

Considerations in Academic Argumentative Research Writing

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial identifies important considerations to keep in mind when writing researched arguments. It provides three sample arguments to illustrate the value of being aware of these issues during the academic writing process.

This tutorial examines considerations in academic argumentative research writing in four parts:

1. Considerations When Writing Academic Arguments
2. Example Argument #1
3. Example Argument #2
4. Example Argument #3

1. Considerations When Writing Academic Arguments

When writing academic arguments, especially those based on research and outside sources of information, it's important to keep the following in mind:

- **Avoid bias.** As with informative writing, academic argumentative writing emphasizes freedom from bias or, more realistically, acknowledgment of bias. Even when making arguments involving a topic about which you hold strong views you, as an academic writer, must make claims objectively and use evidence to support those claims.
- **Engage with sources.** Writers must engage with their sources of information. The best way to do so is to use engaged reading strategies when evaluating potential sources. Remember to read critically: participate in a conversation on the topic with each source in your argument.
- **Use counterarguments.** Writers of argumentative research essays must always consider counterarguments. Opposing viewpoints must be taken into account when developing an argument, especially during the research process. This is a time when writers must look for opinions that are opposed to their own, and consider ways to refute or otherwise address them in their work.

- **Understand the rhetorical situation.** Writers of academic arguments, like writers of any other work, should always have the rhetorical situation in mind. Knowing and understanding the purpose of their work, and its intended audience, will clarify their arguments and reveal how to structure it effectively.



HINT

These considerations are valuable for *readers* of argument-based essays too, since they provide the same critical understanding to readers as they do to writers.

2. Example Argument #1

In this section and those that follow, you'll review sample arguments and determine whether, or to what degree, the writer has kept these considerations in mind. Read the paragraph below carefully. Identify the argument's working thesis, as well as evidence of bias — acknowledged or unacknowledged. In addition, note whether the argument participates in a conversation with its sources, any counter arguments that are refuted (or counter arguments that *should be* refuted), and anything in the rhetorical situation of which you think the writer should be more aware.

Atheists should be a protected class in America because they are reviled. A recent Pew research survey showed that 49%, almost half, of Americans would be unhappy if one of their relatives married a non-believer, making them the most troubling group to Americans overall. With statistics like this, is it any wonder that atheists are often afraid of "coming out" about their lack of belief to colleagues, friends, and partners? They are only people, and this highly irrational response to atheists shows the irrationality of religious thought.

What is the working thesis of this example? It appears to be stated in the first line, as it often is in this kind of argumentative outline. How does the rest of the paragraph support the thesis? Is it biased or objective? This example involves a contentious issue — anything to do with religion usually does — so it's probably not a good idea for the writer to use "irrational" to describe religious thought. Doing so will alienate some readers — 49% of them, if the source's information is correct!

When writing about a subject as controversial as government protection of religious (or anti-religious) views, writers must maintain their objectivity. The writer of this example has not done so. Regarding the source cited, it's always a good idea to "drill down" into the data acquired by surveys, to examine the questions asked, how they were phrased, and any variations or omissions in the survey's process. Regarding this sample, readers could take issue with the survey question because no context is provided. What does "unhappiness" mean in this context, and what other questions were asked?

With respect to counterarguments, one that this essay must take into account is that, in order to receive "protected class" status, atheists must experience more discrimination than the essay currently identifies. To refute this argument, perhaps the writer could introduce other/stronger examples of anti-atheist discrimination.

From a rhetorical perspective, the purpose of the essay seems to be to persuade readers to call for legislative action. Therefore, the intended audience should be all Americans. However, it's not clear that this essay is addressed to *all* Americans, at least not yet. Currently, it seems to target the 51% who would not "be unhappy

if one of their relatives married a non-believer." This essay could be focused more specifically — perhaps towards rallying atheists or convincing the opposition. Currently, it seems to take a middle position, which may not be an effective position to maintain.

3. Example Argument #2

Here is another early draft of an argument. As you read it, note the acknowledgement of bias, the engagement of sources, the use of counterarguments, and awareness of the rhetorical situation.

The U.S. government should ban channels whose primary programming is news, such as CNN and Fox News Channel, because they degrade national discourse while providing very little public good. People used to get their news from newspapers and, later, from the papers and/or from the evening news on television. Today they are inundated, all the time, with information on events around the world. While attempting to meet the public demand for immediate information, news channels produce content, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, whether there's anything to report or not. They must also compete with social media, websites, and other near-instantaneous sources of information, leading them to offer "info-tainment" — entertainment masquerading as news or commentary. Real journalism is the loser. It's time for the government to shut down these channels or at least deny them the right to call what they do "journalism."

