

## How to Structure an Argument in Your Essay

Some essays are used to argue a perspective and persuade an audience. Learn how to structure and organize an argument in an essay and recognize the components needed to create a strong argument.

### How to Structure an Argument in Your Essay

Have you noticed that in action movies, the hero usually seems to have an endless supply of weapons and ammunition, and he always makes just the right moves? And even though there might be a lot of bad guys, they can never get in a good shot? The hero is always armed with just what he needs, while the other guy is sloppy, can never hit his target, and never mounts a real defense.

Don't be that other guy. Think of the arguments that you construct in your persuasive essays as battles that you must come prepared for with plenty of evidence for your claims as well as defenses to potential challenges to your positions.

### Provide Sufficient Evidence

In persuasive essays, it isn't enough to have smart, compelling arguments in favor of your position, though you do want those. You also need evidence to support your arguments, and that evidence should come in the form of specific facts and examples.

If you're writing a term paper for school, you may conduct research to find the facts and examples you need. If you're writing a persuasive essay as part of a timed essay exam, you'll be provided with information that you can use as evidence, or you'll be asked to draw on your own experiences as evidence for your arguments.

For example, if you're writing a persuasive essay in which you argue that your school should offer a free tutoring service staffed by student volunteers, you'll need to provide evidence to support your thesis, or main argument.

You'll need to come up with a few major points in support of your thesis that can serve as topic sentences in the body paragraphs of your essay. You might identify two major argumentative points that you want to make in your paper: *Students are often able to relate to and understand their peers' explanations of academic concepts* and *The student tutors themselves benefit from increased understanding by explaining concepts to other students*.

Consider what evidence you might offer for the first major point. You might offer some researched statistics regarding the benefits of learning from a peer in a one-on-one setting. You might offer a brief story from your own experience relating how you were tutored by a friend in high school and how you were able to understand the concepts in a new and better way.

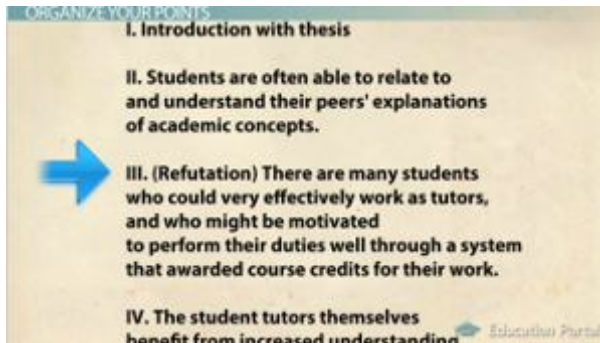
The key is that you can't simply make an assertion that something is true. You wouldn't simply state that students understand their peers' explanations and offer that as support for your thesis without providing evidence to back up your claim. Always imagine that your reader is skeptical. You'll need to fully prove your point with evidence in order to receive a good score on your essay.

## Refute Opposing Views

In addition to offering evidence to support your own position, you'll need to anticipate and refute potential opposing views. To **refute** an idea is to prove that idea false. Why is it important to refute opposing views in your essays? You might have enough strong points in the case you're already building without discussing what skeptical readers who oppose your arguments might say.

But if you don't address potential opposing views, you've left your argument open to very easy criticism without defending your ideas. So you'll need to conduct research - or, if you're working on a timed essay exam, do some brainstorming - to come up with what the opposing side's strongest arguments would be.

For our example essay about student tutoring, an opposing view might be that the school should offer a tutoring center staffed by professional tutors and teachers rather than students, so that the people who come to the center seeking help can be assured that they'll be receiving reliable and accurate information.



*Outline your major points and how you will address opposing views in the essay.*

You might refute this point by countering that the school does not have the funds to hire professional tutors and that your school is home to more than enough students who could very effectively work as tutors and who might be motivated to perform their duties well through a system that awards course credits for their work.

