

Developing the Argumentative Paragraph

In the past, you may have taken a composition class that exposed you to various “modes” of writing, or what the textbook authors may have called “patterns of development,” such as *description, narration, comparison and contrast, process analysis, and cause and effect*. Other patterns of development include *definition, classification, and division and analysis*.

Features of an Argumentative Paragraph

In argumentative writing, you may wish to use some of the patterns mentioned above, but you do so in order to prove a point. Therefore, the main feature of an argumentative paragraph is a topic sentence that makes a claim.

Claim

The claim is usually placed at the beginning of the paragraph, though some paragraphs are arranged with the main point coming last. Remember that a claim is a contention that you will support.

Support

In order to support the claim, you must use supporting details or evidence. Evidence can be classified as quantitative or qualitative data. Quantitative data is data that can be measured, such as the increase in population over ten years in the United States. Qualitative data, such as descriptions, cannot be measured (think about qualities).

Analysis

Your supporting details will usually require an analysis or commentary, which often discusses the relevance or importance of the data that you have collected.

Warrants and Summary Sentences

Other components of argumentative paragraphs may include Warrants and a Summary Sentence. A warrant is the reason why you make a claim. A warrant can be a way of “cushioning” the move from the claim to the evidence, and it can be something as simple as “Many studies conducted in the 1980’s support [x],” with x being the claim of your paragraph. The summary sentence appears at the end of the paragraph and prepares the readers to make a smooth transition to the next point.

On the next page we’ll take a look at a simple model and some examples.

Model

The “building blocks” of an argumentative paragraph, therefore, look like this:

CLAIM
 [WARRANT]
 EVIDENCE
 ANALYSIS
 [SUMMARY SENTENCE]

Notice that analysis supports evidence, evidence supports the warrant, and the warrant supports the claim.

Before looking at an example, let’s demystify some of the terminology often used in textbooks. Textbook authors use different terms to point to the same elements, but these terms are all roughly equivalent in that they refer to elements which perform the same function.

Claim = topic sentence = umbrella statement = mini-thesis (i.e. the mini-thesis is one claim of many in a thesis statement)

Warrant ≈ reason

Support = supporting details = evidence = data

Analysis = explanations = explication = commentary

Summary Sentence = concluding sentence

The structural components of the following examples are indicated in all caps and appear before the components that they identify.

Example 1

This passage is from Zora Neale Hurston’s essay “How It Feels to be Colored Me,” first published in 1928.

CLAIM: At certain times I have no race, I am me. **EVIDENCE:** When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance. So far as my feelings are concerned, Peggy Hopkins Joyce on the Boule Mich with her gorgeous raiment, stately carriage, knees knocking together in a most aristocratic manner, has nothing on me. The cosmic Zora emerges. **SUMMARY:** I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.¹

This is an argumentative paragraph, but Hurston’s claim is supported by vivid analogies and metaphors. Her argument is more subjective, imaginative, and literary.

¹ Hurston, Zora Neale. "How It Feels to be Colored Me." *Best American Essays of the Century* (2000): 114-17. *Essay and General Literature Index* (H.W. Wilson). Web. 6 Aug. 2012.

Example 2

Here's the opening paragraph from Leo Marx's critical work *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America*, first published in 1964.

CLAIM: The pastoral idea has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination.

WARRANT: The reason is clear enough. The ruling motive of the good shepherd, leading figure of the classic, Virgilian mode, was to withdraw from the great world and begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape. And now here was a virgin continent!

EVIDENCE and ANALYSIS: Inevitably the European mind was dazzled by the prospect. With an unspoiled hemisphere in view it seemed that mankind actually might realize what had been thought a poetic fantasy. Soon the dream of retreat to an oasis of harmony and joy was removed from its traditional literary context. It was embodied in various utopian schemes for making America the site of a new beginning for Western society. **SUMMARY SENTENCE:** In both forms—one literary and the other in essence political—the ideal has figured in the American view of life which is, in the widest sense, the subject of this book.²

Since this is the opening paragraph of the book, the author's evidence and analysis points to topics that he will discuss at greater length later in the study. The analytical portion discusses the importance and relevance of the evidence, and the summary sentence is a jumping off point for the next paragraph (as well as the entire book!). Also, notice that the author employs qualitative data here.

Example 3

This is a paragraph from Timothy Noah's article "The United States of Inequality: Introducing the Great Divergence," published on September 3, 2010, by *Slate*.³

CLAIM: Income inequality in the United States has not worsened steadily since 1915.

EVIDENCE: It dropped a bit in the late teens, then started climbing again in the 1920s, reaching its peak just before the 1929 crash. **EVIDENCE:** The trend then reversed itself.

Incomes started to become more equal in the 1930s and then became dramatically more equal in the 1940s. **EVIDENCE:** Income distribution remained roughly stable through the postwar economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s. Economic historians Claudia Goldin and Robert Margo have termed this midcentury era the "Great Compression."

TRANSITION TO THE NEXT PARAGRAPH: The deep nostalgia for that period felt by the World War II generation—the era of *Life* magazine and the bowling league—reflects something more than mere sentimentality. Assuming you were white, not of draft age, and Christian, there probably was no better time to belong to America's middle class.

² Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.

³ Noah, Timothy. "The United States of Inequality: Introducing the Great Divergence." *Slate*. The Slate Group, 3 Sept. 2010. n. pag. Web 6 Aug. 2012.

Notice in this paragraph that the author alludes to quantitative data. He also embeds a concept that helps illuminate his claim, the “Great Compression” and then begins the next paragraph by expanding on that concept. (The first sentence of the next paragraph is “The Great Compression ended in the 1970s”). Many authors will interweave evidence with concepts that might be discussed at length later in their essays.

Key Concepts

- Argumentative paragraphs contain the core components of **claims** and **evidence**.
- Authors may differ when it comes to the type of supporting details that they use and the approach toward analysis and commentary that they employ.
- There is no mold for a perfect argumentative paragraph. However, if you structure your paragraphs in an intentional way, they will be much more persuasive.

Contact

Want to break down the paragraph structure in one of your writing assignments? Come work with a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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