

Argument

What does the word *argument* mean to you? Does it conjure images of people angrily yelling at one another? Well, that is not what we mean when we talk about *argument* in this class. **Argument is making a case in support of a claim**, and it doesn't require any angry yelling to do so. It does, however, require a great deal of critical thinking. Since most of the arguments you will generate for this class will be written as essays, the thinking should occur *before* you put anything on paper. Traditionally, many young writers try to start with a thesis statement and then selectively present whatever "evidence" they can think of to support it, which is backwards and wrong. A legitimate argument is based on sound reasoning, not emotional appeals, so you have to examine the evidence before making a claim. In a language arts class, that evidence is usually a written text (story, poem, article, etc.). In a science class, the evidence might be the results of a lab experiment you participate in. In social studies, the evidence could be a primary source document from a historical figure. Academic argument is everywhere, but before you put anything on paper, you have to observe, inquire, and THINK.

The process of argumentation is an exercise in critical thinking: An **observation** from a text or an experience leads to a problem or **question** (inquiry), which requires you to **gather more information** (research), which becomes your **evidence**. Couple that evidence with what you already know (rules, assumptions, common sense), and you form **warrants** that support logical conclusions or reasons. These conclusions/reasons become your **claims**. When you put a series of claims together in support of a debatable position, you write an overarching primary claim called a **thesis statement**. Then you are ready to write an argumentative essay. So, while the thesis statement usually comes first in academic writing, it is actually the last thing you arrive at after going through the process of critical thinking.

Observation >> Inquiry >> Research >>Evidence>>Warrants>>Conclusions/Claims>>Thesis
Argumentative writing is a reflection of this process, but you have to go through the process before you write!

Informal Example: Sunflowers

Last spring, my son planted some mammoth sunflower seeds along our back fence. By the end of June, many of those giants were eight or nine feet tall with massive round heads. We observed and discussed them informally all summer.

Observations: Some of the sunflowers grew faster than others even though they appeared to flower at about the same time. Each morning, most of the flowers appeared to be "looking" over the fence into the neighbor's yard, but in the evening they were facing our back door -- except the two at the end of the row, which were facing the opposite direction.

Inquiry: Why, we wondered, did some of the plants get bigger faster even though they were all getting the same amount of water? Also, how come they seemed to "move" to look in the same direction, except those two at the end? These questions prompted us to pay more attention to what was happening.

Research: A few weeks of closer observation indicated that there were lots of bugs eating the leaves on the smaller plants, so they did not have as much surface area to take in sunlight. Also, the flowers were indeed "following" the sun across the sky, turning to face it as it moved. My son looked this up in a book about gardens and discovered that sunflowers are heliotropes, a word made up of the root words *-helio-* (sun) and *-trope-* (turn). This heliotropism, however, only lasted until the heads were too large and heavy to turn on the stalks, at which point they began to hang down like the heads of sad, old men. Further observation indicated that the two flowers on the end fell in the shade of a tree in the neighbor's yard by late afternoon, while the rest of the row could still "see" the sun directly.

Conclusions: Sunflowers that get more direct sunlight grow taller. Those infested with bugs struggle to keep up. Sunflowers are heliotropes that turn to face the sun as it moves across the sky, and they will do so until the heads are too big to allow for this kind of movement. Plants that are shaded cannot turn as efficiently and predictably as those in direct sunlight.

If we were to write this example as an argumentative essay, we would indeed begin with our conclusions, written as a series of claims and supported by the evidence we gathered through observation and research, but we could not have arrived at any logical conclusions without having gone through the critical thinking process first. (We couldn't have written the argument in May because we wouldn't have known anything about sunflowers!) Legitimate arguments begin with critical thinking.

Throughout high school, you will follow the same critical thinking process in many classes. In English, for example, the initial evidence or observation might come in the form of a novel you are assigned to read. As you read, you notice things and make observations about the characters, symbols, author’s writing style, etc. These observations lead you to ask critical questions, watch for further examples as you continue reading, and/or research to learn more about the topic. At the end of the novel you can draw conclusions about the themes and the author’s purpose, which could become the focus of an argumentative essay. Of course, in school, the reason you do much of this critical thinking and argumentation is because you are assigned to do so, but these thinking and writing skills will come in handy for the rest of your life.

Argument: Prewriting Samples*

<i>What do you notice?</i> Observation/ Textual Evidence	<i>Why is it significant? (So what?)</i> Warrant	<i>What conclusion can you draw?</i> Claim
Some of the sunflowers grew faster than others even though they all got the same amount of water.	As we know, plants need sun and water to survive, so it stands to reason that the more sun and water they receive, the bigger they will get. If a row of similar plants get the same amount of water and sun, they will probably grow to the same size. If some plants get more water or sunlight than others, the sizes of the plants will probably differ.	The sunflowers that grew faster probably received more direct sunlight.
In <i>The Pigman</i> , John and Lorraine spend more time with Mr. Pignati than they do at home with their parents. John’s mom says: “Maybe you’d better go over to a friend’s house to do your homework...” (p.60). Mr. Pignati always invites John in: “...make yourself comfortable...I want you to feel at home” (p.85).	As a rule, we spend more time with those who welcome us and whose company we enjoy, rather than with those who make us uncomfortable or who push us away. It is much easier to be comfortable in a house where you feel like you are wanted.	John needs Mr. Pignati’s friendship because he does not get welcoming and acceptance from his parents.
In <i>Animal Farm</i> , the animals let Napoleon and the other pigs control everything and give all the orders, but their lives do not get better as the pigs promise. “Clover’s eyes filled with tears...this was not what they had aimed at when they set themselves years ago to the overthrow of the human race” (p. 95).	Usually, we must take responsibility for ourselves to reap the rewards of revolution. If we don’t, those more ambitious than we are will assume power, and we will have no more freedom than before. It is our responsibility to question the judgment and decisions of authority. The subtle competitions of life are seldom won by those who will not or cannot stand up for themselves.	<i>Animal Farm</i> illustrates the theme that the ideals of democracy cannot flourish if people blindly trust their leaders.

*These samples show how a thinking process becomes a writing process. If you were writing an entire essay on any of these topics, you would have multiple lines of evidence, lots of warrants, and all the claims you could generate to support your thesis. Also, writing styles differ in different academic areas.

So you have been given an argumentative writing assignment? Address these things first:

- Observation:** What do you notice? What relationships can you see?
- Inquiry:** What questions do you have? What more do you need to know? What other examples can you see?
(*Hypothesis: You might guess at what outcomes will occur, but you still need to do further study.*)
- Evidence Gathering:** Does the new information support previous evidence or assumptions?
- Evidence:** What are the facts? What data do you have to work with? What quotes are helpful?
- Warrants:** Why is your evidence relevant? (“So what?”) What do we already know that gives this new information meaning, and how does it do that? [Warrants are evidence of your thinking!]
- Conclusions/Claims:** What conclusions do your evidence and warrants support? What logical inferences can you make when you put the warrants and the evidence together?
- Thesis:** What do you believe all these claims suggest? Your thesis is a debatable position statement that says something about your topic in a clear complete sentence that will go in the introduction of your essay.

NOW WRITE!