

Argumentative Writing Overview

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial provides a high-level view of argumentative writing. It identifies the modes of argument and how the three types of rhetorical appeal contribute to an understanding of arguments. It also uses several examples to demonstrate the range of arguments that can be made, even within a single topic.

This tutorial provides an overview of argumentative writing in four parts:

1. Argumentative Writing: An Overview
2. Modes of Argument
3. Rhetorical Appeals
4. Arguments: Examples

1. Argumentative Writing: An Overview

The primary form of academic writing is driven by argument. In the academic context, this doesn't refer to fighting, which sometimes comes to mind when "argument" is mentioned. When discussing writing it's useful to think of an argument as a conversation between thoughtful people who, although they have different views, want to answer the same questions.

For the purposes of this tutorial, an **argument** is defined as writing that states a position on a debatable question, and supports its claims with evidence and reasoning.



TERM TO KNOW

Argument

In academic writing, an argument states a clear position on a debatable question, and supports claims with evidence and reasoning.

Following are the key characteristics of successful academic arguments:

- A clear, focused thesis on a debatable question
- The thesis must be supported by reasoning and credible research in which counterarguments are considered.

- In the academic context, argumentative writing must incorporate research and evidence in addition to reasoning and rhetorical appeals.

2. Modes of Argument

Although argumentative essays sometimes incorporate other modes of writing (e.g., the persuasive or informative modes), all essays that present an argument are considered argumentative.

The persuasive mode is similar to the argumentative: Both of these writing modes seek to influence readers to accept an assertion or take a particular action. The persuasive mode, however, emphasizes *pathos* (to appeal to readers' emotions), more than *ethos* (appeals to readers' sense of right and wrong), or *logos* (appeals to logic and reasoning).

Writing in the informative mode does not argue a specific point, but instead provides information about a subject. This sometimes involves analysis and interpretation, however, which require a form of argumentation. Since the purpose of informative writing is to inform — not to convince or persuade — this mode is a different kind of writing: it has different requirements.

Following is an excerpt from an essay. As you read it, look for elements of argumentative, persuasive, and informative writing.

Part of the reason Hawai'i seems like such a paradise is that it's not home to many of nature's less pleasant organisms. No nettles or poison ivy, few thorny plants or poisonous plants, no snakes or apex predators. Until humans arrived, Hawai'i was a paradise for many organisms. But now that rats, cats, sheep, pigs and invasive vines, trees and grasses have been introduced, the ecosystem that had been at stasis for so long is slowly and steadily becoming more like that of the continental United States (Harjo, 2005, p. 3). Even as government officials inspect ship and air cargo for green tree snakes and fire ants, tree frogs and the multitude of other species that haven't yet established a foothold in the islands, even as ranchers and hunters coordinate to keep wild pigs and sheep populations under control, even as university researchers and park rangers tag and protect endangered birds and turtles, they know it's a battle they can't win.

Which mode of writing is used in this excerpt? It contains elements of each mode, doesn't it? The writer attempts to *inform* the reader about the subject, but he or she also takes — and supports — a position. In addition, the persuasive mode is evident at the end of the excerpt, when the writer makes an emotional appeal that expresses his or her sadness at how human actions have irrevocably changed Hawai'i, rather than a reason-based argument about the ecosystem.



This is the takeaway about these different modes of writing: the lines between them can be crossed. Those lines are blurred, to some extent, in most essays. Therefore, all argumentative writing incorporates some elements of the other modes.

3. Rhetorical Appeals

There are three types of rhetorical appeals: pathos, ethos, and logos.

- Pathos is used to convince readers by evoking their sympathy or compassion for the claims that are made. Pathos can be used unethically, especially when it is not balanced by evidence and reason.
- Ethos bases appeals on credibility. Although the term used to refer only to the credibility or character of the writer (or speaker), modern ethos-based arguments are likely to rely on the credibility and trustworthiness of the information sources used in an essay.
- Logos bases appeals on logic and reasoning: Logos-based arguments use facts and evidence to support logical claims. This form of appeal is the primary focus of many argumentative essays.

Note that most instances of argumentative writing use all three forms of appeal in one way or another.

4. Arguments: Examples

Suppose your English professor has just assigned an argumentative essay on the subject of welfare and public assistance. This is a broad subject, so you've got plenty of options. You could, for example, write an argument that advocates the elimination of public monetary and food assistance programs, and using the money saved to subsidize low-income workers, thus raising the minimum wage without making employers pay more.

Argument 1: The government should abolish food stamps and monetary assistance, and instead subsidize low-income workers, raising the minimum wage.

To support this argument you must locate data about what this would cost, to determine whether it would be feasible. However, it might be a good working thesis.

You might also take a different position, arguing for an increase in the range and scope of government assistance programs. You might claim that it would be better to integrate these currently-separate programs and combine, for example, the disability payout program with those that help the underprivileged to pay for college.

Argument 2: Government assistance programs should be integrated, so they can better provide people with what they need.

You'd need sources to support this argument, but you could also use an emotional appeal to persuade readers.

You might also argue that these kind of programs should be eliminated, to enable society to enjoy the benefits of a true free market system.

Argument 3: Government aid should be abolished to allow our economy to become a truly free-market system, which would be good for everyone in the long run.

This last argument would involve an emotional appeal, perhaps to American individualism and optimism. However, you should also make a logic-based claim, perhaps asserting how this would be better for all citizens in the long run.

As these examples demonstrate, multiple arguments can be made about a single subject. Many more arguments could be made than those described above. Besides the topic, there is something that all three of the sample arguments share: each seeks to answer one debatable question. There are many ways to phrase it, but the question that each of the working thesis statements above claim to answer is this:

Question: What should society do to help those in need?

Each of the arguments outlined in this section is a potential answer to this question. When writing an argumentative essay, you must first decide what you believe, then argue for it.



SUMMARY

This tutorial examined the most common form of academic writing: argumentative writing: writing that is driven by argument. Argumentative writing takes a clear position on a debatable question and backs up claims with evidence and reasoning. Modes of argument — persuasive and informative — were described, as well as the three forms of rhetorical appeal: pathos, ethos, and logos. It is important to note that most instances of argumentative writing use all three forms of appeal in one way or another. Several examples illustrating that different arguments can share the same topic and question were presented.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



TERMS TO KNOW

Argument

In academic writing, an argument takes a clear position on a debateable question and backs up claims with evidence and reasoning.