

Reading for Argument

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial examines arguments, which are a key part of many academic writing projects. It focuses on reading for arguments, and defines what *argument* means in an academic context. It also considers how you, as a reader, can identify arguments: their claims, structures, and components. A particular argument is investigated to illustrate how the rhetorical situations surrounding it impact not only the writing of the argument, but also how it is read and interpreted.

This tutorial examines reading for argument in four parts:

1. Defining Arguments
2. Arguments: Examples
3. Identifying Arguments
4. Rhetorical Situations

1. Defining Arguments

In an academic context, an **argument** is a position asserted and defended in written work. Most of the textbooks you'll use during your college education will have an argument at their core. They will take a position that they will try to convince you, the reader, to understand or believe.



TERM TO KNOW

Argument

A position or point made in written work.

Being able to identify the components of an argument is not only a useful skill, it is necessary for anyone who wants to master written communication. Readers who understand what an argument is (including its structure, components and assumptions), and what particular arguments are trying to convince them to accept, derive the most benefit from what they read.

By identifying the components of an argument, you can analyze its effectiveness. Instead of just being convinced or unconvinced (perhaps without understanding why), you'll be able to evaluate arguments critically. You won't be misled by elegant phrasing or false logic.



HINT

The ability to analyze the effectiveness of an argument is a useful skill in the "real world" (outside college). The arguments you'll encounter there won't always "play by the rules."

2. Arguments: Examples

Consider the following examples of arguments, which demonstrate the wide range of topics and approaches that writers can (and do) use to persuade readers. The first argument is an excerpt from a longer work. While reading it, focus on identifying what it argues for or against.

"The attention given to the execution of 1,000 murderers is repugnant, especially when the loudest voices claim that the death of a convicted murderer is a tragedy. Yet the deaths and suffering of countless victims are only easily-ignored statistics."

In the next example, the subject and the writer's position should be even more clear to you. Pay attention to the different tone used in this excerpt, compared to the first example.

"Throughout the history of mankind, homosexual marriage was not recognized until recently. There is a reason for that: It is not productive to shred the fabric of society. The burden of proof for changing the traditional definition of marriage should fall on supporters of the homosexual agenda. I have heard no compelling reasons that indicate homosexual marriages are necessary to the well-being of society."



THINK ABOUT IT

Did you notice the evidence that this argument includes? It's not a fully-realized essay, at least not from the point of view of an academic scholar, but it's closer to being one than the first excerpt.

Read the next argument, which provides a more-developed sense of direction than the previous examples.

"The greatest threat to our continued existence on this planet is ourselves. Specifically, overpopulation. We have begun to outgrow our ability to feed ourselves, and the scientific breakthroughs of the past hundred years, while amazing, cannot be expected to continue as we reproduce at a multiplicative rate, while our agricultural production grows numerically."

Although the claim in this example is not backed by evidence, the argument is framed: You know what it is about, and can see the direction the rest of the work will most likely take.

These three sample arguments should give you a sense of some of the positions and directions that arguments can take, as well as the variety of tones that can be used to make them.

3. Identifying Arguments

Read the next example carefully. Try to identify not only the argument, but its components. Locate the writer's thesis, as well as some instances of reasoning. What kinds of appeals does the writer make, and what evidence does he or she include to support them?

The First Amendment protects even disturbing speech, a point the Supreme Court should keep in mind on Tuesday when it hears the case of a man convicted of selling videos of dogfighting and other forms of animal cruelty. A federal appeals court reversed his conviction, ruling that the federal law under which he was prosecuted is unconstitutional. The Supreme Court should uphold that ruling.

Animal cruelty is not the only deeply offensive speech protected by the Constitution. Nazis are allowed to march and spew racism. If legislatures have the power to penalize unpopular speech, a lot of expression might become illegal. The federal law in question seems to be based on a belief that it is enough that the harm caused by the animal cruelty outweighs the social value of the videos, but the Constitution does not say that Congress can restrict speech if it fails a test.

Every state has laws against animal abuse. The best way to reduce animal cruelty is to enforce these laws vigorously. Anyone with an ounce of decency should be tempted to ban animal-abuse videos, but anyone who values freedom of speech should understand why we must not.



HINT

Remember that a thesis is the central idea of a written work: a sentence or phrase that explains the main argument of the work. Complete statement of a thesis often requires more than one line.

What is the thesis of the preceding example? You might conclude that the central point of this short essay is that the Supreme Court should rule that selling videos of animal cruelty, while repugnant, cannot be illegal because of the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech. Instead, as the last paragraph argues, animal cruelty laws at the state level must be enforced. Since this argument makes (at least) these two central claims, either one of them can be viewed as the argument's thesis.

In response to a complex argument, different readers will focus on different parts of the whole, but all readers should be able to recognize what the argument is doing.



TRY IT

Towards that end of the last example, where have reasoning and evidence been included? Where do they enter this work? This argument needs more support for its claims. The closest that it comes to a logical appeal is in the first line or two of the second paragraph. There, the author includes a comparison between the unpopular animal abuse videos and the unpopular racist remarks that "Nazis" have a right to "spew." This has the potential to be a strong logical appeal because it demonstrates another form of speech that is — and should be — protected. It enables readers to see the "slippery slope" that might be introduced if the Supreme Court overturned the lower court's decision.

4. Rhetorical Situations

Now that you can analyze an argument and see it not only in its entirety but also as the sum of its components, reconsider the animal-abuse/free speech argument above. Look for clues about the rhetorical situation in which it was written. The purpose of this work should be clear to you: to convince readers that the writer's assertion about animal cruelty and the first amendment is correct.

To whom is this work addressed? Not much legal terminology has been used, despite the legislative subject. Therefore, it can be assumed that it was written for a general American audience. In addition, because the writer does not identify which decision or case is being discussed, it can be concluded that the audience is reasonably well-educated and informed regarding the Supreme Court's upcoming decisions.

The writer indicates that the case will be heard on "Tuesday" rather than on a specific date. This reveals that this work is topical, meaning that it was written in response to a current issue/event and meant to be read soon (unlike many of the academic texts you'll encounter later in class). Readers can also assume that the author's background is related to law or journalism, given the subject he or she chose to address. Other than these, the essay does not include other indicators of bias or personal perspective. This argument is fairly objective, isn't it?



THINK ABOUT IT

Is there anything else you can deduce from this example about the author's views or background? Remember that although some details may seem irrelevant, attempting to understand the rhetorical situation of a work helps readers by providing insight into the whys and hows behind an argument.



SUMMARY

This tutorial described how to read for an argument — how to analyze text for an writer's argument. It outlined what arguments in composition are, and how to identify them and their components, including the rhetorical situation in which they were written.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



TERMS TO KNOW

Argument

A position or point made in a piece of writing.