Organizing an Argument

As with other aspects of writing an argument, your organizational strategy will vary according to the requirements of its disciplinary context, your knowledge and level of expertise within the field, and your previous experience preparing arguments.

There are probably as many ways to draft an argument as there are arguments; however, there are a few tried and true methods—from adversarial to mediation based, and deductive to inductive reasoning—which work well in the academic world. None of them are carved in stone, however. Here we'll explore a number of useful methods to guide you in drafting your own argument.

Rogerian Method

Most of the time we think of arguments as adversarial, taking place between people who fundamentally disagree. One will be right and the other wrong; one wins and the other loses. This works in legal systems as well as in the context of many other situations. But often—especially in academic arguing—no single position regarding a controversy is completely right.

When you're working on an issue or problem about which more than one viewpoint may be valid, you may want to try drafting an argument that is oriented more toward mediation. Unlike adversarial arguments, which typically begin with a firm claim, an argument that mediates will postpone stating a position until much later in the presentation, often the middle or the end.
There are a number of ways to do this; one of the best being based on the work of psychologist Carl Rogers. A Rogerian argument presumes that if author and audience find common ground regarding an issue or problem, they will be more likely to find, or agree upon, a common solution. It succeeds only when the author understands the audience. He or she must present the audience's perspective clearly, accurately, and fairly before asking them to consider an alternative position or solution.

This method downplays emotional appeals in favor of the rational and is particularly useful in dealing with emotionally charged, highly divisive issues and allows for people of good will on different sides of an issue to find, or agree upon, solutions together.

**Parts of a Rogerian Argument**

**The introduction** typically points out how both the author and the audience are similarly affected. Rather than presenting a thesis demanding agreement, which is often seen as an attack on whomever holds an opposing view; this presentation emphasizes unity, putting the audience first.

**The audience perspective** comes next. Described as clearly and accurately as possible-typically in neutral language-the author acknowledges their point of view and the circumstances and contexts in which their perspective or position is valid. Done well, the author builds good will and credibility with the audience, a crucial step leading toward potential compromise. Honest, heartfelt sincerity is the key here: if the audience perceives an attempt at manipulation, the Rogerian argument strategy generally backfires.

**The author's perspective** comes in the next chunk of the argument. For the audience to give it a listen it must be presented in as fair-minded a way as was theirs, in language as equally neutral and clear. To be convincing, besides describing the circumstances or contexts in which the position is valid, it must contain the evidence that supports the claim.

**The closing of a Rogerian argument** doesn't ask the audience to give up their position, but shows how they would benefit from moving closer toward that of the
author's. In other words, it ends by laying out the ways a compromise or alternative solution benefits both audience and author under a wider variety of circumstances than either can account for alone.

**Deductive Method**

The traditional academic argument is deductive, placing the author's position in the introduction and devoting the rest of the argument to presenting the evidence. Unless you are in a field where inductive reasoning is the norm, you can hardly go wrong with this method.

In some cases, all the evidence may be directed at proving the main point; in others, each piece may lead to a sub-point that needs proving before a convincing argument for the main point can be made. Depending on how directly each piece of evidence relates to the position, a deductive argument can be organized in a variety of ways.

**When All Evidence Relates...**

When all evidence relates directly to your main point, or thesis, and each piece of evidence is equally relevant, a typical arrangement simply introduces the position and presents each piece. Transitions connect each to the thesis.

Depending on their strengths and weaknesses, the order in which each piece of evidence is presented, as well as the rebuttals of opposing arguments, can differ greatly.

More often than not, even when all evidence is directly relevant, some pieces may be more convincing-less open to question or interpretation-than others. In these cases, arguments are typically arranged as follows:

- **Introduction** establishing the context of the argument as well as the author's position.
- **Body of Evidence** presented, depending on the audience analysis, from most to least, or least to most convincing.
- **Conclusion** summarizing the argument, presenting a call to action, or suggesting further research.
When Seemingly Unrelated Sub-Points...

When seemingly unrelated sub-points need to be made and proven in order to prove the main point, the author must show how the particular premises of each, along with its supporting evidence, connect, collectively and logically, to support the main position.

