



# How to Write an Argumentative Essay –

*A Student Guide for Academic Writing in  
University Transfer Courses*

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It was produced with help from:

“How to Write Philosophy” by Dr. Peter Horban, Simon Fraser University

*The Longman Academic Writing Series 4* by Alice Oshima and Ann Hogue

The George Brown College Tutoring and Learning Centre: <http://www.georgebrown.ca/tlc/>

“Ending the Essay: Conclusions” by Pat Bellanca, for *The Harvard College Writing Center*, 1998,  
<http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/ending-essay-conclusions>

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## ARGUMENT OR POSITION ESSAYS ARE DIFFERENT

An argumentative essay is not:

- ☒ A research-only presentation of facts
- ☒ An exercise in literary self-expression.
- ☒ A report of what various scholars have had to say on a particular topic.
- ☒ A presentation of the latest findings of tests or experiments
- ☒ A presentation of your personal feelings or impressions.

So what is an argumentative essay?

- ✓ A position paper or argumentative essay may involve research for facts to support your thesis, but it is not just a report of facts
- ✓ A position paper or argumentative paper is a reasoned defence of a thesis.

What does that mean?

- It means you have to take a stand on a particular question or issue
- It means that there must be a specific point that you are trying to convince the reader to accept
- And it means you must also provide the grounds, or reasons, or justification for accepting that point.
  - I.e.: you must argue in support of your position

## GETTING STARTED

There are six steps to writing a successful Argumentative Essay:

1. Break it down. What is this assignment asking you to do?
2. Research your topic
3. Take a position — what you will be arguing for/against – write a thesis statement.
4. Organize your thoughts into an outline
5. Begin writing
6. Review your draft for grammar, spelling and rationality before submitting it

Now that we've listed the Six Basic Steps for Writing an Argumentative Essay, let's take a look at each step in depth:

## STEP 1 – THE ASSIGNMENT: BREAKING IT DOWN

- Read the assignment carefully
- Separate out the individual questions in the assignment
- Write them down, leaving some space in between for you to add your notes
- Be sure you understand each of the questions in the assignment
  - If **ANYTHING** is unclear, ask your instructor to explain things.

## STEP 2 – RESEARCHING YOUR TOPIC

- Think about what you already know, feel, believe, about the subject you are writing
  - What do you NOT know about your topic?
- If your essay is based on assigned readings, make sure you complete all the reading
  - Make sure you understand the ideas, concepts, arguments or claims the author is presenting
  - If there are any questions, speak to your instructor
  - If this is a research paper, then make sure you use reliable resources
  - The librarian can guide you to journals, magazines, newspapers, and on-line data bases that are considered reliable
  - There are also books in the library that can help you (Booking an appointment with a librarian for research help can be very useful)
- **Wikipedia is NOT considered an acceptable academic source for your research**
  - Neither are *Yahoo Answers*, *Answers.com*, or other similar websites

## STEP 3 – TAKE A STAND/WRITE A THESIS STATEMENT

There are 3 important things to remember about writing an argumentative essay:

**1. Technically, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers**

- You are being asked what do **YOU** think
  - ***So, no particular answer is going to guarantee you a good mark***
- There are topics and positions that are considered outside the bounds of acceptable Canadian academic standards
  - You may not, for example, argue for a position in favour of racial, ethnic, or religious discrimination.

**2. There are only well-written or poorly written answers**

- ***Strive to write a well-written answer***

**3. Every successful Argument Essay has a clearly articulated THESIS STATEMENT.**

**WHAT'S A THESIS STATEMENT?**

- Before you write you should be able to state in a single short sentence exactly what you want to prove.
- This statement of what your paper is about is your THESIS statement.
- You need more than a “rough idea”
- If you aren't clear about your position, your audience won't understand your argument.
- A thesis statement should be:
  - **Direct (focussed):** It should tell the reader *exactly* what you are setting out to prove.
  - **Limited in scope:** You should be able to make your case within the limits of your paper.
  - **Arguable:** Readers should be able to disagree with you
  - **Supportable:** There should be evidence to support your claims

**STEP 4 – ORGANISE YOUR IDEAS/RESEARCH INTO AN OUTLINE**

- Think about what you know, feel, believe, about the subject you are writing
- Group similar ideas together into a point form outline
- Remember to ***“Cite as you Write”***
  - Add your sources into your outline *as you write*
  - This helps you to avoid plagiarism
- **Note:** in your outline, you should include the facts you have gleaned from your research as well as citations.
- **DON'T SKIP THE OUTLINING STEP!**
  - Essay outlines help you to organise your ideas into a logical sequence and to keep similar ideas together
  - This is an essential step to producing an essay that is cohesive and makes sense

**There are two ways of organizing your argumentative essay:**

- Block pattern or
- Point-by point pattern.

