

WRITING AN ARGUMENT



The term ‘argument’ is used in everyday language to describe a dispute or disagreement between two or more people. However, within written academic work, the presence of an argument does not always indicate a disagreement. An argument can be used to:

- Support something we think has merit – a position, a point of view, a program, an object.
- Persuade someone that something would be beneficial to do (or not to do) – a course of action.
- Convince someone that something is true, likely to be true or probable – a fact, an outcome.
- Show someone the problems or difficulties with something – a theory, an approach, a course of action.
- Reason with someone to get them to change their mind or their practice.

In its most basic form, an argument is **a claim (or conclusion) that is supported or justified by at least one reason**. The supporting statements of an argument are called **premises**.

An argument is NOT:

- a statement of fact (i.e. 26.7% of Australians prefer dark chocolate.)
- an assertion or claim (i.e. Wearing a seatbelt reduces the risk of injury.)
- a prescriptive statement (i.e. The Government should spend more money on healthcare.)
- a conditional statement (i.e. If you drink too much alcohol, you will damage your brain.)
- a series of statements about the same thing.

An argument IS:

- a group of statements of which one is a proposition or claim that is supported by at least one of the other statements

For example:

CLAIM

PREMISE

PREMISE

Drinking water daily is good for your health as it cleanses out your liver and reduces the level of toxins in your blood.

THESIS STATEMENT

These elements come together in your thesis statement. A thesis statement tells your reader your position and how you will argue it. It acts as a roadmap for your writing, showing the reader **the structure of your argument**.

For example: The death penalty should not be restored in Australia due to the discriminatory nature of capital punishment, the fallibility of proving guilt in criminal cases, and the violation of the most fundamental human right – the right to life.

SEE THE GUIDE ON INTRODUCTIONS FOR MORE

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WHAT MAKES A GOOD ARGUMENT?

The **purpose** of an argument is to convince others of whatever you are asserting or claiming. You do not need an argument to simply describe something, list items, explain how something works or identify key points or factors. However, you do need to use an argument when the point you are making may be not well known or not well accepted (not obviously true), or where you know there is some disagreement or alternative perspective. In these cases, we need to provide reasons to support our position.

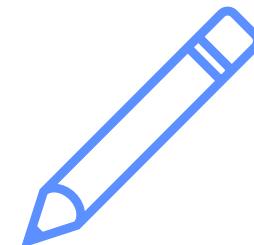


A good argument should be convincing. You should find yourself believing the claim, or at least finding the conclusion reasonable. This entails several things:

- acceptable or reasonable premises (likely to be true)
- evidence or reasons that are relevant to the claim
- reasons which provide sufficient grounds to lead us to accept the claim.

These are called the **acceptability**, **relevance**, and **grounds** of an argument. If an argument satisfies these three conditions, it is likely to be a good argument.

HOW DO I WRITE AN ARGUMENT?



1. Ensure you **understand the question**. What do you have to do? What issues do you need to cover?
2. Do your **research**. What do we know about this issue? What do the researchers say? What are the debates, the problems?
3. Go back to the question and consider your answer, given your research and what you have learnt. This will be your **claim**. Make it very clear what position or point of view you are taking.
4. How will the evidence from your research support your case?
 - Integrate supporting evidence by **quoting** and/or **paraphrasing**.
 - Acknowledge counter arguments/counter evidence.
 - Use linking words and discourse markers to draw connections between your argument and the evidence and/or counter evidence.
5. Argue for this position in an academic context. Consider your claim and supporting premises and draw out the implications:
 - Why am I saying this here?
 - What point am I trying to make?
 - What does this evidence show?
6. Make sure your essay has a **clear, logical structure** with relevant points which lead to the conclusion. It should be easy for your readers to follow where you are heading and why.

You will need to decide how to put forward your point of view in a reasoned and objective way. What made you come to this conclusion? What did you find convincing? What did you find problematic? These will be the reasons that justify your conclusion. If you found the reasons convincing, so should your readers.

! Remember to acknowledge all the sources of your information throughout your paper and in your reference list.

SEE THE GUIDE ON USING THE RIGHT LANGUAGE FOR MORE

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SAMPLE ARGUMENT

The Smart Pill – a critique

(adapted from Super-Pill To Get Students' Brains Into Gear, Jeremy Laurance, London)

Debilitating mental diseases like Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia have a huge social and financial impact. [background issue/broad context] As a consequence, scientists have been trying to find a cure by developing drugs that slow mental deterioration and enhance memory retention. According to researchers (MacNally 1998; Jones 2001) more than 200 chemical compounds that will boost memory and learning ability are currently being developed by pharmaceutical companies. [current state of research] If successful, the application of the drugs could be much broader than just the treatment of dementia. Professor McGaugh (2001) claims that the new drugs will have a wide appeal to students sitting exams and 'ambitious workers wanting an edge over their rivals' (p. 74). [implications]

There seems to be some evidence that a 'smart pill' is a possibility. Experimental trials of a new class of cognitive enhancers, called ampakines, have supposedly had positive results without the severe side effects. [positive case] Current research (McGaugh 2001) indicates that rats taught to avoid one part of a maze by electric shock treatment remembered the information up to a month afterwards when given the drug, compared to the control group which forgot within 24 hours. Ampakines have also had 'remarkable effects in humans' (McGaugh 2001, p. 75). [supporting evidence]

However, these claims need to be treated with caution. [negative case] The Chair of CIBA Foundation says that of the 140 'smart pills' already being sold in California, none were effective and some were actually hazardous. One cognitive enhancer, Tacrine, has produced only modest effects – slowing mental deterioration by just six months – while its side effects, such as liver damage, have been very severe. [supporting evidence] While ampakines are supposed to have reduced side effects, there is little information on what these are and as yet no confirmation on the supposed remarkable effects in humans. [counter-argument]

While the idea of a 'smart pill' is likely to be popular with students and high achievers, there is little evidence that such a pill exists, and especially one without risk. [summarising reasons against] At the same time, all the current research is focused on enhancing memory retention. While this would be beneficial for dementia sufferers and those with Alzheimer's, it will only be of limited use to the normal person, i.e. enhancing short-term memory during a specific task. [implication] Being smart entails more than just retaining information. The benefits of a smart pill, should it be developed, will be very limited and unlikely to be worth the risk. [conclusion, claim]