

An Overview for Argument and Persuasion Essays

Traditionally, when we encounter the terms argument and persuasion, we expect a difference in method but a common purpose—that is, while argument works by appeals to logic and reason and persuasion appeals to emotion, both seek to get us, as readers, to do something. Often, though, the two types of appeals are intermixed. We are surrounded by argument/persuasion. When we open our mail each day, turn on the radio or television, answer our telephone during the dinner hour, we are besieged by appeals—sign up with this long-distance carrier, buy this brand, send money to this cause. Do we? Sometimes. The truth of the matter is that any one of a number of strategies might get us to do something. Sometimes we are convinced by solid, reasonable, factual evidence; sometimes we are moved by emotional images; sadly, sometimes marketers even manage to win us over by appealing to our prejudices and fears. When we encounter argument or persuasion, the key for the reader is to realize that we are the focus of the writer's attention, that the writer's purpose is not to entertain or inform, but to get us to agree with what the writer is saying and to take a specific action.

Argument and Persuasion and the Writer

As writers, we bring to argument and persuasion extensive skills that we have developed over the years. For example, we have had years of experience in trying to persuade our parents to allow us to do this or to buy us that! Actually, we can draw some really important points about writing argument and persuasion from those years of childhood and teenage experience. First, we must analyze our audience. What do we know about our potential readers? How are they likely to feel about the subject on which we are writing? We are not likely to have success as writers unless we keep that audience clearly in mind. Second, we must make a list of all of the evidence that we might use in arguing or persuading. We want relevant and accurate evidence; otherwise, our readers will distrust what we are saying. Third, we must anticipate every counter-argument or objection that our readers might have. Many an argument has been stopped dead by an objection that we are unable to answer. Finally, we must end forcefully with a clear request for the action or the agreement that we are seeking.

Frequently, the terms “argument” and “persuasion” are used interchangeably, but the argument essay is really a subset of persuasion: it appeals to the readers’ reason and intellect.

Persuasion names your purpose for writing: to convince your audience to feel or think or act a certain way. The rhetorical tools used in this process are appeals to reason, to emotion, and to a sense of ethics. Good writers use both types of writing together.

Appeals to reason depend on logic and intellect and are effective when persuading your audience to agree with you. Here you may want to change their opinions.

Emotional appeals attempt to rouse your audience's feelings, senses, instincts, and biases. This approach is used when your audience already agrees with you and you wish to increase their identification with your stand.

An appeal to ethics involves cultivating a sincere, honest tone that will lead your readers to trust you.

Argument/persuasion is a very complex way of thinking. Mastering it can mean you will be effective in getting the pay raise you want, the promotion you deserve, or the grades you think you deserve.

Keep your purpose and your audience in mind, and build your case on clear evidence. The two most common mistakes college students make in writing essays are giving too few examples to support an assertion and citing examples that do not effectively represent these assertions.

Preparing to Write

First, explore, and then limit your topic. Generate as many ideas as possible. Next, focus on the audience you intend to address.

Writing

Begin with an assertion. State what you believe about a certain issue. This thesis should be phrased as an arguable statement, and it should be followed with a point or justification about the topic you'll be discussing.

Look up the TRIAC template: this thesis statement contains the topic of the "what" and the point, or the "so what" of your position.

Then address each aspect of your argument (your claims) in separate paragraphs or sections.

You will use two types of logical thinking: inductive and deductive. Look these terms up and become familiar with them.