An interesting and debatable thesis is outlined in the first sentence of the paragraph. The writer argues that the U.S. government should ban channels that claim to report news, but instead provide entertainment. Although it's a provocative claim, it should be presented with less bias. The use of the term "info-tainment" and dismissal of all news channels as not providing good (or real) journalism indicates an extreme opinion on the issue. Even though this position is debatable, the writer should take a more neutral stance, at least at the outset.

In order for the thesis to be adequately supported by its sources, the writer must locate and identify examples of the faux journalism to which the essay refers. Otherwise, it will be difficult to illustrate the problem: something that must be done before readers are called upon to accept a solution. The thesis also needs support from secondary or primary sources to prove that the damage inflicted on the national discourse by entertainment posing as journalism warrants the extreme "solution" of banning news networks.

Regarding counterarguments, the most obvious is that this thesis, which includes a call to ban news networks, is too extreme. To refute this counterargument, the essay must demonstrate the severity of the problem, and prove that banning the news networks is the only viable option. This will be difficult.

The purpose of this essay seems to be to persuade readers to support a position regarding the topic. Based on its tone, and its assumption of reader consent about the negative impact of news networks, the intended audience is likely Americans who are currently frustrated with news networks. If there is a group of viewers who can be persuaded to adopt the position presented in this essay, it may be Americans who ridicule the sensationalism and shallowness of 24-hour news stations. However, should this be the purpose of this essay, or should it instead attempt to address a broader audience — one that might be large/significant enough to accomplish a ban on news networks? If so, this essay must be extensively revised (and redirected).

4. Example Argument #3

As you read the following argument, think about the considerations identified above: bias, engagement with sources, counterarguments, and the rhetorical situation.

Online harassment is becoming a significant problem, encompassing children who bully a classmate until she commits suicide (e.g., Amanda Todd), to violent threats against feminists (e.g., Anita Sarkeesian and others forced to flee their homes due to rape and death threats). Online bullying, threatening, and trolling cause damage in the real world, as well as in the digital. Twitter, Facebook, and many websites are being asked to reject users who engage in these behaviors and to monitor their forums. However, such harassment should become a criminal offense, prosecuted by the justice system.

Unlike the last two arguments reviewed above, this one does not show any obvious signs of bias. If the writer believes that he or she is a feminist, or if he or she has a close personal connection to online harassment, readers should be informed of these potential biases. Given the personal nature of this issue, many readers probably have a connection to, or memory of, harassment. It would be a good idea for the writer to identify his or her experience related to this topic.

Regarding sources, readers need more detail about the specific instances of bullying and harassment cited in the essay. Writers should not assume that all readers are familiar with the Amanda Todd or Anita Sarkeesian cases. As the essay is developed, sources related to the types of harassment discussed should be included to support the claim that it is such a serious problem that government involvement is necessary.

An obvious counterargument is that online sites and services should monitor users, and that there is no need for governmental action. It can be asserted that each online community (or people in general) should decide how to police these behaviors overall, and how to address specific cases. Another (weaker) counterargument is that online harassment is not a major problem, and victims should "just get over it." A third counterargument might be that trolling is the price we pay for privacy and anonymity on the internet, and that it is worth paying to maintain them. The first and last of these counterarguments should be addressed, though the second may be safely disregarded.

With respect to the rhetorical situation, the purpose of this work seems to be to promote one solution to a problem over another, rather than arguing that online harassment is a problem. The latter argument involves a question that is neither interesting or debatable. The writer of this essay wants readers to believe that governmental action (or, at least, stronger government involvement) is the best solution to the problem. The audience is anyone who cares about online harassment, which might include anyone from legislators and activists, to parents and children, etc. When considering the context, note that current discussions about online harassment (e.g., the cases of Amanda Todd and Anita Sarkeesian), and the attention focused on the issue, should be incorporated in the argument as it is developed.



BIG IDEA

Keeping certain important issues in mind when writing or reading arguments improves the depth of thought and effectiveness of the argument, and readers' engagement with it. Paying attention to bias, engagement with sources, counterarguments, and the rhetorical situation is never a waste of time.



SUMMARY

This tutorial identified some of the most important considerations to keep in mind when writing or reading arguments: bias, the engagement of sources, the use of counterarguments, and awareness of the rhetorical situation. Several sample arguments were evaluated in light of these considerations.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall