

Investigating Best Practices in Academic Writing: Suggestions for Argumentative Essay Writing Instructions

Abstract

This piece of writing highlights 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 counter argument, 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 university levels. This work is of particular relevance because both students and professionals need to know how to write. I have conducted this study by collecting some argumentative essays from participants of academic writing courses organized by the American Center of Dakar in Senegal. The research findings show that this analysis will help users enhance their writing skills, be proficient in academic exams and tests with a view to becoming autonomous learners and workers.

Key words : Persuade, Controversial topic, Logic, Counter argument, Credibility

1. 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, you 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)

This kind of writing is generally divided into three parts. In the following analysis, these three different parts 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.

2. Methodology

This study is drawn from a program I participated in as a student. It was organized by the American Center of Dakar in Senegal and was monitored by a native American teacher. The organizers of the program launched a call for applications to select twenty Senegalese students and professionals to allow them follow intensive academic writing courses. It was highly competitive and candidates needed to demonstrate, each one, why they would be a good candidate and why their application should be selected. After selection, they had to meet in a google class for academic writing courses twice a week in a period of four months. We, who had the chance to be selected, learnt many essay writing types like reaction essay, comparison essay, argumentative essay, etc. But the focus of my research is on argumentative essay writing because not only is it the most common one used at schools and universities but it is also the one that allows more freedom of expression and critical thinking. The method used by the teacher was that whenever we were to meet, he used to beforehand submit a list of topics to the participants depending on the writing type. The participants had to select one of the topics, answer some questions and develop them in their writing.

Here is a list of topics given by the teacher for the argumentative essay writing course:

Topic 1 : Should university be free ?

Topic 2 : Is healthcare a basic right ?

Topic 4 : Are standardized tests a good measure of intelligence ?

Topic 5 : Do you think that deforestation is necessary ?

Topic 6 : Should schools be required to offer art classes ?

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The participants of the study

The participants of this study are from the selected candidates of the academic writing courses. They came from different specializations and, through the program, had the opportunity to practice academic writing skills with a native American teacher. Some of the activities required solo-work and others group work to initiate collaborative work.

For my research paper, I have chosen two sample argumentative essays with different topics. The essays are written individually (solo-work). The reason why I have chosen them as samples lays on the logical connection of sentences and sequencing.

3.2. Data collection

The data is transmitted as collected for the sake of authenticity.

Participant 1

Topic 1: Should university be free ?

Instruction 1 : Write your thesis.

Thesis: Free university education promotes equal opportunities for success and increases the number of graduates.

Instruction 2: Write your argument.

Argument : Education should be free because it promotes equal opportunities for success and increases the number of graduates. Besides, free education respects one of the human rights that is education for all. If people are refused entrance to university because they can't pay, they won't have the chance to be highly graduated ; which will have a negative impact on the job market as it will lack a highly ranked workforce. Another reason why education should be free is that free education can prevent students from low-income families from taking loans or resorting to prostitution to pay tuition. However, free education can decrease quality education.

Question 1 : Does your argument pass the argument test ?

Here, the learner just has to answer yes or no without developing. Passing the argument test means that you have written at least two supporting sentences to support the argument and one counter argument sentence. After passing the argument test, outline your essay and form a pro/con list before writing.

Question 2 : What are your two supporting details ? What is your counter argument ?

Answer : My two supporting details are:

Supporting detail 1 : University education promotes equal opportunities for success and increases the number of graduates

Supporting detail 2 : Free education prevents students from low-income families from taking loans or resorting to prostitution to pay tuition.

Counter argument : Free education can decrease quality education

We can draw from what participant number one has done, that the argument passed the argument test because it contains two supporting sentences and a counter argument sentence.

Instruction 3 : Write your argumentative essay.

Topic : Should university be free ?

Should students be refused access to university because they can't afford the fees? Some people, who take into account many factors, say 'yes', while others don't agree.

First of all, we believe that free education promotes equal opportunities for success to all. We were not born with the same chances in life, some people are well off while some others are not. If university education, which is of paramount importance in the job market, remains expensive ; it will only be the apanage of the rich who will remain the only social class to get the best paid jobs. That won't be fair because education should be for all as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Besides, the impossibility to access university education due to financial constraints, violates one of the ideals of the American dream that is success based on merit. As a result, some intelligent and motivated students will be obliged to drop higher studies because they can't pay.

Another reason why university education must be free is that it increases the number of graduates. If people are refused entrance to university, they won't be highly graduated and that will have a negative impact on the job market as it will lack a highly ranked workforce. Another thing is that expensive education pushes students from low-income families to take loans or to resort to prostitution in order to pay their university fees. As a consequence, they become heavily indebted in the future and won't be able to receive normal salaries for a long period of time. At the same time, expensive education increases the number of school dropouts.

However, some opponents of free university education state that it destroys quality education. If students know that they will all be accepted at university, they won't make effort anymore, especially those from low-income families. Because of expensive education, disadvantaged students must work very hard to fund their studies. But if they know that they won't pay, they may be lazy and stay dependent for ever. That attitude does not correspond to the American belief "do it yourself".

In a nutshell, university education should be free because free education will respect one of the human rights, education for all, and creates equal opportunities to people. A topic about free university education is important in the way the findings make people, especially decision makers, aware of the importance of the issue and redefine the parameters of high education by making it free or less expensive.

