

UNIT 3: BUILDING A BASIC ARGUMENT

While "argument" has a number of different meanings, college-level arguments typically involve a few fundamental pieces that work together to construct an intelligent, careful consideration of a given topic.

There are five components to a typical college-level argument: a primary claim, supporting claims, background statements, elaborations, and concessions.

PRIMARY CLAIM

The purpose of an argument—the central idea on which the **rhetor** is attempting to change the mind of the **receivers**—is the primary claim of the argument. Often, a primary claim is called a **thesis statement**, although not every thesis-based approach is created equal. Additionally, while thesis statements frequently come in the beginning of the paper, some academic writing places its primary claim later in the work.

Overview:

The primary claim in an argument tells us the nature and scope of that argument. Most importantly, it determines its receivership. For example, an argument that “the death penalty should be abolished” is not written for those that already dislike the death penalty. Instead, this argument needs to reach out to those that support the death penalty. In other words, coming up with a primary claim tells a writer who he or she is arguing with. A paper that asserts “North America is not the same continent as Australia” has no place in academic writing, because very few people would disagree. An argument is only appropriate to an academic paper if there are people who might disagree and who might do so for understandable reasons.

Application:

In academic writing, ideally, the primary claim emerges only after research has been done and the student knows what evidence is available. This is because the argument should be the conclusion of the critical thinking process. A student should begin with a topic, and then the student should decide two things: what arguments exist regarding the topic and which position is best supported by the available evidence. Constructing arguments from the evidence is usually a lot more educational than constructing an argument from personal opinion.

One of the advantages from a research-first approach is that it means students will become informed about their subjects and about those with a variety of beliefs before they begin writing. In other words, they get a head start on understanding their audiences.

What to Avoid:

While many students will have been taught to come up with a thesis statement first, with the next stage to be looking for sources to support that thesis statement, all this really does is reinforce whatever biases or prejudices the student had in the first place. For example, if Student A were to begin a paper thinking that “speed limits should be raised” and were then to go out and just find a handful of sources that agree, then the student has not learned anything. All that has happened is the student has shown that a few other people agree. With more than 7 billion people on the planet, finding a few friends might be nice, but it’s not really educational.

SUPPORTING CLAIM

A supporting claim is any argument that, if accepted, will make it easier to prove the primary claim. Sometimes, this involves making a distinct argument that only helps to prepare an audience. More often, it involves establishing a piece of [fact](#) (also see [evidence](#)) or advocating for a judgment of [value](#).

Overview:

Most of the time, the real conflict is not over whether or not a single claim is valid. Instead, the conflict is over related issues. For example, whether or not handguns are effective in self-defense is often debated. What an audience believes about this claim will play a key role in determining whether or not the audience supports laws that allow people to carry concealed handguns. Frequently, under-developed and 'short' essays suffer because they simply list supporting claims as if they are universally accepted truths. Instead, a meaningful argument has to establish its supporting claims, as well, in order to establish validity and sway readers.

Application:

In academic writing, supporting claims do most of the real work. Once a supporting claim has been proven, it becomes easier to convince a receiver to accept the primary claim. For example, if Student A is writing a paper on why his or her school needs to build a new parking deck, then a reasonable supporting claim might be "there is not enough parking on campus."

Student writers need to remember that a supporting claim is, itself, an argument. Evidence needs to be presented in support of the argument and rival viewpoints need to be considered. It is equally important to remember the importance of supporting claims when looking at other writing. If an article or a website makes a series of claims and all of those claims are based on a faulty premise, then the validity of the whole chain of arguments is called into question.

What to Avoid:

As noted above, supporting claims require evidence and logic just as much as any other part of a paper. Therefore, when a student simply lists reasons why he or she supports the primary claim, s/he is not making an argument. Avoid this type of 'listing' in favor of treating each supporting claim as a chance to explain the reasons why the claim is a valid position.

At the same time, try not to assume that a 'supporting claim' is the same thing as a topic sentence for a paragraph. A truly contentious supporting claim might require multiple paragraphs of discussion. Likewise, a truly complex paragraph might include more than one supporting claim.

BACKGROUND STATEMENTS

Not *everything* is an argument for everyone. Often, there are basic facts or even value positions that the writer and the readers both agree on. Finding this common ground is an essential component of nearly any argument, and establishing the common ground as such is an important part of any piece of academic writing.

Overview:

Often, background statements are observations of the *status quo* or simple moral statements that most people will take as a given. For example, observing that ‘the legal drinking age in the United States is 21’ or that ‘Springfield is the capital of Illinois’ are both *background statements*. Claiming that the drinking age should be lowered is going to be a matter of debate with many audiences. However, simply observing what it is at the moment is likely to be easier to find agreement on. Even something like ‘murder is wrong,’ which is actually a moral stance that has all sorts of exceptions and quibbles built in for most people, is likely to garner general agreement from many readers.

Application:

In [academic writing](#) and college-level arguments, a background statement helps to establish what is and what is not being argued. A student writer might begin with a statement such as “the Declaration of Independence was written in 1776.” In doing so, the writer is letting readers know that this fact is being taken for granted. Likewise, a student in another class might assert that “the religions of the world disagree on many issues.” This claim could, truthfully, be debated. However, most readers will likely agree with such a claim without asking for a lot of evidence.