An argument supporting a ban on logging in rain forests might first need to establish and provide evidence regarding five other environmental premises, each supporting the author's position, regarding the effects of logging. For instance:

- It causes soil erosion
- It affects global warming
- It destroys native species
- It alters water routes and levels
- It destroys indigenous lifestyles

Each premise is a debatable issue in and of itself. Therefore, some measure of the supportive evidence behind each—at least enough to connect them as reasonably evidentiary links—must be given before they can be used to collectively support the author's main position. In these cases, arguments are typically arranged as follows:

- **Introduction** establishing the context of the argument as well as the author's position.
- **Brief Preview** outlining each premise, or reason, to be used as evidence supporting the claim.
- **Body of Evidence** presented, depending on audience analysis, in an order which will make the most sense to the audience.
- **Conclusion** summarizing the argument and demonstrating how each premise leads logically to the author's position, presents a call to action, or suggests further research.

**Note:** This arrangement is ideal for content sub-headings where each heading describes the premise/reason to be discussed.

When Opposing Arguments...
When opposing arguments or points of view must be addressed there are a variety of ways to argue against or refute them. They can be place almost anywhere in the text, however, the strength and power of the opposing arguments and how familiar your audience is with them should be your main considerations. Here are a couple of options:

**When opposing arguments are less persuasive** or, at best, equal to, rebuttals are best saved till last where the opposing argument will appear less credible in light of your own:

- Introduction
- Your argument and evidence
- Rebuttal of opposition claims
- Conclusion

**When opposing arguments are particularly strong** and readily accepted, discrediting them point-by-point may be the best strategy for convincing an audience to consider alternative points or support a different position.

- Introduction
- Rebut first opposing argument followed by first counter-argument
- Rebut next opposing arguments, followed by further counter-arguments as you go along
- Conclusion

**Inductive Method**

Inductive arguments are more difficult for an audience to follow, thus they are less commonly found in the academic world than deductive arguments. Typically they begin with the author introducing an issue without proposing a solution or stating a position. Instead, various takes and opposing positions are introduced and argued, for and against, all of which then leads up to the author stating his or her position.

The goal of an inductive strategy is to present all the evidence and information in a manner such that, when the author's position is finally stated, the audience has been moved, or persuaded to agree that it is the one and only logical conclusion.
Inductive arguments can be organized in a variety of ways depending either on your assessment of what position the audience already holds or, on whether you are arguing a position from original research. It may be completely inductive, saving your position for the end, or partially inductive, introducing your position somewhere in the middle of the argument.

**When an Audience Completely Disagrees...**

When an audience completely disagrees with your position convincing them that their reasons for disagreeing are faulty before presenting your own position may be the best strategy.

**Introduction:** States the issue to be addressed and why it is important.

**Body of Argument:** Examines positions already proposed and refutes each one, showing why they are inadequate. Typically organized like this.

- Position 1
- Your refutation of position 1
- Position 2
- Your refutation of position 2

Alternatively, all positions might be examined first and then refuted second.

- Position 1
- Position 2
- Your refutation of position 1
- Your refutation of position 2

**Conclusion/Position Statement:** Once all other positions are shown to be inadequate, conclude with your position as the only logical choice.

**When an Audience Partially Disagrees...**
When an audience partially disagrees with your position, the best strategy still looks a great deal like when they completely disagree: convincing them that their reasoning is faulty before presenting your own position.

**Introduction:** States the issue to be addressed and why it is important.

**Body of Argument:** Examines positions already proposed and refutes each one, showing why they are inadequate. Typically organized like this.

- Position 1
- Your refutation of position 1
- Position 2
- Your refutation of position 2

Alternatively, all positions might be examined first and then refuted second.

- Position 1
- Position 2
- Your refutation of position 1
- Your refutation of position 2

**Position Statement:** Introduced as the only logical choice after the positions your audience finds most persuasive are shown to be inadequate.

**Presentation of Evidence:** Supports your position as not only reasonable, but the best one available as well.

**When an Audience is Completely Unfamiliar...**

When an audience is completely unfamiliar with the issue, presenting evidence and leading to a logical conclusion may be the best choice because you are informing the audience while simultaneously proving the position.

