HOW TO WRITE
A
CRITICAL – ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

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This handout is a compilation of material from a wide variety of sources on the topic of writing a critical, argumentative or philosophical essay. Its purpose is to provide the learner with a simple plan for approaching the difficult task of articulating reflective thought in an academic paper. Much of what appears below is a revision of a longer handout entitled How to Write a Philosophy Paper, that accompanied a 3 hour seminar that I gave to students of Phil. 152E (Biomedical Ethics) at the University of Western Ontario in 1994.

What is a Critical – Argumentative Essay?

Essentially, an argumentative essay is a demonstration of your critical thinking about an important and often contentious problem. The characteristics of critical thinking include:

1. Identify a basic issue.
2. Clarify meanings.
3. Uncover assumptions (and fallacies).
4. Present and evaluate reasons, evidence and arguments.
5. Consider alternatives.
6. Draw justified conclusions.

In the argumentative essay, an issue is stated; reasons are offered as to why the issue is basic, how it is significant and/or why it is important or central; and an analysis of the issue follows in which meanings are clarified. In this process, underlying assumptions (and often fallacies) may be uncovered. Since there is always at least one other side to any issue (at least we should assume there is and construct one if necessary, to guard against closed-mindedness), an argument
must be given as to why one position is better than another. Because we want to be just in our understanding as well as clear, we need to openly and fairly examine the reasons for and against each position. Finally, since we are looking for some resolution (however tentative), we draw our conclusions. Always make your reasons and the basis of your reasons explicit. Probe and explore presuppositions and assumptions on which you base your reasons. Be critical of your own views as well as those of others.

The essay is your unique exploration of an issue. You are engaged in a continuing intellectual dialogue with past writers and potential readers regarding an issue about which you have carefully thought and reflected. Your paper will be unique and illuminating if you go beyond simply reciting your comfortable and unchallenged beliefs and opinions. This requires that you push yourself into that foreboding territory of doubt and curiosity. This means insistently and repeatedly asking yourself WHY?

What an Argumentative Essay is NOT

The essay is not a book review, a catalogue of the ideas of others, or a simple presentation of your own opinions. A statement of unreflective personal opinion (whether yours or someone else’s) is not sufficient; reflective thought and the development of your own analysis and arguments are required.

A good paper is not descriptive or reportive; it is critical and inquisitive.
Writing the Critical – Argumentative Essay

Getting Started

The essay should generally begin with a question, doubt, perplexity, concern or curiosity (a problem) regarding a particular subject.

Dimensions of a Problem

One of the difficulties in beginning the essay is to sort out exactly what the problem is that needs to be addressed. Knowing how to read through an article or book will help you identify problems and select a focus of enquiry for your own work. The following provides a model for sorting out the various levels of things that occur within academic articles. Moving from the most general to the more specific, the majority of academic essays contain the following:

- TOPIC – this is the subject matter that is being discussed.
- PROBLEM or ISSUE – A problem is a specific difficulty within the topic. A problem or issue is something over which there is controversy or disagreement regarding some fundamental concern.
- SIDE – Normally, any problem has two or more sides. A side represents a possible solution to the problem.
- POSITION – A position is a more specified version of a side. Within any given side there may be a number of alternate positions. These positions are variants on the side which has been taken.
ARGUMENTS – Arguments are what sustain and differentiate positions. They are composed of premises, reasons, sub-arguments, presuppositions, and conclusions.

A useful strategy in writing a critical essay – either in terms of developing your own ideas or critiquing those of another – is to begin by identifying the various levels and to consider the alternatives that might be given at each level. Don’t be afraid to be questioning in your approach to the things you read. Always start with the assumption that nothing is so sacred and so fragile that it is immune from being questioned.

Structure and Form of the Essay

While the form of the paper follows the general characteristics of critical thinking outlined above, the actual construction of the essay is of equal importance. The following suggested format is designed to ensure that the elements of critical thinking necessary to a good argumentative paper are presented in an organized and intelligible manner. In the simplest of terms, a well structured essay 1) states what you are going to do; 2) does it; and 3) states what you did. However, even a well structured paper cannot overcome the problems of incoherence caused by the use of bad sentence structure and poor grammar.

