Writing the Argumentative Essay

What a dull world this would be if we all had the same opinions and beliefs about everything. Part of the interest and excitement we generate in our daily lives comes from the preferences and the debate we have with ourselves and others when we make a choice. We sometimes do not know whether the choice is the right one because we never have the opportunity to go back to try the other path, a dilemma that Kierkegaard calls the "pathos of choice." However, once we have made a choice, we can direct our energies to accomplishing our purpose. Our enthusiasm is accented when other people have also made a similar choice and then work with us toward a common goal, and our sense of accomplishment is further heightened if we have chosen the goal and persuaded others to work toward it with us. To encourage them to become involved, we have to help them understand how we see the goal and why it is worthwhile. We have to analyze it, break it down into understandable, related parts that others can examine and evaluate. If you wish to make such a presentation, first, give your readers background about the issue; second, offer a proposition (a thesis) that gives your position on the issue; third, use persuasive arguments to win your audience; fourth, give specific information about facts and valid judgments to support the proposition; and then arrive at a conclusion based on the evidence you have provided. This procedure is the basis of preparing argumentative essays. To write them effectively, you should know as much as possible about your audience and about the ways to present your arguments logically and convincingly.

KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE

To present the right kind of argument, you need to know your audience. For example, if you maintain that an unmarried man and woman should be free to live together, you might expect opposition from people over fifty and support from younger people. But you might discover that some older people could be won to your side by examples of couples who depend on Social Security and other benefits that would be reduced if they marry. Arguing that those couples should not be condemned for living together without a marriage license might be effective with an older audience, but it would be unnecessary with a younger one. Therefore, knowing as much as you can about your audience helps you prepare effective arguments.

Choosing a Subject

To begin your thinking about an argumentative subject, write a general statement:

Aerosol cans containing fluorocarbons should be banned.

Compare that statement with this one:

> **Badwater, a place 279.6 feet below sea level in Death Valley, is the lowest point in North America.**

The first sentence expresses an opinion. It invites argument. You are saying in effect, "I believe that . . .," "I maintain that . . .," or "I am convinced that aerosol cans containing fluorocarbons should be banned." However, you do not have to write "I believe" or "I maintain" because whatever opinion you write represents your opinion. Readers recognize you as the author of that opinion, and they can question what you say. Readers can ask why the aerosol cans should be banned. They can ask for proof. They can dispute the evidence given.

The sentence can be used as a thesis statement or a proposition because the subject tells what the sentence is about, and the predicate gives focus to the topic and limits the discussion to supporting details that give the reasons why aerosol cans containing fluorocarbons should be banned.

Subject	Aerosol cans containing fluorocarbons
Predicate	should be banned.

The second sentence, on the other hand, is not likely to be disputed unless very recent investigation has disclosed another area in the United States that is farther below sea level than Badwater, and someone wants proof that another place is lower than Badwater. In other words, the first statement arouses controversy, but the second one probably does not: the predicate in the second sentence does not lend itself to further development. It simply states a fact: . . . *is the lowest point in North America.*

Both statements are conclusions. They are based on evidence gathered as a result of investigation. The first one is probably based on research done on fluorocarbons and their effect on the ozone layer, and the second one is probably based on geological exploration. The first one is more likely to be debated than the second one because several researchers could gather different kinds of data, one researcher may not be as reliable as another, or the conclusions arrived at may not have been proved. The second statement, however, could very likely be proved true repeatedly unless a shift in the earth's surface brought about a change.

The first statement is argumentative because people respond to it subjectively (from their own point of view) and emotionally. If they like the convenience of aerosol cans, they may try to avoid admitting that the fluorocarbons may be harmful; industry may resist making a change because of increased costs. The second statement, on the other hand, will probably not arouse controversy among the majority of the people. They accept it objectively (in relation to the external world) as a proved fact. In choosing a subject for argumentation, then, you can see that you must have one that is debatable so that you have several points to discuss.

