reliable. The school provides access to academic databases that house many peer-reviewed articles. Google Scholar can also be used to find scholarly sources.

No matter what type of source you use, make sure you evaluate it for reliability and usefulness. For more information on evaluating sources, please see the NCWC Writing Center handout “**Evaluating Sources: The CRAAP Test**” or visit the Writing Center.

**Pay attention to the professor's assignment requirements.  
They may dictate what types of sources you are allowed to use.**

## Organizing the Essay

Clear organization allows your reader to easily follow your ideas. An argument that is well-organized is more likely to be taken seriously and to keep your reader's attention. The structure outlined below will help you create a working map for your paper that includes the basic elements of a good argument. Check with your professor to see if there are any other elements they would like you to include.

### Introduction

A productive way to think about the introduction is to imagine a diamond, starting with a specific attention grabber at the beginning, broadening out to background information on the topic in the middle, and narrowing back down to your specific thesis statement near the end.

- **Attention Grabber:** An attention grabber is a strategy used to get your reader interested in your topic and argument. Common attention grabbers include startling facts or data about the topic, an interesting quote, a brief anecdote, a question, etc. It should relate directly to the argument you plan to make.
- **Background Information:** This section provides context for the attention grabber and introduces the reader to basic information about the topic.
- **Thesis Statement:** The thesis statement should lead logically from the attention grabber and background information. It may be one or more sentences long and is usually the last thing at the end of the introduction paragraph. See the section “Thesis Statement” above for more information about how to write an effective thesis statement.

### Body Paragraphs

Body paragraphs can serve several different functions. They can provide additional background information that is necessary to help the reader understand the topic. They can provide specific evidence to support your claims. No matter what, **each paragraph should in some way connect back to the thesis statement** and the specific topic under discussion. Body paragraphs have five parts: a transition, a topic sentence, evidence, explanation, and a wrap-up.

- **Transition:** A transition shows your reader how the new paragraph connects to the paragraph that came before it and smooths the flow from one idea to the other. The transition may be its own sentence or a part of the topic sentence.
- **Topic Sentence:** The topic sentence can be thought of as the thesis of the paragraph. It tells the audience what will be discussed. All elements of the paragraph should connect back to the topic sentence.
- **Evidence:** Each paragraph should provide at least one piece of evidence supporting the claims made in the topic sentence. This could include quotes or paraphrases from outside sources or discussions of your own experience.
- **Explanations:** Avoid letting your evidence “speak for itself.” Explain to the reader how the evidence supports the claim, connect ideas from different sources, and/or clarify the information provided. (Evidence and explanation will likely be interwoven.)
- **Wrap-Up:** The wrap-up brings the paragraph to a close. Briefly state how the evidence proves the claim made in the topic sentence.

## *Counterarguments*

Counterarguments are views that disagree with part or all of your argument. This section may be written as its own paragraph(s), or it may be worked into the body paragraphs. Contrary to what you might think, including a counterargument lends credibility to your argument because it shows the reader that you have fully examined and understood the topic from all sides before taking a position. When writing the counterargument, you should provide an honest discussion of the opposing view(s). If the opposing view makes a good point, you may write a **concession** (an agreement) of that point.

## *Refutation*

Once you have completed discussion of the counterarguments and concessions, make sure you follow them with a refutation. A refutation is an explanation of the flaws in a counterargument that make it more likely yours is the correct argument and should be supported with evidence. “Because they’re wrong!” is not an effective refutation.

## *Conclusion*

Conclusions can be the most difficult part of an essay to write. You’ve already said everything you wanted to. Now what? Below is a suggestion for how to approach writing the conclusion.

- **Restate the Thesis:** Remind the audience why they started reading the essay in the first place. Avoid copy/pasting the thesis statement from the introduction.
- **Summarize the Evidence:** Briefly remind the audience of the major points made throughout the essay.
- **Answer the Question “So What?”:** Assume that the audience now agrees with your argument and is trying to figure out what happens next. Depending on your topic, you could point them towards logical follow-up questions and issues, provide solutions to a problem, or talk about what it means for the future.