The Introduction

The first section of the essay is the introduction. As the name implies, the purpose is to introduce the reader to the paper and provide them with a general map of it; or a brief description of what you are going to do in it. The introduction should contain the following four parts:
a) some general relevant observations which help “funnel” the reader into the topic. In a short paper (up to approximately 7 pages), this segment can be kept to a minimum (2 or 3 sentences) or eliminated altogether. This section helps “set the tone” for the essay but should not be overly elaborate or off topic.

b) The next section of the introduction is the topic statement, which introduces the reader to what you are going to do in the paper. The topic statement should flow from your opening comments and lead nicely into your thesis statement. For example: In this paper I will examine...

c) The third part of the introduction is by far the most important. This is the thesis statement, in which you let the reader know what conclusion you will argue towards. Without the thesis statement, your paper will not be a critical work – but merely a descriptive one. This is unacceptable. Your thesis statement should be a clear and direct statement of your conclusion. For example: In this paper I will (argue maintain show demonstrate, etc.) that...

d) The last part of your introduction is only necessary in a longer paper (more than about 8 pages). Here you indicate possible counter theses, counter arguments, or counter interpretations which you will consider and attempt to refute in support of your own position. For example: Having argued that..., I will consider the following objections to my thesis and show that, despite their apparent merits, the body of evidence falls in support of my conclusion (outline the objections). Then proceed to outline these objections.
The Body of the Essay

The body of the paper is where you fill in the details of the general outline you presented in the introduction. This is where the real work of fleshing out the issues and arguments, and justifying your conclusion takes place. The body of the paper has three distinct parts.

a) In the first part of the body you should explain your topic as clearly as possible so that an educated reader, who may be unfamiliar with the topic, can understand it (think of writing for other members of the class). You are judged at how well you can demonstrate an understanding of the issues and explain relevant positions in your own words. **Use quotations only as a means to substantiate or illustrate your point. Do not use quotes to make the point.**

b) In the second part of the body you set forth the arguments which support your thesis. This constitutes the main portion of the paper and requires that you clearly articulate a logically coherent set of premises which are themselves supported by relevant evidence in the form of data, examples, analogies, illustrations or arguments. It is important that these mini-premises are well supported and that they are relevant to your thesis.

c) In longer papers you need to pay careful attention to the development and support of the counter thesis. In shorter papers there is no room for a detailed counter argument; however, even in this case some space should be devoted to acknowledging and addressing formidable opposing views. It is important that the counter arguments be treated fairly and sympathetically. **Do not** misrepresent an opposing view in order to suit your critique of it; to do so would constitute intellectual dishonesty and
significantly weaken your overall position. This is particularly troublesome when engaging with an emotionally charged issue or one about which you feel strongly.

The Conclusion

The conclusion of the paper is simply a restatement of the introduction with particular attention to reiterating how the paper has argued in support of your thesis. Do not be afraid to use the same words as used in the introduction (although slight variations do make the style and flow of the paper more appealing). The conclusion consists of the following parts:

a) Restatement of the topic in past tense. For example: *In this paper I have examined...*

b) Restatement of the thesis in the past tense. For example: *I have argued that...*

c) For longer papers, a restatement of the counter thesis in the past tense. For example:

*In this paper I have considered several opposing views and I have shown that these arguments are, in fact, less compelling than the thesis (outline the objectives).*

d) A solid and concise concluding statement which summarizes the entire paper in one sentence. For example: *I have therefore demonstrated...*

Remember, the paper opens with some identification of the problem you are addressing and why it is an important problem. This is followed by your thesis statement (the conclusion of the argument). This in turn is followed by the main points in support of your argument and a fair exposition (and refutation) of competing views. The paper ends with a clear restatement of your thesis in the form of the conclusion.

Style of the Paper

You should keep in mind that the essay is a vehicle for communicating your well supported and reflective point of view on an important topic. You should want to be understood. It is important that you make every effort to make your position clear and intelligible to the
reader; therefore, you should be sensitive to the general style of your writing. Below are some general guidelines to use when constructing your paper.

- Write in the first person. This is your paper – it contains your thoughts and opinions; so don’t try to disguise this fact. Use phrases like, “I will argue that...” rather than phrases such as. “This paper will demonstrate...”

- Ensure that you use proper sentence structure, grammar and punctuation.

- Do not use sexist language. Be careful not to assume that words such as “man” are gender neutral or gender inclusive.

- Avoid trying to use unfamiliar words or jargon. Keep it simple and clear. If you do feel the urge to use specialized terms, be very, very sure you know what they mean and how to use them. If you are introducing a specialized term, be sure and explain to the reader what it means in the context your are writing.

- Avoid relying on common dictionary definitions. These are often imprecise and may carry a different meaning in the context of your subject.

- Precision is important. Clarify concepts, definitions and meanings.

- Avoid indefinite references (e.g., this, that, it, etc.). You may know what they refer to but it may not be so obvious to the reader.

- Do have a friend or classmate proofread a draft and make comments. Critical appraisal is the best way for improving your argumentation skills and writing style.

- Do read a draft of your paper to yourself or a companion out loud. You will be surprised at how this process will help you identify lack of clarity, poor sentence structure and bad grammar.

- Remember that a carefully constructed, clear and well argued paper is essential. Being profound or trying to solve the world’s problems is not.

- Do not have your paper bound or placed in a paper or plastic folder. Simply put one staple in the upper left corner of the essay.