Developing an ‘Argument’ in Writing

This workshop will:

- Identify the components of an ‘argument’
- Suggest ‘types’ of argument that an assignment can be built around
- Offer strategies to apply evidence and theory into your written work

Teaching points:

1. What is an argument
2. Types of arguments to construct
3. Using evidence to support your argument
4. Using theory in your writing
1. What is an argument?

An **argument** is made up of many **inferences** and **claims** defending one viewpoint.

From an academic point of view, a **claim** is making a point about something which makes a point about something else:

‘such and such is the case’ so ‘such and such is the case’...

You can continue this by adding other claims:

...and ‘such and such is the case’ so ‘such and such is the case’ therefore ‘x’.

You are making a series of **claims** which together make up your **argument**.

What students need to do is apply **critical thinking** to a claim to ask ‘is this saying something significant?’ and ‘is there anything else you need to know in order to respond to the claim’? Consider the claim:

*Including President Obama,*

*five out of the most recent seven US presidents have been left-handed.*

Is there any **significance** to this claim?

Possible questions to ask, i.e. research, to see if it is significant in any way include...

A. What proportion of the US population is left-handed? 10% so there may be something significant about such a high proportion of recent left-handed presidents.

B. What about the presidents before the last seven? 3 out of 36, ie about 10%. So why are recent presidents so different?

C. If Barack Obama had lost the election in 2008, would that have meant that four of the most recent seven US presidents had been left-handed? No: his opponent was left-handed. If George W. Bush (right-handed) had lost, his opponent was also left-handed!

D. How many other countries have (had) left-handed leaders?

It *does* appear the evidence and therefore the claim *has* significance.
When one claim is used to claim something else, then we have an **inference**.

*One of the most notorious examples of the disputed significance of a claim are the words ‘Let him have it, Chris’. These were apparently the words used by a young man called Derek Bentley to his friend, Chris Craig, who had a gun whilst they were planning to break into a warehouse. **Craig** shot and killed a policeman. The jury decided Derek meant ‘shoot the policeman’: he was found guilty and hung. Derek also had a learning disability and had the mental age of 11. Craig was too young to be executed.*

So, one example of an inference is…

> **Derek Bentley had a mental age of 11, so he should not have been hanged.**

The first claim about Derek’s mental age is used to **infer** (draw) the second claim that he shouldn’t have been hanged.

Multiple **inferences** make up an **argument**.

**TALKING POINT**

What other inferences, based on the above, could you make to defend the position or argument that Derek should not have been hanged? Use the space below

However many claims are used, just remember that an argument is just…

\[
\text{inference [i.e. claim \(\rightarrow\) claim]} \times \text{many} = \text{argument}
\]

This process of claim \(\rightarrow\) claim is designed to persuade others ‘here is a claim, so this follows from this’. We might or might not agree, so we’re back to where we started from – looking at the significance of claims and questioning them.
2. Types of arguments to construct

Firstly, you have to have something to say. This could be done by:

- **Agreeing** with a particular argument/point of view and presenting reliable evidence to support the position taken.

- **Rejecting** a particular argument/point of view, but again using reliable evidence to do this. (In a **counter-argument** each individual claim in the argument in question is ‘countered’ by another claim).

- **Conceding** that an existing argument/point of view has merits, but needs to be qualified in certain respects, and stating what these are.

- **Proposing** a new argument/point of view, or reformulating an existing one, so that the new version makes a better explanation for the situation under discussion.

- **Reconciling** two arguments/positions which may seem at variance by bringing a new perspective to bear on the topic.

- **Connecting or synthesizing** different ideas, so new approaches and arguments/points of view can be brought to bear on the subject.

You need to build up your case bit by bit whatever your ultimate goal concerning the original argument is. To do this you will have to handle each of its claim/s one by one, thereby creating one **discussion point or belief** for each.

Let’s consider...

*It is better to shop at Waitrose rather than Sainsbury’s*  

If we **agree** with the above statement, we have to defend that **argument** with different **points representing beliefs** supported by **evidence**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point or belief</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>So what?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More convenient</td>
<td>Seldom long queues</td>
<td>Shopping done quicker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a wider range of</td>
<td>Stock unusual chocolate brands</td>
<td>Girlfriend happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>goods</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goods are better quality</td>
<td>Bread is fresher</td>
<td>Sandwiches tastier</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
This can be represented graphically using a ‘family tree’ (see below) or any other style you prefer.

