



The Weissman Center for Leadership and the Liberal Arts
The Speaking, Arguing, and Writing Program
122 Porter Hall

Constructing an Argument

What is an argument? Why is it important in college essays?

“Argument” represents the different methods by which you convince the reader to accept your claim (i.e., thesis statement). An argument is your chance to draw your own conclusions and form your own opinions from readings and class discussions. A successful argument will influence the opinions or actions of others.

Four Steps to Formulating an Argument:

1. Find an interest in a broad subject area.
2. Narrow the interest to a plausible topic.
3. Question that topic from several points of view.
4. Define a rationale for your project.

Types of Verbal Support:

1. Explanations: detailed descriptions
2. Comparison/Contrast: similarities/differences
3. Examples: cases in point
4. Statistics: numbers used to prove trends
5. Expert Testimony: credible sources (reliable opinions, data)

Types of Reasoning:

1. **Deductive** reasoning claims that a conclusion necessarily follows from its premises or assertions. To challenge this type of argument, a reader must evaluate the premises. That is, a reader must draw conclusions based on the connections between the statements.

Example:

Lying is always wrong. (*general principle*)

Lying is knowingly telling someone what you know to be false.

You know eating candy is not good for your teeth.

Telling children that it is good for teeth is a lie.

Therefore, it is wrong to tell children that candy is good for their teeth.

2. **Inductive** reasoning does not prove the argument to be true; rather evidence is used to convince an audience that the argument is probable—a characteristic of the scientific method. To challenge this type of argument, a reader must evaluate the evidence. That is, a reader moves from specific examples to general conclusions.

Example:

MHC has just built a new science center.

Smith has recently built a new science center.

Middlebury has recently built a new science center.

MHC, Smith and Middlebury are all elite liberal-arts colleges.

Therefore, most elite liberal-arts colleges are building new science centers. (*inductive generalization*)

People spend money on what they value. (*assumed generalization*)

Therefore, most elite liberal-arts colleges value science education.

Contemporary Components of Argument (The Toulmin Model):

1. The **claim** is the main idea or point to your argument (i.e., thesis statement).
2. The **evidence/qualifier** is the reason people should believe your claim. It is the probability of the claim always being true.
3. The **warrant** is how or why the evidence supports the claim.
4. The **reservations** are certain conditions under which the claim would not be true.

Fallacies of Argument:

Arguments with conclusions that do not follow their premises are called fallacies. Fallacious arguments fall into three major strategies of rhetoric: fallacies of emotional argument (*pathos*), ethical argument (*ethos*), and logical argument (*logos*). Because these strategies deter civil debate—debate in which the public is able to negotiate political and personal differences with respect and integrity—you should avoid the fallacies in your writing.

For example, “bandwagon appeals” suggest that the audience is foolish to not “join the crowd” or a collective effort. “In-crowd appeals” inviting the audience to identify with an elite or a well-liked person, group, place, time, or activity as a type of flattery. “Ad Hominem” means to directly attack a person’s character or views, which suggests that anything this person might say is flawed. “Post Hoc” means to assume that A caused B because B happened after A. (For a complete list of fallacies in arguments, refer to the SAW handout entitled “Recognizing Unreliable/Unsound Arguments.”)

Examples of Fallacies:

- If the president of the U.S. thinks it’s right, then it is right.
- Poverty causes crime.
- All bad drivers have drinking or drug problems.
- What’s good for General Motors is good for the United States.
- You can’t be a good Democrat if you marry a Republican.
- The Great Depression began during the Hoover administration. Therefore, Hoover’s economic policies caused the Great Depression.

Is my Argument Good Enough?

- Is my claim **substantive**? Does my claim clarify something significant, reach a critical decision on an important issue, or move others to action?
- Is my claim **credible**? Do I offer enough reasons and warrants to support my claim?
- Is my claim **contestable**? Have I covered all my bases? Do I explain or at least state all the objections and oppositions to my thesis?

Source:

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Lunsford, Andrea, Ed. *The St. Martin’s Handbook*, 5th Ed. 2003: 235-300.

Lunsford, Andrea and John Ruskiewicz. “Fallacies of Argument.” *Everything’s an Argument*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s. 1999: 268-279.

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