

1. Make a definite, specific claim.

1.1. Make a definite claim.

Developing an argument requires you to adopt a position on an often controversial issue (one that generates opposing viewpoints). For this reason, many prompts for arguments take the form of “either/or” statements.

e.g. Ultimately, the internet is **good / bad** for democracy.

e.g. Canada **should / should not** increase the number of refugees it accepts each year.

e.g. Mandatory minimum prison sentences **will / will not** deter crime.

If you are presented with a statement like this and are asked to respond to it, you the arguer are expected to carefully consider both points of view and to arrive at one conclusion or the other. Don't try to argue *both* sides, or you'll end up with a muddy statement like this:

e.g. It isn't clear whether Canada should increase the number of refugees because there are pros and cons to doing so.

1.2. Make a specific claim.

In some argumentative assignments, you may not be given a statement to respond to: instead, you may just be expected to come up with a theory about a topic all on your own, and then defend it. When trying to put your position into words, make sure that your language is specific. The language in the sentence below, for instance, is too vague:

e.g. Thomas Carlyle's novel *Sartor Resartus* was ahead of its time.

What does “ahead of its time” mean? Because the language here is vague, the idea is also vague: it isn't clear what the author is trying to argue. The claim below is much more specific. It outlines a clear point of view that can later be proven or defended.

e.g. Although it was written in the 19th century, **Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* is a postmodern novel.**

To make your meaning even more specific, define key terms early on. The author above would need to explain what she means by “postmodern novel” pretty quickly in order for the reader to understand what she is really arguing.

Once you've established the specific meaning of a word or phrase, keep your language consistent. Repeating key words and phrases will prevent you from accidentally substituting one idea for another and switching arguments halfway through. The author above, for instance, shouldn't begin using the term “postmodern” and switch to “futuristic” later on, since these two terms don't share the same meaning.

2. Provide reasons to support your claim, and unpack them.

Often, people state their position without showing how they arrived at that conclusion.

e.g. Russia should be excluded from the G8.

Just like when we're solving a problem on a math test, we have to "show our work" in an argumentative paper. This means taking the time to explain the reasons behind our position.

e.g. Russia should be excluded from the G8 because it is an undemocratic country.

The sentence above is a good start: the author provides one reason in support of his position, but he doesn't really explain the logic behind this reason. More unpacking is needed.

e.g. Member countries of the G8 are expected to be democratic countries. Although Russia is currently a member of the G8, in the last two decades, this country has not been behaving democratically at home or abroad. Therefore, Russia should be excluded from the G8.

The author has now explained his reason, but in order to be convincing, he will still need to support each of the above statements with evidence (See 3 below). e.g. Where does it say that G8 members should be democratic? What are some of the "undemocratic" actions taken by Russia? The author might also have to come up with other reasons in order to make his argument really convincing, and then explain each of those reasons, one at a time.

As you can see in the example below, unpacking your reasons involves explaining your chain of reasoning, which can often be reduced to a series of "if x, then y" statements, ending with your conclusion.

e.g. If you learn to argue well (A), then you'll write better essays (B). If you write better essays (B), then you'll receive higher grades (C). If you receive higher grades (C), then your GPA will improve (D).

Therefore, if you learn to argue well (A), your GPA will improve (D).

If we were going to represent the steps in reasoning above symbolically, it would look like this:

A -> B
B -> C
C -> D
therefore A->D

3. Support your Reasons with Evidence

Just as claims must be backed up by reasons, reasons must be backed up with evidence. Although some reasons rely on common knowledge or assumptions that don't need to be explained (e.g. "We shouldn't eat thumb tacks because they will hurt us"), most of the statements you will make when explaining your reasons need to be supported by evidence.

Evidence can take the form of data, examples, analogies, authorities, and even counterarguments.

