

Investigating Best Practices in Academic Writing: Suggestions for Argumentative Essay Writing Instructions at a University Level

Abstract

This piece of writing shows that in an argumentative essay, also known as a persuasive essay, the writer's purpose is to persuade the audience to agree with his or her ideas about a controversial topic. As such, that essay needs to be based on logic and not on emotion, and must include an opposing viewpoint or counterargument, which gives credibility and strength to it. This paper aims at exploring the best practices in academic writing by making suggestions for argumentative essay writing instructions at both high school and college levels. In the following analysis, the three different parts of an argumentative essay are examined in depth. They are the introduction paragraph that contains the hook and the thesis statement, the body paragraphs in which there are the argument and the counterargument, and the concluding paragraph. This work is of particular relevance in the way the strategies used will help students produce good essays, be proficient in academic exams and tests with a view to becoming autonomous learners.

Key words : Persuade, Controversial topic, Logic, Counterargument, Credibility

Introduction

Academic writing is a formal and accurate style of writing used in schools, universities, and scholarly publications. The hallmark of that kind of writing is the argumentative or persuasive essay writing the main aim of which is to convince or persuade the reader. For this kind of writing, students have to investigate a topic, collect, generate, evaluate evidence, and establish a position on the topic in a concise manner. (The Purdue Online Writing Lab). Thus, it is one of the most common forms of curriculum genres that students write (Mei, 2006, p. 330), particularly in the arts, humanities and social sciences. (Hewings, 2010). What's more, "research on argumentative texts and the overt teaching of argumentation to university students has been a major concern of institutions of tertiary education together with the development of effective theoretical backgrounds for composition programmes focusing on argumentation." (Tanko, G., & Tamasi, G. J., 2008, p. 1)

The argumentative essay writing stages

School essays often take the format of the five paragraph essay which consists of the introduction of the topic, the statement of a claim, three supporting paragraphs for the claim and a concluding paragraph. (Bacha, N., 2010, p. 230).

1. The introduction paragraph

The introduction is the first paragraph of the argumentative essay writing and is supposed to inform the reader about the writer's purpose and steps to follow. It should be very concise and informative on the production's main ideas. The introduction is often structured as follows : the first element can be the hook or a general information about the topic. After that stage, the reasons why the topic is important can be stated, and then the thesis statement that is known to be the most important element of the introduction is placed at the end of the introduction.

1.1. The hook

When writing an argumentative essay, it is important to remember that you should first have a specific topic with a particular point of view on that topic. The hook is the first sentence of the introduction whose aim is to catch

the reader's attention and set the context of the topic. That first sentence of the introduction named the hook can be a statement, a question, a quote or an anecdote. After the hook, you should briefly give the reasons why the topic is important before ending with the thesis statement in which the outline of the work can be drawn.

1.2. The essentiality of the thesis statement in the introduction

The thesis statement is the main idea of the essay and is generally put at the end of the introduction. To grab people's attention on the vitalness of the thesis statement in writing, many scholars have showcased key details of it. For instance, Sullivan states that "it conveys the central or main idea of the composition and often indicates how the main idea will be supported. Ideally, it is one sentence summary of the whole composition." (Sullivan, 1984, p. 125). Sharp similarly points out that "a well-written, effective thesis statement also builds your reader's confidence and trust in your ability as a writer. It is also important because it helps you, the writer, structure your paper around one main point." (Sharp, S., 2011). In the same vein he adds, "you can also think of the thesis statement as the glue that holds your paper together... or even the rudder of your ship, guiding your paper steadily toward its final destination." (Sharp, S. 2011). That means that not only is the thesis statement the summary of your production, but it is also its foundation and should guide it till the end. As a matter of fact, at the end of your work, you should check if the thesis has passed the argument test, meaning if the ideas developed in the argument correspond to those announced in the thesis. If it is not the case, you should restate the thesis to make it correspond to the argument. To avoid a mismatch between the thesis and the argument, you can write the argument first, then work to develop the supporting points before writing the thesis statement.