Adapted from Redman (2001: 48-51)

**Talking Point**

What about *rejecting* the argument? What points or beliefs might you have to defend your *counter-argument*?
Activity 1: Study Skills Workshops v Instant Action one-to-one – which is better?

Place yourself in pairs or small groups. Each will be asked to argue from one of the following stances:

- **Conceding** and show how both are right and both are wrong
- **Proposing** a new argument/point of view
- **Reconciling** to bring a new perspective to bear on the topic.
- **Connecting or synthesizing** different ideas to create something new

Use the space below to make your graphic or list.

### 3. Using evidence to support your argument

When selecting evidence:

- Use examples...
  - Which highlight the most significant or far-reaching implications
  - To illustrate different aspects of your argument
  - From a range of sources, e.g. journal articles, books, and reports
  - To support general arguments.
- Use empirical evidence, i.e. evidence collected via systematic and rigorous observation
- Use maps, diagrams and numerical data (in appropriate assessments, i.e. not essays but reports and dissertations)

### Using theory in your writing

**Do not panic**

Theories are just different ways of seeing the world – like putting on a pair of spectacles – to create a different way of looking at our world.
Assessments will often ask you questions relating to theoretical arguments, or you may use theories as evidence to support your argument, just as you would more ‘concrete’ examples.

To go back to the spectacle metaphor, you have to find a pair that fits a particular view to see something in as useful way as possible. So, when considering slavery as a whole, it may be less useful to see this subject from a feminist point of view (which concerns itself with how women have been or are treated) than from a Marxist viewpoint (which deals with oppression of the working classes by the elite).

Be careful:

- Competing theories are not equal – different theories appeal to different kinds of evidence, so different theories are ‘useful’ in different contexts.

- Do not lump together good bits of different theories into one ‘super theory’ as they will contradict each other.

Make sure you ask questions when you are ‘wearing’ your spectacles to see if there is something you cannot see because it is out of ‘range’ or it is ‘obscuring’ your vision, or if they work with everything you look at. This is ‘standing outside’ a theory to see its strengths and weaknesses, and you may be asked to take a neutral viewpoint on different theories world-views of a subject in order to make a judgement on their positions.

TALKING POINT

Bourdieu and The Theory of Class Distinction. We will go through this together.

Bourdieu’s theory deals with the concept that we learn our social status, whatever that may be, at a very early age, and maintain it throughout our lives by behaving in certain ways, buying objects of a certain types and mixing with others of similar persuasions to distance ourselves from lower groups. Therefore you are unable to ‘break free’ from your class or status. How do you think this relates to education and University?
Activity 2: ‘School is a significant site in which sex/gender is produced.’
[This claim derives from a position (social constructionist) that views sex/gender as being the product of social meanings and practices rather than something you are biologically given.]

Adapted from Redman (2001: 48-51)

In small groups or pairs, come up with argumentative points, with evidence, to both agree and disagree with this claim. Jot down your ideas in any style you wish on the space below.

Analyse your own work – be your own critic

References

Clip art – spectacles/question


dogfaceboy (2007) Slick flame stitch. [online] Available at:


The Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. (2014) Available at:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Bourdieu#Bourdieu.27s_theory_of_class_distincti

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University of Surrey. (2014) Writing Skills. Guildford: University of Surrey. [online] Available at:

**Answers (suggested)**

**TALKING POINT**

Derek Bentley

a) Derek Bentley did not shoot the gun so he should not have been hung.

b) Derek Bentley meant ‘give the gun to the policeman’ so he should not have been hung.

**TALKING POINT**

Sainsbury’s better: Rejection

**Activity 1:** Study Skills Workshops v Instant Action one-to-one

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study Skills Workshops</th>
<th>Instant Action one-to-one</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conceding</strong></td>
<td>Can learn from students on different courses</td>
<td>Can only learn from advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not enough personal attention</td>
<td>Advisor provides undivided attention to student</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have long time to work through specific problem</td>
<td>Short time to work through more than one problem</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Have to wait for when scheduled</td>
<td>Can access help without waiting</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Proposing new argument</strong></td>
<td>Have more than one advisor in workshop so more 1:2:1 attention</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reconciling</strong></td>
<td>Make a group appointment for longer time with co-students</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Connecting or synthesizing</strong></td>
<td>Study skills could be delivered in subject sessions at appropriate times</td>
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