WRITING A PERSUASIVE AND EFFECTIVE ARGUMENT

by

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An assignment requiring an argument will usually focus on an issue that has two sides. First carefully read the assignment and identify the two sides.
The debate over gun control rages on, especially with the expiration of the assault weapons ban. While the NRA defends the Second Amendment, a United Nations conference is proposing global disarmament. Argue either for or against gun control.
ASSUMPTIONS

In any engagement, there must be shared assumptions. Two people cannot play checkers until they accept basic assumptions about how the checkers can move across the board. In the above example, assumptions are made about the potentials of guns (they can be lethal) and gun ownership (they can be owned by an individual). Your first task is to clearly discern the assumptions.
Having accepted the shared assumptions and defined the two sides:

- Choose the side you believe and/or
- choose the side you can better support with facts, data, and various other research.
- If you are undecided, do some initial research to help you either formulate an opinion or gather information. Make two lists, one for each side, and see which one is longer.
Anyone who has been on a debate team knows that a good debater can argue either side and often does. For an academic assignment, you may be better off arguing for the side for which you can gather more proof, especially if you are “on the fence” about the issue.
Now you need to plan your argument. Aristotle identified three elements, all working together, that aid the speaker/writer in persuading an audience:

- **Logos**: Word (Reason, Logic)
- **Pathos**: Emotion
- **Ethos**: Character (Ethics)
EACH HAS ITS OWN FUNCTION

LOGOS
Message

PATHOS
Audience

ETHOS
Writer
LOGOS
Message

Reason (objective proof) is used to spell out claims that are logically sound and supported by reliable evidence. Logic can be either deductive or inductive and either or both can be used depending on what best suits your purpose.
Specific conclusions are drawn from a general statements = syllogism.

Major Premise - All men are mortal.
Minor premise - Socrates is a man.
Conclusion - Socrates is mortal
RULES FOR SYLLOGISMS

1. There must be three terms and only three terms (men, mortal, Socrates)
2. The middle term (mortal) must be distributed (used again) at least once.
3. No term may be distributed in the conclusion if it was not distributed in the premises.
In additions, both the major and minor premises must be true, or the conclusion cannot be true.

All Catholics are Protestants (false).
All Protestants are Baptists (false).
All Catholics are Baptists (false).
If something seems false either in your conclusions or in the other side’s conclusions, look for lack of truth in the premises. For your side, fix the unsound premises so your argument will be strong. For the other side, highlight their unsound premises to attack their conclusions.
Generalizations are made on an observed fact (often used in scientific experimentation).

Every patient suffering from flu that the doctor examined had a fever. Therefore, fever must be a symptom of flu.
Emotions come into play when considering your audience. Aristotle said he would prefer if only reason were involved in debate, but he recognized that we are also emotional beings and are often swayed more by passions than by reason. Pathos can be used for either good or bad.
Martin Luther King used pathos for good, inspiring the masses with emotional repetition of phrases such as “I have a dream,” or “Let us march.” Hitler used pathos for bad, using fear to compel his countrymen to evil acts that defy all reason and morality.
In considering pathos in your argument, ask yourself:

How can I engage my reader?
How can I appeal to my reader’s emotions?
How can I, through my tone and presentation, help my reader to be open to my message?
AVOID FANATICISM

A fanatic cares only about his own emotions and never considers his audience. Something is true simply because he says so or his claims rest on authorities he considers valid. A fanatic cannot use deductive logic because he doesn’t care if his premises are true for his audience.
AVOID SKEPTICISM

A skeptic can never adopt a shared assumption. Even though he puts his feet on the floor when he gets out of bed every morning and is able to stand up, he is reluctant to put his feet on the floor the next morning, fearing he may fall. A skeptic cannot use inductive logic because he does not believe the pattern of the particular will continue to hold true.
ETHOS
Writer

Appeal or persuasion can stem from the writer’s character. Someone who gains trust and admiration can convince an audience. A reputation predisposes an audience. If we do not trust the writer, it does not matter what is said. The writer must have high moral character. This was believed of Hitler when he had power. We tend to trust religious, academic and political authorities until they prove themselves unworthy. Again, ethos can be used for good or bad, depending on the agenda.
Use ethos effectively in your argument by being informed, speaking with authority, writing skillfully, clearly and with grammatical correctness, and using respected authorities in support of your argument.
STRUCTURE OF THE ARGUMENT
Your introduction should briefly set the stage for the issue, touching on the components of both sides. At the end of the introduction, it is imperative that you write a thesis statement that clearly states what side you are choosing and makes a claim. A claim is only good if someone could actually disagree with it.
Something along the lines of, “In this essay I will discuss the issue of gun control” is not a thesis statement. There is no claim here; no one could disagree with the above statement.
The Second Amendment, drafted in 1789, no longer applies in modern American society, and because of the shockingly high incident of gun-involved murders, suicides and accidental deaths, it is imperative that stricter controls be placed on gun ownership in this country.

