

IX

Composing an Argumentative Essay:

C. Writing

You have explored your issue and worked out an outline. You are finally ready to write the essay itself. Remember again that writing the formal version is only the *last* stage! If you have just picked up this book and opened it to this chapter, reflect: there is a reason that this is the last chapter and not the first. As the proverbial old Irishman said when a tourist asked him how to get to Dublin: if you want to get to Dublin, don't start here.

Remember too that the rules of Chapters I-VI apply to writing an essay as well as to writing short arguments. Review the rules in Chapter I in particular. Use definite, specific, concrete language; play fair; and so forth. What follow are some additional rules specific to writing argumentative essays.

(C1) Follow your outline

In the last chapter you developed a five-part outline of your argumentative essay. Follow your outline as you begin to write. Don't wander from one point to a related point which is supposed to come later. If you find as you write that the essay fits together awkwardly, stop and revise your outline; then follow the new one.

(C2) Keep the introduction brief

Some students use the entire first page of a four-page argumentative essay simply to introduce the paper, often in very general and irrelevant ways.

NO:

Philosophers for centuries have debated about the existence of God...

This is padding. It's no news to your philosophy instructor, and even someone who knows nothing at all about the debate could write it. Get to the point.

Yes:

In this essay I will argue that God exists.

or

This paper will argue that instituting a voucher system for the primary and secondary education would lead to society of greater intolerance and isolation between people of different classes.

(C3) Give your arguments one at a time

As a general rule, make one point per paragraph. Including several different points in the same paragraph only confuses the reader and lets important points slip by.

Use your main argument to plan your paragraphs. Suppose that you intend to argue against the voucher system on the grounds that under a voucher system children would not form lasting friendships or feel secure about their surroundings. First make your intentions clear (rule B2). Then you might use hypothetical syllogism we have already sketched:

If we setup a voucher plan, then schools would be competing for students.

If schools are competing for students, then they will use advertisements and promotions to encourage parents to “shop around.”

If parents are encouraged to “shop around,” then many parents will move their children from school to school.

If many parents move their children from school to school, many children will not form lasting friendships or feel secure about their surroundings.

Therefore, if we set up a voucher plan, many children will not form lasting friendships or feel secure about their surroundings.

State this argument first in an paragraph beginning “My main argument will be that...”; you might not want to include all the steps, but give the reader a clear idea of where you are going. Then, to explain and defend this argument, devote one paragraph to each premise. The first paragraph might be brief, as the first premise does not require much defense; just explain that this is the idea of the voucher plan. The second paragraph might be the short argument for the second premise suggested in section A2.

Follow this pattern for all the arguments, not just deductions. Remember this argument from section 8:

The right of women to vote was won only after a struggle.

The right of women to attend colleges and universities was won only after a struggle.

The right of women to equal employment opportunity is being won only with a struggle.

Therefore, all women’s rights are won only after struggles.

Once again, a good essay will first explain the importance of the issue, then make the conclusion plain, and then devote a paragraph (sometimes several paragraphs) to each premise. A paragraph should defend the first premise by explaining how women won the right to vote, another several

paragraphs should defend the second premise by showing with examples what a struggle it was for women to begin attending colleges and universities, and so on.

Notice, in both these arguments, the importance of using consistent terms (rule 6). Even the short arguments considered in rule 6 were hard to understand without consistent terms, but when premises such as these become the lead sentences in separate paragraphs, it is their parallel phrasing that holds the argument as a whole together.

(C4) Clarify, clarify, clarify

Maybe you know exactly what you mean; everything is clear to you. Often it is far from clear to anyone else. Points that seem connected to you may seem completely unrelated to someone reading your essay. Thus it is essential to explain the connections between your ideas, even if they seem perfectly clear to you. *How* do your premises relate to each other and support your conclusion?

NO:

Having a choice many of schools is better than having just one. This is a traditional American value. Thus, we should set up a voucher system.

What is the connection between having many schools and “a traditional American value?” At first glance, in fact, the writer’s claim seems to be false: traditionally America has favored the single public school. More carefully explained, however, there is an important idea here.

YES:

Having a choice of many schools is better than having just one. Americans have always valued having choices: we want to have a choice between different cars or foods, between different candidate for office, between different churches. The voucher system only extends this principle to schools. Thus, we should set up a voucher system.

Clarity is important for yourself as well as for your readers. Points that *seem* connected to you may not *really* be connected, and by trying to make the connections clear you will discover that what seemed so clear to you is not really clear at all. Many times I have seen students hand in an essay that they think is sharp and clear, only to find when they get it back that they can barely understand what they themselves were thinking when they wrote it! One good test of clarity is to put your first draft aside for a day or two and then read it again: what seemed clear late Monday night may not make much sense Thursday morning. Another good test is to give your essay to a friend to read. Encourage him or her to be critical!

You may also have to explain your use of certain key terms. You may need to give common terms a meaning more precise than usual for purposes of your essay. This is fine as long as you *explain* your new definition, and (of course) stick to it.

(C5) Support objections with arguments

Naturally you want to develop your own arguments carefully and fully, but you also need to develop possible arguments on the *other* sides carefully and in detail, if not quite as fully as your

own. Suppose, for example, that you are defending a voucher plan. When you turn to objections (rule B4) and alternatives (B5), consider how people would argue against your plan.

NO:

Someone might object that the voucher system is unfair to poor or handicapped people. But I think that...

Why would someone object that the voucher system is unfair? What *argument* (as opposed to simple *opinion*) are you responding to?

YES:

Someone might object that the voucher system is unfair to poor or handicapped people. Handicapped students usually require more school resources than non-handicapped children, for instance, but with a voucher system their parents would receive only the same voucher as everyone else. Parents might not be able to make up the difference, and the child would be poorly provided for.

The objection about poor families, as I understand it, is this: poor families might be able to send their children only to low-budget schools which didn't charge anything above and beyond the voucher, while the rich could afford better and more varied schools. Therefore, it might be objected that the voucher system represents "freedom of choice" only for the rich.

I would respond to these objections as follows...

Now it is clear exactly what the objections are, and you can try to respond to them effectively. You might, for instance, propose special vouchers for handicapped students. You might not even have thought of this possibility if you had not detailed the arguments behind the objection, however, and your readers certainly would not have understood the point of special vouchers even if you had mentioned them.

(C6) Don't claim more than you have shown

End without prejudice.

NO:

In conclusion, every reason seems to favor the voucher plan, and none of the objections stands up at all. Obviously the United States should adopt a voucher plan as quickly as possible.

YES:

I have argued in this essay that there is at least one good reason to adopt the voucher plan. Although there are some serious objections, it seems possible to modify the voucher system to deal with them. It's worth a try.

Maybe the second version overdoes it in the other direction, but you see the point. Very seldom will you answer all the objections adequately, and even when you do, new problems may surface tomorrow. "It's worth a try" is the best attitude.