Arguing a Position

Everything we say or do presents some kind of argument, takes some kind of position. Often we take overt positions: "Everyone in the United States is entitled to affordable health care." "The university needs to offer more language courses." "Ice-T shouldn't have gone into acting." Some scholars claim that everything makes some kind of argument, from yellow ribbons that honor U.S. troops to a yellow smiley face, which might be said to argue for a good day. In college course work, you are constantly called on to argue positions: in an English class, you may argue for a certain interpretation of a poem; in a business course, you may argue for the merits of a flat tax; in a linguistics class, you may argue that English should not be made the official language of the United States. All of those positions are arguable—people of goodwill can agree or disagree with them and present reasons and evidence to support their positions. This chapter provides detailed guidelines for writing an essay that argues a position. Here is an example.

ANDY MCDONIEAirport Security: What Price Safety?

*Here is an argument written in 2002 by Andy McDonie for his first-year writing course at Wright State University, in Dayton, Ohio.*

We all want to feel safe. Most Americans lock their doors at night, lock their cars in parking lots, try to park near buildings or under lights, and wear seat belts. Many invest in expensive security systems, carry pepper spray or a stun gun, keep guns in their homes, or take self-defense classes. Obviously, safety and security are important issues in American life. But there are times when people are unable to protect themselves.

Air travel is one such situation. There is nowhere to run, and no one is allowed to carry weapons that could be used for self-defense on board an aircraft. Therefore, it is important that no one at all be allowed on board an airplane with a gun or any other weapon. Unfortunately, this is much more easily said than done.

Though airlines and the U.S. government are taking many steps to ensure the safety of passengers, there is still a risk. In light of recent hijackings by militant Islamic Arabs, it would be very easy and economically sensible to target Middle Easterners for security checks at airports and anywhere else security could be an issue. This would allow everyone else who is statistically less likely to be a terrorist to travel more freely without long delays. However, as sensible and economical as this solution could be, it must never be allowed here in the United States.

One airline that targets passengers for security checks based on ethnicity and gender is El Al, Israel's national airline. In "Unfriendly Skies Are No Match for El Al," Vivienne Walt, a writer for *USA Today*, describes her experience flying with this airline. Before anyone gets on any one of El Al's aircraft, he or she has to go through an extensive interview process. The intensity of the process depends on categories into which passengers fit. Jews are in the low-risk category. Most foreigners are medium risk, while travelers with Arabic names are very high-risk. Women traveling alone are considered high risk as well, because authorities fear that a Palestinian lover might plant a bomb in their luggage. Screening passengers takes time; El Al passengers must arrive three hours before their scheduled departure, and even so flights are sometimes delayed because of the screening process.

El Al is secretive about what goes on in its interviews, and company spokespersons admit that the airline will deny boarding privileges to certain ticket holders, but their security record is the best in the world. Since these and other policies took effect over twenty years ago, not one terrorist act has occurred on an El Al plane (Walt 1D–2D). El Al's anti-terrorist system is indisputably effective. But is it ethical? Here in the United States, airports and airlines are racing to meet new security standards set by the federal government. As travelers are flying and as new regulations are being implemented, more and more air travelers are getting pulled aside for "random" security checks. In my experience, these checks may not be as random as the airports would like the public to think. Since September 11, 2001, I have spent several hours at airport gates and have boarded eight separate flights. Not once have I been delayed at the gate for a random security check. I am a young white male. However, I have seen who does get checked. I have seen some middle-class Caucasians checked, but at least from what I have observed, that is not the norm. Minorities are a target, especially minorities traveling alone. I have seen a seemingly disproportionate number of nonwhites delayed at gates. I have also noticed that women traveling alone or with other women are often picked out.

