

1.15 Developing an argument

It is very important that you recognize which type of essay questions are looking for some sort of judgement, and then to be able to construct an effective, convincing argument in your answer.

A major cause of complaint from tutors is that students at all levels do not do this very well, and make their writing descriptive rather than argumentative. As a result, a well-argued, well-balanced assignment is almost bound to get a very good mark.

The following essay titles all require a judgement or argument:

- Should capital punishment be reintroduced in the UK?
- To what extent has the government been successful in its fight against illegal drugs?
- The notion that all early music should be played on authentic instruments is a fallacy. Discuss.
- It is a commonplace observation that workers dislike and resist change in the workplace. How far do you think this is a rational response to their economic position and how far simply a result of the mismanagement of change?

If you were to write a very general essay, for example, about capital punishment, without answering the specific question asked, your mark is going to be low. Instead, what you need to do is:

- Decide what your opinion/standpoint is on the question, either from your own experience, from what you have covered on your course, or from additional reading on the subject. **Be careful - do not leave things out because you do not like them or disagree with them.**
- Think what the main points of your argument would be.
- Do extensive reading to find evidence to back up your points, and at the same time note down counter-arguments and contradictory evidence. There is always more than one side to an argument, and it is very important in a piece of academic writing to show that you are aware of these different opinions. **Your approach must be balanced, not one-sided.**
- Structure your answer carefully. You should state what your conclusion will be right at the start in your introduction; then present both, or all, sides of the argument in a logical, coherent manner, showing clearly which side you stand on by the specific use of language (see below) and use of appropriate examples and evidence; and finally include a well-developed conclusion which draws all the strands together and makes completely clear where you stand. In an argumentative essay the conclusion is probably the most important part, so don't make it too short.

What is an appropriate position to take?

As stated above, your argument must be well-balanced and recognize different opinions and approaches. You should not, therefore, completely dismiss one side of the argument. At the same time, you should not “sit on the fence” and avoid giving a clear answer about the situation/topic. This may be interpreted as you not having an opinion, or simply not knowing.

Sample piece of argumentative writing

Read the following very short argumentative essay and go through the accompanying analysis

Discuss the funding of childcare provision in the UK

Recent changes in government priorities have seen a reduction in financial support for parents who use childcare. This is occurring at a time when there is increasing social and financial pressure on parents, particularly mothers, to work. The issue of childcare and working mothers has been the subject of dispute for some time. Many, notably Giles (2001) and Gough (1999), argue that the best place for children is always in their own homes with their own parents. However, there are many advantages to be had from using childcare and the government should provide more financial assistance to parents who do so.

Pollock (2000) argues that children who attend childcare centres at an early age miss out on important early learning that occurs in parent-child interaction. These children, so this argument goes, may be educationally disadvantaged later in life. However, childcare centres may actually assist children in their early learning. They give children an opportunity to mix with other children and to develop social skills at an early age. Indeed, a whole range of learning occurs in childcare centres.

Another argument against the use of childcare facilities (Vaughan, 2001) is that children can be emotionally deprived in these facilities compared to the home. This argument assumes that the best place for children is to be at their parents', especially mothers', side for twenty-four hours a day. It claims that children's emotional development can be damaged when they are left in childcare facilities. However, parents and children need to spend some time apart. Moreover, children become less dependent on their parents and parents themselves are less stressed and more effective care-givers when there are periods of separation. In fact, a recent study conducted by MCC (2003) indicates that the parent-child relationship can, in fact, be improved by the use of high-quality childcare facilities.

It could further be asserted that the government and the economy as a whole cannot afford the enormous cost involved in supporting childcare for working parents. However, working parents contribute to the national economy. They are able to utilise their

productive skills and pay income tax, while non-working parents can become a drain on the tax system through dependent spouse and other rebates.

In conclusion, government support for childcare services assists individual families and is important for the economic well-being of the whole nation.

Paragraph 1: This is the introduction, which clearly states the main premise in the final sentence: Note that two exponents of the counter-argument are acknowledged.

Paragraphs 2, 3 and 4: These paragraphs all follow a similar pattern. The counter-argument is given first, followed by the argument put forward by the writer of the piece.

The counter-argument is “weakened” or “problematized” by phrases such as: *so this argument goes ... This argument assumes ... It claims that ... It could further be asserted ...*

It is important to show this opposing argument, as by doing so you are showing that you have considered both sides of the argument, and also that you are able to anticipate and criticize any opposing arguments before they are even stated.

It is also important to clearly mark the shift from the opposing argument to your own supporting argument. In these three paragraphs, this is done by the use of the word *however*.

Paragraph 5: This is a very short conclusion. You need to use the main points from your essay to support your answer in your conclusion.

Language Summary: ways of showing that you are aware of the opposing opinion

1. When you can think of the opposing opinion but you have not seen it written anywhere:

It	may be	argued	that...	However, ...
		asserted		
	could be	contended		
		maintained		
	might be	claimed		
		said		

2. When you have seen the opposing opinion written in another text:

It	is / has been	argued	by x (2003)	that...	However, ...
		asserted			
		contended			
		maintained			
		claimed			
		stated			

Or

x (2003)	argues	that...	However, ...
	asserts		
	contends		
	maintains		
	claims		
	states		

Alternatives to “however”:

nevertheless, nonetheless, despite ..., although ...

[You can find more examples of useful academic language in the Manchester Phrasebank.](#)