Argumentative Essay

What is an argumentative essay?
Any time you have tried to convince another person you have engaged in an argument. For many, especially those of us who grew up with siblings, the word argument has a much more confrontational connotation. But among writers, the word simply refers to an attempt at convincing a reader through the use of evidence. Some argumentative essays may be composed entirely of your own ideas while others require you to do some research and engage with the ideas of others. Be sure to check your assignment sheet and/or ask your professor so that you know which kind is expected of you.

What makes a good argumentative essay?

- **Introduction:** Above all else, an introduction should make the writer’s topic clear. Remember that when you begin an essay it could be about literally anything, so you have to clarify for your reader which of those millions of topics is your topic. One way to do this is the “inverted pyramid method.” This method begins an essay by starting broadly and then becoming more and more specific until the topic of the argument is made clear. Your introduction should also include a strong thesis (see the Writing Center’s Thesis Statement handout for more on this).

- **Background:** All arguments require context. Where this context comes is a function of how long the essay is. If you are writing a short three page essay, then it might be best to include this information in the introduction. If you are writing a ten page research paper, then a paragraph or two after the introduction would be more useful. Either way, you should include only the information that is necessary for the reader to understand your argument.

- **The Argument:** Each of your body paragraphs that come after your background ought to be centered around one idea that supports your thesis. This idea needs to be supported by evidence and that evidence must in turn be discussed and clarified so that the connection between it and your main point becomes clear. What this means is that simply dropping a quote into a paragraph is not enough. You must explain the quote in your own words and demonstrate why it is relevant.

- **The Counter-Argument:** Sometimes it is a good idea to include an opposing side’s ideas. For example, if you think Ophelia is the most important character in Hamlet, then it may be a good idea to consider those who would pick Hamlet himself instead. The key here is that after presenting the other side’s idea, you must respond to it. This response can be an outright contradiction (No, they’re wrong) or a qualified acceptance (That may be true but). Either way this section should strengthen, not weaken your argument.

- **Conclusion:** A good conclusion will reemphasize the main point of the argument; however, this is not the same thing as just repeating it word for word. Instead, a good conclusion shows the larger implications of the argument. You can think about it as the reverse of the inverted pyramid in the introduction. Here, writers can gradually work out to larger and more general ideas, showing the important connections between these big issues and their own argument.