Developing and Supporting Arguments

How to write better papers
Why do I need to know how to develop and support arguments?

- The mastery of written language is your most powerful intellectual tool, both in college and in life.
- The ability to evaluate and construct arguments is a necessary part of the mastery of written language.
Developing a thesis

• *Thesis* means *stand* or *position*. Your thesis is the stand or position you take on an issue.

• Many of the papers you are asked to write in college are “thesis defense” papers.
Developing a thesis

- A topic like *abortion* is not a thesis. A thesis is always given in sentence form.
- However, *Abortion is wrong* is also not an appropriate thesis. It is too vague to be helpful in writing thesis defense papers.
- An appropriate thesis must be specific enough to give direction to your research.
Developing a Thesis

- Abortion is morally wrong in all cases, except when the mother’s life can be saved by aborting a nonviable fetus is a thesis.

- Another example: Abortion of a fetus in the first trimester of pregnancy is the moral right of the woman.
Developing a thesis

- In a thesis defense paper, you make a claim and give good reasons for believing that it is true. You defend your claim as you argue that much better reasons exist for accepting it than rejecting it.

- You may not be able to prove your thesis is true, but you should try to show that an unbiased, clear-thinking person would have good reason to accept it.
Some preliminary steps to developing a thesis

- Know your assignment: what is the professor asking you to do? Define? Explain? Solve? Compare?
- Break the assignment down into appropriate subtopics.
- Develop questions about each subtopic.
- From your class notes, readings, and other sources, try to find preliminary answers to your questions.
- Jot down your answers and any other thoughts or ideas.
- Focus and structure your thoughts – devise a tentative thesis. Ask: What is the main point I want to make about the topic? How should I structure evidence and examples to support this point?
- Write the first draft
- Revise
In a thesis defense paper, you generally state your thesis at the beginning of the paper and then spend the remaining paragraphs and pages showing why that position is correct or reasonable.

Your first paragraph should make clear precisely what your thesis is and how you intend to support it.

Your closing paragraph should mirror your first paragraph.
Arguing for, or defending, your thesis

- The thesis statement expresses the assertion that the author intends to establish as true or probably true.
- Don’t be misled by the popular use of the word “argue”. In writing a thesis defense paper, you are not supposed to become an angry adversary, oversimplify, or narrow your mind.
A word about tone

- The tone of your paper should be calm and reasonable.
- Don’t try to sound like politicians or advertisers.
- Don’t exaggerate or use overblown rhetoric.
- Don’t make up facts or play up evidence as if it establishes more than it actually does.
- Don’t use extreme, indignant, self-righteous or derisive language.
- Treat other views fairly.
The strength of your argument depends upon the evidence you offer to support it.

There are 4 kinds of evidence we will consider:

- Anecdotal
- Testimonial
- Statistical
- Analogical
Anecdotal Evidence

- An anecdote is a usually short narrative of an interesting, amusing, or biographical incident.
- An anecdote and serve as an example of some more general claim you are making.
Anecdotal Evidence

- **Thesis:** women are more nurturing than men. **Evidence:** In my family, my mother is the one we go to when we’re feeling sad or depressed. She’s better than Dad at dealing with such things.

- **NOTE:** one anecdote doesn’t prove that ALL women are more nurturing than men. It doesn’t even prove that MOST women are more nurturing than men.
Anecdotal Evidence

- **Thesis:** Women are more nurturing than men. **Counterargument:** But my father is the one who takes care of us when we’re sick. Mom is always too busy.

- **NOTE:** The anecdotal example of a man who is more nurturing than a woman DISPROVES that all women are more nurturing than men.
Anecdotal Evidence

- Thesis: Most women are more nurturing than men.
- The counter-argument doesn’t work here. Anecdotes can’t disprove general (“most”) statements.
Anecdotal Evidence

- Anecdotes cannot prove universal ("all") statements.
- Anecdotes can disprove universal ("all") statements, but not general ("most") statements.
Anecdotal Evidence

- Universal ("all") statements do not always employ the word "all". Look for statements that use words like "every", "always", etc.

- General ("most") statements do not always employ the word "most". Look for statements that use words like "many", "generally", "usually", etc.
Testimonial Evidence

- Most of the information we get regarding news events, other countries, special occupations and professions, etc. comes from the testimony of others.
Be careful not to accept someone’s word blindly, even if they are authorities.

If you’re writing a paper on obsessive-compulsive disorder, Oprah is not a good choice for testimony. Oprah deals with a lot of psychological issues, but she is not a psychologist.
Dr. Phil is not as weak of a source as Oprah is, seeing that Dr. Phil does have a degree in Behavioral Sciences. But he is not the best source, either.
Testimonial Evidence

Better sources would be Drs. Karen Weissbecker of Tulane Health Science Center and Humberto Nicolini of the Instituto Mexicano de Psiquiatria, psychologists who have published research on obsessive-compulsive disorder and have won awards for their research from the Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation.
Testimonial Evidence

- Testimony of credible persons sometimes strengthens your argument, but you need to say why the reader should consider that person’s statements.
- Give the person’s credentials: academic degrees, professional experience, etc.
- Be aware that experts often disagree on an issue. One expert’s opinion alone does not establish a point.
- Your thesis defense paper should involve your own thinking – more than just a compilation of other people’s quotes.
Testimonial Evidence

- Use caution when citing publications.
- An unattributed article in *Reader’s Digest* about OCD is better ignored than mentioned, even if it supports your thesis.
- Every potential source needs to be examined – you must consider each article on the basis of the author’s credentials and the character of the written material itself.
Whenever you use statistics, you must cite the source.

Since statistics from different sources often vary or conflict, give reports from multiple sources when possible.

As you report your source, show that it is a reputable one – that the researcher is competent and unbiased.
Be sure to report the year in which the statistics were compiled.

When you compare statistics from different years, be sure the criteria for compilation do not vary.

For example, if the US government changed the way it computes the Gross National Product, you can’t compare figures compiled before and after the change without statistical adjustment.
Analogical Evidence

- Analogy: an inference that if two or more things agree with one another in some respects they will probably agree in others.

- Example: Ron and Jon like to argue about football. They probably like to argue about baseball as well.
Analogical Evidence

- Analogies can help to clarify something by comparing it with another thing that is similar in some way.
- Analogies can help a person understand a relation and see new connections between things.
- However, you should be cautious when using an analogy or evaluating someone else’s. Analogies seldom provide hard proof of a conclusion or thesis.
Now that you have your evidence…

- Don’t be too closed minded – your evidence may lead you to take up the opposite position from which you started. That’s okay. It's better to change your mind than to remain stubborn in the light of poor evidence.
Counterarguments

Counterarguments are arguments that a critic might level directly at your thesis discrediting one of the specific lines of reasoning you have presented.

Try to anticipate counterarguments and include them in your paper if you can respond to them with good reasoning.

Don’t make up weak counterarguments. The objections that you anticipate should be credible ones.
Evidence: the body of the paper

- Everything between the opening and closing paragraphs of your paper is called the body. The structure of the body the paper should reflect the structure of your opening paragraph.
- Each paragraph, or group of paragraphs, in the body should represent reasons for accepting your thesis – that is, your arguments and counterarguments.