

# Argument

## What You Will Learn

- ▶ To take a position on a topic
- ▶ To craft a good working thesis or take-home idea
- ▶ To build an argumentative position in four main ways—deductive, inductive, Toulmin, and Rogerian approaches
- ▶ To arrange an argument effectively
- ▶ To develop material that supports your thesis

What a confusing word *argument* is! Consider how the word is used in these two situations:

- Between classes in the hallway of your school, you can hear loud, angry shouting and the slamming of locker doors. You look in the direction of the noise and your friend tells you, “Oh, that’s just Warren and Charlotte. They’re having an argument.”
- When you get to your Advanced Placement English Language and Composition course, you hear that students are expected to learn how to “create and sustain arguments based on readings, research, and/or personal experience.”

Can these two examples possibly be referring to the same concept? In the first instance, argument stops communication. As stated in the second, argument is a *kind* of communication that’s ongoing, sustained.

There are lots of the first kind of arguments that fascinate the general public—the magazines beside the grocery checkout are full of stories about Celebrity X arguing with Celebrity Y—but we’re going to concentrate on the second kind in this chapter. (In fact, as you’ll discover perhaps, knowing how

to accomplish the second kind of argument can sometimes prevent the first from occurring.) As with *analysis*, the etymology, the origin, of *argument* suggests a path for our discussion. **Argument** comes from the Latin *argumentum*, meaning “evidence, ground, support, proof.” By the time English came to use the term in the fourteenth century, it meant “statements and reasoning in support of a proposition.” In academic settings, that meaning hasn’t changed over the past seven centuries. That’s what the second example above calls for. When you engage in an argument in school—when you produce an argumentative essay or, less formally, just argue a position—you focus on a specific, clear idea that you want your readers to consider carefully and finally adhere to: stick to, like a Band-Aid sticks to your skin. And you convince your readers to adhere to your central idea by offering details, explanations, and reasons, all arranged in an effective order and all well developed, that support your central idea.

## Taking a Position

The most important step in engaging in academic argumentation and writing an argumentative essay is to construct your **position**, the central point you want to propose and develop—what we call the take-home idea in Chapter 4. You may not be completely certain about this main idea when you start working on an argumentative assignment—main ideas usually get developed while you’re in the midst of considering them—but you should have a clear position formulated by the time you’re producing the final draft to turn in.

How do you develop a main, take-home idea? Suppose you are constructing an argument in response to the following assignment, which actually appeared on the 2008 Advanced Placement English Language and Composition Examination:

For years corporations have sponsored high school sports. Their ads are found on the outfield fence at baseball parks or on the walls of the gymnasium, the football stadium, or even the locker room. Corporate logos are even found on players’ uniforms. But some schools have moved beyond corporate sponsorship of sports to allowing “corporate partners” to place their names and ads on all kinds of school facilities—libraries, music rooms, cafeterias. Some schools accept money to require students to watch Channel One, a news program that includes advertising. And schools often negotiate exclusive contracts with soft drink or clothing companies.

Some people argue that corporate partnerships are a necessity for cash-strapped schools. Others argue that schools should provide an environment free from ads and corporate influence. Using appropriate evidence, write an essay in which you evaluate the pros and cons of corporate sponsorship for schools and indicate why you find one position more persuasive than the other.

After having considered both the pros and cons of corporate sponsorship for schools, let's say you want to argue in favor of allowing corporations to sponsor such school programs as library improvements (purchasing additional computers, more books), arts programs (paying for music, drama, and the visual arts), and clubs (providing funding for field trips). You decide on your position in part because of how you have reasoned through the situation as you read about it. In other words, while thinking as you read you already have begun to create arguments and reasons before you even begin to write. You might decide to support corporate sponsorships because there's an actual sponsorship in a school near you, or you might have read about schools' need for funds or heard people talking about other issues regarding corporations. Your consideration of reasons and ideas leads to your position—the controlling idea for your essay and the thesis of your argument.

