

# How to Write an Argumentative Essay

Please consult the following guidelines *throughout* the preparation of your essay. *I am open to other formats, but these must be discussed with me in advance.* The yellow checklist, which you turn in with your paper, helps remind you of these guidelines.

The first set of guidelines below is in the form of questions. In the best essays every question could be answered "yes."

1. Is your essay addressed to the precise topic? Do you see the topic as posing a complex problem without an easy answer? (If not, you should probably choose another topic.)
2. Do you clearly state your position (central thesis)? Do you precisely state it in one sentence in either the last sentence of your first paragraph or in your second paragraph? Does everything in your essay in some way relate to this central claim? Do you show exactly how it relates? Have you mercilessly deleted everything that does not really relate?
3. Do you begin your next paragraph with a statement of your first argument for your position? Does the first sentence of this paragraph state what this first argument is, not just what it is "about"? Does the rest of that paragraph develop the idea expressed in the argument? Does everything in this paragraph involve a development of this exact argument?
4. Does your next paragraph begin with a statement of an objection to your first argument? Are you careful to be sure that your objection is specifically an objection to the argument you just offered and not an objection to your general position? (There is a place for these objections later; see item 6 below.) Is this the strongest objection you can think of? Does the rest of your paragraph develop that objection to the point where a reader can see why a thoughtful person might believe it? Are you careful to phrase the paragraph so that the reader knows that it is in fact an objection, not a claim that you support (in conflict with the previous paragraph)?
5. Does your next paragraph offer a response to the objection? Does the first sentence of the paragraph state exactly what the response is? Does the rest of the paragraph develop that response? Is the response much more than a restatement of the original argument? Does it support the original argument, taking into account the objection?
6. Does the remainder of your essay adhere to this format of presenting specific arguments, objections, and responses? Optional: do you discuss and respond to an *objection to your overall position* (after discussing each of your individual arguments in the argument-objection-response form)?
7. Do you have a concluding paragraph that briefly ties together what you have done in your essay?
8. Does your essay take into account all relevant arguments from the texts? Is your essay rooted in these texts? Does it cite exact page numbers right in the place in your essay where you use the source? (This is instead of or in addition to a general bibliography at the end. You need the general bibliography mainly if you consult other works but never use a specific idea from them.)

9. Have you worked over your sentences to be sure that they are clear, precise, and grammatical? Have you used a dictionary? Have you proofread for errors?
10. Did you really have to wrestle with the issues when writing your paper? Were you ever tempted to think that the opposing position might actually be the stronger one? Do you consider the topic more complex now than before you wrote the essay?

### **Summary of the Recommended Format for Major Essay**

1. Statement of your position (thesis) either at end of short *introductory paragraph* or in a separate second paragraph of its own, following your introductory paragraph.
2. First argument for your position. [Generally, the very next paragraph.]
3. Objection to first argument for your position.
4. Response to objection to first argument for your position.
5. Second argument for your position.
6. Objection to second argument for your position.
7. Response to objection to second argument for your position.
8. (Optional) Objection to position.
9. (Optional, but required if #8 included) Response to objection to position.
10. Short concluding paragraph.

### **Variations**

There may be more than 2 arguments (but probably not more than 3). There may be more than one objection to your position. There may be several responses to one objection. Or several objections to one argument. (If so, a response should be given immediately after each objection.) A good, probing essay will usually need at some point to follow a response to an objection with an objection *to that response*, and then there will be a response to that further objection. This might even continue for several "rounds." Think of this as like a good, probing oral discussion. Come in and discuss an outline or draft.

### **Most Common Problems to Avoid: Grade-lowering minefields to avoid (from past experience)!**

1. Trying to discuss too many arguments and not discussing any in depth. (Limit yourself to the *strongest* arguments and the strongest objections.)
2. Not using *specific* arguments from the articles in the text. Taking into account all relevant arguments from the text is essential. (These need not and usually should not be directly quoted, but exact page references must be given each time an idea is derived from a source, including our text.)
3. Beginning an argumentative paragraph with something other than a statement of the argument. Example: "My second argument revolves around the issue of privacy." My comment will be "What IS the argument?" First state *exactly* what the argument *is* in one clear

sentence. Then go on to discuss it. The exact same thing applies to objections and responses. Your first sentence should state what the objection or response *is*.

4. Not choosing strong objections or not developing the objection well enough to show why a thoughtful person would hold it. If a case cannot be made for the objection to the extent that one can see why a thoughtful person might hold it, then it is not an objection worth raising. Each objection should be developed in a paragraph of its own.
5. Having a response that just repeats the original argument. The response should *support* the original argument, *taking into account* and responding to the exact objection raised.
6. Using as an objection to an *argument* for your position something that is really a criticism of the general position rather than a criticism of the specific argument that was just given. Sometimes an objection could be looked at either way. If so, just show in your wording why it can be considered the way you have chosen to regard it.
7. **Note this one especially.** Not making it clear what is an argument *for* your position and what is an objection. This kind of essay reads as if it is just contradicting itself, giving one argument in one paragraph and then an opposing argument in the next. Use transitions to make it clear to your reader what is happening in the essay. A transition might be something like "A possible objection to this argument is that..."
8. Common mistakes: argument (not "arguement"); existence (not "existance"). Unless you mean "it is," there is no apostrophe in "its." There is no such word as "irregardless." You probably mean "regardless."

