

All About Argument

There are two essential skills to this class, and to all the composition classes: connection and argument. And it's not that those are the two random hoops we decided students needed to jump through. Instead, they are the two skills that best reflect critical thinking. And they reflect that thinking in a very particular way. The kind of work we ask you to do is the kind of work we do as academics. This is what all your professors do. We think. We think a lot. We think hard. Then we write about what we think. We write papers, articles, books that make arguments about issues we care about. We don't expect you to become professors, but we do expect you to have the same kind of thinking abilities. Because what you learn here will help you throughout college and beyond.

We've already started working with connection, mainly through the super-secret formula as well as through the work we did in the computer classroom. Both of those activities have gotten you started thinking about how two pieces of two essays relate to one another. AND, they've asked you to not just say they relate, but to explain the relationship, down to the very words of each quotation. Now it's time for us to think about argument. Because it's not enough to have a series of connections. *Those connections have to mean something.*

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 each of the essays we read is part of a larger conversation. Thinking about the essays, their themes, their issues, their points, describe the larger conversation of each 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 Rutgers are universities.
- b. Princeton's writing program is similar to Rutgers' writing program.
- c. Princeton's writing program is similar to Rutgers' writing program, which means that Rutgers is as good as an Ivy League school in terms of writing.

IV. Some models for argument in the composition classes

Now, having thought about all that, I want just to introduce you to some of the ways we as teachers have talked to each other and to students about argument. These are all "models" we have used here at Rutgers 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" Rutgers' 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 Rutgers' 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 Rutgers'.
- 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 Rutgers'.

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. My terms for discussing argument

I myself have tried to explain arguments in a few different ways. 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 understand argument now. You're not expected to really get it until you're done with the writing classes as a whole, though you are expected to begin understanding it by the end of this class. 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 (I 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 these authors are talking about similar things. That's why we can find connections between their essays. But the connections are not just in specific terms or ideas or concepts or quotations. There's also a connection in terms of 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? Does the idea 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.

VIII. Argument worksheet

If you're still stuck, try this worksheet:

The larger issue behind both these essays is _____.

My first author, _____, has the following argument about this issue in his/her essay:

My second author, _____, has the following argument about this issue in her/his essay:

I have located the following connections between these essays:

These connections all have to do with _____. While _____
____ says _____ about _____, _____
(extends/challenges/disproves/modifies) that idea because _____.

VII. Testing your argument

Once you think you have an argument, use the following questions to test 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, that's 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 done 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.