**Introduction:** States the issue to be addressed and why it is important.
**Body of Argument:** Presents the different work done on the issue and the conclusions reached.

**Logical Connections:** Looks at how conclusions reached in the research fit together leading to a particular answer to the problem or position on the issue. An alternative arrangement would include connections between each conclusion presented and proven.

**Conclusion/Position Statement:** ends the argument with your position as the only logical choice.

**When Original Research Forms the Basis...**

When original research forms the basis for an argument, particularly in the sciences, the study itself and the results must be discussed before a conclusion or interpretation of the data can be discussed. It must be made obvious to the audience that your position emerges from the research rather than being one you are ensuring the research will support. A deductive arrangement, starting with the conclusion or position, implies that the research may be biased.

**Introduction:** States the issue to be addressed and why it is important.

**Research questions:** Describes study and the issue, problem or question it was designed specifically to answer.

**Methods:** Describes in detail the methods employed in the study.

**Results:** Summarizes and provides a detailed presentation of findings.

**Conclusion/Position Statement:** Argues for a particular interpretation of the results which leads to a conclusion addressing or answering the original issue, problem or question investigated.

**Tying it All Together**

American methods of academic argument are best depicted as a straight line. No matter what-be it evidence, sub-points, refutations of other positions, or personal
anecdotes—everything used must lead clearly back to the position being argued. Although the relevance of each is always clear to the author, their connections are not always so obvious to the audience. Therefore, it is up to the author to carefully explain them.

**Toulmin Method**

One of the best ways to demonstrate why a given piece of evidence supports the thesis, claim or position of an argument is to explain the reasoning process by which they are logically connected. In the Toulmin method, these explanations are referred to as warrants.

First, for each claim that is debatable, or open to question, a reason is offered that supports the claim's validity. A warrant—consisting of a sentence or two—then follows, explaining the reason. Finally, evidence is supplied that supports connecting the reason to a given point or the overall claim of the paper.

### Example of the Toulmin Method

**Thesis, Claim or Position**

Grading should be optional in non-major courses.

**Reason/Point #1**

Non-major courses are designed to help students become intelligent, well-rounded citizens. If the goal of such courses is the exploration and acquisition of knowledge, grades only get in the way.

**Warrant #1**

Rather than learning for the sake of becoming a better person, grades encourage performance for the sake of a better GPA. The focus grading puts on performance undercuts learning opportunities when students choose courses according to what might be easiest rather than what they'd like to know more about. [Introduces why proof is relevant to point]
Evidence

For example, students polled at CSU in a College of Liberal Arts study cite the following reasons for choosing non-major courses:

1. Easy grading (80%)
2. Low quantity of work (60%)
3. What was available (40%)
4. Personality of teacher (30%)
5. Something they were interested in knowing more about (10%)

Similarly, in an interview I conducted with graduating seniors, only two of the 20 people I spoke with found their non-major courses valuable. The other 18 reported that non-major courses were a waste of time for a variety of reasons:

1. I'm never going to do anything with them.
2. I just took whatever wouldn't distract me from my major so I didn't work very hard in them, just studying enough to get an A on the test.
3. Non-major courses are a joke. Everyone I know took the simplest, stupidest, 100-level courses needed to fulfill the requirements. I can't even remember the ones I took now.

Warrant #2

Although not everyone in the interviews or the CLA poll cited grades explicitly as the reason for choosing easy, irrelevant, non-major courses, we can read such reasoning into many of the less explicit references as well. Clearly, students are not choosing courses based on what they can learn from them. Yet they are fairly consistent in their choices: 100-level courses with little work. Although laziness might be seen as the cause of such choices, it is just as likely that choosing according to the amount of work, selecting simple courses, or only studying for the exam are a result of the GPA system. Higher work loads and more complex topics
obviously could mean receiving a lower grade; thus, they should be avoided. [Demonstrates how proof leads to point as necessary conclusion.]

Using Subheadings and Transitions

Chunking text into sections according to where a new point is being made, a new reason in support of your thesis is offered, or a new opposing argument is being addressed helps establish coherence among the various parts of your argument. Using sub-headings to label these different sections will help the audience follow your argument.

