

# The Basics of Argumentative Writing

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**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.

**1.2.2 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.

### 1.2.3 Rhetorical Appeals

Rhetorical appeals are strategies used in writing that are designed to persuade or convince. You can use these categories of convincing strategies to describe the various ways that you try to reach out to your readers and appeal to them so that they will agree with you and trust your arguments.

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

These tools can help you as a writer strengthen your arguments and become more successful and convincing.

The act of persuasion can almost feel like a battle—your point of view facing off against the entrenched opinions of another. It's important to remember that your audience members aren't your enemies! Instead of trying to defeat them with arguments, it can often be more effective to win them over with reason.

Knowing your audience—their beliefs, values, and expectations—will help you strengthen your communication skill and make the most influential argument in any situation. But, since writing isn't one-size-fits-all, understanding what will persuade your audience also requires you to utilize your innovation skill to consider novel approaches that will help you create a show-stopping argument for any crowd!



Rhetorical Appeals Strategies used in writing that are designed to persuade or convince.

1a. Logos Appeals to logos are appeals to logic; these appeals use logic to persuade or convince. When you appeal to logic, you appeal to your reader's intelligence, intellect, and understanding of the world. Logos is thus meant to support your central argument with claims that are based in fact, reason, and logic.

If you are trying to convince someone to buy your used car, you might use logos to appeal to the potential buyer by describing the miles per gallon that your car gets, how reliable it is, or what its safety crash rating is—all to show that it is a smart choice for the potential buyer. Or imagine you're taking a writing class, and you've been assigned an argumentative paper. If you've chosen to make the argument that high school should start later in the day, you might appeal to logos by providing research that shows that the teenage brain works best starting later in the day, or by giving a hypothetical example of a student who gets to sleep in a little later and performs better in class because of it. In those ways, you'd be providing data and reasoning to show your reader that your position in this debate is the smartest one, the best one to believe.



Logos Appeals to logic; uses logic to persuade or convince.

1b. Ethos Appeals to ethos are appeals to credibility; these appeals use the author's own trustworthiness to

persuade or convince. When you appeal in this way to ethics, you demonstrate that you—and your expert sources—are believable and trustworthy because you’re credible. In other words, you’re basically making an appeal to a trust in your believability. You’re making the claim that you are ethical and trustworthy, and therefore, that your research and opinions ought to be believed. Ethos is meant to support your thesis by asserting that your claim is backed up by trustworthy research, uses valid and credible expert sources, and has ethically considered all possible arguments before choosing a side.

## IN CONTEXT

Imagine that you’re taking an economics course, and your final assignment is to argue policy on a particular energy sector. You might use an appeal to ethos by demonstrating that your position is backed by ethical, neutral sources. For example, maybe you’re going to argue against subsidies for the coal industry. In appealing to ethos, you would use nonpartisan, non-biased sources of information, not just data directly from the coal lobby or from its opponents. You would respond to counter arguments reasonably and ethically, and you would vouch for the trustworthiness of your sources by explaining who and what they are. Or, if you’re holding a fundraiser, you might encourage people to donate by making an appeal to ethos, arguing that your charity is more deserving than others because of the way it uses its funds. You could present its internal statistics, showing the percentage of donated funds that directly support the cause. This would show your potential donors that your organization can be trusted to ethically allocate its donations.



### TERM TO KNOW

Ethos Appeals to ethics; uses ethical guidelines to convince.

1c. Pathos Appeals to pathos are appeals to emotion; these appeals evoke emotion to persuade or convince. When you appeal to pathos, you appeal to your reader’s emotional feeling. Pathos is thus meant to cause your readers to feel the emotions you want them to feel, such as anger, sadness, or excitement in order to cause them to believe that your thesis is valid.

## IN CONTEXT

If you need a day off work, and you’re trying to get a colleague to cover your shift, you might appeal to emotion by describing why you want the day off, telling your colleague excitedly that your mom is coming to visit and you can’t wait to see her. Showing your excitement appeals to your colleague’s emotions and will hopefully encourage him or her to switch shifts. Or imagine you’re writing an application letter for your dream job. You want this job badly because it has long been your dream to work in a field where you can provide support for a community that you are passionately engaged with. You might include language like that in your letter, causing the reader to feel passionate about your candidacy as well and give you an interview.



### TERM TO KNOW

Pathos Appeals to emotion; evokes emotions to persuade or convince.

2. Using the Appeals Effectively Now that you’ve had a taste of these three appeals, you can think about how you can use them most effectively. You want to start by thinking about the purpose of your argument.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Politicians want citizens to vote for them, so they use these kinds of argumentative tools to encourage those votes and thereby meet their ultimate purpose of getting elected.

In your own writing, you'll likely use a variety of these appeals as well, deploying different ones for different situations and audiences.

in context If you're writing a paper advocating for an end to the death penalty, you might use many different appeals to connect all possible readers. Some people would be more convinced by facts about the way the death penalty is imposed, and others by the credibility of your ethical argumentation. Still others will be most convinced by emotional appeals that ask them to consider how this policy makes people feel. However, it's important to choose wisely because for every reader convinced by one appeal, another might be repelled by the same.}}

A misused or mistimed appeal can lose you your argument, so you'll want to follow these steps to effectively deploy appeals:



#### STEP BY STEP

First, consider your audience: Appeals to logic might not go over well for an audience expecting to hear personal experiences; the lack of emotional appeal could be read as insensitive. In contrast, overly emotional writing in an academic setting might seem a little unprofessional. Second, consider how often to make each appeal: Used sparingly and selectively, each of these types of appeals can have huge impacts on your readers, but too many can fatigue your readers. In particular, appeals to emotion should be used carefully. Using too many emotional appeals can cause a host of unintended consequences: Readers might feel manipulated. Readers might become bored by hearing about emotions that they just aren't feeling and stop reading. Readers might begin to perceive that the writer is being self-righteous or even moralizing. Thus, be strategic when you select your emotional appeals.



#### TRY IT

See if you can recognize the rhetorical appeals in action in the following three short samples. Read them and decide which appeal each one is using.

The first is an appeal to emotion. You know this not just because it likely makes you feel sad and angry, although your own feelings as a reader are clues. But you also know this is an appeal to pathos because you can see a lot of emotional words, and words that have strongly emotional connotations:

Looking for those elements of a text's tone can help you see what kind of appeal it's making. Words such as vital, privileged, lucky, birthright—those are evocative emotional clues that this is an appeal to pathos.

The second example has a pretty different tone from the first, even though it's covering the same topic. Look at all that data and the even, unemotional tone of the language.

Those factors tell you that this is making an appeal to your logic. The last example again takes a different tone; it's full of ethos. See how the author presents the claim using trustworthy sources, responds considerately to the opposing side, and concludes with a logical and credible argument about how his proposal will play out in the future?

This shows that the argument itself is credible and that the author can be trusted to tell the truth and represent any data honestly.}}

#### 1.2.4 Effective 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 kinds 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 freemarket 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. You now understand how to use these appeals effectively. It's important to consider your audience, as what's appropriate in one context may not be appropriate in another. You should also use appeals sparingly and selectively; an overuse of appeals (particularly emotional ones) can actually make your writing less believable. Good luck!