Tip Sheet: Elements of Argument

When we hear the term “argument,” we often imagine arguments we’ve experienced, situations when our objective was to shout down the person we were arguing with, ignoring or quickly dismissing every point not consistent with what we our own ideas. Argument in these scenarios is generally considered a rough and tumble sport, where the objective is to win. Much of our recent television programming, as well as any number of communications in our online media, unfortunately, have reinforced this limited and incorrect view of what genuine argument—academic argument—really is.

The truth is, academic argument—the kind of argument you write in college—is much more sophisticated, complex, and fair-minded than what we sometimes practice ourselves or see on television. Academic argument is about examination, debate, reasoned and respectful communication. Ultimately, it may be about “winning,” but academic argument values the process of carving out and considering all sides of an issue as much as or more than winning.

So, given this description, what should a good academic argument include? Here’s a list of the basics:

- **A claim (or thesis):** Your claim is a single, clear statement of the argument’s central point or proposition. Like any form of thesis, you should continue to modify it as your essay changes.

- **Evidence:** Evidence in argument papers often appears in the form of relevant and timely statistics, expert opinions, relevant facts, real or hypothetical examples, sound reasoning. Evidence in arguments is often arranged from least to most compelling—in other words, the evidence should build as the essay progresses.

  An important aspect of evidence, of course, is research (note “statistics” and “expert opinions,” above); to write a successful argument, it’s critical that any evidence pulled from research be provided by sources that readers can trust, and that you provide evidence of trustworthiness in your essay.

- **Differing Views:** Academic arguments often require you to provide a clear, fair-minded discussion of views that run counter to your claim. Presenting differing views (1) demonstrates that you’re aware of these views and (2) demonstrates
your willingness to acknowledge and present them fairly. Both of these things help not only to inform your readers but also to increase their level of trust in you.

➢ **Response to Differing Views—Concession:** Concession means agreeing with or acknowledging the validity of ideas and information that counters your position. It’s wise to concede where you must, and to explain why you’re conceding. Doing so does not damage your argument; in fact, it strengthens it by demonstrating to readers, again, that you understand and respect other evidence and are willing to let it influence your argument. In other words, it makes you appear thorough and fair-minded.

➢ **Response to Differing Views—Refutation:** Refutation means disputing or disagreeing with differing views or information, and it is therefore at the heart of any good argument. Whenever you directly refute a piece of evidence, you must be thorough—you must explain why you disagree, show where the evidence might be flawed, and so on. And you must refute politely, respectfully—in a manner that enhances a reader’s view of you.

**Summary**

As you can tell, writing a successful argument requires you to have a thorough and well-rounded understanding of the issue you’re arguing. It requires you, often, to research your topic, and to be extremely careful about your research. It requires you to be organized. And it requires you to be fair and tactful.

It’s no wonder, then, that in our current culture, particularly our political culture, so many people are unable and/or unwilling to argue in this way, and that so many students therefore struggle with the concepts of argument. However, if you learn how to do it well, you will succeed in any course requiring you to argue, and you’ll become the kind of thinker others might just listen to.

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