



Academic Writing Centre ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Things to Remember

An argument presents the pros and cons about a controversial issue.

Personal opinion is the starting point.

Mere opinion is never enough to convince people that you are correct.

This argument uses the authority of experts and factual evidence to persuade readers.

Facts are powerful convickers because they are based on years of direct investigation of material whose merits and potentialities have been carefully weighed.

Tell your readers where you stand on the issue, how you have reasoned it through, what evidence you've found, your response to what others say, and why readers might want to agree with you.

Reasoned Arguments

Persuading Readers

When you write essays or term papers or assignments at university, you will be asked to form an argument concerning an issue about which there are various viewpoints, and to support your argument with evidence from reliable sources.

All academic arguments start with personal opinion. We develop opinions by reading, listening to what others say, talking to people about an issue until gradually, we make assertions about the issue that we believe to be true.

But these assertions or personal opinions by themselves are insufficient to sustain an argument. Consider the following statement: "Mercedes-Benz is the world's best car."

Argument versus Opinion

OPINION: "Mercedes-Benz is the world's best car."

This statement constitutes an unsupported assertion that may be either accepted or rejected depending on one's feeling about Mercedes-Benz, buying foreign cars, Mercedes-Benz television commercials, etc. You may believe that Mercedes-Benz is the world's best car and yet be totally in error. If it is a fact that Mercedes-Benz is NOT the world's best car, no statement of belief will change that fact.

ARGUMENT: "Mercedes-Benz is the world's best car partly because it has the best safety record. In an independent study of 27 foreign and American passenger cars, Mercedes-Benz sedans from 1998-2000 were found to offer better crash protection from head on collisions than the other cars tested (Bundestag Verlung, 2001). These findings corroborate similar results published by consumer watchdog advocate Ralph Nader in *Consumer Reports* (October, 2002)."

A reasoned argument, unlike opinion, is a logically consistent series of statements based on evidence from reputable sources that together persuade a reader to accept a particular point of view (i.e. a thesis).

Using Evidence in Arguments

Evidence itself is neutral. Only when it is deployed in support of a given proposition does it function. In a criminal trial, both the prosecution and the defense have the same evidence. It is what the lawyers do with that evidence that will convict or acquit the defendant. In essay writing, the central concern of reasoned arguments is how to adapt the evidence to the issue (thesis) and to the audience (readers).

Many things can persuade readers to accept evidence: the reader's past experience, the language used by the writer, the status of the experts employed (education, skills, fame, media exposure), the credibility of the evidence (factual, statistical, inferential, first hand, second hand.), and the relevance of the evidence to the issue (thesis).