



An Introduction to College Writing Tutorial I: Making an Argument

This handout is a companion to the first video tutorial in the Hixon Writing Center's "Introduction to College Writing" series. You can use this handout in a variety of ways: it can serve as a space to take additional notes while watching the video; it can help you refresh your memory of the video; or it can be used as a standalone resource because it closely replicates the video's logic and information. Like the rest of our "Introduction to College Writing" series, this resource will probably be most useful to writers who are new to the demands of college-level academic writing.

WHAT IS AN ARGUMENT?

An argument is a coherent series of statements that lead from a premise to a conclusion¹. A good argument should go beyond merely stating your opinion and should, instead, deploy sound logic and evidence to show your reader why your claim has merit and is more complete or accurate than competing arguments.

WHEN DO I NEED AN ARGUMENT?

Being able to make an argument is an essential skill across all academic disciplines because debate leads to the development of new knowledge. It is an essential aspects of composing genres such as:

- Essays
- Reports
- Proposals
- Research articles
- Reviews

Regardless of the context or the discipline, all arguments share a common goal: to convince readers that your ideas are reasonable, valid, and evidence-based.

HOW DO I DEVELOP AN ARGUMENT?

- **Step One:** Familiarize yourself with the topic. What do you already know about this topic? What do you still need to learn?
- **Step Two:** Look for patterns and themes in your evidence. Rather than starting with an argument, your argument should grow organically from your evidence. This is true whether your data are words in a poem or results from a spectrometer.
- **Step Three:** Draw a conclusion based on the most reasonable interpretation of the evidence.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF A THESIS?

- **What *is* a thesis?** In most argument-driven academic essays, the thesis is a statement that captures the essence of your argument in one or more sentences and gives your reader a roadmap for your paper.

¹ Note that in the field of philosophy, the terms "premise" and "conclusion" have very specific definitions. We use them here in their more general sense.

- **Where should I place my thesis?** Most of the time in humanistic writing, your reader will expect to find your thesis at the end of your introduction; the introduction may itself be very brief or quite extensive, depending upon the project. In some fields, it may be acceptable for the thesis to be presented in your conclusion, while in other fields it must appear in the introduction. Regardless of where the thesis is placed, its placement must be deliberate and logical.

WHAT MAKES FOR A STRONG ARGUMENT?

A strong argument is...

- **contestable:** Could someone disagree with you? If you cannot think of any counterarguments, then your argument is not debatable enough.
- **specific:** Can your argument be developed fully within the scope of the paper? Keep in mind that it's better to explore fewer topics in great depth than it is to provide a superficial exploration of several topics.
- **interpretive:** Does it offer to explain something? Strong arguments always delve beneath the surface of a question to ask—and respond to—the question, “What does this *mean*?” This requires moving beyond description and into analysis.

Example of a strong argument:

“While Jane Austen’s novels deal largely with marriage and love, these two topics are not central to character development. Austen instead uses marriage and relationships as a backdrop to her heroines’ self-discoveries, which almost always occur through some moment of embarrassment and shame.”

*This is an example of a **strong argument** because*

- (1) It is **contestable**, as not everyone will agree that moments of embarrassment and shame are the main motivators for character growth in Austen.
- (2) It is **specific** because the author specifically identifies the themes s/he is going to explore.
- (3) It is **interpretive**; while doing the course readings, this writer noticed that there was a correlation between moments of embarrassment and character development. The author then used this observation to explore what this correlation means.

Example of a weak argument:

“Jane Austen uses literary devices such as diction and tone to characterize her heroines throughout her novels.”

*This is an example of a **weak argument** because, instead of being interpretive and specific, it is generic and fails to convey much content to the reader. It is not contestable because all authors use literary devices like diction and tone; in other words, it is impossible to frame any kind of counterargument.*

Want to explore academic writing more? The HWC can help! Visit writing.caltech.edu/tutoring for more information about how to set up a meeting with a tutor.