

CRAFTING AN ARGUMENT

Nearly every argumentative paper you will have to write in university will take the same basic form. Stripped down the overall argument will usually look something like this:

I.	Premise	I.	John is older than Mary
II.	Premise	II.	Mary is older than Bob
III.	Conclusion	III.	Therefore, John is older than Bob (Transitive Property)

Not all arguments will take on this form. Many will have a greater number of premises, and many will have intermediate conclusions before reaching the final one. It is, however, one of the easiest, safest, and strongest ways to go about crafting an argument. You build up the information from simple to complex and from that you draw a conclusion.

Often the information will not be conveniently linked nor will the most important parts be overtly stressed. It is up to you, the writer, to sort through the information and figure out:

- What information is relevant to your argument?
- What actually supports the conclusion you want to make?
- How much background information is necessary, if any?
- What kinds of assumptions are being made?

So, the first thing you're going to want to do is **Get Oriented**.

- **Know your topic.**
- What are the issues being discussed?
- What are your argument's strengths? Weaknesses?
- What are the opposition's strengths? Weaknesses?
- Who is your audience? Do they have any knowledge on the subject?

Let's look at an example. (Completely made up.) "In John Smith's book *The Orchard* there is an emphasis on the contrast between green and red apples. In three to four pages argue why one colour is better than the other."

The arguments that you will have to address are usually not this binary. In most cases there are several positions possible, but we will keep it simple here.

Now, ask yourself:

- What do you know of apples? Is it accurate or anecdotal?
- What does the author say about apples? Is it opinion or sourced?

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- How are green and red apples the same? How are they different?
- Are you submitting this paper for an Aesthetics class? Or, perhaps a class on Horticulture? Health and Nutrition?

Your evidence can greatly vary in its effectiveness based on your audience. Arguing about the reproductive benefits of plants that bear sharply-contrasting coloured fruits would hold more weight in a horticulture class than it might in an aesthetics class. Once you feel confident about the topic, and have decided on a position to take within the paper, you should start to develop a thesis.

THE THESIS

The argument, the supporting facts, and the thesis **must** be in alignment. It is possible that your thesis or your argument may evolve into something different while writing. Be sure that one reflects the changes made in the other. There are three main questions to consider when developing the thesis in line with the argument: **What? How? Why?**

What are you going to argue?

- Red apples are better than green apples

How are you going to support this?

- Red apples are more salient to the animals that eat apples, causing them to be consumed more frequently than green apples.
- Apple seeds remain intact through the digestive tract and animals move around.
- Red apple seeds will be spread farther and have a higher chance of reproducing.

Why is this of any value?

- Reproduction is a good thing.
- This will add support to Jane Doe's evolutionary theory that, unlike animals, plants having contrasting colours is superior to camouflage as an adaptation.

Is it bulletproof? No, but it will serve its purpose as an example. Also, try to think of **assumptions** being made here. Do you care that your food can reproduce itself better than another food? Can every animal see a difference between red and green?

STRUCTURING THE ARGUMENT

It is important to argue linearly; that is, start from the ground up.

- Build from simple to complex.
- Avoid topics that you cannot adequately address in the present paper.
- Don't introduce a valid opposing opinion and then immediately dismiss it if you cannot dedicate the

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space or time to fleshing it out.

- Analogies are going to be of great benefit as a tool in expressing your ideas simply, but don't assume your reasoning to be self-evident because your analogy is clear.
- In most cases the topic you are arguing will not have a clearly right or wrong answer. Do not expect to solve the issue.
- If you have difficulty picking a side "ultimately," pick a side within a specific context.
- It is perfectly acceptable to switch views during writing. As you begin to explore your topic you may find that the side you initially agreed with becomes weaker and that you no longer support it.
- Whether an argument is in support or in opposition to your thesis present it in good faith.

GOOD FAITH

In the hierarchy of importance, Good Faith finishes right behind aligning your argument with your thesis. The concept of Good Faith involves presenting the opposing argument in the best possible light. Explain opinions against your own as if you held that position. Do not undermine counter-claims while simultaneously presenting them. **The stronger the argument you can defeat, the stronger your argument will appear.**

The opposition can also contain a large amount of discussion points often overlooked. The opposing opinion is extremely relevant to the paper. Many times students will have three great facts for their side and present none against. Looking to improve a paper highlighting all of the problems with discrimination in academia, or just add a few more pages? Why not discuss proposed solutions or systems already trying to address the problems you discuss? Again, **the stronger the argument you can defeat, the stronger your argument will appear.**

FINALLY

- Familiarize yourself with common fallacies in order to avoid them. There are great resources available in the campus libraries that can help with this. For instance, the ad-hominem fallacy is a very common pitfall. In this fallacy you attack the author or individual supporter of an argument and not the argument itself. The fact that I eat green apples has no weight against my argument that red ones are superior.
- Avoid pure summary.
- Do not analogy hop. If your argument evolves and your initial analogy no longer works, change it.
- **Have you addressed your thesis?**

REFERENCES:

Buckley, J. (2009). *Fit to print: The Canadian student's guide to essay writing* (7th ed.). Toronto, ON: Nelson Education Ltd.

Feinberg, J. (2005). *Doing philosophy: A guide to the writing of philosophy papers* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth.