

## WHAT IS AN ACADEMIC ARGUMENT?

The term 'argument' is used in everyday language to describe a dispute or disagreement between two or more people. However, within written academic work, the presence of an argument does not always indicate a disagreement. An argument can be used to:

- Support something we think has merit – a position, a point of view, a program, an object.
- Persuade someone that something would be beneficial to do (or not to do) – a particular course of action.
- Convince someone that something is true, likely to be true or probable – a fact, an outcome.
- Show someone the problems or difficulties with something – a theory, an approach, a course of action.
- Reason with someone to get them to change their mind or their practice.

In its most basic form an argument is **a claim that is justified**. What makes something an argument is that **the claim (or conclusion) is supported by at least one reason**. The supporting statements of an argument are called **premises**.

An argument is NOT:

- a statement of fact (i.e. 26.7% of Australians prefer dark chocolate)
- an assertion or claim (i.e. Wearing a seatbelt reduces the risk of injury)
- a prescriptive statement (i.e. The Government should spend more money on healthcare)
- a conditional statement (i.e. If you drink too much, you will damage your brain)
- a series of statements about the same thing.

An argument IS:

- a group of statements of which one is a proposition or claim that is supported by at least one of the other statements (Drinking water daily is good for your health as it cleans out your liver and reduces the level of toxins in your blood).

## WHEN DO I NEED TO USE AN ARGUMENT?

The purpose of an argument is to get others to believe what it is you are asserting or claiming. This means you do not need an argument if you are just describing something, listing certain items, explaining how something works or just identifying key points or factors. However, you do need to use an argument when the point you are making may not be well known or may not be well accepted (it is not obviously true), or where you know there is some disagreement or alternative perspective. Because of this, we have to give **reasons** to support our position.

Essay topics often ask us to take a position on a topic. Is privatisation better than public ownership for developing countries? Why do nurses need to be culturally sensitive? To answer these questions, we need to decide what position we hold and then defend it. This means we need to present a well-reasoned argument.

## WHAT MAKES A GOOD ARGUMENT?

A good argument should be convincing. You should find yourself believing the claim, or at least finding the conclusion reasonable. This entails several things:

- that the premises are acceptable or reasonable (likely to be true)
- that the evidence or reasons are relevant to the claim
- that the reasons provide sufficient grounds to lead us to accept the claim.

These are called the acceptability, relevance and grounds conditions of an argument. If an argument satisfies these three conditions, it is likely to be a good argument.

(see Govier, T 2005, *A practical study of argument*, Thomson/Wadsworth, Southbank, Vic.)

## HOW DO I WRITE AN ARGUMENT?

First, you need to understand the question. What do you have to do? What issues do you need to cover? Then you need to do your research. What do we know about this issue? What do the researchers say? What are the debates, the problems? Then go back to the question and see what you think. What do you think is the answer, given your research and what you now know? This will be your claim. You now need to argue for this position in an academic context.

Once you have decided your position, you need to work out how you will put forward your point of view in a well-reasoned and objective way. Ask yourself, what made me come to this conclusion? What did I find convincing? What did I find problematic? These will be the reasons that justify your claim or conclusion. If you found the reasons convincing, then so should the person reading your essay. Remember to acknowledge all the sources you accessed to get your information.

## A GOOD ARGUMENT

Facts or evidence alone do not make an argument, they merely support it.

1. Make it very clear what position or point of view you are taking. What will you be claiming or arguing?
2. Work out what will support your case:
  - Include supporting evidence
  - Acknowledge counter arguments/counter evidence
  - Use the right language/discourse markers
3. Draw out the implications:
  - Why am I saying this here?
  - What is the point I am trying to make?
  - What does this evidence show?
4. Comment on what you are doing and what you include as you write.
5. Make sure your essay has a good, clear, logical structure:
  - Your points are relevant
  - They lead towards the conclusion
  - It is easy to follow where you are heading and why

## THE LANGUAGE OF ARGUMENT

Just making a claim and presenting evidence to support that claim will not qualify as an argument **unless** you use the right connectives, indicator words or discourse markers. This will show the logical connections between your ideas, the literature and the statements you are making. It will indicate why you have included a particular piece of information, and its relevance to your overall claim.

For supporting premises, you need to use words like: *because (of) . . . , given that . . . , the reason is that . . . , not only . . . but also . . . , whether or not . . . , due to . . . , since . . . , in order to . . . , in order that . . . , rather than . . . , if . . . then . . .*

Examples:      The Government should spend more money on healthcare *because* . . .  
                          *Given that* . . . , the Government should spend more money on healthcare.

For conclusions, you need to use words like: *so . . . , therefore . . . , thus . . . , then . . . , it follows that . . .*

Examples:      *Given that* wearing a seatbelt reduces the risk of injury, *then* . . .  
                          Wearing a seatbelt reduces the risk of injury. *Therefore* . . .

