The Argumentative Theme

Argumentative writing is writing that expresses the author’s opinions, or propositions, and argues in favor of them. Newspaper editorials and the talks of some television and radio commentators are often of this kind, though often of a very poor style. Classical examples taken from the dialogues of Plato, for example, are stronger kinds of argumentative texts. While we may not realize it, many types of texts or messages with which we are confronted every day have some argumentative aspect to them, even though sometimes it may be hidden (such as in advertisements).

A student occasionally uses argumentative writing in his or her class tests when they are asked to give an opinion on a subject and to support this opinion with (primarily or exclusively) facts learned in the course. The purpose of argumentative writing is to convince the reader that the author is right. The writer, then, must present his or her arguments clearly and soundly if they wish to be convincing.

An argumentative theme usually begins with a statement of opinion, or a proposition, that will be supported by sub-propositions and evidence given in paragraphs. This statement is the central idea or thesis. There are several ways to support this opinion. Perhaps the most commonly used is the listing of facts or examples (evidence) in support of a proposition. A writer may also prove their point by giving responsible arguments arrived at via logical thinking. The most effective way to develop the theme is to use a combination of both evidence and reasonable arguments by means of a structure something like the following (note that each of your sub-propositions can have a different number of pieces of evidence):

Main Proposition: “In this paper, I am arguing that X.”

1. Sub-Proposition A
   a. Evidence
   b. Evidence

2. Sub-Proposition B
   a. Evidence
   b. Evidence
   c. Evidence

3. Sub-Proposition C
   a. Evidence
   b. Evidence

Conclusion: “Given what I have presented above, X must be true.”

The order of ideas in an argumentative theme usually goes from ideas of lesser importance to ideas of greater importance, saving the most powerful arguments (and therefore the most convincing evidence) until the climax of the text. Here is a more fully fleshed-out example of an argumentative structure, taking into account the build-up from less important to more-important ideas.

- First Paragraph: State the argument
- Second Paragraph: Destroy the opposition with facts, OR recognize the opposition
- Body Paragraphs: Build up your case. Use facts, logic, and authoritative sources of information. Cite sources directly in the text whenever possible: that is, use quotes.
- Penultimate (next-to-last) Paragraph: State your most powerful argument. Include an emotional appeal if necessary (Editor’s note: this often weakens and invalidates the whole argument if handled improperly, so only use when absolutely necessary. Argumentative writing should be distinguished from persuasive writing, and when an author uses an emotional appeal, he or she is crossing the line into persuasive (rhetorical) writing).
- Last Paragraph: Summarize and restate argument more strongly.

For smoother writing, use moreover, first (second, third), finally, furthermore, in addition, then, too, equally importantly, on the contrary, at the same time, hence, therefore, thus, in fact. For more information on the effective use of transitions, see the handout Transitions, available from the ISS Handouts Page.