Participant 2

Topic 2 : Do you think that deforestation is necessary ?

Thesis : Trees form and nurture the environment.

Argument : Trees form and nurture the environment because if you cut them, you destroy and kill it. But sometimes, it is necessary for people to cut trees for some needs.

Supporting sentence : If you cut trees, you destroy and kill the environment.

Counter argument : Sometimes, it is necessary for people to cut trees for some needs.

Argumentative essay

Deforestation is the act of cutting trees and its effects on the environment, human beings and animals' lives. Trees form and nurture the environment. If you cut them, you destroy and kill it. But sometimes, it is necessary for people to cut trees for some needs.

Deforestation must be banned because it has many drastic consequences in life. In recent years, we have noticed that many trees are classified as endangered species because men keep on cutting them for their own business. In doing so, they satisfy the needs of a minority and prevents the great part of the population from being happy. For instance the African Baobab tree nicknamed "the tree of life" is in extinction. It is a very important tree that helps keep soil conditions humid, promote nutrient recycling and prevent soil erosion.

Trees are also a major source of food, water and shelter for animals and human beings. So, they shouldn't be cut. Many wild and domestic animals feed on fruits and leaves. For more security, birds deposit their nests on trees. Besides, some animals dig holes in trees for hibernation, which allows them to survive in winter. We have the example of bears which sometimes hibernate in trees. People also feed on fruits such as mangoes, apples, monkey bread from the African baobab, etc. Moreover, they use the leaves either for food or for medication especially in Africa where traditional medicine is very common. Trees are essential in our lives since they give us oxygen owing to which we breathe and store carbon dioxide.

Yet, we may need to cut trees because they provide us with wood thanks to which we make furniture and charcoal. In Africa, many women, who do not have money to buy gas or use electric cookers, cook with wood burning stoves in which they put charcoal or wood. Another thing is that people need to get furniture in their houses. For that to be possible, carpenters use wood to make beds, chairs, tables, capboards, etc. Thus, trees are a source of luxury.

In the end, it can be said that deforestation has more drawbacks than benefits. As a matter of fact, cutting trees is not good. With the advent of industrialization, it's high time people thought about other ways of getting wood and charcoal without cutting trees.

3.3. Data analysis

The two essays showcase the aspect of an academic writing because the paragraphs are well structured, the language is accurate, and the grammatical rules and vocabulary items are appropriate. The forms are satisfactory because they respect the traditional form of an argumentative essay writing that generally is a five-paragraph text, the first one being the introduction, the second one being body paragraph number one, the third one being body paragraph number two, the fourth one being body paragraph number three, and the fifth one being the concluding paragraph. The first two body paragraphs support the argument and the third body paragraph refute the argument to give another side to the work and make it critical. However, in terms of content the main ideas that should compose a normal introduction (see 3.1. The structure of an introduction) of an argumentative essay writing are

skipped in both essays, which reduces the works' scientific aspect. Only the hook that is a question in the first essay and a definition of the main word of the topic in the second one is seen. Thus, the two introductions don't inform the reader enough on the works' main ideas since the writers' aims and steps to follow meaning the outline, which are necessary for an introduction, are not mentioned.

The body paragraphs are well written and are two-sided. On the one hand, there is the argument with two paragraphs and on the other hand, there is the counter argument or refutation that gives a critical side to the argumentative essays. In both essays, the writers have used contrastive connectors in the refutation or the counter argument. As far as logic is concerned, both essays match their theses. In an argumentative essay, the writer should constantly go back to the thesis while writing to check it for coherence. The writers have also used strong modals like *must* or *will* in the main argument and weak modals like *may* in the counter argument. Modals can be used to set the tone of an essay. Strong modals strengthen the argument and weak modals soften it. What gives also an argumentative aspect to these pieces of writing is the organization of the ideas ; meaning the way they are structured. The arguments are justified with good examples the aim of which are to convince the reader in the writers' position.

The conclusion is short but very telling as it includes the most essential parts of an introduction paragraph, that are the summary of the main points and the raising of another issue related to the topic for further researches.

In my opinion, the two essays are acceptable as they respect many rules of an argumentative essay writing.

4. 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). As stated by Bacha, the first part of an argumentative essay is the introduction in which there is a hook, some introductory details and a thesis. The second part can be two body paragraphs with a topic sentence, supporting details and a concluding sentence for each one. Then, there is a third paragraph known as the counter argument that also contains a topic sentence to introduce the counter argument (s), supporting details to show why the author's other position is weak or false.

4.1. The structure of 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.

4.1.1. 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.

4.1.2. 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).

5. The body paragraphs’ writing process

5.1. 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.

List 1 : 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 - 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"> - Lack of freedom to wear whatever you like - Restricts students’ freedom of expression regarding their self-image - Destroys students sense of fashion - Uniforms fade and will need to be replaced - May allow ill-intentioned people localize students easily

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).

5.2. 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.

5.3. The counter argument 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.

5.4. 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.

5.5. 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.

6. The concluding paragraph

In the conclusion, the writer should restate the thesis first, say why it is important and give the main points. At the end, he or she can raise another issue related to the topic for further researches.

7. Conclusion

Writing is a very important skill for both students and professionals because in all exams, there is writing, especially academic writing. In addition, 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, job seekers and workers 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). For that, the decision makers in education should invest more in writing.

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