## Your Thesis: Developing a Take-Home Idea

Once you decide generally what position you think it best to take on an issue, or perhaps *while* you are deciding, you can begin to craft your take-home idea—the central proposition, or thesis. You formulate a thesis as you consider evidence, locate examples, conduct research, and talk to others about a topic. A reasoned, well thought-out argument does not simply preach a point. Instead, it treats the topic with respect, recognizing its complexity, acknowledging that more than one position could be offered. A good thesis will sustain the complexity of an issue, not oversimplify it. No intelligent audience will adhere to a take-home idea that essentially dumbs down the topic.

It's important, therefore, to think carefully and repeatedly about how you will word your thesis, your main point, your take-home idea. You may need to refine it more than once during the process of developing your argument.

Here are some characteristics of a good thesis:

- **It is *robust*:** It is rich, full, and strong enough to do justice to the complexity of the topic.
- **It is *finessed*:** It is carefully phrased to show the intricacy and subtlety of the thinking that will be involved in developing this main idea.
- **It is *nuanced*:** It is constructed to suggest careful distinctions that will emerge in the development.
- **It is *directive*:** It not only commits to a central idea but also suggests the way the idea will develop in the remainder of the essay.

What do these characteristics suggest about the actual construction of the thesis? Probably that a single, simple sentence will not suffice. Most effective thesis statements have more than one clause, and usually one of those clauses is subordinate to the other, allowing the writer to show the readers the complexity of his or her thinking. Sometimes, a writer needs more than one sentence to construct the position and suggest its direction to readers.

Let's say that you are writing on the role of women in a novel you're reading for class, *The Scarlet Letter*. You've decided that the women in the novel are the strongest characters, and you have some good evidence from events in the novel and dialogue between the characters to back up your position. Here's a possible thesis:

Although it may seem that women in early America were assigned much weaker roles in the cultural and political life of the colonies, *The Scarlet Letter* suggests that may be a false assumption of twenty-first-century readers. Not only Hester, the main character in Hawthorne's novel, but others, including her daughter Pearl, effect changes in men's attitudes and in the entire culture of their small village through their strength and ability.

And what do these characteristics suggest about the nature of an *ineffective* thesis, the kind you want to avoid? Ineffective theses generally are blunt, shallow, and overbearing—the kinds of statements that suggest that you really don't want your readers to enter into a conversation with your position. Ineffective theses suggest that you simply want to lecture your readers, not to reason with them. Or they may be too vague and general, which leaves readers wondering what the idea is and why they should want to read about it. Here's a poorly designed thesis:

Hester and Pearl stand up for themselves and so they are perfect examples of how women are often stronger than men in the novel.

### ACTIVITY Forging a Good Thesis Statement

In a discussion with a classmate or a group, examine, compare, and contrast the following thesis statements on the issue of corporate sponsorship of schools.

1. Corporations should be allowed to support schools financially.
2. Corporations should be allowed to support schools financially, but their support should be monitored by schools, which are customers of the corporation. Corporations should not be permitted to display their advertisements on the school's property or on students' books and materials.
3. Although some critics might believe that corporate support for schools could interfere with students' academic success by distracting them from their studies, a carefully monitored program of corporate support could allow chronically underfunded parts of the school to flourish. In particular, corporate support could enable school libraries to upgrade their books and technology, arts programs to involve more students, and intramural clubs to engage in community service projects.
4. Corporations can bring needed resources to schools they support financially, but as with many gifts, strings may be attached. A school, therefore, should weigh carefully the potential benefits and losses that might come with corporate involvement in the classroom.

## Extending Your Thesis Into a Full Argument: Four Paths

After thinking about the topic, perhaps discussing it with others or doing some reading about it, and crafting a version of your thesis that you're willing to refine as you proceed, you're ready to plot out the lines of your own argument. There are, of course, lots of ways to develop the idea you're beginning to shape as your thesis, and you may not decide on your method completely until you've gathered evidence from your reasoning and reading. But once you begin to write, systematic plans help you arrange ideas and make sure you've developed them well. Here are four possible avenues you might follow as you expand and deepen your thesis: deductive argument, inductive argument, Toulmin argument, and Rogerian argument.