There are plenty of people who disagree with the above statement. Now you need to prove it, persuade your reader.
The first section of your paper should provide background information. It could be one paragraph or a few paragraphs, depending on the length of the paper. Just remember it should not take up more than maybe 15% of the paper. Your job is to argue the issue, not just explain it. But before you argue, you need to briefly lay out both sides of the issue. It is better to assume your reader is unfamiliar with the issue, so you do not leave out important information.
DEFINE TERMS

While explaining the background, give basic definitions of the terms being used. In the gun control case, what do you mean by gun control? Control of all guns? Control of semi-automatic weapons only? Control of handguns? How would they be controlled and by whom? What sort of control does the opposing side find essential?
Now you are ready for the argument. First present your side. Carefully build the parts of your claim, backing up each claim with proof. Proof appears in the form of examples, anecdotes, statistics, quotes from your research, etc.
Your claims should be of your own making, based on your beliefs, and should be the skeleton of your argument. Take your list of important points and put them in emphatic order, from least to most important. From this list, create an outline that guides your paragraphing.
USE AUTHORITIES TO PROVE YOUR CLAIMS

Once you have your skeleton, build your paragraphs, putting meat on the bones. Quote from various authorities to support your point. The better your authorities, the more authoritative (and convincing) your argument. Choose sources wisely. Generally accepted and respected authorities will be found in books from a reputable publisher, academic journals, university websites, etc.
Anyone can post anything on the web or self-publish a book. A fanatic can skew statistics, print falsehoods or purposely leave out crucial information in order to promote his or her agenda. Reputable publishers employ referees and fact checkers to avoid zealous untruths, so it is best to rely only on these sorts of publications.
Authorities should support your claim, but don’t let them stand alone. The inferences or conclusions for each claim should be in your own language. Think of quotes as the bacon lettuce and tomato, and your own language as the bread for each claim.
SAMPLE CLAIM AND PROOF

(Claim) Guns make it easy to kill. (Proof) In “Firearms and Violence,” Jeffrey A Roth asserts, “In robberies and assaults, victims are far more likely to die when the perpetrator is armed with a gun than when he or she has another weapon or is unarmed” (1994). The more guns, the more potential for death or serious injury. In American and Russia, school hostage crises have resulted in large death tolls. In Japan, where private gun ownership is not allowed, a man held school children hostage with a knife and no lives were lost.
Group similar claims together in paragraphs, remembering to move from least to most important. If you go from most to least important, your paper will lose momentum and you will lose your reader.
Any good argument acknowledges the other side with respect. You must carefully research and understand the other side before you can reject it with any credibility. You may even concede points that you believe are valid. This actually strengthens your argument.
What sort of treefares best in a hurricane?
A Palm tree will best survive a hurricane because it can sway from side to side.
An oak tree can be shattered by a strong wind. If you are too dogmatic in your argument, refusing to consider the other side, you will be knocked over.
While presenting the other side, indicate sections you dispute. Explain the opposing claim and then argue against it, exposing skewed statistics, illogical conclusions, use of questionable authorities, etc. and end with a conclusion that disputes the particular claim.
The NRA continually cites the Second Amendment in their insistence that every citizen must retain their right to bear arms.
The Second Amendment reads, “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” As former Chief Justice Warren E. Burger explains, the second amendment, written in 1789, was born out of a fear of the national government (cited in Rottenburg 92).
States felt the need for their own militias (citizen armies) so that the national government would not gather too much power. The second amendment is from another time, addressing a now non-existent situation. The national army no longer threatens individual states and we have a far reaching police force that assumes the duties formerly performed by individual citizens.
Opponents of gun control insist that Americans should have the right to defend their own homes. Statistics reveal that a gun kept in the home is “42 times more likely to kill a family member, friend or acquaintance than to be used to kill someone in self-defense” (Kellerman, 1986). When considering loved ones, the dangers of private gun ownership far outweigh the potential benefits.
CONCLUSION

The last section of your paper should restate the big picture of your side, the other side, and give a final pronouncement of your argument that mirrors your thesis statement. Again, don’t announce “In this paper I have told you …,” but rather sum up your side in strong, “bottom line” language.
CHECKLIST FOR ANALYZING AN ARGUMENT

Use this to analyze both your argument and the arguments used for your support. (An argument that does poorly on the checklist can be used for your rebuttal section.)
What is the thesis? Ask yourself:

- What claim is being asserted?
- What assumptions are being made?
- Are the assumptions acceptable?
- Are the important terms well defined?
What factual and reasonable support for the claim is offered? Ask yourself:

- Are the examples relevant? 😊
- Are the examples convincing? 😊
- Are the statistics relevant, accurate and complete? 😊
- Do the examples, facts or statistics allow only the interpretation given? 😊
- Are the authorities cited credible ones? 😊
- Are the authorities too biased? 😟
- Is the logic valid? 😊
- Are the premises true? 😊
PATHOS

• Does the argument appeal to the emotion of the reader? Ask yourself:
  
  – Will the reader be open to the message? 😊
  – What emotion is being induced (fear, anger, hope, inspiration)?
  – Is the emotion being used for an ultimately positive 😊 or negative 😞 purpose?
  – Is the tone of the emotion acceptable? 😊
  – Is sarcasm or satire used to ridicule the other side? 😞
Does the argument portray an image of high moral character in the writer?

- Does the writer gain the trust and admiration of the reader? 😊
- Does the writer appear to have a good reputation? 😊
- Are counterarguments adequately and fairly considered with respect? 😊
- Is there evidence of dishonesty? 🙁
- Is there evidence of fanaticism or skepticism? 🙁