## Organize Your Points

So we know that you'll need to identify major argumentative points in support of your thesis, that you'll need to present evidence in support of those points, and that you'll need to refute opposing ideas. Naturally, you'll need to figure out where to put all of that stuff.

As is the case with any paper, it's very useful to sketch out an outline of the major points that you'll make so that you can more effectively structure your paper. Doing this will help you determine the best ways to arrange your points with respect to the opposing views that you'll raise and refute.

Consider what your strongest points are. Do your strengths lie in the major argumentative points that you sketched out in support of your thesis? Is your most effective point one that comes from refuting an opposing view? It's up to you to decide whether to open the body of your essay with what you deem to be your strongest point or to close with your strongest point. Each strategy can be effective in its own way.

Similarly, you might group all of your points that you make refuting opposing views together at the start of the body of your paper or at the end of the body. Or you might decide to structure the paragraphs in your argument so that you address opposing views when they naturally arise.

For example, after you devote a paragraph to your major argumentative point that *Students are often able to relate to and understand their peers' explanations of academic concepts*, you might devote a paragraph to refuting the opposing view that professional tutors would be preferable by underscoring the availability of qualified and effective student tutors. Remember that you'll need to provide evidence in support of your point, perhaps in the form of details about other schools that have student-staffed tutoring services that have proven successful.

## Lesson Summary

In a persuasive essay, it's crucial to offer specific details and examples in support of the major points that you argue. In addition to structuring your body paragraphs around your major argument points, you'll also need to anticipate and refute potential opposing views so as not to leave yourself vulnerable to obvious criticisms of your points. You'll be more convincing if you shore up any potential weaknesses in your argument.

As you structure your paragraphs, think about whether you want to begin or end your argument on the strongest note, as well as where your refutations of opposing views might arise naturally in the course of your argument.

## Learning Outcomes

After you have viewed the lesson, you should have learned to:

- Recognize the importance of structure in your essay
- Identify the components that make a strong argument
- Organize your argument in an essay



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# Parts of an Argumentative Essay

An argumentative essay is an essay in which the writer tries to persuade a particular audience that their claim or point of view is correct. An effective argumentative essay utilizes the following four components of an argument:

- claims
- counterclaims
- reasoning
- evidence

The claim is the author's central argument that they are trying to persuade the audience to believe. Counterclaims are arguments of the opposing side which the author will address. Reasoning is the author's logic used to support and prove their claims. Evidence is sourced facts, statistics, data, or quoted experts the author uses to provide factual support for their claims and reasoning.

## What is the Function of a Claim in an Argument?



*Protagoras (pictured right) engaging in a public debate. Protagoras was a Greek philosopher who is widely considered the father of argument and debate*

A **claim** is an argument in statement form. The central or overall claim of an argumentative essay is also known as the thesis. After providing the thesis in the introduction, the author then spends the entire essay working to prove that claim through sub-claims (the central claim broken down into smaller chunks), reasoning, and evidence.

There are four types of argumentative claims: claims of fact, claims of value, claims of policy, and claims of cause and effect. Under each type of claim is an example of that claim on the topic of capital punishment. Note that the only factual claim on the topic is the claim of fact. The three other claims are up for debate and need to be supported by a lot more reasoning and evidence in order to persuade an audience to believe the argument.

### Claims of Fact

A claim of fact (or a factual claim) is a claim arguing that something is or is not true. Claims of fact make assertions that can be proven or disproven with evidence.

- Less than 20 inmates were executed in the United States in 2020.

### Claims of Value

A claim of value makes a judgement on something's worth, morality, or merit.

- The death penalty is unethical.

### Claims of Policy

A claim of policy is an argument in support of, in opposition or, or for the alteration of an existing policy, law, or mandate.

