

HOW TO WRITE AN ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY



Alexander College
WRITING AND LEARNING CENTRE

Argumentative Essay: What it is

An argumentative essay is a reasoned defense of a thesis. You may need to conduct research to support your thesis. You have to **take a position** and provide **reasons for the validity of your position**.

Argumentative Essay: What it is Not

An argumentative essay is **NOT** a report of facts, what various scholars have said about a particular topic, or a presentation of the latest findings of experiments. It is also **NOT** a presentation of your personal feelings or impressions.

The Six Steps to Writing a Successful Argumentative Essay

1. Break it down: determine what the assignment is asking you to do
2. Research your topic: look for reliable sources to use in your paper
3. Take a position and write a thesis statement: decide what you will be arguing for/against
4. Organize your thoughts into an outline: group similar ideas together and keep track of your sources
5. Begin writing: get your thoughts down on paper
6. Proofread your essay: review your draft for grammar and spelling mistakes before submitting it

Now that we've listed the six steps for writing a successful argumentative essay, let's take a look at each step in depth

The Six Steps to Writing a Successful Argumentative Essay

Step 1 – Break it Down

- Read the assignment instructions carefully
- Separate out the different requirements of the assignment
- Write down the questions, leaving space in between for you to add your own notes
- Ask your professor or the Writing and Learning Centre for clarification if anything is unclear before progressing to the next steps

Step 2 – Research your Topic

- If you are writing a research paper, make sure you use reliable academic sources
 - Make sure you understand the ideas, concepts, arguments, or claims that your sources are presenting
 - Verify with instructions if your sources need to be peer reviewed or not
 - The librarians at Alexander College can help you search for journal articles, newspapers, and online databases that you can reference in your paper

Step 3 – Take a Stand/Write a Thesis Statement

- There are 2 important points to remember about writing an argumentative essay:
 - Technically, there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers
 - 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
 - For example: You may not argue for a position in favour of racial, ethnic, or religious discrimination

Step 3 continued on the next page

The Six Steps to Writing a Successful Argumentative Essay

Step 3 – Take a Stand/Write a Thesis Statement Continued

- Before you start writing, you should be able to state in a single sentence exactly what you want to argue in your essay
 - If you aren't clear about your position, your audience won't be convinced by your essay
- A thesis statement should be:
 - Focused: 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 – Organize your Ideas/Research into an Outline

- Don't skip the outlining step!
 - Essay outlines help you organize your ideas into a logical sequence and keep similar ideas together
 - Remember to add your sources into your outline as you write; this helps you avoid plagiarism
- There are two ways of organizing your argumentative essay:
 - Point-by-point pattern
 - Block pattern

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

Essay Outline: Point-by-Point Pattern and Sample

Section 1: Introduction

- Some background information to introduce the topic
- Thesis statement that clearly articulates what you will be writing about and the position you will be taking

Section 2: Opposing Point 1+ Rebuttal

- Consider what someone who doesn't hold the same point of view might say and begin with their argument
- Take the objection seriously, but think what reasons you can offer to convince the reader your position is stronger?
- Support your argument with research

Section 3: Opposing Point 2+ Rebuttal

- Begin with the other side's second argument
- Respond with your own counterargument, supported by research

Section 4: Opposing Point 3+ Rebuttal

- Begin with the other side's third argument
- Respond with your own counterargument, supported by research

Section 5: Conclusion

- Wrap up your discussion by linking your thesis statement to your position and the objections you have discussed.
- Your conclusion and your thesis statement should agree with each other

Section 1: Sample Introduction

- Most countries have a legal drinking age of 18. In the US, it is 21.
- Thesis: By lowering the drinking age to 18, teenagers will be able to learn to drink responsibly and have the right attitude about alcohol.

Section 2: Sample Opposing Point 1+ Rebuttal

- Drinking causes serious health issues in teenagers as their brains and bodies are still developing.
- Rebuttal: Alcohol tolerance is less dependent on age than on physical attributes such as height, weight and gender.
- Ex: A 16-year-old male that is 6'4" tall will tolerate a higher alcohol level than a 25-year-old 5'1" female (Student Affairs, Stanford University).

Section 3: Sample Opposing Point 2+ Rebuttal

- Teenagers are not mature enough to drink responsibly.
- Rebuttal: Lowering the drinking age allows parents to teach teens to drink responsibly by example in controlled environments.
- Drinking no longer treated as a "Rite of Passage"; teens will be more focused on their responsibilities.

Section 4: Sample Opposing Point 3+ Rebuttal

- Teenagers are more likely to binge drink and demonstrate alcohol-associated behaviours such as violence and drunk driving.
- Rebuttal: Underage students can always obtain alcohol from older friends.
- Young people from cultures that don't treat drinking as a poison or 'magic potion', have fewer drinking problems (Prof. Ruth C. Engs, Indiana University).

