



How to Structure a Formal Argument

Instead of an outline of topics, consider using this classical Greek rhetorical outline by functions. Note that some of these points might take several paragraphs.

1. Opening – The Introduction

To build credible ethos, to demonstrate to the audience that one is a reasonable person of good will who shares core beliefs with the audience (warrants). Some classic openings include:

- a quotation
- a question
- an anecdote

2. Providing Background Information

Arguments need to situate the reader with historical background. If the argument is about lowering the drinking age, provide information about how and why and why the drinking age was set to where it is now. This should include information as to differences by localities, particularly if the argument is going to proceed by parallel cases – i.e. "in Germany... therefore in America..." Some of the statistics can be saved for the Proof section.

3. Defining the terms and explaining the issues

Continuing the above example, tell the reader "What is meant by drinking age?"

"What are the consequences?" "Consequences for whom?" Just do NOT directly state: "In this paper, I will show" ... or "this paper is about..."

These are errors that reduce the sophistication of the writer in the eyes of readers.

4. Presenting the thesis

The argument's claim – particularly for a deliberative argument about policy (i.e. what should be done) -- plus reasons.

5. Giving Proof

This includes statistics, examples, quotes, and any other evidence to persuade a reader of the validity of the thesis. The ordering of these should match the reasons given in the thesis statement. Thus if the thesis is that "More nuclear power plants should be built because nuclear power is cheaper and reduces dependence on foreign oil" then the proof of cheapness comes before the proof of dependence on foreign oil. However, it is generally agreed that if some of the arguments/proofs are stronger than others, then one should start and end with strong ones and sandwich the weaker arguments in the middle.



6. Answering opposing arguments.

Specific arguments must be provided (with speakers' names etc.) and then refuted (or acknowledged but dismissed as not sufficiently pressing), whether by challenging the speaker's factual accuracy, logic, or expertise. If no opposition is found, consider whether the argument is really a debatable point. Sometimes hypothetical "critics" can be alleged: "Critics might charge that..., but...". However, for this assignment, actual opposition must be found and cited.

7. Concluding

Sum up the points of the argument to show how the weight of evidence proves the thesis, while the opposition has been refuted.

Ideas from Rhetoric in the Classical Tradition by Winifred Bryan Horner. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988. 232.