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Simply choosing a controversial subject, however, does not guarantee an argumentative paper. To write successfully and convincingly about an issue, you should be well informed about the subject and able to include substantial evidence to support your beliefs. In addition, you should be open-minded so that you can examine all aspects of the issue before you begin writing. In fact, you should try to be as objective as possible by putting aside your own feelings temporarily to examine both sides of the issue. If you can see only your own side, you eliminate all possibility for discussion. In addition, you keep yourself from learning because you refuse to consider any other possibility. However, if you acknowledge the opposition and show that you understand both sides of the issue, you will appear to be broad-minded and reasonable. You will be indicating that you are concerned about the other person's beliefs and willing to discuss the issue. Your readers, then, will feel that they want to understand your point of view and will take the time to read your essay.

You may support your conclusion inductively with examples, statistics, cause-effect, or analogy, and you may also support it deductively by testing your evidence with a proved conclusion in a variety of ways, all of which will be explained later in this unit.

EXERCISE

Write a conclusion (a general statement), expressing your opinion about each of the following subjects. If you feel you do not know enough about a subject to express an opinion, read articles, or substitute a subject of your own for each of the three subjects given.

1. No-fault insurance

2. Equal Rights Amendment

3. Nuclear energy

Show these to your instructor before you go on with the next part of the lesson.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE OPPOSITION

After you have written a general statement expressing your opinion, think about how other people may react to it. You should be aware that some people become very threatened by ideas that may be different from what they believe. In effect, a new idea may attack their pattern of beliefs, which they have put together over a period of time in order to cope with life, and thus it may threaten their security. As a result, you have to acknowledge and respect their beliefs and then offer adequate evidence to support your ideas in a diplomatic way. If you simply attack, they probably will close their minds to anything you may say.

To show your readers that you understand the opposing point of view, discuss it briefly at the beginning of your essay and then devote the largest part of your paper to evidence that supports the points you want to make. In some cases, you may give several points made by the opposition and give your side in each case. Help yourself to get an idea of the scope of both sides by writing statements that show both sides of an argument like those given below:

Hand guns should be outlawed.	Every person has the right to bear arms.
Food additives are needed to preserve food.	Food additives are hazardous to health.
Police radar helps save motorists' lives.	Police radar sets a speed trap for motorists.
Laws protect the rights of each person.	An overabundance of law restricts a person's freedom.

Then determine which side you support, and make that your ***pro*** argument. The one that you oppose becomes the *con* side. The next step is to jot as many ideas as you can about each side of the argument. In some cases you will have more for your pro side, and in other cases you may be able to match each point with an opposing view. If you find that you do not have specific information, read books and magazines, and talk with people who may have special knowledge about the subject. Until you take the time to jot notes, you will not know whether you will be able to develop your subject adequately for an essay. Here are statements about whether motorcyclists should wear protective helmets.

Motorcyclists should be required to wear safety helmets to protect them from serious head injuries.

"Death rates per 10,000 registered motorcycles are double the rates of other vehicles, with more than 80 percent of reported motorcycle accidents resulting in injury or death against a comparable 10 percent for cars." (Sylvia Porter)

Helmets are unnecessary and inadequate for motorcyclists, and they may even create hazards because they limit the rider's vision and may hamper hearing.

Helmets protect only a small part of the rider's body.

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Helmets protect only a small part of the rider's body.

Motorcycles, lacking the metal shell of automobiles, give riders almost no protection.

Riders also need bright-colored clothing, heavy enough to protect arms and legs, and shatterproof face shields attached to helmets.

Much more important is emphasizing defensive driving--being constantly aware of cars changing directions, riding to the left side of traffic lanes to avoid oil in the center of the lane, being cautious in bad weather, staying in one lane at a safe distance from cars.

Skilled cyclists choose a motorcycle that is not too big or too heavy for them to handle. They can reach and operate controls comfortably. They do not try to use a trail bike for highway use.

ASSIGNMENT: SUBJECT FOR ARGUMENTATION

Choose a subject that you think is suitable for an argumentative essay. Write two sentences in which you show both sides of the argument. Label one sentence *pro* and the other sentence *con*. Below each sentence jot notes about specific details that support each statement. Do not be concerned yet about order. Copy these in ink on lined 8 1/2 x 11 paper. Label the assignment *Subject for Argumentation*, and hand it in to your instructor.

Writing the Argumentative Thesis Statement

As you jotted notes on both sides of an issue, you probably had in mind which side you would support. Take time now to look over the two sentences you wrote to show the two sides of your argument, and also review the jotted notes. Then decide which side you support. You may sometimes begin by supporting one side but then change sides after you have examined evidence for the opposing argument. In any case, determine which side you support, and then examine the supporting details by asking these questions:

Are all the details significant?

Are they closely related to the subject?

Do they cover the subject thoroughly, or do I have to do more research?

Do any of them say essentially the same thing in a slightly different way?

Does any note contain more than one idea?

As you apply each of these questions to your jotted ideas and discover that you have to make changes, revise them. Eliminate unrelated or repeated ideas, gather more information by going to the library or talking with knowledgeable people, and break notes that contain more than one idea into individual parts.

After you have completed these steps, you are ready to develop a thesis statement that summarizes your subject and shows both sides of the argument. You might write a thesis statement that states a fact you intend to prove. In this kind of statement use ***is, are, does,*** or ***do***. To show a policy you are advocating, use ***should***. However, be sure that your statement is stating a fact or showing policy by examining the meaning of what you are saying. Merely using the verbs given above does not insure their being a fact or policy. For example, the following is not a statement of fact because ***is*** is functioning as an auxiliary in relation to ***considered*** in this sentence:

Not a fact Hamilton Waring ***is considered*** to be an authority on unidentified flying objects. (He may or may not be an authority.)

Fact Hamilton Waring ***is*** an authority on unidentified flying objects.

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Fact Hamilton Waring ***is*** an authority on unidentified flying objects.

ONE STUDENT'S ASSIGNMENT

Write an argument for or against capital punishment based upon a fundamental value which you hold. Include material from at least three essays in The Informed Argument, *but do not use any other sources beyond your personal experience—which you may include if you wish to do so. Use MLA style parenthetical documentation. Since all of your sources will come from the textbook we are using for this class, you do not need to include a list of works cited for this particular assignment.*

A Matter of Life or Death
Suzanne Wright

I come from a small town where it was a major news story when the Lion's Club decided to reseed the baseball diamond in our only public park. People seldom locked their doors, and I was never afraid to walk home at night after choir practice. During my junior and senior years in high school, I often wished that I lived someplace that was more exciting, and I looked forward to being able to go to college away from home. But growing up in a small town, where I knew my neighbors and my neighbors knew me, helped me to understand the value of individual life. It is for this reason that I am in favor of capital punishment. 1

It might seem strange that I believe in the value of life and also support the death penalty. This could almost seem like a contradiction, since opponents of capital punishment often cite the sanctity of human life as a reason for abolishing the death penalty. They believe that if it is wrong for someone to kill someone else, it is also wrong for the state to take away someone's life. I believe that the death penalty affirms the value of human life by showing that murder is the most serious of all crimes. If we value human life, and want to make this clear, then murder has to receive a punishment which is more severe than that given for any other crime. 2

One common argument against capital punishment is that it does not deter other violent crimes. According to Clarence Darrow, one of the most famous lawyers in American history, "The old-fashioned stories of men deliberately plotting and committing murder in cold blood have little foundation in real life" (149). Darrow goes on to argue that the death penalty is inappropriate for a crime which is seldom premeditated. I agree that the death penalty should not be imposed on someone who has killed someone else in a moment of panic or confusion, but the law already makes a distinction between murder in the second and first degree. A murder which has been planned cannot be excused. It is only for this type of murder, murder in the first degree, that I favor the death penalty. 3