

How to Write an Argumentative Piece

A handout created by the **CEU Philosophy Tacit Knowledge Group**, as part of the 2015 CEU Philosophy R&P Lab sessions. (Source: <https://ceurplab.wordpress.com/>).

Finding your topic and the research question

Formulate a clear and concise research question to guide both your research and your writing. The scope of the question will depend on the format of your writing and its size, but generally keeping the research question as narrow and focused as possible will help structure your work best:

- Make a conscious decision to focus on just one of the issues in the debate.
- Use more specific keywords.
- You could choose a title and play around with it to get started.

How to develop a structure for a piece or for research and manage to keep it focused:

- It is usually advisable to begin with a clear statement of what your thesis is, i.e., what you will argue in the paper.
- Some background work may be necessary next, perhaps to position your argument within the literature and the current state of the debate. Don't forget to motivate both the problem (your research question) and your solution to it.
- Remember to define any technical terms or esoteric phrases that are necessary for your argument, as well as from within the debate more generally - even if they seem obvious to you!
- Present your argument, in as much detail as the size of the piece allows. Carefully explain the premises or points and how the argument establishes your thesis.
- Consider objections to your view. Responding to objections is a productive way to strengthen the position of your own argument (as long as they are careful and considered objections, don't spend time fighting windmills!)
- Conclude, this should be more than a summary of what you have written up to this point. It is useful to reconstruct the thread of the argument and what you propose to have established but you could also include prospects for future research given your argument, or the implications that your thesis might have for related areas in the field.

Writing

Preparing to Write

Things to respect:

- Charitable reading: interpret the views and arguments you are going to discuss or criticize in the most charitable way. Charitable interpretation will not only convince your audience that you are being as fair as you can be to your opponent, but will also increase the significance of your own essay.

- No minimal answer: an essay's quality is largely determined by the *depth* of understanding the issues that it exhibits, the *comprehensiveness* with which it treats them, and by how *thorough and convincing* a case the essay makes for its thesis.
- Argumentation: arguing for a position does not mean simply reporting your beliefs on the subject. Giving an argument for the view you are advocating involves giving you audience something that should count for them as a reason that they, too, should hold your view.
- Consistency: the arguments should be consistent, which means devoid of logical contradictions. If possible, it can be useful to abstract at least the essential argumentative scheme in logical form even before writing.

During the Researching Phase:

- Keep the research focus restricted and relative to the size and scope of the piece you are writing.
- Find the balance between being concise and being thorough
- Keeping it all in mind by methods of abstraction: you could try to summarise your position within the literature using mind maps, one-page summaries, or any form of abstracting that works for you.
- Remember that it is important to actively make the decision to stop researching and start writing once you have the material you need.
- Titles are important. They should always be informative, and sometimes they can be catchy and provocative too.

During the Writing Process

- Find a regular writing schedule: choose a time that suits your writing best and keep it free just for writing
- Don't edit your work or think too much about the topic whilst you write. Writing is a generative process in itself, your ideas will form and refine as you write.
- Getting rid of irrelevant details that lie beyond the scope of your piece: once the paper is finished, you should be able to go through it and explain how each paragraph (and each sentence) is making some contribution in support of the thesis your attempting to establish.

How to deal with an unexpected or surprising conclusion:

1. Drop the expected conclusion,
2. Change the conclusion, e.g., by narrowing or limiting the claim,
3. The "split-brain solution", considering your original argument as proposed by someone else and proceeding to criticising it.

Further Issues

- Don't be afraid to use the trashcan and start again.
- Don't try to write it all at once, give yourself enough time for the ideas to develop. Outline, giving one short sentence to each premise. Draft, giving yourself enough time to clear your head between your first draft and your draft for review. A good paper isn't written, it's re-written (and re-written, and re-written).
- Say no more than you need to say. A philosophy paper should establish a modest point as clearly, carefully, and concisely as possible.

- Use direct quotes sparingly. Mostly employ them to present and interpret potential ambiguities in another author's work.

Further Resources

P. Kyle Stanford, 'The Seven Deadline Sins of Argumentative Writing'. [Available here](#)

Daniel Dennett, 'Rapoport's Rules', in *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Critical Thinking*, Ch. 3.

Ryan Robb, 'How to An Argumentative Essay'. [Available here](#)

Belcher, W.L. (2009). *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks: a Guide to Academic Publishing Success*, California: SAGE Publishing.

Look around the 808 section for other books on general writing and research issues. More books can also be found in the Multimedia Library.

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