In addition, transitions explaining why one section helps support the point made in the previous one or how the next point follows logically from the first helps the reader see more clearly how these points ultimately relate to the claim, or position being argued.

Using Subheadings and Transitions: An Example

**Thesis/Claim:** Greenlife's proposal to ban all logging in rain forests should be supported.

**Reason #1:** It would help prevent global warming.

[This sentence then gets developed, followed by a transition leading to Reason #2.]

**Transition between #1 and #2:** Although global warming may be the most persuasive reason to stop logging in rainforests due to the effect it has on the entire planet's population, the effect on local culture, affecting a much smaller number of people, is just as important. Losing native habitats destroys ways of life which can never be replaced, displacing people and devastating cultures that
can never be restored.

[Logic: both are equally important reasons to stop logging.]

**Reason #2:** Logging destroys indigenous lifestyles.

[This gets developed, followed by a transition leading to Reason #3.]

**Transition between #2 and #3:** Not only is the effect on indigenous cultures and global climate impossible to reverse but logging also has a lasting effect on the local environment that could have equally disastrous consequences. The erosion caused by logging results in a change in the ecosystem, particularly the loss of rich, fertile soil essential to both plant and animal life.

[Logic: human effects of global warming and loss of indigenous cultures are not the only considerations: effects on ecosystems are also consequences of logging.]

**Reason #3:** Logging produces erosion in the local environment.

[This gets developed, followed by a transition leading to Opposing Position #1.]

**Transition between reason 3 and opposition #1:** Of course, many have argued that the loss of plant life and soil should be considered necessary damages if they work in favor of increasing the quality of human life.

[Logic: Introduces opposing argument #1 and leads to its refutation.]

**Opposition #1:** The argument that human life is more important than plant life, however, simply does not hold up when considering that the devastation of an ecosystem also affects human life. These effects, as I've already shown, can be measured not only in terms of climate change and the loss of indigenous cultures, but also in terms of losses to farming and other local economic systems.
[Logic: Demonstrates that opposition to point 3 is not viable because of points 1, 2, and 3.]

Using Topic Sentences or Explanatory Paragraphs

Another good way to help an audience follow the logic of your argument is to use of topic sentences literally telling them how each point relates to the claim, clearly connecting them so that there isn't any question how or why they relate. In longer arguments, entire paragraphs can serve this purpose by explaining the connections between extended summaries of evidence or the logical arguments of sub-points to the main claim.

**Paragraph Example**

**Claim/Thesis of Paper:** Writing teachers fail to deal with multicultural issues to the detriment of their students.

**Section One:** An analysis of the weaknesses of current curricular approaches to writing

**Transitional Paragraph tying analysis to thesis and next section:** As the analysis above shows, none of the available curricular models address multiculturalism except in the most cursory manner. Worse, their very superficiality does more damage than good. By introducing the topic of writing for multiple communities, the pedagogies make an attempt to bring diversity into the classroom; yet their focus remains on teaching academic writing with standard usage and grammar. Although they admit that such teaching is only for this context, putting such emphasis on standard forms introduces the issue: which forms of writing have more power in society, something none of the pedagogies address. By putting forth the academic model as the one which must be taught and learned in schools, they implicitly devalue other forms. The failure to foreground these power issues, then, leads students of difference to conclude that although their language and forms of writing might be acceptable in certain places, they are not welcome in the places which
count in society. The effect of such an implicit message can be devastating to maintaining cultural values and difference.

Section Two: Discussion of research on multicultural student reactions' to writing classes.

Topic Sentence Example

Main Claim or Thesis of Paper: Professor X is a good teacher and should retain her job at CSU.

Introduction: Argues that determining whether Professor X is a good teacher involves evaluating her performance against criteria for good teachers.

Body of Argument: Works through several criteria to judge Professor X’s teaching quality.

Topic Sentence Example: The first and probably most important criteria for judging the quality of a teacher is student opinion and, by any measure of student opinion-course evaluations, interviews, and class enrollment- Professor X is clearly one of the best teachers at CSU.

