VIII

Composing an Argumentative Essay:

B. Main Points of the Essay

Suppose that you have arrived at a conclusion which you think you can defend adequately. Now you need to *organize* your essay so that it covers everything that needs to be covered, and so that you can present your argument most effectively. Get out a large sheet of scratch paper and a pencil: you are about to prepare your outline.

(B1) Explain the question

Begin by stating the question you are answering. The explain it. Why is it important? What depends on the answer? If you are making a proposal for future actions or policies, like the voucher plan, begin by showing that we presently have a *problem*. Why should others share your worries or be interested in your ideas for change? What led *you* to be concerned?

Consider your audience. If you are writing for a newspaper or public presentation, your audience may be unaware of the issue, or unaware of the extent of the problem; your job is to make them aware. Restating the problem can be useful even when it is no news. It helps to locate your proposal –what problem are you trying to solve?- and it may help remind those who are aware of the problem but who may not have considered its importance. (If you are writing an academic essay, however, do not try to restate the whole history of the issue. Find out how much background your instructor expects.)

To justify your concern with a particular question or issue, you may need to appeal to shared values and standards. Sometimes these standards are simple and uncontroversial. If you have a proposal about traffic safety, you will probably find that its goals are obvious and noncontroversial. Nobody likes traffic accidents. Other arguments can appeal to standards shared by as specific group, such as professional codes of ethics, or to institutional standards, such as the standards of student conduct that a school endorses. They can appeal to the constitution and to our shared political ideas, like freedom and fairness. They can appeal to our shared ethical values, such as the sanctity of life and the importance of individual autonomy and growth, and to broad social values such as beauty and intellectual curiosity.

(B2) Make a definite claim or proposal

If you are making a proposal, be specific. "Something should be done" is not a real proposal. You need not be elaborate. "Everyone should eat breakfast" is a specific proposal, but also a simple one. On the other hand, if you want to argue that the United States should institute a voucher plan, some elaboration is necessary, to explain the basic idea, how payments would work, etc. Similarly, if you are making a philosophical claim, or defending your interpretation of a text or event, first state your claim or interpretation *simply* ("God exists"; "The American Civil War was caused primarily by economic conflicts," etc.); elaborate later as necessary.

If your aim is simply to assess some of the arguments for or against a claim or proposal, you may not be making a proposal of your own, or even arriving at a specific decision. For example, you may only be able to examine one line of argument in a controversy. If so, make it clear immediately that this is what you are doing. Sometimes your conclusion may simply be that the arguments for or against some position or proposal are inconclusive. Fine! But make that conclusion clear immediately. Begin by saying: "In this essay I will argue that the arguments for X are inconclusive." Otherwise, it is *your essay* that will seem inconclusive!

(B3) Develop your arguments fully

Once you are clear about the importance of the issue you are addressing, and once you have decided exactly what you intend to do in your paper, you are ready to develop your main argument.

Planning is important. Your paper has limits: don't fence more land than you can plow. One argument well-developed is better than three only sketched. Do *not* use every argument you can think of for your position: this is like preferring ten very leaky buckets to one well sealed one. (Also, the different arguments may not always be compatible!) Concentrate on your one or two best.

If you are making a proposal, you need to show that it will solve the problem with which you began. Sometimes just stating the proposal is enough. If the problem is that your health is suffering because you do not eat a full breakfast, then eating a full breakfast is the obvious solution. If your proposal is that the United States set up a voucher plan, however, then some careful argument is necessary. You need to show that a voucher system would encourage freedom of choice, that would be a variety of schools available, and that these schools would be a clear improvement over the present schools. You will have to argue about cause and effect, argue from example, and so forth, and the rules discussed in previous chapters apply. Use arguments you began to develop in Chapter VII.

If you are arguing for a philosophical claim, this is the place to develop your main reason(s). If you are arguing for your interpretation of a text or event, this is the place to explain the details of that text or event and to work out your interpretation in detail. If your essay is an assessment of some of the arguments in a controversy, explain those arguments and the reasons for your assessment. Once again, remember the rules from previous chapters. If you rest a claim on an argument by example, be sure you have enough examples, representative examples, etc. If you use a deductive form, make sure that it is valid and that any questionable premises are defended as well.

(B4) Consider objections

Anticipate skeptical questions. Is your proposal affordable? Will it take too long? Has it been tried before? Can you get people to carry it out? If your proposal will be a difficult one to carry out, admit it; argue that it is worth carrying out all the same.

Most proposals have many effects, not just one. You need to consider what *dis*advantages your proposal might have. Anticipate disadvantages that others might raise as objections; bring them up yourself and respond to them. Argue that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages (and be sure, once you've considered them, that they really do!). True, the voucher plan might make schools less stable, but that might seem a small price to pay to make schools, more responsive to the wishes of parents and communities. You can also argue that some possible disadvantages will not actually materialize. Maybe the schools will *not* become unstable: after all (use an argument by analogy), businesses are not destabilized when they are forced to respond to changing customer preferences.

Anticipate objections to your claim or interpretation. If you are writing an academic paper, look for criticisms of your claim or interpretation in the class readings. Once you have explored the issue carefully, you will also find objections by talking to people with different views, and in your background reading. Sift through these objections, pick the strongest and most common ones, and try to answer them.

(B5) Consider alternatives

This is the obvious rule, but it is constantly overlooked. If you are defending a proposal, it is not enough to show that your proposal will solve a problem. You must also show that it is *better* than other plausible ways of solving that problem under the circumstances.

> The U of Q's computer facilities are overcrowded, especially near the end of the terms. Therefore, the U of Q should expand its computer facilities.

This argument is weak in several ways: "overcrowded" is vague, and so is the proposal. But remedying these weaknesses will not justify the conclusion. There may be other and more reasonable ways of ending the crowding. Perhaps computer time should be rationed, so that people use it more consistently instead of putting everything off until the end of the term. Or perhaps the U of Q should prohibit certain uses of the computer near the end of the term. Or perhaps the university should do nothing at all; let the users readjust their use for themselves. If you still want to propose that the U of Q should expand its computer facilities, you must show that your proposal is better than any of these alternatives.

Similarly, if you are interpreting a text or event, you need to consider alternative interpretations. No matter how cleverly and thoroughly you may explain why something happened, some other explanation may seem more likely. You need to show that other explanations are *less* likely: remember rule 19. Even philosophical claims have alternatives. Does the argument from creation (section 12) show that *God* exists, or that a *Creator* exists who might not necessarily be everything we think of when we speak of "God"? Argument is hard work!