Tip Sheet Developing an Argument

Academic writing will often require you to develop and present an argument defending your position on an area of study.

This tip sheet explains what an argument is, and the steps involved in developing a logical and coherent argument for your assessment.

What is an argument?

At its simplest, an argument is a conclusion which logically follows from a number of premises. A premise is an idea or fact that provides reasons to support a conclusion. A conclusion is a claim that follows from a set of facts:

The proof of a conclusion depends on both the truth of the premises and the validity of the argument. In the above example we accept the conclusion as long as we accept the premises as true. Of course an argument in an essay may not be this simple, but the point is that in a good argument, a conclusion will follow clearly and logically from the premises.

What are the steps involved in developing an argument?

1. Clearly state your contention (thesis)

The first step in making an argument should be to clearly state what you are arguing. In scientific papers this involves outlining the hypotheses to be tested, but for essays you should directly and clearly identify what you intend to prove or show in a thesis statement. Your thesis statement should be outlined in the introduction of your essay.

E.g. Mobile phones should be banned from schools.

2. Identify the important reasons for your argument (premises)

Consider the different topics that will form the parts of your argument. Each part should be a reason convincing the reader of your thesis. Each paragraph should explore a single idea or topic and the topic sentence at the start of the paragraph should encompass your premise.

E.g. A mobile phone ban in schools would result in:

- Better mental and physical health for students;
- Improved classroom focus and fewer distractions;
- Better student social interactions and reduced cyberbullying.

3. Consider objections

In developing your argument you should also consider possible objections. By addressing potential objections pre-emptively, you strengthen your argument and demonstrate that you are presenting a considered logic.

E.g. A mobile phone ban in schools would result in:

- Reduced “real world” preparation of students as devices are ubiquitous;
- Less access to the internet which can be a powerful learning tool.

4. Use evidence

In an argument, it is important to provide evidence from past research or experimental data to support each point. Claims without evidence are simply opinion. It is also important to evaluate evidence identifying how it supports your argument. Facts without evaluation are meaningless.

E.g. Przybylski and Weinstein (2017) showed young people’s smartphone use to be a detrimental factor in their mental health.

Research has demonstrated a link between decreased social interaction and mobile device use resulting in lower levels of psychological wellbeing (Rotondi, 2017).
5. Consider the logical structure of your argument.

The coherence or flow of your argument can be as important to the strength of your argument as the premises points you make. A good argument will provide a logical flow from one idea to the next, and it will ensure assumptions of important premises are supported and ideas are clarified to relate directly to the premise topic.

E.g. Reason 1 – Better social (better social interactions, reduced cyberbullying)
   Objection 1 – Reduced learning (reduced real world research, less access to the internet)
   Reason 2 – Better learning (fewer distraction in class, less divided student focus)
   Reason 3 – Improved health (better mental health, better physical health)

6. Have a clear conclusion

As mentioned, the conclusion of your essay should follow logically from the premises of your paragraph topics. It is important in your conclusion to show how your claim has been supported by the evidence you have presented. In a good assignment this is more than simply reminding the reader of your points; instead, you should explain how your points contribute to your argument as a whole.

E.g. Despite evidence suggesting mobile phones can be useful learning tools, the research into the social, health and learning effects of mobile phones in schools overwhelmingly demonstrates the need for a ban.

An argument map like the one below can help you structure your writing according to a reader’s logic – that is, structured according to what your reader needs to know in order to be convinced by your argument.

Some words and phrases for arguments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explaining complex points.</th>
<th>Presenting counterarguments</th>
<th>Giving examples</th>
<th>Signifying importance</th>
<th>Summarising</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• In order to</td>
<td>• However</td>
<td>• For example</td>
<td>• Notably</td>
<td>• In conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In other words</td>
<td>• On the other hand</td>
<td>• For instance</td>
<td>• Importantly</td>
<td>• Above all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To put it another way</td>
<td>• By contrast/in comparison</td>
<td>• To give an illustration</td>
<td>• Persuasively</td>
<td>• Persuasively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• That is to say</td>
<td>• That said</td>
<td>• As can be seen</td>
<td>• Compellingly</td>
<td>• Not only... but also</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To that end</td>
<td>• Yet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Not to mention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adding supporting information

• Moreover
• Furthermore
• Likewise
• Similarly
• Another thing to remember
• As well as
• Not only... but also
• Not to mention

Adding a proviso

• Despite this
• With this in mind
• Provided that
• In view of/in light of
• Nonetheless
• Nevertheless
• Notwithstanding