## **You must document!**

You must document every idea you use, whether you quote it or not, whether you use it directly as you found it or modify it, whether you are endorsing it or arguing against it. If the source is not required reading for this class, you must use a regular footnote. If the source is one of the required readings, it is sufficient for you to put the *author and page number* in parenthesis in the text of your paper; e.g.: (Mill, pp. 64-65). In a complete reference, book titles are underlined or italicized, while titles of *articles* are in quotation marks (not underlined).

## **Important Warning and Protection**

If you have in mind doing something risky and different—original and brilliant, you hope, but not exactly following these instructions—**talk to me first**. I cannot emphasize this enough.

## **Matters of form**

1. Please *type/computer-print*, double or 1.5 spacing. (In Microsoft Word: Ctrl-A selects everything, then Ctrl-2 double-spaces.) Use your best quality, most readable font, and leave margins wide enough for comments. If there is no room for comments at the bottom of the last page of your essay, please include a title page or a blank sheet at the end.
2. Please number your *pages* (so my comments can refer to particular points in your essay). In Microsoft Word: click on menu item Insert, then Page Numbers.

3. Please *staple* pages together at the upper left-hand corner. (Never just fold the edges together!) Do not put your paper in any kind of folder or binder.
4. *Always* retain a separate copy of your finished essay in case your paper is misplaced or stolen. (This is more likely to happen if you hand in your paper at a time different from others in the class.)
5. Know what plagiarism is in all its forms—ask questions if in doubt—and realize that in fairness to all students, any cases of cheating will be dealt with very harshly. (See syllabus.) The paper you turn in or someone turns in for you is the one you are responsible for. Always be prepared to defend your essay orally. You may be asked to discuss your paper orally for many reasons; this is not necessarily an accusation of plagiarism.
6. Late papers will be accepted until the next class session with a reduction in .5 from your grade. (An A, which is recorded as 11, would become 10.5.) Also, I will not read late papers until I have read on-time work in all my classes, so there may be a very substantial delay in returning late papers. Papers due in the last 2 weeks of class must be on time if you wish to be sure of receiving a course grade. If your printer breaks down, email your paper first, to meet the due date, and then print it later. (In a pinch, give me the file on a memory stick that I can return to you.)
7. If you "find yourself" in the unfortunate position of still working on or finishing up your paper at the last minute, please do not avoid class on the day the paper is due. (It's going to be late either way since papers are due at the beginning of class.) Come to class and take the time later to finish writing *and proofreading* your paper.
8. Never turn in two different writing assignments at the same time since a major purpose of writing assignments (or outlines or prospectuses) is for you to learn from the comments on your earlier effort(s). For my part, if your first assignment is on-time, I will always return it with comments well before your second one is due (or postpone the due date).
9. If a paper is sloppily presented and clearly not proofread, it is *not finished*. It will be returned to you for completion, and you will need to turn it in as a late paper. (I'm reasonable: I'm not going to return your paper because there is a typo.) Take the time to proofread with a dictionary. If you have a computer spell-checker, use it; however, be aware that doing so does not replace careful proofreading.
10. Take advantage of office hours to discuss outlines or first drafts of your essay. Have these typed or written legibly if you want me to read them (which is usually the idea!). Come at a point when you still have time to make some substantial revisions. Expect our discussion of your paper to complicate things and make writing the paper more challenging. Expect to gain a clearer sense of the issues complexities. *With further work*, your final paper will be much more likely to be a good one, which means it should earn a higher grade. (I'll even help you with *some* of that work.)
11. Always feel free to talk over *any problem* you may be having in writing your paper. Remember, the whole purpose of papers is to *help you learn*.

Be sure you staple the "checklist" as the last page of your essay and *fill out your portion and sign*. If you didn't get it in class or can't find it, you can download and print it out at <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~elias/Courses/checklists.pdf>

## How to Cite Sources

Please follow these standard guidelines in citing sources. Most (except #5) apply to all your papers in any class. Note #3, and this is standard for all citing in any writing you do.

