

IDENTIFYING AND ANALYZING ARGUMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Laurier Library's presentation on "Identifying and Analyzing Arguments"

This presentation will explain the steps you should take to create strong and effective arguments from the academic sources you discover through your research.

By the end of this presentation, you should be able to understand the characteristics of an argument, identify those arguments that you find within an academic paper, and analyze those arguments.

Let's begin!

IDENTIFYING ARGUMENTS

An argument, in the context of your university career, is a formal way to make a point in academic writing.

This remains distinct from the "real world" definition where an argument might mean a fight or a conflict.

An argument consists of two parts.

1. Firstly, a claim or statement that summarizes the main idea
2. and secondly, reasons why that claim is true, and/or evidence to support that claim.

Let's look at an example.

Reflective writing can help students become better thinkers. It can help students see that ideas are meant to be discussed and debated. Bridges and Jost found that students who did weekly reflective journal writing about their course content for a semester could analyze course concepts at a deeper level than those who didn't (131).

In this case, the sentence "Reflective writing can help students become better thinkers" is the claim.

The claim is expanded upon in the next sentence, "It can help students see that ideas are meant to be discussed and debated."

Finally, evidence is presented, often in the form of a citation. Here, we read that "Bridges and Jost found that students who did weekly reflective journal writing about their course content for a semester could analyze course concepts at a deeper level than those who didn't."

This evidence supports the originally presented claim and its expansion.

This diagram displays a recommended argument structure which should be utilized in a university-level essay.

1. A main argument, or thesis, is presented first.
2. Then, different sections are formed with the purpose of supporting the main argument.
3. Within those sections, we find paragraphs which hold the purpose of supporting the sections that support the thesis.

Utilizing this type of hierarchy structure is an excellent way to ensure that your essay stays on track and continues to argue what it sets out to argue.

Let's move on to identifying arguments within academic writing.

When reading, you will need to identify arguments in order to properly understand the main points.

In paragraphs, a topic sentence often identifies the main claim or idea of the paragraph.

This is usually the first sentence, but not always.

To find it, follow the following steps:

1. Firstly, read the paragraph.
2. Next, ask "What is this paragraph about?"
3. Thirdly, summarize the content in your own words, and lastly, find the sentence within that paragraph that best matches that summary. This is likely the stated claim of the paragraph.

Most other sentences in the paragraph provide reasons and evidence to support the claim made in the topic sentence.

Reasons and evidence explain why and how the claim is true, and usually consists of quotes or ideas from other scholars, data, or facts.

Let's look at an example. Let's take for example the following paragraph:

The story of Disney's "The Lion King" draws direct inspiration from Shakespeare's "Hamlet". Simba represents Hamlet, the successor of the King/Mufasa, who swears revenge on his evil uncle Scar/Claudius. Likewise, Simba's best friend Nala represents both Ophelia, a love interest, and Horatio, a best friend.

Take a minute and follow the four-step process to determine the stated claim. Click "Continue" when you have an answer in mind.

After reading the paragraph, it seems clear that the author is comparing "The Lion King" to "Hamlet".

More specifically, it is saying that the similarities between the two are too great to be only coincidences.

As a result, it would appear as though the best 'sentence' match to this summary would be the first sentence. This is likely the stated claim.

It is important to note that not all paragraphs have topic sentences.

If there isn't one, identify the important ideas in the paragraph, then look at what they have in common and summarize that to get the main claim or idea.

Let's look at an example. Take, for example, the following paragraph.

According to a paper published in the journal 'Science', people in America living near coal-fired power stations are exposed to higher radiation doses than those living near nuclear power plants. In addition, despite popular belief, the production of nuclear energy results in a lower yearly death rate compared to coal energy production.

This paragraph does not appear to contain a topic sentence.

Follow the three-step process to determine what the stated claim might be. Click "Continue" once you have an answer in mind.

