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# BASIC STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF ARGUMENT

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## Learning Objectives

- Review the elements of argument
- Apply strategies for writing strong arguments

## The Topic: What Are You Arguing About?

When you are tasked with crafting an argumentative essay, it is likely that you will be expected to craft your argument based upon a given number of sources—all of which should support your topic in some way. Your instructor might provide both the topic and these sources for you, in which case, your job is to find something original to say about that topic—something that goes beyond what you’ve learned from studying those sources. Other times, a professor will assign you a topic and ask you to locate sources, or provide you with some sources and ask you to find others. Again, you will need to take the topic your professor assigned and determine how you can add your own insights into what others have said about the topic. If you get to choose a topic and the sources yourself, your professor expects you to choose a specific focus and to do more than simply parrot what others have written about that topic.

In each case, you are tasked with the challenge of writing something original, and that something will always require that you write an argument. That doesn’t mean you have to come up with an earth-shattering new idea, but it means you have to go beyond what professors sometimes call an “information dump,” which is a paper full of information from different sources, with no originality and no real point. Your professor will want your argument to have a point, and he or she will expect your essay to contain the basic components of an argument: claim, background information, support, warrants, and counterarguments.

## Claim: What Do You Want the Reader to Believe?

In an argument paper, the thesis is often called a claim. This claim is a statement in which you take a stand on a debatable issue. A strong, debatable claim has at least one valid counterargument, an opposite or alternative point of view that is as sensible as the position that you take in your claim. In your thesis statement, you should clearly and specifically state the position you will convince your audience to adopt. One way to accomplish this is via either a closed or open thesis statement.

A **closed** thesis statement includes sub-claims or reasons why you choose to support your claim.

### Example of Closed Thesis Statement

The city of Houston has displayed a commitment to attracting new residents by making improvements to its walkability, city centers, and green spaces.

In this instance, walkability, city centers, and green spaces are the sub-claims, or reasons, why you would make the claim that Houston is attracting new residents.

An **open** thesis statement does not include sub-claims and might be more appropriate when your argument is less easy to prove with two or three easily-defined sub-claims.

### Example of Open Thesis Statement

The city of Houston is a vibrant metropolis due to its walkability, city centers, and green spaces.

The choice between an open or a closed thesis statement often depends upon the complexity of your argument. But maybe you're not sure what you want to argue because you haven't yet determined what you think. That's a great place to begin! Instead of a thesis, you can begin with a research question.

A research question approach might ask a large question that will be narrowed down with further investigation.

### Example of Research Question Approach

What has the city of Houston done to attract new residents and/or make the city more accessible?

Even if you begin with an open or closed thesis, you will need to let the research guide your thinking. That means that the thesis you begin with will almost never be the thesis you present in your final version of the essay. The advantage to starting with a research question, then, is that it allows for your writing to develop more organically according to what you discover through research. When you write your essay, you will change the question to an open or closed thesis—the main claim you want your readers to accept, based on the evidence you are going to present.

## Background Information

Before you get into defending your claim, you will need to place your topic (and argument) into context by including relevant background material. Remember, your audience is relying on you for vital information such as definitions, historical placement, and controversial positions. This background material might appear in either your introductory paragraph(s) or your body paragraphs. How and where to incorporate background material depends a lot upon your topic, assignment, evidence, and audience. If you want to incorporate background information in your opening paragraph(s), don't forget that a good opening should have a "hook," something that engages the readers so they are interested in reading the rest of your essay. If you present your background information in a body paragraph, you should help your readers understand why they need the information you're presenting.

The background information typically needs to come before you begin presenting the support for your main claim. The majority of your essay needs to present compelling support for the claim.

## Support: What Makes Your Reasoning Valid?

To validate the thinking that you put forward in your claim and sub-claims, you need to demonstrate that your reasoning is based on more than just your personal opinion. You need to present evidence. Evidence, sometimes referred to as logical appeals, can take the form of research studies or scholarship, expert opinions,

personal examples, observations made by yourself or others, or specific instances that make your reasoning seem sound and believable.

Before you write your first draft of an argument, you should already have plenty of evidence. Don't begin writing an argument and hoping you can think up some evidence as you draft. Instead, list your reasons or sub-claims and evidence for each of those sub-claims. Even if you don't like to write formal outlines, starting with a general idea of how you will support your main claim or thesis will make it more likely that you have a strong argument.

