

SEMINAR 4 NOTES: BUILDING A GOOD ARGUMENT

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Key learning outcome: improving your essay argumentation & argument structuring skills

Argument building home exercise reflection

- Some questions to get you started...
 - How do you usually approach the task of building an essay argument? What are the key steps that you usually take?
 - Has the exercise helped you refine your arguments?
 - Was the diagram template easy to follow? What additions did you feel were needed for the model? Did any of the content overlap from one box in the diagram to another?
 - Has the process of doing the exercise changed in any way the substance of your argument?
 - **Extra reflective exercise:** Pick a controversial topic in your field. Using the diagram model from the home exercise, try to write a plan for two separate arguments, one on each side of this debate. Reflect about your own perspective on the topic. Was building the argument you tend to agree with easier? What are the assumptions we use when developing arguments on the topics that interest us? Doing this type of exercises will help you develop your argumentation skills.

What makes a good academic argument?

Regardless of the topic, all good arguments have some common features:

- **Clear from the start**

Is the argument clear from the introduction? Does the introduction outline how are you going to structure this argument and what types of evidence will you use to support it? Do you have a thesis statement?

- **Easy to follow throughout the essay**

The argument stated in your introduction has to be followed throughout the essay and evaluated in the conclusion. All paragraphs have to fit together like a puzzle in building the overarching argument.

- **Based on solid evidence**

An argument is expressing a point of view which is supported by evidence. A good argument avoids logical fallacies. Are you using reasoning or evidence, or asserting your personal views only as part of your argument premises? Are you judging evidence based on its substance and content, rather than based on who is making these claims?

- **Convincing for your audience**

Writing involves various aims. For example, some parts of your writing will describe a problem, others will be more analytical. The aim of the argument is to convince the reader that 1. you answered the question(s) and 2. you have an original angle to the topic.

*Reflection: These are **general** characteristics of good arguments. Can you find any that are **specific** to your field of study?*

Argument cohesion - overall and paragraph-level

Overall argument cohesion - working on your thesis statement

A thesis statement usually appears in the form of one sentence early in the essay. The thesis statement is the main idea of your essay, which you will then support through argumentation. It takes a position - it does not present two perspectives as having equal weight. After doing critical reading on the topic, start with a working thesis statement. Think critically about your working thesis statement: Did I answer my question? Is there relevance in my thesis? Is my thesis statement too broad? Does the body of the essay support the thesis statement? Are there any paragraphs or sections that diverge from the argumentation supporting the thesis statement? Have I thought critically about my assumptions?

Exercise: Write a working thesis statement in 1-2 lines for the essay or dissertation you are currently working on. Is it too broad, or is it specific enough? Does it take a position based on the evidence you critically engage with in the essay?

Paragraph-level cohesion - make your argument flow throughout your essay.

INTRODUCTION: Include your final thesis statement. Contextualise your argument. Show how you will answer the research/essay question through the argument.

BODY: Detail on each part of the argument and the evidence. The body has to demonstrate argument cohesion and flow. Smoothen the transitions between paragraphs -make it enjoyable to read for the marker! Think about word choice for transitions - addition, concession, causation, summation -, but do use them with moderation and only when they add value to the sentence.

CONCLUSION: Was the argument supported by the body of the essay? Remind the marker what your argument was. Demonstrate how you supported the argument threads with evidence in order to reach the conclusion. Point at any limitations in your argument, e.g. this could be due to data limitations or perhaps not including or detailing certain possible perspectives & explaining why.

Reflection: There are many argument styles - from classic Aristotelian arguments, to the widely used Toulmin type argument (the example we used in class). Can you identify a pattern of argumentation style in your field of study?

Live demonstrations

1. Mindmapping arguments using MINDMUP

In this interactive exercise, we used MINDUP to build two arguments. We considered the following essay question: "Is globalisation a force for good?"

Exercise: If you found this useful, why not try MINDMUP with your own essay or dissertation question? The link is in the resource box below.

2. Live essay marking - argumentation

In the last part of the seminar, we read a Philosophy student essay and focussed on its argument. We discussed what makes that essay deserve over 70%. Think about what you found good about the essay's argument and reflect on how you can adapt some of the tips this week on your own argument.

Tip: Look at the marking criteria for your current assignment. Does it have a category dedicated to the argument? If not, which marking tickbox would the argument fit in? Distinction level arguments are commonly described using the words "critical", "analytical", well supported", "logically structured" and "original". Does your argument demonstrate these criteria/

Useful resource box

- MINDMUP is a free mindmapping software, which can be good for argument structuring in a visual way. You can read more information and use it here: <https://www.mindmup.com/>
- Chatfield, T., 2018. *Critical thinking*. London: Sage. (In particular Part I - Chapters 1-3 on argumentation).
- Cottrell, S., 2017. *Critical thinking skills: effective analysis, argument and reflection*. 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan.
- The Argument Handout from the Writing Center: <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/argument/>
- Excelsior Online Writing Lab is an excellent resource with detail on different types of argument styles: <https://owl.excelsior.edu/argument-and-critical-thinking/>