



In the driver's seat: the role of the argument in structuring an essay

All students are told that the purpose of an academic essay is to make an argument. Teachers' and writing manuals frequently emphasize the centrality of an argument to the essay, but the way in which the argument directs the entire essay is often unclear. What is the connection between the argument of an essay and its components? I find it useful to think of the argument as the driver of a car: just as the latter determines every turn that a car takes, so does the argument determine where the essay is headed and what the next paragraph should be. In what follows, I show how the argument is intrinsically linked to the three major parts of an essay, its introduction, body, and conclusion.

The argument and the introduction

A strong introduction to an academic essay normally does the following:

- it situates the argument in a broader context
- it states the argument clearly
- it hints at the importance of the argument, and
- it gives the reader a clear sense of *how* the argument will be made, that is, of the overall flow of the paper.

The context could be anything that introduces the topic and allows the reader to 'slide into' the argument without being abruptly exposed to it in the first sentence. The context might be only a couple of sentences in length. For instance, for a paper analyzing the Disney movie *Mulan*, the introduction could begin, "Earlier this year, Disney celebrated the 20th anniversary of the release of its 1998 classic, *Mulan*." And then go on to talk about the popular (or scholarly) interpretation of the movie and why you felt an analysis of it was important.

Stating the argument/thesis statement might seem an obvious thing to do, but a great number of students are often unable to do so appropriately. It is therefore prudent to state the argument explicitly at some point in the introduction: "This paper argues" or "In this paper, I argue ..."

The main purpose of the introduction is to get readers to read the paper. They will only do so if they think the argument you're making is important enough for them to read the rest of the paper in order to decide on its validity.

This is why it is important to mention, briefly, why your argument is important, for instance, “This essay thus contributes to the growing literature which suggests that colonialism never ended, only transformed.” Or, “My argument calls into question the prevalent assumption that with time all modern societies will move toward secularism and a more egalitarian constitution.” The full import of your argument will unfold only toward the end of the essay, but it is important to give the reader a little ‘trailer’ to whet his appetite. In a way, the suspense that revealing the plot takes away (see below) can be reintroduced through one or two well-chosen sentences about the importance of your argument.

Finally, the introduction should direct readers to what lies ahead, giving them a clear sense of what to expect in the upcoming pages. This is how the introduction to an academic essay is different from the opening chapter of a story or novel. In the essay, you must state the ‘ending’ of the story right at the beginning (somewhat similar to ‘flashback’ narratives). And you must also give the reader a broad sense of how the narrative will unfold, removing any ‘suspense’ (unlike a flashback story). For instance: “To make my argument, in the first half of my paper, I will unpack the popular interpretation of the movie by analyzing the movie’s reviews in three major film magazines. By showing the errors in their reading of the movie, I will present, in the second half of the paper, a more nuanced reading of the movie.”

The argument and the body

The body is where the bulk of the reasoning takes place. This is the place where you develop your argument and give the reader sufficient reasons to believe in its validity. All subheadings should, therefore, be dedicated to illustrating the various aspects of your argument.

The argument also ties together the different paragraphs of an essay. Think of the different paragraphs as different pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and the argument as the picture that emerges when all the pieces are put together. Without a central argument, the different paragraphs, no matter how fascinating individually, will remain disjointed, unconnected, random pieces of information—just like having scattered pieces of the jigsaw puzzle lying around without any sense of the complete picture that must emerge from them.

The argument and the conclusion

The conclusion reiterates and ‘hammers home’ the argument. It does so performing two essential steps. First, it summarizes the entire argument. Especially in a long essay, it is easy for readers (and for writers during the writing process) to lose track of the central argument as they labor through the body of the essay. A quick summary of the whole paper noting the impetus for writing the essay, the major points discussed, and the evidence used to justify the central argument reminds the readers not only of the ground covered but also of the larger picture.

Second, a strong conclusion comments on the implications of the argument. What does this essay entail for further researchers in this field or elsewhere? Think of the primary audience to which

your argument is directed and what your study means for them: “policy makers in developing countries will benefit immensely from adopting this approach” or “To those interested in early Mughal history, this essay provides important questions for future research.” (Of course, in many cases your primary audience will only be your instructor, but you must still try to show why your argument matters—other than getting you a good grade.)

Every academic essay makes an argument. The argument gives direction to the essay, and is the single most important factor in the various stages of the writing process, whether it be the introduction, body, or the conclusion. Understanding how the argument is central to all the parts of an essay is essential to a well-structured cohesive academic essay.