In addition to evidence, support includes ethical and emotional appeals. Ethical appeals are your attempts to show readers that you're reasonable and fair and that you've researched your topic thoroughly, so it's important that you actually research your topic thorough (you can't show what you don't have!). You create ethical appeals by avoiding fallacies, adopting a reasonable tone, and citing your sources so that readers know you have done good research.

Emotional appeals are the reasons your audience will find your evidence compelling. Readers are rarely moved by facts alone; if the facts don't relate to the readers' values, if they don't reflect the readers' beliefs and concerns, the audience is likely to be unconvinced. You may reference data from the Center for Disease Control, which states that 48,830 people died from gun-related injuries in the U.S in 2021, but those numbers may not touch upon a readers' values as much as a specific example of a school shooting where several students and teachers died. Readers need to share the values or beliefs that would make them find the statistics troubling, and sometimes you will need to help them see how the statistics relate to their values and beliefs.

In addition, evidence works only if it directly supports your reasoning — and sometimes you must explain how the evidence supports your reasoning. You can't always assume that a reader can see the connection between evidence and reason that you see or that the reader will understand what's at stake when you present evidence. When that happens, you have a problem with a warrant.

## Warrants: Why Should a Reader Accept Your Claim?

A warrant is an assumption that connects the claim or sub-claim and support, that makes the readers see why the support is meaningful. Think of warrants as the glue that holds an argument together and ensures that all pieces work together coherently and logically. Sometimes warrants are stated directly; other times, they are implied.

An important way to ensure you are properly supplying warrants within your argument is to use topic sentences for each paragraph and to question the specific support for each topic sentence. What do readers need to believe or think if they are likely to accept your support? Why would they care about the evidence you're providing? Or play devil's advocate: Why might some readers think this support is invalid or problematic? What can you do to help those readers accept the support? In questioning your own support, you may find it necessary to address counterarguments.

## Counterargument: But What About Other Perspectives?

A strong arguer should not be afraid to consider perspectives that either challenge or completely oppose his or her own claim. When you respectfully and thoroughly discuss perspectives or research that counters your own claim or even weaknesses in your own argument, you are showing yourself to be an ethical arguer. The following are some things of which counter arguments may consist:

- summarizing opposing views;
- explaining how and where you actually agree with some opposing views;
- acknowledging weaknesses or holes in your own argument.

You have to be careful and clear that you are not conveying to a reader that you are rejecting your own claim. It is important to indicate that you are merely open to considering alternative viewpoints. Being open in this way shows that you are an ethical arguer – you are considering many viewpoints.

## Types of Counterarguments

Counterarguments can take various forms and serve a range of purposes such as:

- *Could someone disagree with your claim?* If so, why? Explain this opposing perspective in your own argument, and then respond to it.
- *Could someone draw a different conclusion from any of the facts or examples you present?* If so, what is that different conclusion? Explain this different conclusion and then respond to it.
- *Could a reader question any of your assumptions or claims?* If so, which ones would they question? Explain and then respond.
- *Could a reader offer a different explanation of an issue?* If so, what might their explanation be? Describe this different explanation, and then respond to it.
- *Is there any evidence out there that could weaken your position?* If so, what is it? Cite and discuss this evidence and then respond to it.

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, that does not necessarily mean that you have a weak argument. It means ideally, and as long as your argument is logical and valid, that you have a counterargument. Good arguments can and do have counterarguments; it is important to discuss them. But you must also discuss and then respond to those counterarguments.

## Response to Counterargument: I See That, But...

Just as it is important to include counterargument to show that you are fair-minded and balanced, you must respond to the counterargument so that a reader clearly sees that you are not agreeing with the counterargument and thus abandoning or somehow undermining your own claim. Failure to include the response to counterargument can confuse the reader. There are several ways to respond to a counterargument such as:

- Accommodate: concede to a specific point or idea from the counterargument by explaining why that point or idea has validity. However, you must then be sure to return to your own claim, and explain why even that concession does not lead you to completely accept or support the counterargument;
- Refute: reject the counterargument if you find it to be incorrect, fallacious, or otherwise invalid. Always explain why the counterargument perspective does not invalidate your own claim.
- Dismiss: correct a misconception about your argument, something the reader might think you mean when, in fact, you mean something else entirely. For example, you may have a different definition of a word than the one your reader assumes, or you may be offering a viewpoint that's similar to but significantly different from another viewpoint.