History has many examples of the U.S. government's suspending or abridging the rights of certain groups during wartime. In the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln suspended the right of habeas corpus (which allows prisoners to have their detention reviewed by a court of law), an act that was later ruled unconstitutional. During the First World War, freedom of speech was restricted by the Supreme Court, which declared, "When a nation is at war, many things that might be said in time of peace are such a hindrance to its effort that their utterance will not be endured so long as men fight and that no Court could regard them as protected by any constitutional right." During the same war, Pittsburgh banned Beethoven's music; the Los Angeles Board of Education forbade discussions of peace in school; and in many states German could not be taught. Perhaps the worst example of American wartime discrimination occurred during World War II, when Japanese Americans had their property seized and were forced to live in internment camps. Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, one commander enforcing the internment, justified this policy by saying that "in the war in which we are now engaged, racial affiliations are not severed by migration. The Japanese race is an enemy race. . . . A jap is a jap" (O'Brien 419–25).

What can we learn from this grim history? Ben Franklin said that if we sacrifice freedom for security, we get neither. Though safety is important, at what price should it be bought? And if we sacrifice our freedoms for it, are we really safe? It would be easy for most Americans to justify restricting the rights of just one minority group. After all, most people would not be affected. But if we can oppress people from the Middle East during a time of crisis, we can do the same to any other group of people at any time. That is not the way Americans should have to live.

There is an additional point here: not all terrorists are of Middle Eastern descent. If we were to target Middle Easterners for security checks, many Muslims might have difficulty boarding an aircraft, but the Unabomber or Timothy McVeigh would have had little or no trouble. Acts of murder, political turmoil, and terrorism are carried out by persons of all races and nationalities. Focusing on one group might only simplify the process for non-Arab terrorists.

New security measures exist in many European airports. Some use retinal scans, a high-tech way of identifying passengers by scanning their eyes. Most screen checked baggage and match checked baggage to passenger lists. Many airports interview all passengers. According to one German frequent flier, "The level of scrutiny at a checkpoint says a lot about security at the whole airport to me. I feel safer flying to the United States than flying back" (Davis).

Clearly more changes need to be made at airports worldwide. Though it would be more economically sensible to target certain groups, doing so would be unethical. If the rights of one group of people are jeopardized, then the rights of all Americans are jeopardized. Freedom must not be sacrificed for security.

Discriminating against a single group would also be ineffective. Many people of Arab descent would have difficulty boarding an aircraft, but white, black, or Asian terrorists could move through security easily. Targeting certain groups would be easier but less than fair. Instead of focusing on one or more groups, airlines should treat all passengers equally, using technology that is currently available.

Works Cited
Davis, Aaron. "Guarding Europe's Airports—Future of Air Travel
 Visible in Tight Security Terminal." *San Jose Mercury News*.
 22 Nov. 2001: A1+.
O'Brien, Ed. "In War, Is Law Silent?" *Social Education* 65 (2001):
 419–25.
Walt, Vivienne. "Unfriendly Skies Are No Match for El Al." *USA
Today* 1 Oct. 2001: 1D–2D.

*This argument offers a clear statement of its position: people of Middle Eastern descent must not be targeted for airport security checks. McDonie organizes his essay carefully: after introducing the topic, he contrasts El Al*'*s procedures with those of U.S. air carriers, provides examples of suspended rights in the United States during wartime, presents the core of his argument against targeted searches, and concludes by acknowledging the need for improved security.*

Key Features / Arguments

**A clear and arguable position.** At the heart of every argument is a claim with which people may reasonably disagree. Some claims are not arguable because they're completely subjective, matters of taste or opinion ("I hate sauerkraut"), because they are a matter of fact ("The first Star Wars movie came out in 1977"), or because they are based on belief or faith ("There is life after death"). To be arguable, a position must reflect one of at least two points of view, making reasoned argument necessary: Internet file sharing should (or should not) be considered fair use; airport security should target certain groups (or should treat everyone the same). In college writing, you will often argue not that a position is correct but that it is plausible—that it is reasonable, supportable, and worthy of being taken seriously.

Necessary background information. Sometimes we need to provide some background on a topic we are arguing so that readers can understand what is being argued. McDonie establishes the need for special measures to ensure airline passengers' safety before launching his argument against targeting specific groups for security checks; Quindlen offers a characterization of the current connotations of the term feminism and provides its historical context as context for her argument that it's a term we're "still needing."

