The Argumentative Essay

What action should be taken? Ideas or concepts altered? How valid is the position? the support? Where are the flaws in the logic? What are the hidden assumptions?

_Rhetoric is "the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion."
--Aristotle

_Rhetoric is the application of reason to imagination "for the better moving of the will."
--Frances Bacon

Purpose and Written Description

Academic argumentation—the art and craft of persuasion—has a long history dating back to the Greeks. It is a formal application of various components which—if successful—ultimately lead to the reader being persuaded to change a point of view or take a specific action.

Academic argumentation is not “personal”–that is, it is not an exchange of heated, undefined, angry emotions, but rather a focused, sometimes passionate, exchange of intellectual ideas oriented toward a specific goal.

A Well-Defined Issue

The academic argumentation paper presents a purpose to the reader that is persuasive in nature. It may ask the reader to agree with a value judgment, propose a specific action and/or advance an opinion that is quite different than held by most people.

A Clear Position

The writer must examine and know the real reasons for her or his views on a subject before beginning to write.

The student writer must realize that argumentation poses a different motivation than exposition. Therefore, the purpose, selection of details, and arrangement of ideas will exhibit distinct differences when contrasted to the informative approach. In addition, she or he must know the opposing views on the subject and be prepared to answer these objections.

The main job of a student writer is to write a concise and arguable thesis sentence. This is the heart of the argumentation paper; it is the main proposition.
A Convincing Argument

Emotionalism in an academic paper is suspect when it is:

1) simply used as a reason for the argument (for example, “I hate speed laws and they should all be changed” is an opinion not an argument, as it states only the writer’s personal preference without giving any logical reasons and support as to why the speed laws should be changed other than that the writer hates them.

2) used to twist an argument toward a point of view without giving each side of the argument a “fair” hearing. Moreover, emotionalism used in this way often is used to inflame emotions or “hit the hot button” of readers instead of examining issues from a logical standpoint (“If the government doesn’t change the speed laws, then road rage will be the only way drivers will be able to deal with their frustrations”).

3) used to hide or deform the facts of an argument (“Speed laws result in more deaths of children per year than any other type of state mandate”).

The purpose of academic argumentation is not to provide the reader with “the absolute truth” but to provide the reader with a precise, reasoned logical structure which will move the reader to agree with the writer’s views on a particular “position.” In academic arguments, the student writer will often be asked to write a valid argument which speaks to how well—not how true—the argument is constructed.

There are many resources, texts and even entire sets of course work devoted to the art and craft of argumentation. The purpose of this guidebook is to distill some of the crucial elements of various modes—in this case, argumentation—so as to direct the college student writer toward the essential components of a successful college-level essay.

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Sound Reasoning and Solid Evidence

Accuracy and fairness play an important role in sound argumentation. These aspects are not only morally correct, but they can be a means of persuasion. Writers who are able to refute opposing arguments in a fair manner and without hostility add strength to their case.

Though there are many names used for the various components of an academic argumentation paper, the essential elements of argumentation are as follows:

Claim + Support
A **claim** is the first part of an argument. It is essentially the part of the argument which states that something should or should not be done. The **support** is the part of the argument that offers reasons as to why a claim or a position is solid. The most difficult part of an argument is to locate the warrant or justification. This part of the argument is not stated but ties the claim to the support.

The student writer must develop sufficient evidence to support his or her claims. Some ways in which evidence can be developed are: factual information and established truths (for example, water always freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit, statistical findings from reliable authorities, opinions and statements from authorities, experience of others whose opinions are relevant to the topic and, on occasion, personal experience is permissible.

There is a prescribed way of structuring the argument paper for the most effective impact on the reader. In essence, the components of the structure are: clear, focused thesis (something is or is not the case), the reasons/evidence given for making the case, the reasons/evidence given by others *against* the case, the final conclusion (what action need to be taken). Essentially these structure are: ascending order, refutation-proof, con-pro or some combination of these.

Another way of looking at the structure of an argumentation paper is this:

**Introduction (Thesis=Claim + Support)**

**Warrant (Justification)**

**Main Opposing Views**

**Refute Opposing Views**

**Make The Case for the Thesis Argument**

**Conclude**

**Anticipation of the Reader’s Concerns**

One of the most significant components of argumentation is to pinpoint and then refute the flaws in logic from the opposing viewpoint. These flaws are called *fallacies*. When a student writer locates the weaknesses in the opposing viewpoint, she or he has found a way to form a rebuttal which ultimately leads the student writer to a stronger argument.
Essentially, flaws in academic papers fall into three broad categories: flaws in emotion, flaws in logic and flaws in ethics. There are many specific kinds of flaws, some of which are listed on the check sheet in this guide and in your text.

**Conclusion**

Conclude the essay by restating your position and making one final appeal to the reader for support or action.