

Guidelines and Suggestions for Presenting An Argument and Taking Exams

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I. *The Argument*

An Argument is an effort to make the thoughts of other people conform to our own. It is not merely a taking of opposite sides, or the act of disputing or quarrelling. In the argument the end and aim of all that is done is to produce in the mind of another person a belief that the theory asserted is true or valid. Conviction and persuasion are indissolubly combined in a good argument.

An argument consists of three parts: the Introduction, the Proof, and the Conclusion.

(1) The introduction is that part of the argument in which we explain to our reader that which we intend to prove.

(2) The proof is that part of the argument actually produces convictions. It consists of the presentation of facts or evidence and the reasoning from the facts or evidence to the results which lead up to the establishment of the main point. An argument that is without evidence is assertive. Assertion is the statement of unsupported opinion. To rest your case merely on your unsupported opinion may be fatal. The reader demands not only that you state that a thing is so, but that you also show why it is so. The legal adage, "A case well stated is half proven" is as true in argument as it is in law.

(3) As an introduction is necessary to show what we intend to do, so a conclusion is necessary to show that we have done it. The mind demands some final closing of an argument which makes the conclusion more than a mere matter of form. If, after you have presented your last fact and drawn your last inference from it, you leave the subject, there is an abruptness which leaves the reader hanging.

II. *Suggestions for Writing an Argument*

A. Introduction

- a. Challenge the attention in opening your argument; e.g., with a quotation, illustration, incident, epigrammatic statement, or striking piece of evidence.
- b. Make the conflict of opinions a comparison of points of view, rather than of detailed contentions.
- c. Have the main issues stand out clearly at the end of the introduction.

B. Proof

- a. Delineate your main sub-points in some kind of logical order, or ordered format, e.g., general to specific
 - i. e.g., sub-point A with example
 - ii. e.g., sub-point B with example
 - iii. or sub-point A
 1. sub-point A-1
 2. sub-point A-2
 - iv. sub-point B
 1. sub-point B1

2. sub-point B2

- b. Never take it for granted that this logical ordering is self-evident; it may be to you but not to your reader.
- c. Do not assume that your reader can deduce your points amidst your evidence without your specific statement of those points. You'll probably be wrong.

C. Conclusion

- a. Do not conclude inconclusively. Reiterate your main points in the conclusion.
- b. In longer essays, summarize your themes and principle subsidiary points.

III. *Additional Suggestions for Effective Writing and Exam Presentation*

A. Essay Exam

- a. When studying for an essay exam, study with the following considerations in mind:
 - i. Identify the major questions and topics surveyed in the course.
 - ii. Examine how the class discussion and assigned readings have served to clarify or not clarify the principal topics and questions.
 - iii. Write out questions that arise while you are studying or the points of confusion and present these to the Lecturer for discussion.
 - iv. Consider what the lecturer has said that you should ideally get from the course or what the course is designed to do.
 - v. Divide your notes in manageable proportions according to the main topics, issues, questions, and/or perspectives in the course.
 - vi. Reflect on whether and how you can construct an argument for each of the principal questions, issues, and/or perspectives discussed in the course. Remember to try to identify your basic themes or themes, the subsidiary points, relevant examples or evidence and a concluding statement.
 - vii. Try to determine from what angles questions might be asked given the emphasis of the course and the materials covered. Try to construct reasonable arguments to address these questions. In this regard, remember that the Lecturers are trying to find out what you know, not what you don't know. They are not out to nail you on details or trivia.
- b. Do not cram until the last minute for an essay exam. Give the material some time to filter through your mind. Your mind must be relaxed and clear. Under pressure, the material you crammed will not help and you will feel frozen in the details you just reviewed. I would suggest that you stop studying a few hours or the night before an exam. Relax, get an adequate amount of rest, eat a good (but not heavy) breakfast or lunch. You must be comfortable before you can write comfortably. Remember an essay exam is designed to monitor how you think, not to monitor how well you use your memory. While the exam presumes a certain amount of substantive knowledge, details are not important. Do not cloud your thinking with details or think that by memorizing

details you are really thinking critically. You are not and the results of your exam will indicate it.

- c. Come to an exam room early (about 10-15 minutes before) and adjust yourself to the room, your desk and lighting. If it is too warm or cold, say so (if nothing can be done adjust your clothing, so come prepared).
- d. When writing under a time constraint, outline a “doable” essay. Do not try to do more than what time allows. It is better to complete your presentation with a definite concluding statement than to appear to trail off due to lack of time in the middle of your discussion.
- e. Think out your statements **before** you write. Do not assume that you will make the point by blurting out everything you know in a stream-of-consciousness approach. Your blurting will appear to just that.
- f. Remember that the reader is not interested in learning **all** you know. The reader is interested in reading **your argument** hoping that it is presented clearly and concisely.