On the next pages are rough ideas of what your outline will look like when organized into a block pattern and a point-by-point pattern

- The left side describes what should be in each section of your outline
- The right side is an example of what a possible outline could look like

## BLOCK PATTERN

<p><b>Introduction:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some background information to introduce the topic</li> <li><b>Thesis statement</b> that clearly articulates what you will be writing about in this paper and the position you will be taking.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Section 1 Sample Introduction:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Canada wasn't officially a country when the war happened</li> <li><b>Thesis:</b> This war brought Aboriginals and French and English settlers together to fight for a common cause, thereby defining what kind of country Canada would become.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Section 2: Possible Objections</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider what someone might say in response to your argument — someone who doesn't hold the same point of view</li> <li>Focus on ONE or TWO objections only, not all possible objections to your position.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Section 2: Sample Possible Objections</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some might argue this was not really a Canadian battle because "Canada" didn't technically exist then</li> <li>You could argue this was really just another battle between the British Empire and their former American colonies.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Section 3: Response to Objections/Supporting Arguments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Don't just dismiss the criticism/objection out of hand</li> <li>Take the objection seriously, but think why your position is more convincing.</li> <li>Refer back to your thesis statement as you write</li> <li>What position are you taking?</li> <li>Why do you feel your position is correct?</li> <li>What reasons can you offer your readers to agree with you?</li> <li>Develop your ideas using research and your own critical thinking skills to convince readers to accept your position.</li> <li>This will take more than 1 body paragraph</li> <li>This is the bulk of your essay</li> </ul>	<p><b>Section 3: Sample Response and Supporting Arguments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The fact that the territories weren't annexed to the U.S. meant that Canada <i>could</i> become a country in 1867</li> <li>The battle brought together Aboriginals, French and English Settlers who did not want to become part of the U.S.</li> <li>Resolved issues left over from American War for Independence</li> <li>Attempted annexation of Canadian territories failed</li> <li>French &amp; British Settlers &amp; Canadian Aboriginals fought as allies to stop American conquest</li> <li>Curtailed American expansion in N.A.</li> <li>Affected/determined the cultural and linguistic development of the Canadian colonies – distinct from American</li> </ul>
<p><b>Section 4: Conclusion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wrap up your discussion by linking your thesis statement, to your position, and to the objection(s) you have discussed.</li> <li>Don't simply summarise your paper</li> <li>Your conclusion and your thesis statement should agree with each other</li> <li>See "Strategies for Effective Conclusions" on page 7.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Section 4: Sample Conclusion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>War of 1812 was fought on several fronts</li> <li>Resulted in no changes in territory, ultimately</li> <li>Shaped the future of Canada</li> <li>Our laws and customs fashioned on British and French models rather than American models, giving us a unique character</li> <li>French and English considered founding nations and, therefore, continue to be official languages</li> </ul>

