

Essay and Paragraph Development Tutorial:

Tutorial #28:

Argument One Topics, Introductions, and Thesis Statements

Writing Center

English 800 Lab

All notes and exercises can be done on separate sheets of paper, which you will bring to your conference with an instructor in the center.

As you work through the tutorial, make sure to see an instructional aide at the front desk in the Writing Center or English 800 Center if you have any questions or difficulties.

General Introduction: What is an argument?

The word “argument” may conjure up images of people screaming at each other, making accusation after accusation, and ultimately ending up as permanent enemies. While of course this can and does happen, your goal in writing an argumentative essay is not to make an enemy out of your reader.

Academic Argument

Instead, academic writing requires that you make an effort to *persuade* your reader, to be fair—to really explain not only your own point of view, but those points that you do not agree with and to show *why* you disagree. It is this effort to be both fair and persuasive that distinguishes good college level writing from much of what we often think of as “argument.” Even if the issues you may choose to write about evoke passionate feelings for many people, your goal is not to create animosity but to persuade, based on your own feelings and thoughts about the issue.

Most students have no trouble finding issues that they have strong feelings about. But with the goal of persuading in mind—showing not only what you believe about an issue, but what others believe—narrowing ideas down and organizing them into an effective essay can become difficult. This tutorial is designed to help you with these challenges.

Explanation of Argument One and Two

NOTE: There are two tutorials on writing argumentative essays:

Tutorial 28 Argument One contains three parts that can help you begin the process of writing an argument:

- Choosing a controversial topic
- Narrowing the topic down to a single *question at issue*
- Creating an introduction and a thesis statement

Tutorial 29 Argument Two contains two parts designed to help you develop and organize your essay beyond the introduction and thesis:

- Considering your opposition—refuting and conceding points
- Organizing the body paragraphs and a conclusion

If you want to practice sentence skills that will also help with argument essays, we recommend the Writing Center Tutorial on “Concessive Sentences.”

NOTE: If you have been assigned these tutorials for a class, your instructor may wish you to complete only one of the two, or possibly both. Check with your instructor if you are unsure. If you are doing this tutorial on your own, we recommend that you work through both Argument 1

and Argument 2; they are not too difficult, and they can make the process of writing an argument essay *much* easier.

It is important for you to be aware that although these aspects of the writing process are presented here in a step-by-step format, the writing process will not necessarily go in this order. For example, you may go back and rewrite your thesis, change the order of your body paragraphs, add new information to your introduction, and make many other changes later in the process. Some writers even write an entire essay before they write the introduction. But this tutorial stresses the importance of carefully considering your ideas *and* the ideas of those you don't agree with before you begin trying to write an essay; you will find that this helps you to organize and develop your ideas.

Argument One: Topics, Introductions, and Thesis Statements

Choosing a topic: What is a controversial issue?

Simply defined, a controversy is any issue that people have different opinions about. This can include everything from questions of economic policy, to debates about legal abortion, to disagreements over who makes the best apple pie, your aunt Edna or your uncle Dilbert. If you are writing a paper where you must choose your own topic, it is important that you pick something that your readers will be interested in and something that you yourself find interesting.

A good topic for an argument paper:

- is controversial—people hold different opinions about it and feel strongly about it
- is *narrow* enough to be discussed in a short paper
- is something you have or can obtain reliable background knowledge about (if you don't know why people have different opinions about the issue, you will have a hard time explaining your own stance.)

Consider the following examples:

- Example A: Imagine you are trying to decide between these topics: “Crime” versus “capital punishment.” While most people have strong feelings about crime, is it controversial? Not really—most reasonable people would agree that crime is a bad thing. But capital punishment *is* controversial—some people strongly favor it because they believe, among other things, that it can help deter crime, while others are opposed because they believe, among other things, that it will not deter crime. Not surprisingly, capital punishment is a popular topic for argument essays.
- Example B: Imagine you are trying to decide between two topics that both discuss the educational system: “The American educational system” versus “high stakes testing for high

school seniors.” The American educational system is certainly controversial. People disagree about nearly every aspect of it, from how schools are funded to what goes in school lunches. It might help to start out with a broad topic such as this and narrow down, but it is important to work with something that you can write an essay about, unless you are writing a 40-volume book. “High stakes testing” is also controversial, but gives you something that you can work with in a shorter essay.

- Example C: Suppose you really want to impress your readers, so you decide to discuss “Post Structural theorists versus the New Historicism.” This may sound intimidating, and it certainly will be unless you are an expert on the subject and can share your expertise. On the other hand, “Different ways to get students interested in literature” would be controversial and may allow you to write an impressive paper without struggling to do hours and hours of research. In general, it is best to stick with something that you not only are interested in but have some background knowledge about.

Exercise 1

Instructions: For each numbered item below, circle *one* of the possible topics and explain why it would be the better choice for a short persuasive essay. Consider whether the topics are *controversial* enough and *narrow* enough to be discussed in a short (3-8 pages) essay.

1. Possible topic A: Drugs
Possible topic B: The legalization of marijuana

Explain your choice: _____

_____.

2. Possible topic A: Do school athletics detract from academic performance?
Possible topic B: Sports in college and high school

Explain your choice: _____

_____.

3. Possible topic A: Scientific research
Possible topic B: Testing on laboratory animals

Explain your choice: _____
_____.

Exercise 2

Instructions: Choose *one* topic from the list below that you will work with throughout the rest of this tutorial. *Remember to try and pick something that you have some background knowledge about*—at least an understanding of why people disagree about this issue. You may also write a topic of your own in the space provided, or, if you are currently working on a persuasive essay topic for one of your classes, you may write this topic in the space.

Possible topics

Choose one:

- capital punishment
- human cloning
- abortion
- English as the official language of the US
- high stakes testing (for example, requiring high school seniors to pass a standardized test before they graduate)
- gun control
- sex education in high schools
- high school or college students working while going to school
- euthanasia
- censoring internet pornography

or

your topic: _____

Why is the topic you have chosen a good topic to focus on? _____

Narrowing your topic: What is the question at issue?

Most of the topics above are broad enough that they allow you to brainstorm, to think about a wide variety of issues before you narrow down to something you really want to focus on. But narrowing down is a very important part of the process. If you do not have some idea early on in the process of writing what question you really want to focus on, you may end up writing an essay that lacks a clear point, or strays from the thesis statement to discuss issues that aren't relevant.

By focusing on the *question at issue*, you avoid the danger of writing an essay that doesn't seem to stay focused on a central point.

For example: Suppose you are writing about the issue “violence on television.” It’s a good topic—it is definitely controversial. But there are several different issues that you might consider:

- Does TV violence cause children to act violently?
- Does TV violence make violent behavior seem more common—so that people are more afraid to go out of their homes?
- How do we define violence on TV anyway? Should the news be considered “violence” if reporters only describe violent acts? Can children’s cartoons in which the characters always come back to life really be considered violent?
- Is violence the most serious issue, or should we be more concerned with the amount of TV people watch, or other issues?

All of these questions are important, and all of them are relevant to the topic “violence on television.” But an essay that attempts to answer all of these questions is very unlikely to be effective. The writer might begin with an introduction that defines the issue of violence on television, move on to discussing how it affects children, then go back to arguing about how we define violence, and so on, and so on, resulting in a disorganized essay that takes up many interesting questions but doesn’t really answer any of them in enough detail to be persuasive.

When you can focus on just *one* question, you can begin thinking more about your thesis statement and how you will organize your essay. Of course, you should remember that nothing in the writing process is written in stone. If you decide early on to focus on one major question about the issue and then realize that you have little to say about it, you can always go back and pick a new one—unless you are writing your essay at four a.m. on the day that the final draft is due.

Remember: the question at issue is not the <i>only</i> question the issue raises; it is simply a major question that you can focus on in your own essay.
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Exercise 3

Instructions: Narrow down the topic you chose in the previous exercise by writing out some possible questions. When you have listed at least three questions your issue raises, pick one that you believe you can focus on in a short essay.

Example:

Issue: Removing books parents consider offensive from my high school's library

Questions:

1. Would removing the books violate free speech?
2. Should parents (rather than teachers, librarians, or students) be the only ones to make decisions?
3. What makes a book "offensive" enough to be removed? Do all parents of students in the school agree on this?

Question at issue: *Should parents be the only ones to make decisions?*

Your Issue (from Exercise 2):

Questions your issue raises:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Question at issue that you will focus on (remember this can be any of the above—choose the one that you think you will be able to say the most about):

Developing a Thesis Statement

Thesis statements cause many students a great deal of difficulty. This is understandable. Students often worry that they are limited to whatever the thesis says, that they will not have much to say, or that the thesis is not written correctly.

But writing a thesis is relatively easy once you have narrowed the topic down to a particular question at issue. Your **thesis** is simply *your answer to the question at issue*. Of course, there are some guidelines for writing a clear, effective, thesis, but for now, anything that directly answers the question at issue can be considered a thesis. The question at issue asks something important about the controversy you are writing about, and the thesis is your answer.

Obviously, there is no one “right” answer. The answer—your thesis—is what you genuinely believe, and different people, naturally, will have different beliefs.

For example: If you were writing about the question used as an example in the previous exercise, you might come up with a variety of answers:

Question at issue: Should parents (rather than teachers, librarians, or students) be the only ones to make decisions about what books are available in the school library?

Some possible answers (and tentative thesis statements):

- Parents, who are paying their taxes to have their children educated, and who bear the responsibility for protecting their children, should be the ones to decide what books are available for their children to read.
or
- Decisions about what books are available in the school library should be made by all people who are affected—parents, teachers, and students—rather than only one group.
or
- No books should be taken from the school library—to do so is censorship and violates the first Amendment.

Any of these answers can be developed and supported in an essay. Once the writer has clearly stated a thesis, it is his or her job to persuade readers that this is the correct response to the question at issue.

Two Ways of Writing a Formal Thesis

While professional writers may write persuasive essays that only *imply* a thesis—they assume that their readers will understand the main point, or know enough about the writer to know what he or she believes anyway—in most college writing you are expected to include an *explicit thesis statement*. Explicit simply means that it is distinct—your reader should be able to tell what your thesis statement is even if you do not underline it.

The “Open” Thesis: The plain and simple point

For some writers, the thesis statement is no more and no less than their response to the question at issue; while they must explain *why* they have reached this conclusion about the issue in the body of their essays, writers who prefer the open thesis may feel that a simple, direct point is more concise and clear than a thesis that also explains why they have taken a particular stance.

For example:

- Affirmative action is an effective way to improve the lives of many minorities in America.
- Lowering taxes on the rich is not an unfair measure so much as a highly effective way to stimulate the economy.
- Barney, the purple dinosaur beloved by preschoolers, corrupts the innocent minds of children.

The “Closed” Thesis: What and why

A thesis statement may include not only your answer to the question at issue, but an indication of *why* you hold this position. For some writers, this provides a better foundation for an essay—they can go back to the thesis any time they are uncertain about what direction the essay should be going. Notice that the following examples show both *what* the writer will argue and *why* he or she believes this. For example:

- Because the Smith Canyon Dam is destroying wildlife in the Sacramento River and does not provide needed resources for people, it should be dismantled.
- Schools that promote sex education may teach students an unintended lesson—that premarital sex is acceptable regardless of what their cultural traditions claim or their parents tell them. Therefore, sex education should only be taught with parental consent.
- To prevent future tragedies, the city of San Francisco should install traffic lights, or at the very least a stop sign, at the corner of California and Lincoln.

Notice that all of the thesis statements above show clearly *what* the writer believes and indicate *why*.

Notice that they do not all indicate *three* reasons—a method taught in many high schools and some college classes. In the “three part thesis” or “five paragraph essay” format, the writer indicates three major ideas, followed by three paragraphs that support these ideas:

- Because they are unsafe, cause air pollution, and disrupt community life, automobiles should be restricted and eventually outlawed.

This may seem like the easiest way in the world to organize your essay. Now you simply write one paragraph each on how cars are unsafe, cause air pollution, and disrupt community life, in that order. In fact, many students become so comfortable with this format in high school that they are reluctant to give it up. But many college teachers do not want essays that are “formatted.” Instead, they want you to organize your paragraphs based on your own ideas about the topic and your own beliefs about what will persuade an audience. Check with your teacher if you are unsure.

Some final reminders about thesis statements:

- Your thesis statement comes at the end of your introduction. Your introduction may be one or two or even (for longer papers such as 10-page research reports) three paragraphs long, but the thesis should be at the very end of it, not the beginning. By placing your thesis at the end of your introduction, you make your strongest point after you’ve provided the background information that helps your readers to see this point in the context of other opinions about the issues, and then you can immediately move on to support that point, while it is fresh in your readers’ minds.
- The thesis is a statement that takes a stance on the issue. It should not be just a simple statement of fact.
- Thesis statements *may* be more than one sentence, but try not to make many different points—if you are writing a short essay, every paragraph in the essay must be clearly related to the thesis; this is difficult to do if your thesis makes multiple points.