This paragraph discusses a couple comparisons between nuclear energy and coal-fired energy production. Specifically, it gives two examples where coal-fired energy production is more dangerous than nuclear energy production. To summarize, you might say that "Despite popular belief, nuclear energy production is actually quite a bit safer as a whole than coal-fired energy production." This is the stated claim.

You will find that this process works the same way when identifying main arguments or section arguments.

Sometimes such arguments will have explicitly stated topic or thesis sentences, and sometimes not.

If not, identify the important ideas, see what they have in common, put them in groups if needed, and summarize the main idea based on those groups.

ANALYZING ARGUMENTS

We will now move onto analyzing arguments.

Usually you are expected, both for your course readings and for your assignments, to identify and understand the arguments that the author is making.

You are also expected to analyze these arguments.

In order to begin analyzing an argument, you must first look at the evidence presented to you, then ask questions based on that evidence.

Ask questions like,

- "Based on the evidence, is there a different explanation or claim possible?"
- "Is the evidence convincing and sound?"
- "How does the argument/evidence compare with others you've read?"

You will likely find two authors who make different claims on the same topic.

How do they each support their claims with reasons and evidence? Let's look at an example.

Every citizen should have access to a free, universal health care system. This would allow medical professionals to concentrate on healing their patients rather than dealing with insurance procedures and liability concerns. Each person has a right to be cared for and having access to free medical services provides patients with the opportunity for regular checkups when otherwise they may not be able to afford them.

Universal health care is an impractical system where total costs end up being much higher compared to privatized care. Doctor flexibility is decreased due to government policy and those that are healthy are forced to subsidize the health benefits for smokers and those that are obese. Everyone should be given access to health care, but not in a publically-controlled system.

These two passages each reflect an opinion about a universal health care system.

Although each paragraph discusses the same topic, they both claim very different things.

The upper paragraph argues that universal health care gives doctors the opportunity to focus on care over insurance concerns while the bottom argues that doctor flexibility is decreased in such a system due to intrusive government policy.

The upper paragraph argues that universal health care gives everyone the opportunity for regular checkups, no matter the cost while the bottom argues that such a system forces the healthy to subsidize benefits for those needing care due to smoking or obesity.

Ultimately, each author supports his claim with effective reasoning.

As you read, make sure you understand the claims that the author is trying to make.

PRACTICE

Let's take some time to practice a few of things we just went over.

Click "Continue" to begin a series of multiple choice questions which will help test the skills you just learned.

Best of luck!

What is the main idea of paragraph 1?

“Digital piracy is not killing the music industry. History has shown that formats shift and change depending on consumer preferences. LPs and cassettes have been phased out to make room for CDs. With the current shift from physical to digital, consumers have the freedom to purchase individual tracks instead of whole albums, a move that explains the drop in album sales and as a result, overall profits.”

- a) As a result of piracy, overall album sales dropped
- b) Consumers prefer digital media over physical media
- c) Digital piracy is not killing the music industry
- d) LPs and cassettes have been phased out to make room for CDs

(Answer is at the end)

What is the main idea of paragraph 2?

“When a consumer product in some way has a negative impact on society, governments often move to place high taxes on those products to discourage use, for example high taxes on cigarettes and alcohol. Obesity should be viewed in the same light. With the high availability of soft drinks and junk food at an affordable low price, consumers are all but discouraged from eating healthy. A tax on such products would discourage mass purchasing and positively impact our society by curbing obesity rates.”

- a) High taxes on a product discourage use
- b) Low prices and high availability of junk foods results in an increased obesity rate
- c) Taxes on healthy food items should be reduced

d) To encourage healthy eating, higher taxes should be imposed on soft drinks and junk food
(Answer is at the end)

Hopefully you found these problems to be helpful in solidifying your understanding. Make sure to utilize these skills as you continue through your university career.

This brings us to the end of our presentation. Thanks for watching and good luck!

Answers to practice questions:

Paragraph 1: c) Digital piracy is not killing the music industry

Paragraph 2: d) To encourage healthy eating, higher taxes should be imposed on soft drinks and junk food