Developing an ‘Argument’ in Writing: Constructing an Argument and Incorporating Evidence and Theory

This workshop will:

- Revist what an argument is
- 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. Types of arguments to construct
2. Using evidence to support your argument
3. Using theory in your writing
1. Types of arguments to construct

All argument construction begins with critical analysis. As a reminder, the critical analysis process is...

- Something that happens **before** writing take place
- Engaging **analytical thinking**
  - by looking at something (whether tangible or conceptual) before you start your reading for your **initial impressions**
  - **Breaking it down** into its constituent parts using analytical thinking of close observation
- Employing **critical thinking** by...
  - **Asking questions** of the origins of ideas, the assumptions behind the ideas, and the applicability of the ideas
  - **Evidencing** your conclusions and findings from this questioning process.
  - Keeping an **open mind** about the application of this knowledge to address a problem or answer a question.
- **Not a linear process** as you answers raise more questions and so on.

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. (A **counter-argument** is an argument that goes against another 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 goods</td>
<td>Stock unusual chocolate brands</td>
<td>Girlfriend happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goods are better quality</td>
<td>Bread is fresher</td>
<td>Sandwiches tastier</td>
</tr>
</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.
2. **Using evidence to support your argument**

Your markers and tutors will expect you to use a range of sources and to use it appropriately and effectively within your writing.

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)

3. **Using theory in your writing**

**Do not panic**

Theories are just different ways of seeing the world – like putting on a pair of spectacles. A child may see a rainbow in a puddle; an artist may see a window into colour; a scientist may see a prism created by oil on water – it’s just different ways 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.

Bourdieu and The Theory of Class Distinction. We will 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.
In summary, make sure you...

- Undertake critical analysis before you start writing
- Are clear about your position on the issue (if asked to choose a stance)
- Take multiple perspectives – THE BEST ANSWERS DO THIS: IT IS A MARK WINNER
- Are clear about your conclusion (if asked to be definite)
- Use appropriate empirical or theoretical evidence to support your points/beliefs
- 'Stand outside' a theory to see its strengths and weaknesses

Finally,

Analyse your own work – be your own critic

References

Clip art – spectacles/question


**Answers (suggested)**

**TALKING POINT**

Sainsbury’s better: Rejection

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study Skills Workshops</th>
<th>Instant Action one-to-one</th>
</tr>
</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>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have long time to work through specific problem</td>
<td>Short time to work through more than one problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have to wait for when scheduled</td>
<td>Can access help without waiting</td>
</tr>
<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>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reconciling</strong></td>
<td>Make a group appointment for longer time with co-students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connecting or synthesizing</strong></td>
<td>Study skills could be delivered in subject sessions at appropriate times</td>
<td></td>
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