1. You must cite any source where you get an idea, not just ones you quote from. (In this course your papers should have few if any direct quotations. Use your own words.) This applies to objections as well as your own arguments. If you are citing a point made by an author but opposed by that author, you should indicate that. If you modify an idea, you should indicate that too. The point is that you need to acknowledge that you originally got the idea from someone else. Examples in footnotes:
  - Jamil Rashid argues *against* this point in “The Case for Merit,” *Ethics and Education*, (December 1999), pp. 22-23.”
  - “Modified from Sarah Robinson, “Varieties of Play” in *Education for a Free Society*, edited by Jose Ramirez (Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 28.
  - Rose Hochman, “Ethics of Therapeutic Cloning,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* (February 2001), p. 96. This argument is criticized by Robert Schumaker at <[www.harvard.edu/personal/schumaker/cloning.htm](http://www.harvard.edu/personal/schumaker/cloning.htm)>
2. A general bibliography at the end is not sufficient. You need to cite sources at the exact point where you use them in your essay, and you need to cite the page number or *exact* web site address of the source. *The reader needs to be able to go to the source and find it easily.* If you use some sources as general background reading but never use a particular idea, then you can include a bibliography as well. (This would generally include all sources including those you cite, and if you do this, then your particular citations can be abbreviated. For example, if you had the Rashid article above in a bibliography, you would just include the page numbers of the *whole article* in the bibliography—e.g., pp. 15-30—and then in the footnote you might just cite as “Rashid, p. 22-23” because the reader can go to the bibliography for the more complete reference. I don’t require a bibliography, so if you don’t have one, you need to cite the complete reference in the first footnote. Subsequent footnotes could be abbreviated (e.g., “Rashid, pp. 22-23). The reader knows to look to earlier footnotes for the complete reference.
3. Standard form: underline or *italicize* titles of books and journals, but not article titles. Article titles are in quotation marks. The examples above illustrate this. You can follow the form of the examples above or any standard guide to citations (e.g., MLA form). I don’t insist on the exact form, only that you include everything needed for the reader to find the source, which includes *date* and *page numbers*.
4. You must cite any web site that you use, and the standard form is to use angle brackets; e.g., <[www.healthdesignco.org/wellness/advice.htm](http://www.healthdesignco.org/wellness/advice.htm)>. Note that you need the exact page, not just the home page.
5. For my courses, if your citation is to a required reading in the course, then you do not need a full footnote but, if you prefer, you can just indicate the *author* and *page number* in parenthesis right in the text of your paper. “Author” means the person who wrote what you are citing, not the editor of an anthology.

Example: My response is that the fetus may be biologically human but this is not sufficient to give it the full moral status of a person. (Warren, p. 1464).

## On Sending Email and Email Attachments

*Email help is in addition to help I can offer in person, not a replacement for it!*

There are advantages of office discussions and of email exchanges. *There is nothing quite like a real conversation, and I also get to know you that way.* But I can often answer your questions or help you write your paper by email, and then you don't have to read my handwriting. You will also have my comments on your draft right in front of you. Like everyone, I get a lot of email, and I am asking you to help by following these guidelines. Most important:

**Include course number in subject of email**

**Include your name and email address in the body of the attachment (not just in email message and not in header/footer).**

### *Other guidelines for email messages*

1. Be sure your name (not just email address) is in the From: header of any email messages you send. I won't know who you are if your email is just from blueeyes6845@hotmail.com, and I may even end up deleting it, thinking it's some kind of advertisement. (Last resort: sign your name to your message.)
2. Let me know when you plan to check again for a response. Sometimes I'll try to respond very quickly (maybe within 30-60 minutes if I'm free) *if I know you will get it.* But I'm not too pleased if I stop what I am doing and rush a detailed response to you and then learn 2 days later in class that you haven't yet checked your email. Please ask for a response only if you intend to follow up and read it!
3. If you are asking about a matter of general interest in the class and it's not confidential, consider posting to the *discussion* part of the CourseTools web site (for courses that are using CourseTools) instead of writing a private email. That way my response can benefit everyone. If you want a quick response, you might want to email me also to tell me that you've posted the discussion item. I get email pretty continuously when I'm at a computer, but I don't check the course web site as often.

### *About email attachments.*

For drafts and outlines, I will usually send these back to you with my comments in blue. **Send as a Word (not Works) attachment** so I can do this.

4. Be sure your computer is virus-free before sending attachments to me (or anyone).
5. **Include your name and email address on the attachment itself.** (Put them in the body of the file, not the header, so it will be visible in Word's NORMAL view, not just page view.)

6. Not essential but much appreciated before saving: set to normal view, use 12 point font or larger, and set to *page width* by clicking on View, then Zoom, then page width. (You may discover that this makes reading/writing much easier for yourself too.) If you remember, change the name of your document that you are sending to me to be *your last name*. (I know you won't want to keep that name for your own file, but it's more informative and useful to me than something like ethics.doc. You can always change it after you send it to me.)
7. I cannot absolutely guarantee that I will have time to respond to email drafts although I usually do. If I have to choose, first I'll give preference to students who also are willing to take the time to come to my office. But I realize that my office hours may not be convenient for you, and I can usually help via email. However, don't expect a response if you wait until almost the last minute; I will not respond to drafts sent the afternoon or evening before the due date. If I have more emails than I can handle, I'll start with those that save me clicks (and time) by following these guidelines.
8. Do send drafts by email attachment (rather than in body of message).
9. Consider sending just a part of your paper (if it's a full paper), the part to which you feel you most need a response. Or let me know which part you are most concerned about in case I don't have time to respond to the whole draft.