Section 5: Sample Conclusion

- By lowering the legal drinking age, teens will not associate alcohol with something that is forbidden and tempting.
- Drinking can be a lesson in responsibility and teens will be less likely to binge drink.

Essay Outline: Block Pattern and Sample

Section 1: Introduction

- Some background information to introduce the topic
- Thesis statement that clearly articulates what you will be writing about and the position you will be taking

Section 2: Possible Objections

- Consider what someone might say in response to your argument—someone who doesn't hold the same point of view
- Focus on ONE or TWO objections only, not all possible objections to your position

Section 3: Response to Objections/Supporting Arguments

- Take the objection seriously, but think why your position is more convincing
- Refer back to your thesis statement as you write
 - What position are you taking?
 - Why do you feel your position is correct?
 - What reasons can you offer your readers to agree with you?
- Develop your ideas using research and your own critical thinking skills to convince readers to accept your position
- This will take more than 1 body paragraph
 - This is the bulk of your essay

Section 4: Conclusion

- Wrap up your discussion by linking your thesis statement, to your position, and to the objection(s) you have discussed
- Don't simply summarize your paper
- Your conclusion and your thesis statement should agree with each other

Section 1: Sample Introduction

- Canada wasn't officially a country when the war of 1812 happened.
- Thesis: The war of 1812 brought Indigenous peoples and French and English settlers together to fight for a common cause, thereby defining what kind of country Canada would become.

Section 2: Sample Possible Objections

- Some might argue this was not a Canadian battle because "Canada" didn't technically exist then.
- You could argue this was really just another battle between the British Empire and their former American colonies.

Section 3: Sample Response to Objections/Supporting Arguments

- The fact that the territories weren't annexed to the U.S. meant that Canada could become a country in 1867.
- The battle brought together Indigenous peoples and French and English settlers who did not want to become part of the U.S.
- The attempted annexation of Canadian territories was a failure.
 - Curtailed American expansion in North America
- Affected/determined the cultural and linguistic development of the Canadian colonies

Section 4: Sample Conclusion

- The War of 1812 was fought on several fronts.
 - Resulted in no changes in territory, ultimately
- Canadian laws and customs were fashioned on British and French models rather than American models, giving the country a unique character.

The Six Steps to Writing a Successful Argumentative Essay

Step 5 – Write Your Essay

- You have an outline of your essay and a thesis statement. Your next task is to convince your readers that your thesis is valid by presenting evidence in support of your thesis statement.
- Take a 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 you refer back to your thesis so you stay on topic
 - Also remember to “cite as you write”
- Check to see if your thesis statement and conclusion agree
 - If they don't, you may need to revise something in your essay

Step 6 – Proofread Your Essay

- Proofread more than once
 - Run Grammar Check (MS Word) or Proofreader (Mac Pages)
 - These are useful tools, but they cannot catch every single error

Common Mistakes to Avoid in Argumentative Essays

1. Not enough support
2. Fence sitting
3. Accusations of falsehood
4. Everything-but-the-kitchen sink
5. Name calling
6. Circular reasoning
7. Arguing by citation

Mistake 1 – 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 shares your belief
- The best way to formulate a convincing argument is to assume that your reader is intelligent and can understand your point of view, but disagrees with you
 - Assume your reader is asking “Why should I accept that?” and that some readers will say “I don't accept that”

Mistake 2 – 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
 - You are expected to take a clear position based on an evaluation of the argument(s) presented

Mistake 3 – Accusations of Falsehood

- An argument is NOT false because you disagree with it
 - You have to show readers how the argument is false. In other words, it's not just a matter of opinion but demonstrating an error in logic

Mistake 4 – Everything but the Kitchen Sink

- The “everything-but-the-kitchen-sink” approach refers to including every argument you have come across in support of your position
 - This approach generally results in weak papers because your readers will find it hard to keep track of so many arguments
- Including weaker arguments gives the impression that you are unable to tell the difference between weak and strong arguments
- Including many different arguments can also result in spreading yourself too thinly
 - Try to cover one or two points in depth rather than a broad range of arguments superficially

Common Mistakes to Avoid in Argumentative Essays

Mistake 5 – Name Calling

- You can disagree with someone’s position, but you must be respectful
 - You can’t just claim that “Kant is an idiot” or that “Vegetarianism is stupid”
 - Instead, inform 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

Mistake 6 – Circular Reasoning

- Circular reasoning involves assuming the truth of the conclusion in the premises of the argument
 - For example: The Bible is the word of God
 - How do you know that?
 - For example: Because the Bible tells us so
 - Why should I believe the Bible?

Mistake 7 – 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 places where it is essential to relay the author’s exact selection of words
- Paraphrasing should also be kept to a minimum
 - Remember it is YOUR arguments that matter