

Writing an Effective Argumentative Essay

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers argumentative essays in greater detail by discussing some effective techniques for writing these essays, as well as how to avoid ineffective techniques. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Choosing a Topic
2. Types of Evidence
 - 2a. Personal
 - 2b. Researched
3. Presentation of the Author
4. Rules for Effective Argumentation

1. Choosing a Topic

When writing any type of essay, you'll need to start with the topic. But if you're making an **argument**, which takes a clear position on a debatable question and backs up claims with evidence and reasoning, then you'll want to think carefully about what topic you choose to ensure it is argumentative and clear.

A clear, argumentative topic needs two distinct sides (pro or con, yes or no) on a debatable issue, meaning both sides make valid and interesting points in a way that makes the issue worth having a debate about.

In addition, the debate needs to be somehow controversial. If no one really cares about the outcome, then it's not a debate. You need a topic about which reasonable people might disagree.

You also need to think about your **audience**, or the person or people at whom the specific piece of writing is directed. The topic should be relevant or of interest to your intended audience.

IN CONTEXT

If you were presenting a paper against nuclear power at a conference of nuclear scientists, you would

need to think about whether or not it would be possible for you to change their minds. If you were trying to convince them of your position, you would need to think carefully about the way that you appealed to your shared connections, such as perhaps a shared belief in the need for alternative energy sources.

Finally, for an argument to work as an essay topic, the author needs to pick a side of that topic and stick to it. If you don't clearly and consistently argue for one side of the debate, then your audience isn't going to be convinced.



TERMS TO KNOW

Argument

Takes a clear position on a debatable question and backs up claims with evidence and reasoning.

Audience

The person or people at whom a specific piece of writing is directed.

2. Types of Evidence

Once you know your argument, you need **evidence** to back up your claims. Evidence is facts and details that support an argument.

There are two types of evidence that you can use:

- Personal
- Researched



TERM TO KNOW

Evidence

Facts and details that support an argument.

2a. Personal

With personal evidence, you draw from your own experience to justify your position. But this needs to be done carefully. For it to work effectively as evidence, your experience needs to be shared. You're using your experience to speak to and for more people than yourself, so that experience needs to be relatable.

This can be a very useful kind of evidence when you're trying to make a personal connection with your readers. But if you only use evidence from your personal experience, then your readers may perceive the issue that you're discussing as being related only to you and not to a larger context that they might relate to.

2b. Researched

Your other option is researched evidence. When you research, you gather up facts, data, statistics, and ideas from other writers and sources to support your ideas. Your evidence needs to be current and relevant, as out-of-date ideas won't help you, and neither will data that doesn't speak directly to your argument.

Research is a great way to fend off those who would dismiss your argument as being just your opinion, which may happen if you base your evidence solely on personal experience. Research proves to your reader that you're not just mindlessly relaying ideas, but have instead thoroughly and carefully thought through the argument and found the data to support your position.

3. Presentation of the Author

Just as important in making a convincing argument is how you, the author, present yourself in your writing. What tone are you using? What authorial persona is coming across to your readers?

An argument may be less convincing if the author seems haughty versus if the author seems considerate. Likewise, an author who is clearly biased, hot-headed, and brash is less credible than one who is even-keeled, rational, and approachable.

You want to practice projecting an aura of rationality, and then think carefully about what your tone, word choice, style, and other writing aspects are saying to your readers about who you are.

All of these facets together make up what is called the author's ethos. Building a credible persona depends upon presenting an unbiased viewpoint, a reasonable tone, and making careful use of logical reasoning, research, and rhetorical appeals.

4. Rules for Effective Argumentation

Now that you understand some of the important aspects of an argumentative essay, you can think about the rules for making that essay effective:

Rules for Effective Argumentation	Description
Rely upon shared values.	All effective arguments and, indeed, many other kinds of writing should appeal to values that you share with your readers. This is why it's important to think of your audience. For instance, a paper arguing that science fiction novels aren't important probably wouldn't get much traction with an audience at Comic Con.
Incorporate carefully sourced research and credible evidence that supports your claim.	In particular, you want to select evidence that directly supports your side of the argument. Be careful when you're presenting evidence about the general topic, as sometimes it can contradict your claim.

Explain clearly why your claim is valid or believable.	You want to do this instead of just stating that your claim is believable. It's hard to be convinced by an argument that merely states, "I am right." A more convincing argument will explain, "I'm right, and here is why."
Clearly state the argument so that the reader knows which side you're on.	In particular, it's essential that you use a thesis statement in the introduction to demonstrate your position on the debate.
Stick to one argument.	You may have multiple parts to an argument, but if you're taking on two different debates, you should be writing them in two separate papers.
Make careful and thoughtful use of rhetorical appeals.	Consider how to use logos, ethos, and pathos.

