

How to Teach the Argumentative Essay

1. **Build Background Knowledge:**
 - a. Using exemplars (student samples –see Appendix C-- or professional models) and graphic organizers, teach the structure and vocabulary of argument.
 - b. One of the biggest problems we face when teaching students to write an argument essay is the students lack of background knowledge. Formal argument, unlike persuasion, is based on fact. Students need to watch news clips, speeches, and debates; they need to read, take notes, and discuss news articles, editorials, and exemplar essays.
2. **Generate Ideas:** As students read and discuss topics, they should write. Use Venn diagrams or two-column notes to help students keep track of facts. Have them write mini-debates, dialogues, dual voice poems, etc. to generate ideas.
3. **Focus Ideas:** Direct students to highlight or circle their best ideas. They should consider which side of the argument they can best support. They should also think about examples they will use to support their claim. Do they have concrete evidence, news stories, quotes or statistics (if they are using text) they can use.
4. **Write a tentative draft:** Based on the strength of their evidence they should write a tentative claim, counter-claim, rebuttal point, and main reasons/evidence of support.
5. **Pair-Share-Respond:** Students should read aloud to partner twice. First read, responder just listens; during the second read the responder considers the following questions:
 - a. Is the author’s claim reasonable, clear and specific?
 - b. Is the counter claim reasonable, clear and specific?
 - c. Is the rebuttal logical? Does it show why the counter claim is not valid?
 - d. Do the main reasons listed provide logical, factual support for the author’s claim?
 - e. What questions do you have about the content of the paper?
6. **First Rough Draft:** Student write a first rough draft based on response.
7. Using exemplars **teach 10 -20 minute mini-lessons** and use guided practice to have students apply to strategies to own papers.
 - a. Organization: Review the structure of argument. Analyze exemplars then have students analyze their papers. They can outline or highlight the different parts of the argument.
 - b. Transitions
 - c. Ideas: How to develop ideas/using evidence (anecdotes, statistics, quotes, etc.)
 - d. Leads and conclusions

- e. Sentence Fluency: sentence combing, underline and analyze sentence beginnings, eliminating “to be” verbs, etc.
 - f. Word Choice
8. **Second Rough Draft Peer Response:** Students should exchange papers and respond using response sheet (use one specific for the task). Students should revise essays based on student response.
9. **Mini-lesson:** Teach grammar and mechanics mini-lessons and have student edit with a partner. Use peer edit sheet.
- 10. Final draft**

9 Easy Steps to Writing an Argumentative Essay

1) Choose your topic—carefully. Check your ideas against the following three criteria before finalizing your topic:

- Your topic must be *arguable*. The phrase “everything’s an argument” is not quite true—*most* things are, but not everything. Take the common high school editorial topic of “cliques are bad”: it’s a common opinion, sure, but who really disagrees? Your topic needs to be debatable; there has to be a clear opposing argument that others support. Ask yourself: who would oppose me? Why?
- Your topic must be *contemporary and relevant*. Arguments do not exist in a vacuum; they arise because people of varied beliefs interact with one another every day (or just bump heads). Your essay, even if it is about the past, should connect to values and ideas of the present. Look to current events or issues for inspiration—what’s going on in the world that’s inspiring discussion and/or disagreement? Ask yourself: does my topic matter to people right now? Why?
- Your topic must have *value to you*. Given the hours you’ll need to invest in the paper, your topic needs to be more than “interesting”; it has to be knowledge you want to pursue for your own personal benefit, not just a grade. However fascinating cloning may be, for example, if you’re not interested in science or ethics—two fundamental sub-issues of the cloning debate—your essay will be a chore to write. Choose a topic you care about and are invested in. You’ll write better and research deeper because of your personal investment.

2) Narrow and focus your topic. Many popular topics, such as abortion or euthanasia, are too broad for even 100- to 200-page books, let alone your 3- to 5-page essay. Focus on a specific aspect of your topic: a specific method (e.g., a late-term abortion procedure), a specific policy (e.g., *No Child Left Behind*), or a specific perspective (e.g., evangelical Christians and the environment). Doing so not only makes your topic (and life) manageable, it should help you develop very specific search terms when you go to gather evidence.