## POINT-BY-POINT PATTERN

<p><b>Introduction:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Some background information to introduce the topic</li> <li>▪ Thesis statement that clearly articulates what you will be writing about in this paper and the position you will be taking.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Section 1: Sample Introduction</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Most countries have a legal drinking age of 18. In the US, it is 21. But in many European countries, it is 16.</li> <li>▪ <b>Thesis:</b> Alcoholic tolerance, responsibility and attitude to alcohol are not related to age; by lowering the drinking age to 16, teenagers will be able to learn to drink responsibly and have the right attitude about alcohol.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Section 2: Sample Argument</b></p>
<p><b>Section 2: Opposing Point 1+ Rebuttal</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Consider what someone who doesn't hold the same point of view might say and begin with their argument</li> <li>▪ Take the objection seriously, but think what reasons can you offer to convince the reader your position is stronger?</li> <li>▪ Support your argument with research</li> </ul>	<p><b>Opposing Point:</b> Drinking causes serious health issues in teenagers as their brains and bodies are still developing</p> <p><b>Rebuttal:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Alcohol tolerance less dependent on age than on physical attributes such as height, weight and gender                         <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ E.g.: 16-year-old male, 6'4" tall will tolerate a higher alcohol level than a 25-year-old 5'1" female (Student Affairs, Stanford University).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Section 3: Opposing Point 2+ Rebuttal</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Begin with the other side's second argument</li> <li>▪ Respond with your own counterargument, supported by research</li> </ul>	<p><b>Section 3: Sample Argument</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Opposing Point:</b> Teenagers are not mature enough to drink responsibly</li> <li>▪ <b>Rebuttal:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Age does not equal maturity.</li> <li>▪ Lowering the drinking age allows parents to teach teens to drink responsibly by example in controlled environment (e.g. restaurant)</li> <li>▪ Drinking no longer treated as a "Rite of Passage"; teens will be more focused on their responsibilities</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><b>Section 4: Sample Argument</b></p>
<p><b>Section 4: Opposing Point 3+ Rebuttal</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Begin with the other side's second argument</li> <li>▪ Respond with your own counterargument, supported by research</li> </ul>	<p><b>Opposing Point:</b> Teenagers are more likely to binge drink and demonstrate alcohol-associated behaviours such as violence and drunk driving</p> <p><b>Rebuttal:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Underage students can always obtain alcohol from older friends.</li> <li>▪ Removing the "forbidden fruit" effect reduces binge drinking.</li> <li>▪ Young people from cultures that don't treat drinking as a poison or 'magic potion', [e.g. Chinese, Italians and Greeks] have fewer drinking problems (Prof. Ruth C. Engs, Indiana University).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Section 5: Conclusion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Wrap up your discussion by linking your thesis statement, to your position and the objections you have discussed.</li> <li>▪ Your conclusion and your thesis statement should agree with each other</li> <li>▪ See "Strategies for Effective Conclusions" on page 7.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Section 5: Sample Conclusion</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ By lowering the legal drinking age, teens will not associate alcohol with something that is forbidden and tempting.</li> <li>▪ Drinking can be a lesson in responsibility and teens will be less likely to binge drink.</li> </ul>	

## STEP 5 – WRITE YOUR ESSAY

- You have an outline of your essay and you have a thesis statement — your organizing idea
  - Your next job is to convince your readers that your thesis is correct by presenting arguments and evidence in support of your thesis statement.
- Look at your outline
  - Note that you have organized your thoughts into **SECTIONS**, not paragraphs
  - A section, aside from your introduction, may have 1 or more paragraphs
    - Each paragraph will have similar ideas grouped together to help build your overall argument
    - When you begin to discuss a new idea, that is usually a clue to start a new paragraph
- Make sure that you refer back to your thesis so you stay on topic
- **Remember to “CITE AS YOU WRITE”**
  - Include citations in your outline so you don’t end up with an academic alert for plagiarism.
- Make sure your thesis statement and conclusion agree
  - If they don’t, you may need to revise something in your essay
    - If there aren’t any errors in logic then it’s okay to ***change your thesis statement!***

### Strategies for Writing Effective Conclusions

The information in this section is based on “Ending the Essay: Conclusions”, written by Pat Bellanca for the *Harvard College Writing Center* website: <http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/ending-essay-conclusions>

#### Conclusions Matter!

- Your conclusion is your last chance to persuade your readers to accept your point of view, to impress yourself upon them as a writer and thinker.
  - Your conclusion shapes the overall impression your readers will have about your essay – the impression that stays with them.
- At the end of the essay, your readers should feel that your discussion is complete while also leaving them with the sense there are further possibilities about your topic, its larger meaning, its implications.
  - **For example**, an essay on gun laws should inspire your readers to think about the implications of changing or not changing the laws where they live.
  - An essay about a human rights issue should spark broader thinking on other human rights issues.
- In short, your concluding paragraph should close **YOUR** discussion without entirely closing off further discussion about the topic.