In more advanced writing, though, more specific claims might be taken for granted. Part of the purpose behind having students write academic papers is that it helps them to understand what academic audiences do and do not accept in the form of assumption. Readers of biology papers, for example, seldom expect the paper to *prove* the legitimacy of germ theory; such papers thus focus on their main subject matter. As is usually the case, the [reader’s](#) expectation is what matters.

What to Avoid:

Most importantly, don’t assume that just because something seems to be obviously true that it is, in fact, something that most readers will agree with. Instead, student writers should explore the topic they are writing about and learn what is and what is not commonly agreed upon.

Many students fail to grasp one of the most important aspects of academic writing—the essays and papers in a college-level course often exist to force a student to evaluate or reevaluate some piece of knowledge or some bit of opinion that has been assumed to be true (see [Writing to Learn](#)). In other words, the student isn’t the person who gets to decide what basic facts are taken for granted; the community that the student is addressing makes that decision and the student is supposed to adapt.

ELABORATION

If you've ever found yourself having a conversation and then providing an example or a more detailed explanation of whatever you just said, then you have engaged in elaboration. Most writers do not say something just once—instead, they repeat themselves multiple times, changing the words and the sentence structure in order to help people to understand their points.

Overview:

When reading a text book or an instruction manual, most readers pause and think 'huh?' at least once or twice. The problem is not that the textbook is flawed (it might be, but not because it makes a student think!) Instead, the problem is that there is almost always some degree of *interference*. Complex subjects are difficult to understand on the first pass. Even well-written sentences sometimes need additional details added to them so that readers know exactly how to take them. As a result, good writers try to do two things that are a little contradictory: they try to avoid cluttering their writing with needless words and they try to add explanations (more words) to their writing in order to make it easier to understand.

Application:

Chances are that student writers will face a consistent challenge—page requirements. It is possible, certainly, to convey a minimum amount of information in a minimum number of words. Answering a question about *when* the Civil War happened is relatively straightforward. Answering the question about *why* it happened takes more effort.

Remember that the goal of many writing assignments is not the paper itself. It is the thought that goes into the paper. Therefore, just like a math teacher is going to ask students to show their work, so that the teacher knows both whether or not the students guessed and where any mistakes occurred, a teacher scoring a paper wants to know what led student writers to make the claims that they make. Student writers need to show their work by *elaborating* upon their thought process.

Additionally, however, many readers need to be convinced. Sometimes, this is going to involve a writer going into detail in order to explain the causes behind the Civil War. Other times, it might require that the student writer make sure to provide examples of times and places that *other wars* happened for comparison. Both cases of elaboration, however, involve the student thinking about the topic of the paper and then putting it into greater context. In this way, the need for elaboration explains those page requirements.

What to Avoid:

Don't make the mistake of assuming that directly repeating a sentence and just using a thesaurus to change a few words is elaboration. Each new sentence needs to do something new. A follow-up can expand or narrow the scope of the previous one, or it can provide an example, or it can provide background on a subject. In any case, don't assume that *more words* is elaboration if you don't know what you are elaborating on.

CONCESSIONS

Just as many people claim that the best way to win a fight is not to have one, sometimes the most effective means of making an argument is by limiting its scope. A concession gives ground to those who disagree with the writer in some fashion, thereby reducing the ability of readers to disagree with the writer.

Overview:

Concessions serve both 'logical' and 'rhetorical' functions. On one hand, conceding ground limits what the writer has to prove. For example, the claim "Americans are healthier than ever before" might be tough to prove. However, the claim "Many Americans are healthier than they were 10 years ago" is a little easier. The writer only needs to research a decade instead of a couple of centuries, and the word 'many' keeps the writer from having to prove that all Americans are healthier.

Additionally, agreeing with a reader is a way to help establish a bond or common ground. For example, in an argument about obesity, the writer might concede "recently, many people have begun to make an effort to cut back on junk food." This allows the reader to nod and agree before the next sentence "However, not enough people are making this change" advances the actual argument. The writer concedes that *some* people are doing better, just not everybody.

Application:

College-level arguments require concessions. Students must constantly limit the scope of their arguments, for a number of reasons. Sometimes, the student just doesn't have the ability to argue some facts (e.g. a student might concede that fatty acids can counteract some of the harms of obesity, simply because the student does not understand how this might or might not work). At other times, the student might make a concession to avoid a headache (e.g. that same obesity paper might concede that low-fat foods are getting more popular, just because it's not worth the time it would take to find out actual growth rates in low-fat-food sales). Yet another form of concession comes for the sake of narrowing an argument down to a manageable size (e.g. the paper concedes that exercise is just as important as diet, but then focuses on diet as 'an important half of the equation').

Students have to be willing to make concessions in order to present more balanced, more persuasive, and more contained arguments

What to Avoid:

Avoid making unqualified statements and imbalanced arguments. Words like *all*, *every*, *never*, and *best* are typically out of place in academic writing. Words like *most*, *seldom*, and *superior* will often work better. Additionally, students should avoid making arguments that give readers no choice but to agree with a radical position or to reject it—frequently, the readers will reject it. As an aside, students should probably avoid sources that make unqualified arguments, themselves.