Identifying and Analyzing Arguments

Introduction

Usually you're expected to identify and analyze the arguments made in the readings you do for your course and assignments. In this video, we'll give some tips on how you can do that effectively.

Identifying arguments

Let's start with how to identify arguments. An argument is a formal way to make a point in academic writing. When reading, you'll need to identify arguments to properly understand the main points the author is making.

There are two ways you usually do this. First, in many paragraphs there is a topic sentence that states the main claim or argument of the paragraph. This is normally the first sentence. Other sentences provide more detail, reasons and evidence to support the argument made in the topic sentence.

Here's a sample paragraph. In this case, the first sentence, "reflective writing can help students become better thinkers," is the topic sentence and states the main claim or argument for the paragraph. The next sentence expands a little on the argument, and the last sentence provides support by citing a research study. If you can see that the writer is using topic sentences, you can get the main arguments by reading the first sentence of each paragraph.

Not all paragraphs have topic sentences, though. If not, you have to work a little harder to figure out what the main argument is. First, you need to identify what the important ideas are, then look at what they have in common, then summarize that to get the main point.

Here's an example. Its a short paragraph that doesn't have a topic sentence. Instead, it has two sentences, each of which makes a claim. The first claim is that people who live near coal-fired plants are exposed to more radiation than those living near nuclear plants. The second is that nuclear energy production results in fewer yearly deaths than coal production. What these have in common are examples where nuclear energy is safer than coal-fired energy. In summary, the main argument of this paragraph then is that nuclear energy is safer.

The papers you read will have arguments at every level. First there will be the thesis, or main argument of the paper. Then there will be different sections, each with one main argument that supports the thesis. Each section will have paragraphs, each with a main argument that supports the argument of the section. Its important to get a sense of the bigger arguments being made as well as how the smaller arguments contribute to them.

Analyzing arguments

Once you've identified the main arguments, you're expected to analyze them. To analyze arguments, you need to look at the supporting evidence presented to you.

Look at the evidence critically and ask questions. Is the evidence sound and convincing? How does it compare with other arguments and evidence you've read? Is there a different explanation possible based on the evidence? People can make very different claims and support them with similar evidence, so its important to think about their reasoning.

In our first sample paragraph, support is given by citing a study that found that students who wrote in journals weekly could analyze course material better. This appears to be a credible study based on original research, and the findings logically connect to and support the main point, which is that reflective writing helps students to be better thinkers.

In our second sample paragraph, the author mentions a paper in the journal Science, but doesn't give any details or citations. That means we can't evaluate how sound the evidence is. Without more detail, we can't be sure that this evidence supports the claim effectively, and can't know how sound the argument is.

In summary, to effectively analyze arguments, we need to understand how well the supporting evidence backs them up.

That's how to identify and analyze arguments in your reading. You can also use these tips though in your own writing to improve your papers. Make sure you have a main point for each section of your paper, and state it clearly in a topic sentence. Then make sure you support your argument effectively with good evidence from sources.

You can find out more about creating arguments and supporting them in our other videos, at library.wlu.ca/help/tutorials.

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