However, an effective thesis statement must be narrow and debatable. Thus, Weida, S., & Stolley, K highlight: "an argumentative or persuasive piece of writing must begin with a debatable thesis or claim. In other words, the thesis must be something that people could reasonably have differing opinions on. If your thesis is something that is generally agreed upon or accepted as fact then there is no reason to try to persuade people." This sentence is an example of a non-debatable thesis statement "it's not good to throw garbage on public places." No reasonable human being will provide a counterargument for this statement, so it's not debatable. To make it debatable, it can be reformulated this way : "The Senegalese national government should spend 60% of its budget on garbage recycling." Here, some people may say that 60% is too much for garbage recycling because there are many other priorities. Another thing is that the thesis should not be too broad, it should be narrow or limited. For instance, if you say "pollution is detrimental to society," it is too broad since there are many kinds of pollutions such as water pollution, air pollution, environmental pollution, etc. It is better to write a narrow and debatable thesis like this « The Senegalese national government should spend 60% of its budget on garbage recycling because garbage creates environmental pollution that is harmful to people's health. The thesis claims that garbage recycling is a priority in Senegal and gives the reason why the national government should focus on it. Weida, S., & Stolley also suggest the use of qualifiers in order to limit the scope of the claim where they say : "qualifiers such as typically, generally, usually or on average also help to limit the scope of your claim by allowing for the almost inevitable exception to the rule." (Weida, S., & Stolley, K., 2014). For instance, to improve the thesis, we can say "it is generally accepted that the Senegalese national government should invest more on garbage recycling because garbage creates environmental pollution that is harmful to people's health."

Generally speaking, you can understand the thesis statement as "the pivotal component of argumentative essay." (Tanko, G., & Tamasi, G. J., 2008, p. 1).

2. The body paragraphs

2.1. Developing a pro / con list to set logic throughout the essay

Before writing the argument you can develop a pro / con list for your topic.

Example of a pro / con list for a topic on 'school uniforms':

School uniform	
PRO's	CON's
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Means of identification - Creates equality between students - Prevents girls from wearing sexy clothes - Allows parents to save money 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of freedom to wear whatever you like - Restricts students' freedom of expression regarding their self-image - Destroys students sense of fashion

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creates pride of belonging to a particular school in students - Gives an aesthetic aspect to the school / Participate in the nice image of the school - Encourages team spirit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Uniforms fade and will need to be replaced - May allow ill-intentioned people localize students easily
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The pros reflect the arguments for and will be developed in the argument whereas the cons are the arguments against and will be worked out in the counterargument. It is beneficial to develop a pro/con list before starting writing the argument and counterargument because with this strategy, the main points are already drawn. After that step, what is left to the writer is just to develop the ideas and support them with claims and illustrations. Besides, “assigning weights to each of the pros and cons, is an additional exercise that promotes deeper thinking and presumably leads to better-quality decision making.” (Charyk, C., 2017).

2.2. The argument

The writer should, before all, remember to check the logical connection between the thesis and the argument paragraphs. The development of the argument is the moment when you state or support your position. It refers to the first paragraphs of the body in which you explain, give your viewpoints and defend your position with strong evidence and illustrations in order to convince the reader that you are right. The key to persuading the reader that your viewpoint is valid, is to support it in every paragraph.

Referring to the concept of the argument, Wingate explains, “it can refer to individual claims or the whole text. In reference to individual claims, argument means that a proposition is supported by grounds and warrants.” (Wingate, P. 146).

In an argumentative essay, you need to show how confident and determined you are through your words. If you want to be aware of how your arguments sound when writing an argumentative essay, meaning if you want to know if they are too strong or not strong enough, modal auxiliaries can help you control the tone of the text. Modals like *must* and *will* make a verb stronger and express the firmness of the writer’s position. So, they can be used to support the arguments. To illustrate that, let’s consider the following sentence: “People who value their health must need to stop smoking immediately in order to have a better life.” In this statement, not only will the writer assert his or her main point, but the reader will also know where the writer stands on the issue.

To round up, it can be stated that the argument is a process intended to defend a position with strong and convincing statements.

