Argument and Composition Terms

Argument
The goal of argumentation is to bring about a change in an audience. The arguer must use a variety of ways to analyze an issue, or some particular aspect of it, and engage an audience either to change its initial views on the issue or to reach a consensual understanding that all parties can accept.

Critical Thinking
"Critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe and do" (Robert H. Ennis, Author of The Cornell Critical Thinking Tests). Critical thinking is crucial to the art of argument and composition, as it requires the mental processes of definition, discernment, comprehension, analysis, reflection, evaluation, synthesis, and application of material in order to form a solid opinion that reconciles evidence with common sense.

Issue
A subject that is not settled, and that invites more than one view or perspective. Also called a topic or subject. Issues are phrased as questions: Should the United States remain prepared for a major world war? Should capital punishment be enforced? Should teenagers have unlimited, unrestricted access to the Internet? As a general rule, DO NOT include the question in your argument; ask yourself questions to fuel your own thinking, research, and analysis, and use your answers to address the issue as a matter of fact.

Claim
The thesis statement, statement of focus, or purpose in an argument. Also called the proposition, thesis, or main point. Claims are phrased as statements: The United States should not remain prepared for a major world war. Teenagers should not have unlimited, unrestricted access to the Internet.

Subclaims
The main ideas or reasons in an argument. The best way to understand this is to imagine the word “because” after the claim. The subclaims explain why or how the issue of the claim should be addressed. For example: The United States should not remain prepared for a major world war because it is too costly, it requires too many people to interrupt their lives, and it is not likely to be needed. Or: Capital punishment should be enforced because it is a just penalty for the most severe crimes, it is the moral responsibility of the government in the protection of its citizens, and it serves as a deterrent to further criminal activity.

Types of Claims
There are 5 types of claims; to determine the category of the claim, understand what kinds of questions it answers.

- **Fact:** Did it happen? Does it exist?
- **Definition:** What is it? How should we define it?
- **Cause:** What caused it? Or what are its effects?
- **Value:** Is it good or bad? What are the criteria that will help us decide?
- **Policy:** What should be done about it? What should be the future course of action?
Support
Also evidence, grounds, data, and proof. This is additional information that is used to make claims and subclaims convincing to the audience. There are many types of support including examples, personal narratives, statistics, analogies, comparisons, definitions, descriptions, and reasoned opinion. Support for the subclaim that “capital punishment serves as a deterrent to further criminal activity” might include comparing crime statistics before and after the institution of capital punishment in enforcing states and interviews with criminals or law enforcement officials.

Warrants
Also premises (stated or unstated), implicit values (commonly held beliefs), or motives. These are the assumptions or presuppositions of the author. For example, in the argument that the United States should not remain prepared for a major world war because this is not a good use of people’s time, a possible warrant is that there are better or more important ways in which people would prefer to spend their time. In the argument that teenagers should not have unlimited, unrestricted access to the Internet because they could view inappropriate material or images, a warrant could be that there are materials and images that are appropriate for teen viewers.

Types of Proof
This is not physical evidence, like a murder weapon, or written contract, but proof that “represent[s] the creative thinking and insights of clever and intelligent people.” There are 3 types:

- Logos: appeals to people’s logic, reason, understanding and common sense
- Ethos: establishes the credibility and authority of the source
- Pathos: appeals to or arouses the emotions of the audience

Rhetorical Situation
A situation that raises questions in people’s minds and motivates them to discuss and argue in an attempt to resolve the issues and problems that emerge. This is the context for the argument and includes the text itself, the targeted and untargeted readers of the argument, the author, the constraints on both the audience and the author (such as existing value systems or individual backgrounds, perceptions, and experiences), and exigence (what happened to cause or motivate the argument in the first place).

Refutation
Also rebuttal or counter-argument. An objection to a claim or subclaim, a point of refutation may point out a flaw or invalid point in the argument, or may introduce another point of view or perspective entirely. The purpose for the refutation section of your research paper is to address and overcome objections or arguments someone might have with your claim.