## USING THE RIGHT LANGUAGE

The introduction is usually the only place where you can use 'I' (unless you are writing a self-reflective paper which asks for your personal views or reactions).

Even then, some lecturers prefer you not to use it at all. Avoid using expressions like 'in my opinion' or 'I think.' The following gives examples of how to use 'I' appropriately and how to avoid using it altogether.

### The use of 'I'

*In this paper: I discuss/ will discuss..., I argue / will argue that..., I will show ..., I will present..., I will put forward the claim that..., I refer to the work of/theory by...*

### Avoiding the use of 'I' (Changing the subject)

*This paper discusses . . . , This essay puts forward the claim that . . . , This paper argues that . . . , The findings indicated . . . , The idea was to . . . , The intention of the research was to . . .*

### Using the passive voice

*It will be argued that . . . , Four articles will be analysed . . . , Eight nurses were interviewed . . . , It was found that . . .*

## USEFUL DISCOURSE MARKERS

There is a range of different words you can use that indicate the logical connections between your ideas, your attitude to the research you have included and the relationship between the evidence and what you are claiming. These are called logical connectives (and, but, or, either/or, if . . . then, therefore) and discourse markers. Below are some useful examples.

### Citing evidence

*According to Smith..., Smith claims that..., Smith states..., As Smith claims / shows / illustrates..., This is supported by..., Research findings indicate/show that..., This indicates that ..., There is evidence to show that...*

### Showing agreement

*Consequently..., As indicated ..., Further to..., In support ..., As a consequence ..., Furthermore . . .*

### Showing disagreement

*In contrast..., On the contrary..., On the other hand..., However..., Contrary to..., ...but...*

### Disjunction (qualifying)

*Despite this..., Although..., In spite of this..., While..., Nevertheless..., Whereas..., Regardless of..., Yet..., Even if, even though..., By comparison...*

## OTHER LANGUAGE FOR ADDRESSING THE LITERATURE

*It is clear that..., As shown, current research..., In relation to X, this is very important/ significant because ..., As can be seen, many theorists hold that..., There are serious implications that can be drawn from..., These findings indicate that..., This finding is supported by..., This seems to imply that..., It is still not completely clear that..., Interesting research has been conducted by..., They extend the idea of..., Evidence of this can be seen in the work by...*

## SAMPLE ARGUMENT

### The Smart Pill – a critique

(adapted from *Super-Pill To Get Students' Brains Into Gear*,  
Jeremy Laurance, London)

Debilitating mental diseases like Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia have a huge social and financial impact. **[background issue/broad context]** As a consequence, scientists have been trying to find a cure by developing drugs that slow mental deterioration and enhance memory retention. According to researchers (MacNally 1998; Jones 2001) more than 200 chemical compounds that will boost memory and learning ability are currently being developed by pharmaceutical companies. **[current state of research]** If successful, the application of the drugs could be much broader than just the treatment of dementia. Professor McGaugh (2001) claims that the new drugs will have a wide appeal to students sitting exams and 'ambitious workers wanting an edge over their rivals' (p. 74). **[implications]**

There seems to be some evidence that a 'smart pill' is a possibility. Experimental trials of a new class of cognitive enhancers, called ampakines, have supposedly had positive results without the severe side effects. **[positive case]** Current research (McGaugh 2001) indicates that rats taught to avoid one part of a maze by electric shock treatment remembered the information up to a month afterwards when given the drug, compared to the control group which forgot within 24 hours. Ampakines have also had 'remarkable effects in humans' (McGaugh 2001, p. 75). **[supporting evidence]**

However, these claims need to be treated with caution. **[negative case]** The Chair of CIBA Foundation says that of the 140 'smart pills' already being sold in California, none were effective and some were actually hazardous. One cognitive enhancer, Tacrine, has produced only modest effects – slowing mental deterioration by just six months – while its side effects, such as liver damage, have been very severe. **[supporting evidence]** While ampakines are supposed to have reduced side effects, there is little information on what these are and as yet no confirmation on the supposed remarkable effects in humans. **[counter-argument]**

While the idea of a 'smart pill' is likely to be popular with students and high achievers, there is little evidence that such a pill exists, and especially one without risk. **[summarising reasons against]** At the same time, all the current research is focused on enhancing memory retention. While this would be beneficial for dementia sufferers and those with Alzheimer's, it will only be of limited use to the normal person, i.e. enhancing short-term memory during a specific task. **[implication]** Being smart entails more than just retaining information. The benefits of a smart pill, should it be developed, will be very limited and unlikely to be worth the risk. **[conclusion, claim]**

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TEL: 61-8-8201 2518  
E-MAIL: [slc@flinders.edu.au](mailto:slc@flinders.edu.au)

INTERNET: <http://www.flinders.edu.au/SLC>  
POSTAL: PO BOX 2100, ADELAIDE, SA 5001