Good reasons. By itself, a position does not make an argument; the argument comes when a writer offers reasons to back the position up. There are many kinds of good reasons. Some are a matter of defining—Quindlen bases her argument about feminism on a dictionary definition of the word. Lessig makes his argument by comparing, showing many examples of so-called piracy in other media. McDonie's main reason for his position that we should not target Middle Easterners for airport security checks is that doing so is unethical.

Convincing support for each reason**.** It's one thing to give reasons for your position. You then need to offer support for your reasons: facts, statistics, expert testimony, anecdotal evidence, case studies, textual evidence. All three essays use a mix of these types of support. Quindlen uses statistics from a Princeton study to support her claim that women do not yet have job equality in comparison with men; Lessig offers facts from the history of the broadcast media to support his argument for file sharing.

Appeals to readers' values. Effective arguers try to appeal to readers' values and emotions. Both Quindlen and McDonie appeal to basic values—Quindlen to the value of equality, McDonie to the values of freedom and security. These are deeply held values that we may not think about very much and as a result may see as common ground we share with the writers. And some of Quindlen's evidence appeals to emotion—the examples she offers from Duke University and the state of California are likely to evoke an emotional response in many, if not all, readers.

A trustworthy tone. Arguments can stand or fall on the way readers perceive the writer. Very simply, readers need to trust the person who's making the argument. One way of winning this trust is by demonstrating that you know what you're talking about. Lessig offers plenty of facts to show his knowledge of copyright history—and he does so in a self-assured tone. There are many other ways of establishing yourself (and your argument) as trustworthy—by showing that you have some experience with your subject (as McDonie does), that you're fair (as Quindlen suggests when she says that "hundreds of arenas . . . have opened to working women"), and of course that you're honest.

Careful consideration of other positions. No matter how reasonable and careful we are in arguing our positions, others may disagree or offer counterarguments or hold other positions. We need to consider those other views and to acknowledge and, if possible, refute them in our written arguments. Quindlen, for example, acknowledges that women today have more employment opportunities than they did forty years ago, but she refers to the Duke study to refute any argument that women have attained complete equality with men.

A GUIDE TO ARGUING A POSITION

Choosing a Topic

A fully developed argument requires significant work and time, so choosing a topic in which you're interested is very important. Students find that widely debated topics such as "animal rights" or "gun control" can be difficult to write on because they seldom have a personal connection to them. Better topics include those that

* interest you right now,
* are focused, but not too narrowly,
* have some personal connection to your life.

One good way to GENERATING IDEAS for a topic that meets those three criteria is to explore your own roles in life.

Start with your roles in life**.** On a piece of paper, make four columns with the headings "Personal," "Family," "Public," and "School." Below each heading, LIST the roles you play that relate to it. Here is a list one student wrote:



Identify issues that interest you. Think, then, about issues or controversies that may concern you as a member of one or more of those groups. For instance, as a primary-education major, this student cares about the controversy over whether kids should be taught to read by phonics or by whole language methods. As a college student, he cares about the costs of a college education. Issues that stem from these subjects could include the following: Should reading be taught by phonics or whole language? Should college cost less than it does?

Pick four or five of the roles you list. In five or ten minutes, identify issues that concern or affect you as a member of each of those roles. It might help to word each issue as a question starting with Should.

Choose one issue to write about**.** Remember that the issue should be interesting to you and have some connection to your life. It is a tentative choice; if you find later that you have trouble writing about it, simply go back to your list of roles or issues and choose another.

Considering the Rhetorical Situation

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| --- | --- | --- |
| https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/write/fieldguide/images/icon01.gif | **PURPOSE** | Do you want to persuade your audience to do or think something? change their minds? consider alternative views? accept your position as plausible—see that you have thought carefully about an issue and researched it appropriately? |
| https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/write/fieldguide/images/icon01.gif | **AUDIENCE** | Who is your intended audience? What do they likely know and believe about this issue? How personal is it for them? To what extent are they likely to agree or disagree with you? Why? What common ground can you find with them? |
| https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/write/fieldguide/images/icon01.gif | **STANCE** | How do you want your audience to perceive you? As an authority on your topic? As someone much like them? As calm? reasonable? impassioned or angry? something else? What's your attitude toward your topic, and why? |
| https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/write/fieldguide/images/icon01.gif | **MEDIA / DESIGN** | What media will you use, and how do your media affect your argument? If you're writing on paper, does your argument call for photos or charts? If you're giving an oral presentation, should you put your reasons and support on slides? If you're writing on the Web, should you add links to counterarguments? |

Generating Ideas and Text

Most essays that successfully argue a position share certain features that make them interesting and persuasive. Remember that your goal is to stake out a position and convince your readers that it is plausible.

