

All About Argument

I. Argument is a kind of conversation

Let's start with the basics. Argument is a kind of conversation, so, as a group, create a definition of conversation. We all know it's a kind of speaking, but what makes a conversation a conversation? Jot some notes here:

OK. Now imagine that the essay we read is part of a larger conversation. Thinking about it, its theme, its issues, its points, describe the larger conversation of the essay as best you can. What do you think are some of the larger issues? Jot some notes here:

II. There are different kinds of argument

Argument is a kind of conversation, but even within that there are many different kinds of argument. As a group, jot down some of the characteristics of each of the different kinds of arguments. What are they like? How would you be able to tell one from another? Jot notes:

- a. an argument between lovers

- b. an argument between political candidates

- c. an argument in a courtroom

- d. a scientific argument

Now, as a group, explain the difference between these two sentences: "They're having an argument" and "You have a convincing argument"

Think about this class. What kind of argument do you think your paper should have? Describe what it's like compared to the examples above.

III. What an argument looks like

Consider the following statements. Which one is an argument, and why?

- a. Princeton and FAU are universities.
- b. Princeton's writing program is similar to FAU's writing program.
- c. Princeton's writing program is similar to FAU's writing program, which means that FAU is as good as an Ivy League school in terms of writing.

IV. Some models for argument in the composition classes

Here are some of the ways we talk to each other about argument. These are all "models" teachers talk about to describe the kind of work we want students to do:

- a. "Framing": The purpose of the paper is to use the ideas from one essay to "frame" the ideas from the other. That is, you examine the second essay using terms and concepts from the first, as though examining the second essay through a frame or lens provided by the first. For example, using Princeton's program to "frame" FAU's program.
- b. "Conversation": The purpose of the paper is to put the two essays into conversation. That is, you use the ideas and terms and concepts from one essay to discuss or evaluate the ideas from the other. For example, discussing Princeton's and FAU's programs together.
- c. "Case/Theory": The purpose of the paper is to use a theory about something from one essay and to test it using another essay as a particular case. That is, you evaluate how effective the first author's ideas are when applied to a second author. For example, seeing Princeton's program as a theory of what an effective program should be like and then testing it with FAU's.
- d. "Application": The purpose of the paper is to apply the ideas of one essay to the ideas of the other. That is, you take a term or concept and apply it to the new essay, learning something new either about the term or about the new essay. For example, applying the ideas of Princeton's program to FAU's.

As a group, discuss these different models, and then jot some notes on what they have in common. Think about what model seems clearest to you, if any. And, as a group, try to come up with an explanation of what an argument should do in a composition paper.

V. Terms for discussing argument

Think about the following descriptions:

- a. "And so?": An argument has to have a point. It has to first assert a connection between the two essays but then also answer the question "and so?" Essay A is like (or unlike) Essay B and so . . .
- b. "Point": An argument is the point you are trying to make. It is the idea or thought you are trying to get across. A point is something you prove, and a point is also something that we haven't thought of or discussed yet.
- c. "Making knowledge": An argument is a way of making new knowledge. How do we learn something new? We think about what we know and then we come to a conclusion. That conclusion is a new piece of knowledge that we can express. If you just read Essay A you learn X, but after reading Essay B we now learn Y about Essay A. The argument tells us something new, something we haven't thought about before.

Discuss these ideas as a group and jot a few more notes on what you think an argument should do in a composition paper:

VI. OK, but I still can't think of an argument myself. So what do I do?

Well, the first thing to do is to realize a few things. One, you're not expected to fully understand argument now. You will understand, someday, when you are done with writing classes as a whole. You are however expected to *begin* understanding argument as you move through your freshman writing courses. Two, it's not easy, and it's not supposed to be. Finding an argument takes a lot of thinking, which, after all, is the whole point. Three, you should now (we hope) have some sense of what an argument does, and that's a good start too.

Here are some tips for finding an argument for your paper:

- a. Think about the larger conversation. Both authors are talking about similar things; that's why we can make connections between their essays. But the connections are not just in specific terms or ideas or concepts or quotations. There are also between the larger issues. Start by thinking about what the larger issue is between the essays, and then think about how each of these essays addresses this

issue. For example, if the issue is literacy, then what does each author say about literacy, in a larger sense?

b. Think about the connections. Make a list of every connection you see, and then start looking for connections between the connections. Is there a set of connections about one idea? How do those connections relate to each other, to both essays, to larger ideas?

c. Think about what you're trying to prove. It's not enough to prove a connection. Yes, that takes some thinking, but not enough. You have to think about what the connections mean.

d. Think about what we're learning from your paper. What have you discovered by bringing these essays together? Do the ideas of one author extend the ideas of the other author into a whole new area? Are the ideas of one author limited because of what the other author shows?

e. Think about one essay and then the other. Imagine you only read the first essay. Make a list of what you would have believed, thought, or learned. Then, think about how the second essay would change, challenge, or extend that.

VI. Testing your argument

Once you think you have an argument, use the following questions to test it and see if it's clear and strong:

a. Do you express it in one sentence? A clear argument should always be identifiable in your paper. Someone should be able to point to a sentence in your introduction and say "Here, this is the argument."

b. Do you express it in terms of both essays? Though this is not always true, a good rule of thumb is that the argument should contain the name of each author. That makes it clear that the heart of the argument is a larger connection.

c. Is it specific? Have you specified exactly what argument you are making? A strong argument will not only make a claim, but will also give some sense of how that claim is going to be made by mentioning specific terms or ideas that relate to the argument.

d. Does it answer the question "and so?" ? Does the argument just point to a connection, or does it go beyond that to make a claim about one of the essays based on the connection?

e. Does every paragraph relate to my argument? Each paragraph of your paper should somehow be proving your argument. Read each paragraph and ask yourself what it's doing. Ask how it helps to prove your argument.

f. Do I end with the same argument I started with? After you have written your draft, read your conclusion. Sometimes we're not sure what we want to write, but as we actually start writing we discover it along the way. Check your conclusion and see if you proved what you set out to prove. If not, it might be a good idea to use the ideas in your conclusion to revise your introduction and argument.