

# 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

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## 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