

Writing an Argument

(Fowler, H.R., Aaron, J.E., & Okoominan, J. *The Little, Brown Handbook*. Longman, 2001.)

Tests for an Argument Topic

- thesis must be an arguable claim
- concerns a conclusion drawn from evidence (not an indisputable fact)
- can be disputed: others might take a different position (I.E., THE CLAIM is not just personal taste)
- will be disputed: it is controversial (I.E., MORE THAN A few people disagree)
- is something you care about
- is narrow enough to argue in the space and time available

Six Types of Arguments

1. Classical Argument

Introduction: Provides some context: a question, quotation, an anecdote, some historical background, some factual information, or a narration of events. **POSES A PROBLEM**. It also includes a thesis statement: a statement of claim, and major reasons.

Body: two sections, one answering possible objections to the claim (may be called inoculating your claim from other objections) and one supporting the claim.

Conclusion: summarizes the main points of the argument or calls for some sort of action; it may include an emotional appeal to give the argument **PRESENCE**.

2. Delayed Thesis Argument (when audience strongly opposes your claim)

May first discuss assumptions, values, or definitions the audience holds in common with the writer of the argument. The writer shows how these common assumptions provide support for a set of beliefs that will become the chain of reasons to support the claim. The chain of reasoning leads the claim or thesis at the end. *May also begin with objections to the claim. Then the writer answers these objections and leads the audience through the chain of reasons that support the claim.*

Challenges for the writer: does not follow a set form or pattern, and writer must maintain audience interest and assent throughout without giving a sense that the audience is being manipulated or "trapped."

3. Conciliatory Argument (when the audience totally opposes your claim)

Similar to the delayed thesis argument but does not move on to any statement of author's claim. The goal is to move the audience from a position of unconditional opposition to a more moderate position, even one of conditional support. The writer tries to build a basis for further

conversation, establishing some common ground with the audience in order to win a degree of consent. The writer tries to move the audience toward a more moderate position in relation to the writer's position.

4. Motivational Argument (when the audience already agrees with the writer's position but may not be motivated to act or respond)

Motivational appeals generally involve an appeal to a common vision or common set of values. (Most ads are motivational arguments, trying to move us to acquire things we already want or value. Preaching is also motivational in that a preacher describes a religious or moral vision and encourages those who accept this vision to change their behavior. Business consultants have made millions using this kind of argument.)

1. A description of a need or problem
2. A description of the negative effects or consequences of that need, or the problem for the audience if the audience does not do some action or make some response
3. A way to fill the need or solve the problem
4. A description of a "vision" of this solution, how things would be better if the solution were put into place
5. Ends with a specific action that readers can take to contribute to the solution (make a phone call, write a letter, contribute money, make an immediate change in behavior, make a commitment, sign a contract, etc. The motivational argument usually includes the means to take the action (phone number and what you should say, addressed envelope, etc.)

5. Rogerian Argument (Carl Rogers, psychologist): nonconfrontational, nonjudgemental, and cooperative argument-when you want to establish common ground and mediate between two opposing groups-to begin dialogue among parties that might not get together otherwise [e.g., a labor dispute or a diplomatic summit]

Section 1. Context for the argument described and a brief statement summarizing the various positions. All parties should agree that the mediator has stated their position accurately.

Section 2. The mediator tries to outline each position as clearly as possible without passing judgment on any position or seeking to favor one side over the other. All parties should accept these as accurate.

Section 3. Mediator attempts to describe assumptions, values, & definitions that the different parties share.

Section 4. Concludes with a presentation of claims that all the parties can accept based on what they share.

A Rogerian argument may result in *an agreement to disagree*, but at least it will be an *informed* disagreement. It will show precisely where the parties disagree and what they have in common; and it may move both parties to a new position.

