

Building an argument

What is an argument?

An argument is a way of positioning yourself in your writing. Writing is a conversational act and effective arguments are always in a dialogue with other arguments.

How do you build an argument?

There are two essential steps in building an argument:

STEP 1 **Listen carefully.** What do other authors have to say about the topic?

STEP 2 **Enter the conversation.** What is your response? How can you engage with the views of others?

Making an argument means listening closely to what others have said about the topic and finding an opening through which you can enter the conversation.

Listening to others

Considering the above, an effective argument requires that you familiarise yourself with the relevant literature. This knowledge of the field will enable you to recognise the existing debates, assumptions, and ideas that are perhaps contested or fluctuating. It will also expose you to the competing arguments, which, in turn, will allow you to establish your own position in relation to those arguments and the available evidence.

When examining the existing evidence and body of knowledge, maintain a critical analytical approach. Ask questions about the content, scrutinise examples that illustrate ideas, question assumptions, and consider alternative explanations. See if you can identify differences in perspective and potential gaps or inconsistencies in argumentation. Try to focus on the evidence that is most relevant to your specific take on the topic and make detailed notes while researching. Don't forget to include all references when recording the ideas of others!

As an exercise, consider finishing these statements about your readings:

↪ She argues that...

↪ The essence of his argument is that...

↪ According to X,...

↪ She maintains that...

↪ As the authors put it, '...'

↪ A number of historians have recently suggested...

↪ In his recent work, X has offered a critique of...

↪ In Y's view...

↪ X disagrees when he writes...

↪ Y's point is that...

↪ X's approach sheds light on...

Developing your own ideas

Your own argument will be a response to the arguments you have already identified in Step 1. By positioning your own claims in relation to the existing body of knowledge ('they say' *versus* 'I say'), you make them relevant to your audience. *What* you are saying is as important as *why* you are saying it.

Positioning yourself means taking a stand by agreeing with others, challenging them, or expressing mixed feelings about the issue. Try to avoid a simple agree/disagree approach, however. Always opt for complexity and subtlety in your analysis. If a decisive stance on the issue is not possible, acknowledge it, instead of simplifying issues in order to force a one-dimensional answer.

When disagreeing, do not merely contradict the established views, but offer reasons and evidence that will support your response. Note that pointing out unusual features or interpretations is an implicit form of disagreeing with the dominant approaches, so you don't always have to be very direct in your standpoint.

Ultimately, building an argument is not about adopting an adversarial discourse whose purpose is to attack established ideas, but about exploring these ideas with more nuance, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, so we can gain a better understanding of the material and learn from each other.

As an exercise, consider finishing these statements about your response to the readings:

- ↪ His assertion that... is contradicted by recent research...
- ↪ While it is true that..., there are still several unanswered questions...
- ↪ X's claim rests on the assumption that...
- ↪ One implication of Y's theory is that...
- ↪ In discussions of X, one controversial issue has been...
- ↪ By focussing on..., he overlooks the fact that...
- ↪ X's approach needs emphasising since...
- ↪ X's analysis calls into question the widely accepted view that...

Argument checklist:

- Does it respond to other arguments and/or wider knowledge?
- Is it valid?
- Is it clear?
- Do I have enough evidence to support it?
- Have I made any assumptions?
- Are my conclusions justified?

Some useful verbs and transitions

- ↪ **making a claim:** argues, asserts, insists, observes, demonstrates, suggests, claims, emphasizes, states, puts it, agrees, urges, maintains, confirms, supports (authors never just say things!)
- ↪ **questioning a claim:** complicates, contradicts, denies, refutes, questions, rejects, disagrees, overlooks, challenges, objects, disputes, assumes, calls into question
- ↪ **transitions:** accordingly, hence, since, while, although, nonetheless, despite, likewise, on the other hand, regardless, however, for instance, specifically, as an illustration, by extension

Recommended reading:

- Graff, G. and Birkenstein, C. (2010) *'They Say/I Say': The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. 2nd ed. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Greetham, B. (2009) *How to Write Your Undergraduate Dissertation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zinsser, W. (2006) *On Writing Well*. 30th Anniversary Edition. New York: Harper Perennial.

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