B. Take Home Essay

- a. Do not wait until the last evening or day to prepare your answer. Begin by reading over the question or problem and considering it without your notes. Jot down your ideas and first impressions for approaching your essay.
- b. Next, review your notes and reading to extract or take note of the portions which you feel are relevant to making your case.
- c. Outline your initial presentation with your main points, sub-points, examples or evidence, and conclusion.
- d. Set the outline aside for a few hours and do something else.
- e. Review your outline, then review your notes and readings to consider your presentation, examples and evidence. Revise the outline.
- f. Draft your initial essay.
- g. Set the draft aside and do something else for a few hours or sleep on it overnight.
- h. **Revise your essay** by:
 - i. Returning to your outline to satisfy yourself that you have said all you wanted to say;
 - ii. Review your notes and readings to assure yourself that no other important points can be made or evidence be used;
 - iii. Review your conclusion and opening paragraph. Be sure the former ties up your presentation in terms of the main question asked and your main point or points. Be sure that the opening paragraph states clearly the question asked or problem presented and the way that you will handle the question or problem in terms of your main points.
 - iv. Type the revised draft taking note of your grammar and style for a presentable final copy. Print a copy of your final draft and read it over.
 - v. Once the essay is finished, forget it. Hand it in as soon as you can. Do not fuss over it. If you have followed all the steps up to this point, you will probably do quite well.

C. After receiving any exam or essay back (especially prior to the final), talk over your problems, questions, and/or criticisms with the TA or professor. We are here to help you but we are dependent on your coming to us with your

problems. If you feel the exam was not a good one, please let us know so that trouble can be avoided on the final. We are here to help you if you will allow us to help.

- D. Learn from your mistakes. In addition to correcting your substantive problems, examine your strategy for class note taking, participation, exam preparation and performance. Identify areas where you can improve yourself. Never assume that either you have mastered your task (and therefore have nothing to learn) or that you cannot improve your performance. You can and you will, provided you are willing to work to do so.
- E. Final Point
 - a. These are not iron laws; they are simply guidelines and suggestions that we have found helpful and hope that you will find helpful. We would appreciate your comments or suggestions to improve this presentation.

IV. *Some Principles of Composition and an Approach to Style*

Note: The following principles have been taken from Stunk, William, Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (available as a Macmillan paperback). It is a useful little reference book.

- A. Some Principles of Composition
 - a. Choose a suitable design and hold to it. Planning is a deliberate prelude to writing.
 - b. Avoid excessively long or short paragraphs. As a rule, single sentences should not be written as paragraphs except for sentences of transition, indicating the relation between parts of an argument.
 - c. Use the active voice.
 - d. Put statements in positive form. Make definite assertions. Avoid lame, colourless, hesitating, non-committal language.
 - e. Use definite, specific, concrete language. Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract.
 - f. Omit needless words. Vigorous writing is concise.
 - g. Avoid a succession of loose sentences or phrases.
 - h. Express coordinate ideas in a similar form.
 - i. Keep related words together.
 - j. In summaries, keep to one tense.
 - k. Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.
- B. An Approach to Style
 - a. Place yourself in the background. Write in a way that draws the reader's attention to the sense and substance of the writing, rather than to the mood and temper of the author.
 - b. Write in a way that comes naturally; however, do not assume that because you have acted naturally your product is without flaw.
 - c. Work from a suitable design. Make an outline of the principle and subsidiary points and the order of presentation.
 - d. Revise and rewrite. Your words are not set in granite; do not be afraid to change them or cross them out. When revising a paper, use scissors and tape to reorder the sentences and paragraphs or to add or delete materials.

- e. Do not overwrite. There is no need for rich or ornate prose. Be direct and to the point.
- f. Do not overstate or else the reader will lose confidence in your judgement or prose.
- g. Do not affect a breezy manner. Do not assume that the way your ideas pop into your head is the way the reader wishes to read them.
- h. Use orthodox spelling. For example, do not use thru for through.
- i. Do not explain too much. Unless details are significant, do try to limit them.
- j. Do not construct awkward adverbs. Adding **ly** to a word is not the answer.
- k. Avoid fancy words; avoid the elaborate, the pretentious, the coy and the cute.
- l. Do not inject opinion. Unless there is a good reason for its being there, do not inject opinion into a piece of writing. We all have opinions about almost everything, and the temptation to toss them in is great. To air one's views gratuitously, however, is to imply that the demand for them is brisk, which may not be the case.
- m. **Be clear**. Since writing is communication, clarity can only be a virtue. And although there is no substitute for merit in writing, clarity comes closest to being one.

You might also wish to consult John Wilson's *Thinking With Concepts*.