Exercise 4

Instructions: For each numbered item below, indicate whether the statement is an *open* thesis—if it makes a direct point but does not provide reasons why; a *closed* thesis—if it both provides the major point and indicates at least one major reason for that point; or is *not* a thesis—if it does not take a stance on an issue. Be sure to indicate how you know.

Example:

- Oranges grow best in hot, humid climates.

Answer: *This is not a thesis. The question of what kind of climates oranges grow in is not controversial but a statement of fact.*

1. Community colleges, because they provide students with smaller classes, more individual attention, and often more experienced teachers, may be a better choice than large state institutions for a student's first two years of higher education.

closed thesis

open thesis

not a thesis

How you know:

2. The original "Star Wars" is one of the highest grossing movies of all time.

closed thesis

open thesis

not a thesis

How you know:

3. Children should not be allowed to watch more than thirty minutes of television a day.

closed thesis

open thesis

not a thesis

How you know:

4. Because they are generally designed and proposed by advanced countries such as the United States, free trade agreements often do more harm than good for developing countries such as Nigeria.

closed thesis

open thesis

not a thesis

How you know:

5. The city of San Jose cannot afford a professional football team.

closed thesis

open thesis

not a thesis

How you know:

For more help and practice with thesis statements, see the Writing Center tutorial devoted to this subject.

Exercise 5

Instructions: Return to the “question at issue” you wrote as your own at the end of Exercise 3. Create both an open and a closed thesis statement in response to the question at issue. You will probably need to do some brainstorming to create a closed thesis—try to come up with good reasons for your claim.

Example:

- Question at issue: *Should bilingual ballots no longer be allowed in California?*

Open thesis: *Bilingual ballots must continue to be a part of our democratic system in California.*

Closed thesis: *To avoid eliminating the democratic rights and responsibilities of hundreds of thousands of legal California citizens, we must continue to allow bilingual ballots.*

Your question at issue (from exercise 3): _____

Open thesis: _____

Closed thesis: _____

Remember that you can change your thesis statement as you are writing the essay. If you find that you have changed your mind entirely, or want to make a different point, you can go back and revise your thesis. Again, this doesn't apply if you've put your essay off until the day it is due!

A Brief Note on Introductions

Often, students attempt to write essays without considering ideas in advance. They simply write an introduction that gives background information about the issue, then attempt to create a thesis statement. The result is often an essay with a thesis that seems to jump out of nowhere, as if it was “tacked on” at the last moment.

To avoid this, you may want to work backwards. Even though your thesis statement will come at the end of your introduction, you might want to come up with your thesis first, as you have in this tutorial.

Once you have a tentative thesis statement, all you need to do to create an introduction is to work backwards. What will your readers need to know before they get to your main point?

For example, Angela is writing an essay with the thesis statement “Educational TV is rarely educational.” It is likely that her readers already have a general idea what “educational TV” is—most of us remember shows such as Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers—but we may need to know a little more about why this is a controversial issue:

Many American parents allow their children to watch hours of TV every day, even when their children are as young as two years old. Though this may seem like irresponsible parenting, an excuse for mom and dad to ignore the kids, many parents with the best intentions may believe that they are actually doing something positive for their children. To be honest, I used to allow my own four-year-old son to watch TV for as much as an hour a day—as long as the shows he was watching were the “educational” kind popular on public television. I believed that shows such as “Mr. Rogers,” “Barney

and Friends,” and “Teletubbies,” because they are on those “educational” stations, must be doing something good for my child. But when I finally sat down to watch these shows closely, I realized that I had made a naïve assumption: to my surprise I found that educational TV for children is rarely educational.

Here, the writer provides background information about how she herself discovered surprising things about educational TV. To think about what kind of background information will work well in your own essay, consider some of the following questions:

- Are most of your readers likely to already know a lot about the controversial issue you will be discussing? If not, what will they need to know before they can understand your thesis?
- Are there any interesting examples that would show why your topic is controversial? (For example, an essay on “the legalization of marijuana” might begin with a dramatic story about a drug bust).
- Do you have something personal to say that explains why you are interested in this topic? (Note that the writer in the example above discussed her own experience with “educational television.”)

Exercise 6

Instructions:

1. Look back at the principles and exercises in this tutorial and make notes on a separate sheet of paper. You will bring these notes and the essay to your conference.
2. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor in the Writing Center (18-104) or English 800 Center (18-102). To make this appointment, stop by the Centers or call (650) 574-6436. During this appointment, the professor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to these exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.

Reminder:

For this appointment, bring

- any notes about the tutorial that you have taken
- your completed tutorial exercises
- and the essay