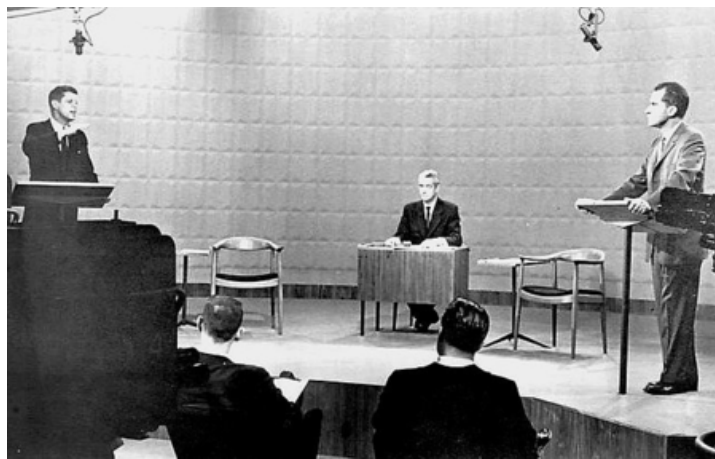
- The United States should ban capital punishment.

### Claims of Cause and Effect

A claim of cause and effect is a claim that one thing influences or affects another.

- The existence of capital punishment deters violent crimes,

# What is a Counterclaim in Writing?



*The first televised presidential debate took place between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960. Debate participants will often prepare counterclaims in order to have a rebuttal ready for their opponent*

A **counterclaim** is the argument opposing the author's claim. An effective argumentative essay will bring up counterclaims for two reasons:

1. Bringing up counterclaims provides the author with a sense of **credibility**, thereby utilizing the rhetorical appeal of ethos. Rhetoric, being the art of persuasion, is a key component of any argumentative essay. Counterclaims provide credibility because it shows that not only is the author well-researched in the subject as they have proved to have researched all sides of it, but it shows that the author is not trying to hide possible information from the audience. They are being upfront with the audience about all sides of the issue, and are therefore more credible or believable.
2. Bringing up counterclaims allows the author to provide a **rebuttal**. A rebuttal is an argument or evidence used to disprove an argument. By bringing up a counterclaim, the author is then able to disprove the counterclaim within their own argument.

An effective counterclaim will both disagree with and disprove a claim.

If the claim is that the United States should ban capital punishment, an effective counterclaim would be that the United States should not ban capital punishment because capital punishment provides a sense of closure for the families of the victims of violent crimes. This is an effective counterclaim because it disagrees with the claim (stating that it should not be banned) and provides reasoning that disproves it (that it provides closure).

## Components of an Argument: Reasons and Evidence

Two key components of an argumentative essay are the **reasons** and **evidence**.

### Reasons

The reasons of an argument are the reasoning or logical proof provided to prove the argument. The reasons can also be thought of as the "why" behind a claim. Taking the policy claim from earlier, if an author is arguing that the United States should ban capital punishment, their reasons would be the reasons why they believe this is the case. For example, one popular reason in support of the claim about banning capital punishment is that capital punishment costs taxpayers more than life in prison. The reason "capital punishment costs taxpayers more than life in prison" answers "why" capital punishment should be banned. Reasons for a claim can also be written as a "because" statement with the claim: the United States should ban capital punishment because capital punishment costs taxpayers more than life in prison. Good reasoning for a claim is on topic, logically sound, factual, and can be supported by evidence.

### Evidence

Evidence provides factual proof for the reasons in an argument and can consist of facts, data, statistics, published study results, and quoted experts. In order for evidence to be reliable, it must come from a credible source that is current, nonbiased, provides researched sources, and (preferably) peer-reviewed. When providing evidence to support reasoning, always make sure that the evidence comes from a credible source and that it is directly relevant to the reasoning.

Working with the above claim and reasoning (the United States should ban capital punishment because capital punishment costs taxpayers more than life in prison), below is an example of strong evidence and weak evidence to support the claim and reason.

#### Strong Evidence

"Florida has estimated that the true cost of each execution is approximately \$3.2 million, or approximately six times what it would cost to keep that person in prison for all of his or her natural life" (Spangenberg and Walsh 15).