Explore what you already know about the issue**.** Write out whatever you know about the issue by FREEWRITING or as a LIST or OUTLINE. Why are you interested in this topic? What is your position on it at this point, and why? What aspect do you think you'd like to focus on? Where do you need to focus your research efforts? This activity can help you discover what more you need to learn. Chances are you'll need to learn a lot more about the issue before you even decide what position to take.

Do some research. At this point, try to get an overview. Start with one GENERAL SOURCE of information that will give you a sense of the ins and outs of your issue, one that isn't overtly biased. Time, Newsweek, and other national weekly newsmagazines can be good starting points on current issues; encyclopedias are better for issues that are not so current. For some issues, you may need to INTERVIEW an expert. For example, one student who wanted to write about chemical abuse of animals at 4H competitions interviewed an experienced show competitor. Use your overview source to find out the main questions your issue raises and to get some idea about the various ways in which you might argue it.

Explore the issue strategically. Most issues may be argued from many different perspectives. You'll probably have some sense of the different views that exist on your issue, but you should explore multiple perspectives before deciding on your position. The following methods are good ways of exploring issues:

* As a matter of DEFINITION. What is it? How should it be defined? How can phonics or whole language be defined? How do backers of phonics define it—and how do they define whole language? How do advocates of whole language define it—and how do they define phonics? Considering these definitions is one way to identify different perspectives on the topic.
* As a matter of CLASSIFICATION. Can the issue be further divided? What categories might it be broken into? Are there different kinds of "phonics" and "whole language"? Do various subcategories suggest various positions or perhaps a way of supporting a certain position? Are there other ways of categorizing the teaching of reading?
* As a matter of COMPARISON. Is one way better than another? Is whole language a better way of teaching children to read than phonics? Is phonics a better way than whole language? Is the answer somewhere in the middle?
* As a matter of PROCESS. Should somebody do something? What? Should teachers use whole language to teach reading? Should they use phonics? Should they use a mix of the two methods?

Reconsider whether the issue can be argued. Is this issue worth discussing? Why is it important to you and to others? What difference will it make if one position or another prevails? At this point, you want to be sure that your topic is worth arguing about.

Draft a thesis. Having explored the possibilities, decide your position, and write it out as a complete sentence. For example:

Pete Rose should not be eligible for the Hall of Fame.

Reading should be taught using a mix of whole language and phonics.

Genetically engineered foods should be permitted in the United States.

Qualify your thesis**.** Rarely is a position on an issue a matter of being for or against; in most cases, you'll want to qualify your position—in certain circumstances, with certain conditions, with these limitations, and so on. This is not to say that we should settle, give in, sell out; rather, it is to say that our position may not be the only "correct" one and that other positions may be valid as well. Qualifying your THESIS also makes your topic manageable by limiting it. For example:

Pete Rose should not be eligible for the Hall of Fame, though he should be permitted to contribute to major league baseball in other ways.

Reading should be taught using a mix of phonics and whole language, but whole language should be the dominant method.

Genetically engineered foods should be permitted in the United States if they are clearly labeled as such.

### Some questions for qualifying a thesis

* Can it be true in some cases?
* Can it be true at some times?
* Can it be true for some groups or individuals?
* Can it be true under certain circumstances?

Come up with good reasons. Once you have a thesis, you need to come up with good reasons to convince your readers that it's plausible. Start by stating your position and then answering the question "Why?"

Thesis: Pete Rose should not be eligible for the Hall of Fame. Why?

Underlying reason (because): He bet on professional baseball games, an illegal practice. Why?

Underlying reason (because): Professional athletes' gambling on the outcome of games will cause fans to lose faith in professional sports.

As you can see, this exercise can continue indefinitely as the underlying reasons grow more and more general and abstract. You can do the same with other positions:

Thesis: Pete Rose should be eligible for the Hall of Fame. Why?

Underlying reason (because): He's one of the greatest baseball players of all time. Why?

Underlying reason (because): Few players have played with more hustle and passion than Rose.

Write out your position, and then, below it, list several reasons. Think about which reasons are best for your purposes: Which seem the most persuasive? Which are most likely to be accepted by your audience? Which seem to matter the most now? If your list of reasons is short or you think you'll have trouble developing them enough to write an appropriate essay, this is a good time to rethink your topic—before you've invested too much time in it.

Develop support for your reasons**.** Next, you have to come up with support for your reasons. Here are some of the ways you can offer support:

* facts
* statistics ("A national study found that X percent of . . . ")
* testimony by authorities and experts ("According to X, . . . ")
* anecdotal evidence ("This happened . . . ")
* scenarios ("What if . . . ?")
* case studies and observation ("This is what happened when . . . ")
* textual evidence ("I found this in . . . ")

Some kinds of support are acceptable to certain audiences but not to others. For example, case studies may be readily accepted in certain social sciences but not in the physical sciences; anecdotes or stories may be accepted as evidence in humanities courses but not in engineering. Some audiences will be persuaded by emotional appeals while others will not. You may well need to consult SOURCES.

Identify other positions. Now, think about positions that differ from yours and about the reasons people are likely to give for those positions. Be careful to represent their points of view as accurately and fairly as you can. Then decide whether you need to acknowledge or refute the position.

Acknowledging other positions. Some positions can't be refuted, but still you need to acknowledge readers' doubts, concerns, and objections to show that you've considered them. Rather than weakening your argument, acknowledging possible objections shows that you've thought about and researched your argument thoroughly. For example, in an essay about his experience growing up homosexual, writer Andrew Sullivan acknowledges that not every young gay man or woman has the same experience: "I should add that many young lesbians and homosexuals seem to have had a much easier time of it. For many, the question of sexual identity was not a critical factor in their life choices or vocation, or even a factor at all." Thus does he qualify his assertions, making his own stance appear to be reasonable. In addition to acknowledging other views, though, you may sometimes shape other views to incorporate them into your own argument.

Refuting other positions**.** State the position as clearly and as fairly as you can, and then show why you believe it is wrong. Are the values underlying the position questionable? Is the reasoning flawed? Is the supporting evidence inadequate or faulty? If the argument has some merit but fails on some points, say so, but emphasize its shortcomings. Avoid the FALLACY of attacking the person making the argument or bringing up a competing position that no one seriously entertains.

Ways of Organizing an Argument

Readers need to be able to follow the reasoning of your argument from beginning to end; your task is to lead them from point to point as you build your case. Sometimes you'll want to give all the reasons for your argument first, followed by discussion of any other positions. Alternatively, you might discuss each reason and any counterargument together.





Consider the order in which you discuss your reasons. Usually what comes last is the most emphatic and what comes in the middle is the least emphatic, so you might want to put your most important or strongest reasons first and last.

Writing Out a Draft

Once you have generated ideas, done some research, and thought about how you want to organize your argument, it's time to start DRAFTING. Your goal in the initial draft is to develop your argument—you can fill in support and transitions as you revise. You may want to write your first draft in one sitting, so that you can develop your reasoning from beginning to end. Or you may write the main argument first and the introduction and conclusion after you've drafted the body of the essay; many writers find that beginning and ending an essay are the hardest tasks they face. Here is some advice on how you might begin and end your argument:

Draft a beginning**.** There are various ways to begin an argument essay, depending on your audience and purpose. Here are a few suggestions.