### To accomplish this, consider the following:

- **One option:** link your final paragraph to the first, perhaps by repeating a significant word or phrase you used at the beginning.
  - Consider using a quotation from or reference to a primary or secondary source
    - Select one that amplifies your main point or puts it in a different perspective.
      - **For example,** a quote from the novel, poem, or historical figure you are writing about can add some texture and focus to your discussion.
  - A quote from a scholar (secondary source) may similarly be helpful.
    - **A word of caution:** this is **YOUR** essay, so make sure YOU have the final word.
- **Another option:** conclude by placing your discussion into a different or larger context.
  - **Example:** You could conclude an essay on the impact of the industrial revolution on workers by linking it to a contemporary concern like increased robotization displacing workers in modern car factories.
- **Another strategy:** end your essay by redefining one of the key terms of your argument.
  - **Example:** You could begin an essay that argues against Marx's treatment of the conflict between wage labour and capital with his claim that the "capitalist economy is . . . a gigantic enterprise of dehumanization".
    - You could then conclude with the notion that Marx himself is guilty of dehumanizing workers because his theory considers them from a solely economic perspective.
- **Another alternative:** wrap up by assessing the implications of your argument, analysis, or discussion. What does your argument imply, or involve, or suggest?
  - **Example:** an essay on multiculturalism might open with the thesis that argues that the 'cultural mosaic' model allows individuals and cultural groups greater autonomy in deciding their level of integration into Canadian society.
    - The conclusion might indicate that this autonomy also poses greater challenges to Canada when native mores are at odds with Canadian mainstream values.

### Closing Sentences:

Instructors will often ask you to have a "concluding idea" or "final thought" that leaves readers with something to think about. This can sometimes be a bit of a challenge, but consider one or more of the following writing techniques:

- Consider writing a final sentence that is composed mainly of one-syllable words.
  - Simple language can have a lasting impact by giving your conclusion an understated sense of drama.
- Write a concluding sentence that is compound or parallel in structure.
  - These kinds of sentences can establish a "just right" sense of balance or order to a complex discussion.
    - It will leave the readers with an impression that your essay is balanced and therefore fair and rational.
      - *This is a great impression to leave with your readers!*

## STEP 6 – PROOFREAD YOUR ESSAY

- Proofread more than once.
- Run Grammar-Check, (MS Word) or Proofreader (Mac Pages)
  - These are useful tools, but they are not “bullet-proof”
- Work with a writing specialist at the Writing and Learning Centre

### TIPS FOR BETTER WRITING

#### **Avoid Lengthy Introductions.**

- Be brief and get to your thesis statement.
- Provide relevant details:
  - Don't waste your readers' time by telling them your topic is important or that it has interested people for hundreds of years
- Clearly explain what your essay is about

#### **Use Appropriate Writing Style**

- Good academic writing is usually simple, dignified and not conversational.
- It is clear, free of grammatical errors
- Avoid unnecessary overly descriptive or flowery language such as:
  - Describing people as “famous” or “important” or “well-known”
  - Phrases like “since the dawn of time”, or “for thousands of years”
  - Clichés and slang expressions
- Choose words that best explain your position, not because they are “big” or sound “impressive” or “intelligent” or “academic”

#### **Use An English Dictionary!!!**

- This will help you select appropriate words
  - It will also build your English writing and comprehensions skills
- ***Electronic translators are poor tools for academic writing.***
  - They are great for helping tourists find things, but they do not translate technical, academic material accurately.

#### **Stay Focussed On Your Thesis**

- As you are writing, go back to your thesis and ask yourself: How clearly and effectively am I defending my thesis?

#### ***Always cite your sources***

- Use citation and writing style designated by your instructor (MLA, APA, or Chicago Style) for citations and bibliographies
  - ***Do NOT use citation generation apps*** in Microsoft Word or online sites – they are almost always wrong.