## A Note About Where to Put the Counterargument

Some people prefer to present their counterarguments first where they can address them and then spend the rest of their essay building their own case and supporting their own claims. However, it is just as valid to have the counterarguments + response appear at the end of the paper after you have discussed all of your reasons. You can also address counterarguments as they might emerge in the minds of the readers as they are reading your work. If you offer evidence that a reader might question, for example, you can address that question right away; you don't need to wait until the end of the essay to present the readers' legitimate concern, and doing so would probably be confusing.

What is important to remember is that wherever you place your counterargument, you should:

- Address the counterargument(s) fully:
  - Explain what the counter perspectives are;
  - Describe them thoroughly and fairly, usually by presenting quotations from those who have a different viewpoint;
  - Cite authors who have these counter perspectives;
- Then, respond to these counterarguments:
  - Make it clear to the reader of your argument why you concede to certain points of the counterargument or why you reject them;

- Make it clear that you do not accept the counterargument, even though you understand it;
- Explain any legitimate confusion your readers might have about any elements of your argument;
- Be sure to use transitional phrases that make this clear to your reader.

## Responding to Counterarguments

You do not need to attempt to do all of these things as a way to respond. Instead, choose the response strategy that makes the most sense to you for the counterargument that you find:

- If you agree with some of the counterargument perspectives, you can concede some of their points. (“I do agree that ....”, “Some of the points made by X are valid.....”) You could then challenge the importance/usefulness of those points;
  - “However, this information does not apply to our topic because...”
- If the counterargument perspective is one that contains different evidence than you have in your own argument, you can explain why a reader should not accept the evidence that the counterarguer presents;
- If the counterargument perspective is one that contains a different *interpretation* of evidence than you have in your own argument, you can explain why a reader should not accept the interpretation of the evidence that your opponent (counterarguer) presents.

If the counterargument is an acknowledgement of evidence that threatens to weaken your argument, you must explain why and how that evidence does not, in fact, invalidate your claim. Is it because other, more convincing evidence exists to support your position? Is it because something has changed that makes that evidence less convincing? Is it because the evidence is limited somehow? You must have a good reason for accepting counter evidence but not the counterargument.

It is important to use **transitional phrases** in your paper to alert readers when you’re about to present a counterargument. It’s usually best to put this phrase at the beginning of a paragraph such as:

- Researchers have challenged these claims with...
- Critics argue that this view...
- Some readers may point to...
- A perspective that challenges the idea that...

Transitional phrases will again be useful to highlight your shift from counterargument to response:

- Indeed, some of those points are valid. However, . . .
- While I agree that . . . , it is more important to consider . . .
- These are all compelling points. Still, other information suggests that . .

- While I understand . . . , I cannot accept the evidence because . . .<sup>1</sup>

## Putting It All Together

Although all arguments should include these elements—claim, background, support, warrants, and counterarguments—you have to determine for yourself how best to present each of these elements. Doing so requires that you think about your audience. You need to present all the elements of the argument in a way that makes your reasoning easy to follow and convincing. Think about the convincing arguments you’ve read or heard. Did they all follow the same format? Probably not. Most likely, the authors presented their arguments in a way that they hoped the audience would find compelling.

That said, you should keep a few points in mind:

- you need a strong opening paragraph—something with a hook and several sentences that transition from the hook to the thesis
- your background information should appear early on and should include only what the readers need to appreciate your argument; don’t include everything you’ve learned about your topic
- your support should build up somehow, perhaps by starting with the least convincing reasons for accepting your claim and moving to the most convincing reasons.
- you should include emotional appeals in the argument by telling stories, using imagery, employing figurative language, and highlighting shared values
- you should cite all information from sources so that readers know where you found your evidence
- you should present counterarguments fairly and address them in a way that strengthens your argument
- you should conclude gracefully, in a way that leaves a lasting impression upon your readers

### Key Takeaways

- Knowing the elements of argument will help you write good arguments for all of your

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- Arguments can be structured in many different ways