Now consider the following short essay:

Violent video games are nothing more or less than fun, entertaining, and stress-relieving games. However, there are many people who want to restrict access to these games. Violent video games shouldn't be restricted from anyone who wants to play.

I am an avid gamer; I've won numerous championships among my friends and logged hundreds of hours of gameplay. And does this make me a monster? No. When I play violent video games, they don't make me want to hurt people. Instead, they make me feel good about myself and help me relieve stress.

Some people think that children shouldn't play these games and want to restrict children from accessing them. Though a ratings system wouldn't change my ability to play these games, the argument that violent video games cause damage to children is laughably false. If a child becomes violent, it's likely the parents' fault, not the fault of some video game.

Does this author seem credible, reasonable, or believable? No. In this spot, you can see that the author is making a pretty substantial claim:

Violent video games shouldn't be restricted from anyone who wants to play.

But there isn't any evidence to support that claim. Furthermore, the author comes across as angry and brash and doesn't seem like someone you'd want to trust.

*Violent video games are nothing more or less than fun, entertaining, and stress-relieving games. However, there are many people who want to **restrict** access to these games. **Violent video games shouldn't be restricted from anyone who wants to play.***

*I am an avid gamer; I've won numerous championships among my friends and logged hundreds of hours of gameplay. **And does this make me a monster? No. When I play violent video games, they don't make me want to hurt people.** Instead, they make me feel good about myself and help me relieve stress.*

*Some people think that children shouldn't play these games and want to restrict children from accessing them. Though a ratings system wouldn't change my ability to play these games, the argument that violent video games cause damage to children is **laughably false**. If a child becomes violent, it's likely the parents' fault, not the fault of some video game.*

And see how here the author is taking a really extreme line of reasoning without addressing any possible disagreement?

It seems like the author is dismissive of anyone who might disagree. That's not very credible. Overall, this author seems hard-line and presents as biased, not wholly informed, and unreasonable, instead of measured, neutral, and rational.

Compare that to the following piece:

Playing violent video games is, for many, an enjoyable way of relieving stress. However, some worry about the effect that violence has on players. They argue that exposure to violence desensitized players, making games dangerous. Others disagree, arguing that violent games are safe when played thoughtfully. Violent video games should not be banned from adult players.

For many of us, these video games are positive elements of our lives. For example, I find playing such games to be stress-relieving and have enjoyed the many hours playing in my gaming community. For me, the violence of the games is merely one aspect of an overall experience that truly is positive. People like me can be trusted to play violent video games thoughtfully and do not need to be restricted from them.

It's clear that there are circumstances where violent video games are inappropriate. It's reasonable to be concerned about the effect of violence on young children. Just as films have ratings that are meant to protect children, so too can video games benefit from a ratings system. Such a system would help guide parents to make informed decisions about what media their children consume. This does not, however, mean that violent video games should be restricted from adults, who are old enough to make their own decisions.

What do you see here? The tone is markedly different. In this version of the essay, the author seems reasonable and trustworthy. See how here the author makes a concession to the other side?

It's clear that there are circumstances where violent video games are inappropriate. It's reasonable to be concerned about the effect of violence on young children.

That's a mark of credibility—being able to represent the other side fairly and generously and finding the rational connections between the two sides instead of demonizing the other side. That's something you want to emulate.

Also notice how here the author's personal experience is used to demonstrate how violent video games can be a positive element of an adult's life:

For many of us, these video games are positive elements of our lives. For example, I find playing such games to be stress-relieving, and have enjoyed the many hours playing in my gaming community. For me, the violence of the games is merely one aspect of an overall experience that truly is positive. People like me can be trusted to play violent video games thoughtfully and do not need to be restricted from them.

This is a believable and rationally presented example of personal experience, unlike what you saw in the previous text. Overall, you could say that this author manages to strike the right tone and uses evidence and appeals carefully to make the argument.



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that when writing an argumentative essay, one of the most important steps is **choosing a topic**. The topic needs two clear sides on a debatable issue, and you as the author must choose one of these sides.

When making your argument, you need to back up your claims with evidence, or facts and details that support your argument. There are two **types of evidence** you can use: **personal** evidence and **researched** evidence. With that in mind, **how you present yourself as an author** is equally important. You want to come across as rational and believable throughout your essay.

Finally, you learned some **rules for effective argumentation**. When writing this type of essay, you want to rely upon values you share with your audience, incorporate credible evidence, explain why your position is believable, clearly state your argument, stick to a single argument, and make effective use of rhetorical appeals.

Good luck!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Argument

Takes a clear position on a debatable question and backs up claims with evidence and reasoning.

Audience

The person or people at whom a specific piece of writing is directed.

Evidence

Facts and details that support an argument.