3) Analyze your audience. Review your assignment sheet to check whether you've been assigned a specific audience to address in your response. If no audience is assigned, you can assume your audience is your teacher, a knowledgeable and experienced reader in the subject area. But don't skip this step just yet.

Your understanding of your audience—yes, even your teacher—is integral in determining the development and organization of your argument, as well as the stylistic techniques you can utilize in your writing. For example, if you are writing to your instructor, consider what he/she expects from students on such an assignment—a formal tone, large amounts of evidence integrated into the paper, analysis of these ideas, right? On the other hand, if you're writing for an audience of peers, you'll want to lean heavily on your connection with them: use personal pronouns ("I" or "we"), express sympathy or understanding for their feelings, and address shared concerns.

4) Research wisely. Google is quick and easy; everybody uses it. So does your professor, who is rather justified in his/her skepticism of website credibility—lots of the readily accessible data via Google is inaccurate and risky. Make sure your online sources are from established educational/professional sites (like eNotes). Also use your library's subject-specific databases to find professional journals covering your topic. With a narrow and focused topic, searching should be a breeze. And use the "snowball" research technique: once you find a helpful source, look at its references/bibliography to get new leads on evidence for your paper. Wash. Rinse. Repeat.

5) Utilize a variety of evidence types. Statistics can be sexy, but they can't do all the work for you. In addition to quantitative research, utilize expert opinions—in the form of quotations or paraphrases—and historical examples to provide varied and insightful support. And don't be afraid to examine a sometimes overlooked source: you. Include your own personal experience or observations if they help illuminate the topic for your audience.

6) Express your *judgment*, not your opinion. In middle school they call it "persuasion"; in college they call it "argumentation"—so what's the difference? Expectation. Your instructor is less interested in what side you take than in how you take that side, how you analyze the issue and organize your response. Forget about whether you're right and someone else is wrong; writing a good paper is not a competition. Instead, focus on your "line of argument"—how you develop your paper by meeting your audience's needs, integrating solid evidence, and demonstrating a solid understanding of the topic. Steps 7 and 8 will help you get there.

7) Dig deeper. A meaningful topic will tap into underlying values and issues of modern society. Look for the themes or big ideas of your issue. For example, consider whether or not cities should limit or ban national chain stores from expanding in their respective communities. On one hand, yes, a paper might address the positives and negatives of Wal-Mart or Subway. Yet an excellent argument will also discuss the bigger conflicts at play: convenience vs. community identity, job creation vs. environmental damage.

Seeing the “big picture” adds depth to your argument.

8) Complexify your argument. There are several rhetorical “moves” or patterns writers can utilize to enhance their argument and demonstrate critical thinking about their topic. Here are short summaries of six of them:

- Cause and effect: discuss what has led to your topic becoming an issue and why the issue is affecting people.
- Qualification: “qualification” here means to limit your position to specific contexts or situations, a “yes, but...” perspective. Qualifying not only can demonstrate that you understand the complexity of an issue but can show you have a unique perspective on it.
- Examination of the opposing argument: know thy enemy. Analyzing other perspectives on your topic has three key advantages: you demonstrate a broad understanding of the issue; you can strengthen your position by comparing it to others; and you’ve given yourself plenty more to write about.
- Concede a little, as necessary: it’s perfectly okay to admit your position is not perfect; in fact, breaking down what works and what doesn’t about your topic can enhance your analysis. Anticipating and alleviating your reader’s concerns can be incredibly persuasive.
- Propose a solution: a logical and feasible solution to your issue provides authority and credibility, and it can make for a strong conclusion.
- Examine the implications: what effect will this issue have on individuals and/or the world? Discussing what lies ahead for your topic also makes for a strong approach to a conclusion.

Note: there is no “correct” strategy about how to integrate these techniques into your writing, nor is there a desired amount or limit to how many can be used. Use your best judgment.

9) Revise, revise, revise. Talk is cheap—and so are papers littered with clichés, illogical arguments, and grammar mistakes. Find a peer who disagrees with your position and have him/her read your paper. Discuss your ideas, your approaches, and your writing style with this naysayer; take the feedback and advice seriously. Read your paper out loud to yourself during later revisions. Be sure to check if you’ve cited your sources correctly. Edit for grammar and spelling only after you are comfortable with what you’ve written and how you’ve written it.