[Paper goes on to offer summaries of all three forms of proof listed and then moves onto the second criteria with a topic sentence that ties back to the overall judgment of Prof. X as a good teacher.]

Example of When Methods are Combined

Claim of Paper: Decreasing the average work week to 32 hours would help support family values.

From Body of Paper: Although most of us know that working too much affects family time and thus family structure, we usually assume that this is the case only for people who work 40+ hours a week. Studies of how work-related stress influences family time, however, suggest that too much work, even within what is considered "normal," has detrimental effects on family time. [Topic sentence
connects evidence (studies) to the point that 40 hour work weeks have negative affects on families.]

For example, in Smith's 1987 study of 15 average, middle-class families, he describes the undue pressure a 9-5 schedule puts on families. In particular, he notes that this time schedule translates to at least three forms of unnecessary family stress: (1) "rushed" mornings where parents desperately try sticking to a rigid time schedule that gets the children off to school and themselves to work between the hours of 7 and 9; (2) financial pressure of paying babysitters or day care facilities during school holidays and the 2 or 3 hours after school while parents are still at work; (3) overly frantic weekends where, since many businesses close at 5:00, all errands must be done before then. [Note how the author highlights only the parts of the study that influence family pressures.]

The stresses Smith documents are not in families where parents work 60-70 hours a week. The parents working 40 hours a week are secretaries, mechanics, bank employees, etc. The effects on them, he notes, clearly translate to less time spent with family members because of work demands as well as increased pressure when the family is together. [Warrant explaining why proof shows the problem is the 40-hour work week discussed in the initial point made]

Such pressures can't help but influence the quality of time the family spends together, influencing its ability to stay together or to have the type of time most conducive to instilling family values. [Topic sentences which ties point 1 to overall claim of paper] In fact, as psychological studies show, the type of time spent together has a great influence on family cohesiveness. [Transition connecting point 1--effect of 40 hour week on families--to point 2: the influence of time pressures on keeping family together]

**Next Paragraph:** Summaries of psychological studies to support the new claim of effect on cohesiveness.

**Reviewing and Revising Your Connections**
After drafting an argument you'll want to take a step back and check the logic of its organization. You want to make sure that everything is connected and that every connection will make sense to an audience.

**Analyze by Outlining**

Chunk your argument into numbered sections: read through the text and place a number in the margin every time you change focus, even slightly. These changes may or may not come at regular intervals: one section might take three paragraphs while another takes only one. When you are finished, ask the following questions:

- Do similar points come up in different sections? If so, put them together.

- Are any sections only a few sentences long? Are they relevant? If so, expand them; if not, cut them out.

- Can you define the relationship each section has to the position being argued? How is each one relevant? Look at your revised argument and create a list of reasons that connect each section to the position being argued. Those that don't should be cut. Save this list, the reasons you have identified will make excellent transitions between argument sections.

- Can you explain why section #2 follows section #1 and so on? If not consider how sections might be moved around so that you have a clear reason for why each one follows another. Make another list, including these reasons. Consider using them as transitions between argument sections as well.

**Get Some Peer-Review**

Have a friend or several friends read through your argument. Ask them to mark where they get lost or are not sure of your point or where you are going next. These are places where rearrangement or clearer transitions are probably necessary. Also, try reading the argument aloud, to yourself and your friends. Frequently, when you hear an argument out loud, you can pinpoint where its logic doesn't add up. Changes can then be made.

**Cut and Paste**
Cut and paste. Play around with your organizational structure. Literally cut your paper into paragraphs and then make piles out of those which have things in common. If only part of a paragraph does, then cut some more. Save the leftovers in a separate pile. What do the pieces in each pile have in common? Construct a title for each pile based on the reason: Finally, ask yourself: what is the relationship between each pile: How are they related? Don't be afraid to shuffle them around and look at them in different positions. This will help you order the sections of your argument when pasting it back together. Look at your pile of left over pieces to see if they belong. If they do, consider expanding them so their relevance is made clear. If not, leave them out. Remember, throwing stuff out is not a sign of failure; it's an integral part of rewriting.

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