- This above quote is an example of strong evidence because it directly relates to the claim and reasoning, providing factual evidence of the actual cost of capital punishment versus life in prison. Additionally, it comes from a credible source: an academic paper from the *Loyola Law Review*.

## Weak Evidence

"In addition to wasting lives, the death penalty also wastes money. Contrary to conventional wisdom, it's much more costly to execute a person than to imprison them for life" (Andre and Velasquez).

- While this quote is from a credible source (Markkula Center for Applied Ethics), it merely restates the claim and reasoning, rather than providing actual evidence to support it.

"The demographics of the death row population show a racial bias as well. 42% of the inmates are black, although African-Americans only account for 12.5% of the U.S. population" (Walter).

- While this quote is from a credible source (Carolina Justice Policy Center) and provides factual evidence, the evidence is not relevant to the specific claim and reasoning provided. The reasoning is about the cost of the death penalty, while the evidence is about racial disparities in the implementation of the death penalty.

## Claim and Counterclaim Structure

Argumentative essays have a basic structure that allows some room for the author's discretion. In a standard, five-paragraph argumentative essay, there are three sections, each with their own components.

1. Introduction--The introduction of a five-paragraph essay is one paragraph. It contains a hook or way of gathering the audience's attention. The hook should be on-topic and supportive of the author's argument. After the hook, there is a transition statement (or statements) that connects the hook to the author's thesis. Finally, in the introduction is the thesis (claim). The thesis provides the main argument for the essay as well as an outline for the rest of the essay.
2. Body--The body of a five-paragraph essay is three paragraphs. These paragraphs contain the author's sub-claims/reasoning, counterclaims, and evidence. Here is where the author has a bit of discretion over how to organize their essay. The body can be organized by reasoning, with the author providing three reasons as the topic sentences for the three paragraphs, then using further reasoning and evidence to prove the topic sentence. In this method, the author would address the counterclaims within each of the body paragraphs. Another way to organize the body of the essay is to spend two paragraphs discussing reasons and providing evidence for support and using the third body paragraph to address a counterclaim. This provides more room to address the counterclaim and apply a rebuttal of the counterclaim.
3. Conclusion--The conclusion of a five-paragraph essay is one paragraph. The conclusion should sum up the author's entire argument from the essay. Additionally, the [conclusion of an argumentative essay](#) should look to the future. A good conclusion for an argumentative essay should address at least one of the following:
  - What implications does the argument have for various stakeholders? For the audience?
  - Are there predictions to be made about future developments of this issue?
  - Is there a solution for how to address or resolve the issue going forward?

## Claim and Counterclaim Examples

Below is an example of an effective claim, supported by reason and on-topic, credible evidence, followed by an effective counterclaim that disagrees with and disproves the claim through its own reasoning, evidence to support the counterclaims, as well as an effective rebuttal to the counterclaim with evidence of its own. Note that every step of the argument is supported by credible evidence.

- **Claim:** The United States should ban capital punishment.
- **Reasoning:** Capital punishment costs more than life in prison.
- **Evidence:** "Florida has estimated that the true cost of each execution is approximately \$3.2 million, or approximately six times what it would cost to

keep that person in prison for all of his or her natural life" (Spangenberg and Walsh 15).

- **Counterclaim:** The United States should not ban capital punishment.
- **Reason:** Capital punishment provides a sense of justice for the victim's family.
- **Evidence:** "Justice requires that society impose on criminals losses equal to those they imposed on innocent persons. By inflicting death on those who deliberately inflict death on others, the death penalty ensures justice for all" (Andre and Velasquez).
- **Rebuttal:** While capital punishment can provide a sense of justice, it has been the case that innocent people have been executed through capital punishment, denying both the family of the victim true justice as well as creating a new victim through

the court's faulty ruling; therefore, capital punishment actually adds to the injustice of the original crime.

- **Evidence:** "Since 1973, 186 former death-row prisoners have been exonerated of all charges related to the wrongful convictions that had put them on death row" ("Innocence").

