



DEVELOPING AN ARGUMENT

What Is an Argument?

A scholarly essay is an exercise in developing and defending ideas. Although the heart of a paper is the single idea that you want to explore or defend, most of your paper—and probably most of the time you spend writing—will be devoted to the reason or reasons why your reader should believe that your thesis is valid. This analysis and explanation of your claim is called an *argument*. In effect, the argument of your essay is an answer to the question *Why is the central idea or thesis of this paper valid or plausible?*

To see your paper as defending a claim is only one way of thinking about developing an argument. A slightly different way of thinking about the process is in terms of questions and answers. You may choose to see your paper as an answer to a question or a solution to a puzzle (the thesis) followed by an explanation of why that answer or solution is a good one (the argument). Suppose, for example, you read a novel by Russell Banks and then hear a lecture about Mark Twain. Afterwards, you start to wonder, “Why do these writers have so many themes in common?” Having formulated this question, your task is to answer it. The formulation of the question, the answer to the question, and the extended analysis or explanation of why the answer is satisfactory makes up the paper.

There are still other variations of how to think about argument. While most writers of academic papers use their argument to answer a question or defend a claim, it is sometimes possible to raise a question or a claim and simply explore it without taking a stand on it. For example, you might be interested in exploring the ethical issues raised by new genetic technologies. You may have no particular view that you want to defend. You may only want to raise questions or speculate about possibilities. This can be a legitimate approach to a paper, but you risk leaving the reader unsure about your main point. Whatever format you decide on, you should remember that you still have to present an argument. *An academic paper has to consist largely of giving reasons for what you are saying.*

Generating Ideas through Exploratory Writing

There is no formula for creating or developing a good argument, but there are a few strategies that can help you decide how best to defend your main idea. It is often extremely useful to do some exploratory writing even before you’ve figured out what your argument is going to be. This may seem a surprising bit of advice because many students assume that writing is what you do after you’ve done your thinking. They see writing as the way that thought is presented—a kind of packaging—rather than as a way of thinking. But consider the parallel idea that speaking is just the packaging of thought. We know that’s not true, especially if we consider all that we can accomplish by “talking through” an issue in our heads or with someone else. Exploratory writing can work like

that, too, but remember that you'll have to throw away a lot of what you write at first and hold on only to the ideas that are gems. (For more on how to use writing to generate ideas, see the Writing Center handout on "Getting Started.")

Why Do You Believe Your Thesis?

Another way to think about how to develop an argument is to remember what made you believe or consider your central idea in the first place. Since you thought it was a sufficiently reasonable or interesting claim to consider, you probably had a reason for thinking so. If that reason was compelling enough for you, it might also be compelling enough for your reader. For example, suppose we return to the question of how the novelists Russell Banks and Mark Twain are related. After hearing a lecture on *Huck Finn*, you might be struck by the similarities between that novel and Banks's *The Rule of the Bone*. This initial observation is a good place to begin thinking about a thesis and an argument. If, after you go back and review the novels, you decide that there are a sufficient number of related themes, characters, and literary techniques, you are on your way toward being able to make an argument about how and why Russell Banks rewrote *Huck Finn* for the late-twentieth century.

Constructing an Argument

Once you have a general sense of a potential argument, you will go through a procedure similar to the one that produced your thesis in the first place. You need to express as precisely as you can what the argument is, and then refine it. You should think about the various steps of the defense you are going to make. Perhaps the support for the thesis is complex and has to be developed in pieces. If you are unsure how to proceed, think about what you've read and work up a tentative formulation of an argument. If you are writing a research paper, you can continue your research and read material that might help you to decide whether you are right. Your reading may suggest new arguments or refinements of your original one.

For each step in the defense of your argument, you will need to provide sufficient *evidence* and an *analysis* of that evidence. What kind of evidence you provide will depend, of course, on the type of paper you are writing—a sociology paper might require research data; a history paper might present material from primary documents; an art history paper might include a careful interpretation of several paintings. But no matter what evidence you use to support your argument, you also need to analyze the evidence—that is, explain clearly to your readers exactly how the evidence you have offered supports your argument. If you merely string together a series of assertions or facts, expecting that your reader will be able to see the connection to your central point, you are sidestepping your responsibility to answer the question of why your thesis is valid or plausible.

After you have constructed your argument and written a draft of your paper, you can test the strength of your ideas by imagining a reader looking over your shoulder and asking "Why should I believe what I'm reading?" An even better way to test your ideas is to find a classmate or friend who will read through your draft to see what questions are begging to be answered, what parts of your argument are not logically developed, and where there are gaps in the evidence or analysis. These problems are often hard for a writer to see; there may be a few crucial steps that you've made in your head, but that

you've forgotten to put on the page. A reader who is not as caught up in the project as you are may be able to help you see the structure of your argument clearly again.

Outlines and Other Visual Organizers

Although students often think of outlining as a tiresome exercise they were forced to learn in junior high school, many writers find it useful to chart out their ideas using outlines, maps, or flowcharts. As tools, outlines and maps allow a writer to see an entire project on one or two pages. Outlining forms a record of your essential ideas and allows you to check the logic and completeness of your argument. Outlines can reveal the structure of what you've actually written and can provide a blueprint for how to revise or develop your argument. (For more on outlining, see the Writing Center handout "Outlines.")

Taking Time

Developing a thesis and an argument take time and work, so you need to plan on that from the start. Writers sometimes have revelations; they suddenly have a terrific idea and see their whole paper clearly all at once. But this is very, very, rare, and even when it happens, it still takes work to put the idea down in words and flesh it out fully. Working out ideas on paper (or the computer) always makes writers confront problems that were not initially apparent. Be reassured: solving those problems is the day-to-day work of writing and thinking.

Related Writing Center Handouts

Getting Started

Outlines

Developing a Central Idea or "Thesis"

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