* Offer background information. You may need to give your readers information to help them understand your position. McDonie provides a rationale for Americans' desire to fly safely in dangerous times before stating his own position that safety must not be achieved through selective airport security checks.
* Define a key term. You may need to show how you're using certain key words. Lessig, for example, defines piracy as "using the creative property of others without their permission" in his first sentence, a definition that is central to his argument.
* Begin with something that will get readers' attention. Quindlen's first sentence does just that: "Let's use the F word here." From there, she goes on to argue that feminism "is not an expletive but an ideal."
* Explain the context for your position. All arguments are part of a larger, ongoing conversation, so you might begin by showing how your position fits into the arguments others have made. Quindlen does this in her third paragraph when she refers to the "conventional wisdom" that sees feminism as having accomplished all it set out to accomplish.

Draft an ending. Your conclusion is the chance to wrap up your argument in such a way that readers will remember what you've said. Here are a few ways of concluding an argument essay.

* Summarize your main points. Especially when you've presented a complex argument, it can help readers to SUMMARIZE your main point. McDonie sums up his argument with the sentence "Freedom must not be sacrificed for security."
* Call for action. Lessig does this when he concludes by saying the law should seek a balance between copyright law and the need for continued innovation.
* Frame your argument by referring to the introduction. Quindlen does this when she ends by saying that "The F word is not an expletive but an ideal—one that still has a way to go."

Come up with a title. Most often you'll want your title to tell readers something about your topic—and, if possible, to make them want to read on. McDonie covers both bases with his title and subtitle, "Airport Security: What Price Safety?" Quindlen's title doesn't quite tell us what she's writing about, but she probably makes a lot of readers continue reading to see what "Still Needing the F Word" is all about. See the chapter on Guiding Your Reader for more advice on composing a good title.

Considering Matters of Design

You'll probably write your essay in paragraph form, but think about the information you're presenting and how you can design it in such a way as to make your argument as easy as possible for your readers to understand. Think also about whether any visual elements would be more persuasive than plain words.

* What would be an appropriate typeface? Something serious like Times Roman? Something traditional like Courier? Something else?
* Would it help your readers if you divided your argument into shorter sections and added headings?
* If you're making several points, would they be easier to follow if you set them off in a LIST?
* Do you have any supporting evidence that would be easier to understand in the form of a bar graph, line graph, or pie chart?
* Would illustrations—photos, diagrams, or drawings—add support for your argument?

Getting Response and Revising

At this point you need to look at your draft closely, and if possible GETTING RESPONSE from others as well. The following are some questions for looking at an argument with a critical eye.

* Is there sufficient background or context?
* Is the thesis clear and appropriately qualified?
* Are the reasons plausible?
* Is there enough support for these reasons? Is that support appropriate?
* Have you cited enough sources, and are these sources credible?
* Can readers follow the steps in your reasoning?
* Have you considered potential objections or other positions? Are there any others that should be addressed?
* Are source materials documented carefully and completely, with in-text citations and a works cited or references section?

Next it's time to REVISE, to make sure your argument offers convincing support, appeals to readers' values, and achieves your purpose.

Editing and Proofreading

Readers equate correctness with competence. Once you've revised your draft, follow these guidelines for EDITING an argument:

* Make sure that every assertion you make is well supported.
* Check to see that your tone is appropriate and consistent throughout, reflects your STANCE accurately, and enhances the argument you're making.
* Be sure readers will be able to follow the argument; check to see you've provided TRANSITIONS and summary statements where necessary.
* Make sure you've smoothly integrated QUOTATIONS, PARAPHRASES, and SUMMARIES from source material into our writing and DOCUMENTED them accurately.
* Make sure that illustrations have captions and that charts and graphs have headings—and that all are referred to in the main text.
* PROOFREAD and spell-check your essay carefully.

Taking Stock of Your Work

Take stock of what you've written by writing out answers to these questions:

* What did you do well in this piece?
* What could still be improved?
* How did you go about researching your topic?
* How did others' responses influence your writing?
* How did you go about drafting this piece?
* Did you use graphic elements (tables, graphs, diagrams, photographs, illustrations) effectively? If not, would they have helped?
* What would you do differently next time?
* What have you learned about your writing ability from writing this piece? What do you need to work on in the future?