3.1 Data as evidence

In the social sciences and hard sciences, evidence is often quantitative data (involving numbers or measurements) or qualitative data (which describes qualities using language). This type of evidence includes survey results, statistics, raw scores, ratios, verbal responses, etc., and it comes from formal experiments or empirical studies. When using quantitative data (data with numbers), it is important to provide context so that their significance and accuracy are clear.

- include or consider the numerical data when giving percentages

e.g. Laptop theft in the library has increased 100% since last year. At first, this statistic may sound alarming, but if this only means that 2 laptops were stolen this year compared to 1 last year, then we shouldn't conclude that laptop theft is a major problem at the university.

- give comparable figures to provide perspective

e.g. If you mention that girls spend 15 hours per week doing chores, be sure to mention how many hours per week boys spend doing chores so that the reader can compare.

3.2 Examples as evidence

Instead of including data that includes many responses or results, you could choose to focus on a few key examples. When using examples as evidence

- make sure your examples are not generalizations (e.g. “We all know, for instance, that underage workers are always exploited in the workplace.”). Try using more specific examples

e.g. In Bangladesh garment factories, workers as young as 12 are forced to work 11-hour shifts in appalling conditions for wages that are lower than those offered to adults.

- give more than one example: ideally, use a spread of examples from different studies, cultures, periods, regions, etc.

e.g. Children in Bolivia perform dangerous work without formal contracts, which leaves them particularly vulnerable to abuse.

- use representative examples. For instance, the opinion of one random student probably does *not* represent the opinions of an entire student body, but the head of the local Homeowner's Association probably represents the interests of most homeowners in that region.

3.3 Analogies as evidence

- if you can't find many examples, you can argue by analogy—i.e. use an example from one situation in order to make a point about another, similar situation

e.g. The U.S. shouldn't intervene militarily in Syria because its military intervention in Afghanistan was unsuccessful. (The assumption here is that the crisis and response in Syria would be similar to the crisis and response in Afghanistan, and therefore lead to similarly unsuccessful results.)

- if you choose to argue by analogy, make sure the underlying premises are true.

e.g. In order for the above analogy to be successful, you would have to (1) show how the crises in Afghanistan and Syria are similar, (2) prove that the U.S. military's response in Syria would be similar to its response in Afghanistan, and (3) demonstrate how the U.S. military's intervention in Afghanistan *was* unsuccessful, making sure to define what counts as "success."

3.4 Authorities as evidence

In academic writing, we often use the words of other sources to back up our own assertions. These other sources are written by organizations or researchers who are "experts" or authorities in their field. When we use quotations from these sources to defend our analyses, then we are arguing by authority. In order to be able to rely on a source's authority, you must

- make sure that your source is in fact an authority. Academic arguments often require academic sources. Make sure that the books you use are published by academic publishers or university presses, and the articles you are using are published in peer-reviewed journals (where other experts ensure the quality and validity of the research).
- make sure that your source is independent and impartial — i.e. that it is not part of an interest group or lobby. You can do this by checking out the organization's mission statements and sources of funding, or by looking for biased language. You can also check for other authorities to see if their facts or findings are similar.
- cite your sources (i.e. make it clear who said what and where) using a citation style like APA, MLA, or Chicago style. Make sure that your source is citing, too. It's always best to quote "straight from the horse's mouth": if your source quotes another source, find that original source and quote from there.

3.5 Counterarguments as evidence

You can also defend your own argument by showing that the opposite view leads to absurd conclusion. Do this through the following steps:

- state what you want to prove (A)
- assume the opposite (not A)
- argue that, from this assumption, we'd have to conclude (B)
- show how is false, absurd, or contradictory (not B)
- conclude that (A) must be true after all

e.g. Women are more careful drivers than men (A). If women weren't more careful drivers than men (not A), then they would be charged with reckless driving as often, or more often, than men (B). But a recent study showed that three times as many male drivers are charged with reckless driving than female drivers in industrialized countries (not B). Therefore, women must be more careful when behind the wheel (A).