### 1. The Deductive Argument

**Deductive arguments** work best when the issue at hand seems to be related to some general principle that you think most of your audience would agree with. When you argue **deductively**, you begin by describing this general principle, premise, or assertion. Then you cite a specific example that fits under this general premise and ultimately offer a conclusion that logically follows from the first two steps. For example:

<b>General Premise:</b>	Corporations can become good citizens by taking some of their profits and supporting entities in their communities that do good work and need financial support.
<b>Specific Example:</b>	Public schools do good work in the community and almost always need additional funding for libraries, the arts, and clubs.
<b>Conclusion:</b>	Therefore, corporations should be encouraged to support libraries, the arts, and clubs in the schools that serve their communities.

### 2. The Inductive Argument

**Inductive arguments** are a good choice when you have access to lots of particular, specific pieces of evidence that you believe demonstrate a general point. When you argue **inductively**, you pull together a range of specific examples that collectively lead to a conclusion, the take-home idea that you finally argue for. For example:

<b>Specific Example:</b>	Corporations sponsor school athletic teams.
<b>Specific Example:</b>	Corporations sponsor local public libraries.
<b>Specific Example:</b>	Corporations sponsor local public arts programs.
<b>Specific Example:</b>	Corporations sponsor local citizens' service organizations.
<b>Conclusion:</b>	Therefore, corporations should be permitted and also encouraged to support libraries, the arts, and clubs in the schools that serve their communities.

You are likely familiar with deductive and inductive reasoning from essays you've written and from work in other disciplines, like math and science. Arguments often proceed using one of these methods. You may be less familiar with the following two strategies for argument, though they're used often.

### 3. The Toulmin Argument

The **Toulmin argument** can be effective when you want to reason very carefully and specifically with your readers. In *The Uses of Argument*, the British philosopher Stephen Toulmin promoted a method of constructing and analyzing an argument that has come to be known simply as the Toulmin Model. Here's how it looks in a diagram, using a simple example as shown in Figure 5.1:

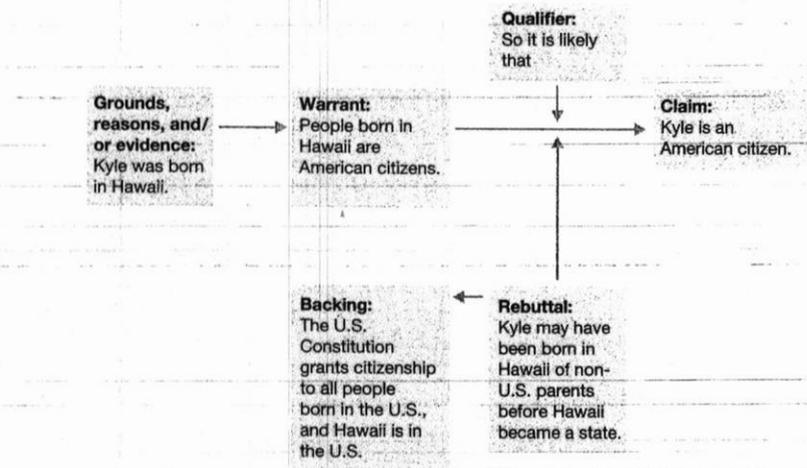


FIGURE 5.1 Toulmin Model of Argument

- The **claim** is the conclusion of the argument, the take-home idea.
- The **ground, reasons, and/or evidence** consist of specific examples and reasons that support the claim.
- The **warrant** is the general premise or line of reasoning that connects the grounds, reasons, and/or evidence to the claim.
- The **backing** comprises support, justification, or reasoning that “back up” the warrant.
- The **rebuttal** anticipates and addresses possible objections to the warrant and therefore leads to the **qualifier**, which specifies any possible limits to the claim.