6. Option Three Argument (developed by William Safire, former political columnist and language expert for the *New York Times*) *Is similar to Rogerian argument but in Section 3 (see above), the writer presents a third option that lies between the two extremes, a position that builds on what he or she and the audience share. (Often used in political campaigns when candidates try to identify with the political center, hoping to win votes from both parties and in the corporate world when, for example, a company wants to show stockholders it is steering a middle course between two extremes.)*

Using Reason

Your **thesis** or **claim** is a conclusion you reach by reasoning about evidence. Two methods of reasoning are **induction** (you observe your evidence or infer a generalization from that; you predict something about the unknown based on what you know; you create new knowledge out of old) and **deduction** (you proceed from a generalization to your own specific circumstance; you apply old information to new information). Both induction and deduction use the elements of argument: claims, evidence, assumptions, and qualifiers.

1. **claims**- positive statements that need support
2. **evidence** (also sometimes called **data** or **grounds**)- the facts, examples, expert opinions, and other information that support the claim. Ask of evidence: Is it accurate? Adequate? Relevant? Representative?
3. **assumptions**- these are the writer's underlying-often unstated-beliefs, opinions, principles, or inferences that **link the evidence to the claims**. The writer's assumptions justify or warrant making the claims on the basis of the evidence provided. For example: Claim= Chemistry faculty should evaluate the lab's quality. Assumption= Chemistry professors are the most capable of evaluating the lab's quality.
4. **qualifiers** or **hedges**- these words and phrases, such as *may, might, perhaps, in the following circumstances*, make the writer appear cautious and thoughtful, and allow for exceptions to the rule.

Distinguishing Facts, Opinions, Beliefs, and Prejudices in an Argument: the acceptability of a claim depends partly on which of these categories it falls into.

Caution: Claims of belief or prejudice that pose as considered opinions often appear online. Anyone can post anything on the Internet without passing it through an editorial screening like that undergone by books and articles in journals. The filtering of such Internet materials is entirely up to you as the reader.

A **fact** is verifiable--one can determine that it is true. It can be misinterpreted or distorted but it is ultimately verifiable, so it does not make a worthwhile argument by itself. (Ex. The cost of medical care is rising).

An **opinion** is a judgment based on evidence, an honest attempt to draw a reasonable conclusion from evidence. Expert opinions are the judgments formed by authorities on the basis of their own examination of evidence. (Ex1. Mandatory drug testing in the workplace violates constitutional freedom. Ex2. Mandatory drug testing in the workplace is essential to increase employee productivity).

A **prejudice** is an opinion based on insufficient or unexamined evidence. It is an inaccurate generalization about a group of people, things, etc. This kind of assertion has no place in an argument. (Ex. Teenagers are irresponsible.) (Ex. Trailer homes are disgusting.)

A **belief** is a conviction based on cultural or personal faith, morality, or values. It expresses a viewpoint (like an opinion), but is not based on facts and other evidence. Beliefs cannot serve as the central claim of an argument since they cannot be disproved by facts or even contested on the basis of facts. However, statements of belief can serve as a kind of evidence in an argument, and they often form the assumptions linking claims and evidence. (Ex. Capital punishment is legalized murder. [The writer would need to provide evidence to support this belief, would need to show how capital punishment relates to murder.])

Readers must be appealed to through a combination of three modes of persuasion:

Logos: appeals to the reader's mind and capacity to reason logically between evidence and claims

Pathos: appeals to the reader's imagination and beliefs and feelings

Ethos: ethical appeal--the sense the writer gives of being a competent, fair, trustworthy person

Deciding what kind of questions is at issue

Some experts consider these 6 categories to be progressively inclusive because claims in one category typically depend upon claims in the category preceding it.

1. **Fact:** Does X exist? Did X occur?
2. **Definition:** What kind of thing is this? What category of things does it fit? What does the category label mean? (**Clear and defined terms** are essential, especially highly abstract words such as *justice*, *equality*, *quality*, and *maturity*. Definitions may take an entire paragraph or more.)
3. **Cause or Consequence:** What caused this thing? What will happen because of it?
4. **Interpretation:** What does this mean? What is it like that we already understand?
5. **Value:** Is this thing good or bad?
6. **Policy and Procedures:** What should be done? How should it be done? Who has the authority to do it?