- You must cite:
  - Direct quotes (in “quotation marks”)
  - Summaries and paraphrases of the ideas of another writer
  - General ideas, concepts or a particular line of argument, even if you modify it

## Common Mistakes to Avoid

### Not Enough Support

- **Don't overestimate the strength of your position.**
  - Just because you are convinced that your thesis is true, it does not mean everyone else is.
- The best way to formulate a rationally convincing argument is to assume that your reader is
  - Intelligent and can understand your point of view,
  - But disagrees with you
- **Anticipate objections.**
  - Assume your reader is asking “Why should I accept that?”
  - Also assume that some readers will say “I don't accept that”.



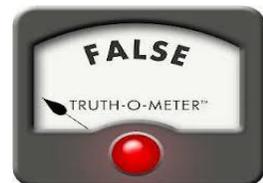
### Fence sitting:

- Do not present a number of different positions in your paper and then conclude by saying that you are not qualified to settle the matter.
  - Or that you are undecided
- Do not close by saying that philosophers have been divided over this issue for centuries and that cannot resolve the issue in a short essay
  - You are expected to take a clear stand based on an evaluation of the argument(s) presented.
  - **That is what you are being graded on**



### Accusations of Falsehood

- An argument is **NOT** false because you disagree with it
- You have to demonstrate **how** the argument is false
- It's not just a matter of opinion but **demonstrating an error in logic**



## Everything-But-The-Kitchen-Sink:

- Mentioning virtually every argument you have come across in support of your position
- The “everything-but-the-kitchen-sink” approach generally results in weak papers because:
  - Your readers find it hard to keep track of so many different arguments
  - The arguments that stand out are the very best ones and the very worst ones.
  - Including weaker arguments gives the impression that you are unable to tell the difference between weak and strong arguments.
  - Including many different arguments results in spreading yourself too thinly.
  - This makes your paper seem unfocused
  - It also gives the impression that you are not so certain about your own position
- Instead, cover one or two points in greater depth rather than a broad range of arguments superficially.



## Name Calling

- Just because you disagree with someone’s position, doesn’t mean that person is an idiot or wrong.
- Disagreement is okay, but it **must be respectful**.
  - You can’t just claim that “Kant is an idiot” or that “Vegetarianism is crazy”
  - Tell your readers why you think Kant’s moral reasoning is weak or why you think Vegetarianism won’t work as an alternative to other types of diets



## Begging the Question

- This expression gets used a lot in common speech, but it is seldom used correctly.
- Begging the question means engaging in what is known as “circular reasoning” or assuming the truth of the conclusion in the premises of the argument.
- **The graphic below is a classic example of Question-Begging:**
  - The Bible is the word of God
    - How do you know that?
  - Because the Bible tells us so
    - Why should I believe the Bible?

- The Bible is infallible
  - How do I know that?
- Because .... “The Bible is the word of God”
- Question begging assumes the validity of your conclusion in one of the premises.
  - In this example, claiming that the Bible is infallible because it contains the word of God assumes God’s authorship, something which has not been proven.
    - ***That’s the circle in the reasoning; the question-begging***



## Arguing By Citation:

- Inexperienced writers often rely too heavily on quotations and paraphrases.
- This is commonly referred to as “arguing by citation.”
- Keep direct quotes to a minimum
  - Use quotes in those places where it is essential to establish the author’s exact selection of words.
- Paraphrasing should also be kept to a minimum.
  - After all, it is **your** paper – it is **your arguments** that matter.
  - Keep that in mind, especially when your essay topic requires you to critically assess someone else's views.

## Resources to Help You

If you are still having trouble with your essay:

1. Speak to your instructor during office hours if the assignment is unclear to you
2. Make an appointment with a writing instructor at the Writing & Learning Centre.  
[www.alexander.mywconline.com](http://www.alexander.mywconline.com)
3. Citation Style Guides: <http://alexandercollege.ca/writing-and-learning-centre/english-and-humanities/academic-writing-styles/>
  - You will also find a schedule for campus-wide citation workshops
4. “Everything Essays” Web resources from the Writing & Learning Centre:  
<http://alexandercollege.ca/writing-and-learning-centre/english-and-humanities/everything-essays/>
  - **Pdf writeable outline worksheets:** designed for different types of essays.
  - **Annotated Bibliography:** Writing Guide and Pdf writeable worksheet.
  - **Thesis Statement:** Writing Guide and practice worksheet