2.3. The counterargument or refutation

An argumentative essay remains incomplete without at least one counterargument or refutation. The latter can be seen as the strongest idea that someone would give you to show that your ideas are wrong. Including a counterargument shows that you are a critical thinker and can be trusted as a writer on the topic. Another thing is that the counterargument adds credibility to your paper. It disagrees with the thesis. Besides, “including counter claims allows you to find common ground with more of your readers.” (Weida, S., & Stolley, K., 2014).

Most of the time, the counterargument is placed after your main argument. After providing the counterargument, the writer must show that it is not valid. That is called refutation, and it means that you give your opponent's idea at the same time give reasons why it is not valid. Even though you are arguing one side of an issue (either for or against it), you must think about what someone on the other side of the issue would argue. As soon as you give your opponent’s point of view, you must offer a refutation of it. This means that you refute the other point of view, or show how it is wrong. For example in the following sentence, it is stated that: “opponents of mandatory uniforms say that students who wear school uniforms cannot express their individuality.” On the surface, this point has some merit. However, as claimed previously, school is a place to learn, not to show off wealth or style. In order to accomplish this task, students can use the brainstorming period to develop a pro/con list to facilitate the job. In addition to this, writers can use contrasting connectors to support their refutation.

3. Some phrases for refutation

There are some phrases for refutation such as :

- Introducing the opposing point + however

You can introduce the opposing point + however to show refutation. Let's consider the following statement to illustrate that : "Critics may argue that school uniforms are expensive, however they actually save money over time."

- Using even though + the summary of the opposing point

Another phrase for refutation is even though + the summary of the opposing point. Example : "Even though critics may argue school uniforms are expensive, they actually save money over time."

- Using two sentences: while this may be true + your argument

Example : "One group of researchers has evidence to support the idea that our personality is determined by the environment in which we grow. While this may be true, personality is innate and most skills emerge as we mature."

- Using two sentences: In reality + your argument; or Counterargument + but in reality + your argument

Example : "Some people think that the best way to learn a second language is in the native country. In reality, learning a second language only requires a good environment for learning and you don't have to travel abroad to learn."

"Some people criticize uniforms by saying they are expensive, but in reality they spend more on non-uniform clothing for their children."

Again, don't forget that each paragraph should be logically connected to the thesis statement.

However, you can acknowledge an opposing point when you use weaker modals such as may, might, should, can, could and would. This way, the writer shows that the statement is not strong and can be easily refuted. In actual fact, one of the writer's goals in an argumentative essay is to weaken the counterargument. This is another example of refuting an argument with a weak modal : "While it may be true that people have eaten meat for a long time, the number one killer of Americans now is heart disease, caused in part by the consumption of animal fat."

4. The role of the topic sentence in paragraph writing

A well-developed paragraph should start with a strong and clear topic sentence. The topic sentence is the basic component of a paragraph and probes the main idea of the paragraph. D'Angelo asserts that the topic sentence is "a collection of sentences with unity of purpose." (D'Angelo, 1986, p. 432). Kolin goes further by reporting that "a topic sentence is claimed to be the most important sentence in a paragraph, stating the main idea of the whole paragraph and controlling the paragraph development." (Kolin, 2010, p. 693). That is the reason why, while writing the body paragraphs, you should constantly go back and check your thesis for coherence. If you state a claim in the topic sentence, you have to support it by more detailed evidence in the supporting sentences.

5. The conclusion

In the conclusion, you should restate the thesis first, say why it is important and give the main points. After passing the argument test, outline your essay and form a pro/con list before writing. Use contrastive connectors in refutation or counter argument. Remember to use strong modals in the main argument and weak modals in the counter argument. Make sure that you have a strong and clear topic sentence for all your body paragraphs and constantly go back and check your thesis for coherence. At the end, you can raise another issue related to your topic for further researches.

Recommendations

The decision makers in education should invest more in writing because it is a very important skill. For instance, while applying for a job in administration, for most of the time, you have to submit a written paper or papers. It is important for students to be skillful in this domain as « being able to write persuasively is a key to success in both academic and real-life settings. » (Crowhurst, 1988, p. 35).

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