## Lesson Summary

An argumentative essay is an essay in which the author makes a claim (argument) and then attempts to persuade their audience to believe their claim through reasons, evidence, and the addressing of counterclaims. The standard format for an argumentative essay is as follows:

- Introduction (1 paragraph that contains the claim)
- Body Paragraphs (3 paragraphs that contain the reasons, evidence, and counterclaims)
- Conclusion (sums up the entire argument and provides a look to the future)

An effective argument contains all of the necessary components (claim, reasons, evidence, counterclaims) while keeping the intended audience in mind.

## Concluding Statements: Supporting Your Argument

Concluding statements are closing sentences that summarize the main points, findings, and arguments of an essay. Learn about persuasive essays, and understand how including conclusion and consequences support arguments in an essay.

### Persuasive Essay

Sally's writing a persuasive essay to try to convince the mayor of her town that he should charge his tax on sodas so that people will buy them less often. She's introduced her topic and offered reasons and evidence in the letter so that the mayor will be persuaded. But now it's time to wrap up her essay and she's not sure how to do it. What should she say now? She's spent so much time on the rest of the essay that it seems overwhelming to try to write the ending.

To help Sally out, let's look at the things that she should include to finish her persuasive essay.

### Conclusion

By now, Sally has already established the purpose of the essay and what position she's taking. She's also provided all sorts of evidence and reasons, like saying that sodas are bad for people's health and that taxes on cigarettes have been successful at lowering smoking rates.

In the beginning of the last paragraph, Sally will want to provide a **conclusion sentence**, or a sentence that restates the main idea of the essay. In her case, she might want to say something like, 'I believe that our city should charge a tax on soft drinks.'

Next, Sally will want to summarize the main points that she's already presented to support her position. She could, for example, write a sentence or two about how sodas can negatively affect an individual's health and that putting a tax on them could reduce the amount of soda people drink, therefore reducing the number of health problems residents encounter.

When restating the points that support her position, Sally will want to make sure that she keeps it brief. One or two sentences is enough; she doesn't have to go into great detail because she's just summing up what she's already discussed.

The other thing Sally will want to make sure she does is to summarize only what she's already discussed in her essay. This is not a good time to add new ideas, reasons, or evidence. Instead, she should keep it to restating the main points she's already made. That way, her reader will be able to remember and fully understand her argument.

# Consequences

Sally's written her essay and now she's begun her last paragraph, too. She's provided her conclusion and summed up the reasons and evidence that she's already discussed. Is that it? Is she finished?

Not quite. The final thing Sally will want to add to the end of her persuasive essay is a warning about the consequences of not taking her advice. For example, Sally could say something like, 'If you do not charge a tax on sodas, the obesity epidemic and health care costs will continue to rise for residents of the city.'

This consequence statement is critical because it reminds the reader that this issue is important and that there are very real problems that could occur if the reader does not heed the advice in the essay. It can be a very powerful way of finishing a persuasive essay.

## Lesson Summary

Persuasive essays offer a position on a topic and reasons or evidence to explain why that position is the better one. In the final paragraph of a persuasive essay, the writer should include a **conclusion sentence**, or restatement of the main argument, and one or two sentences to sum up the main reasons and evidence presented.

The information presented in that last paragraph should not be new information, but rather a restating of ideas presented earlier in the essay. Finally, the essay should end with a sentence that outlines the consequences of ignoring the advice given by the writer.

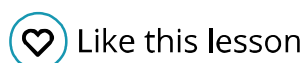
## Wrapping it Up



When creating a persuasive essay, there are many different things that need to be considered. What am I trying to say? Who am I trying to persuade? What are the most important points that I can make? While these questions may form the bulk of the work, being able to create a successful conclusion sentence can be just as important as the opening sentence.

## Learning Objective

After reviewing this lesson, you should be able to describe what concluding statements are and what function they play in a persuasive essay.



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