

6: Planning Your Argument

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Most of us would rather read sources than start to write a draft. But well before you've done all the research you'd like to do, you have to start thinking about the first draft of your paper. You might be ready when your storyboard is full and you're satisfied with how it looks. But you can't be certain until you start planning that first draft. Do that in two steps:

- Sort your notes into the elements of a research argument.
- Organize those elements into a coherent form.

In this chapter, we explain how to assemble the elements of your argument; in the next, how to organize them. As you gain experience, you'll learn to combine those two steps into one process.

6.1 What a Research Argument Is and Is Not

The word *argument* has bad associations these days, partly because radio and TV stage so many nasty ones. But the argument in a research paper is not the verbal combat we so often get from politicians and pundits. It doesn't try to intimidate an opponent into silence or submission. In fact, there's rarely an "opponent" at all. A research argument is like an amiable conversation in which you and your readers reason together to solve a problem. But those readers won't accept that solution until they hear a case for it: good reasons, reliable evidence that grounds those reasons, and your responses to their reasonable questions and reservations.

It is challenging enough to maintain a sense of amiable cooperation with others who do not share your views when you can talk face-to-face. But it is doubly difficult when you write, because you usually write alone. You have

to imagine your readers' role in that conversation: not only do you have to hold up your end, but your imagination has to hold up theirs. Your argument can answer your readers' questions only if you can first imagine those readers asking those questions for you to answer.

When readers hear traces of their questions in your written report, they recognize that you've thought not just about your views but about theirs as well. Remember this core principle of argument: Each of us can believe what we want, for whatever reason we want, but we have no right to ask others to believe it unless we can give them good reasons to do so, reasons that make sense *from their point of view*.

When you make a research argument, you must lay out your reasons and evidence so that your readers can see how you reasoned your way to a conclusion; then you must imagine their questions and answer them. That sounds challenging—and for a complex argument it can be. But it's more familiar than you may think, because in fact you have that kind of conversation every day.

6.2 Build Your Argument Around Answers to Readers' Questions

6.2.1 Identify (or Invent) Target Readers Interested in Your Question

You cannot anticipate your readers' questions unless you have a good idea of who they are and what they know. That's a problem for many class papers, since you have no obvious readers but your teacher—who isn't reading as herself (see the Caution below). That's why teachers often set up research papers so that your target readers are your classmates. If not, you have to select at least one target reader for yourself. Your best choice is someone you know who would be interested in your question and who knows as much about it as you did before you started your research. (Even better if you know two or more such people.) Have them in mind when you imagine your readers' questions. If you don't know such a person, invent one. The more you can imagine specific, familiar people asking you questions, the better your argument will be.

CAUTION

Write for Target Readers, Not Your Teacher

Your teacher may be your only reader, but don't write with only your teacher in mind. First of all, teachers generally judge papers not as themselves but from the point of view of your target readers, who know less than they do. Second, you risk making unconscious assumptions that distort your argument: you will fail to explain matters your teacher already understands but readers don't, fail to anticipate questions that readers might have but your teacher won't, and generally produce a paper that is fully suited neither to your teacher nor to your target readers. Once you identify your target readers, write only for them.

6.2.2 How Arguments Grow from Questions

You already know about asking the kinds of questions whose answers will compose your argument because you ask and answer them every day. Consider this exchange:

A: I hear you had a hard time last semester. How do you think this one will go? [A poses a problem in the form of a question.]

B: Better, I hope. [B answers the question.]

A: Why so? [A asks for a reason to believe B's answer.]

B: I'm taking courses in my major. [B offers a reason.]

A: Like what? [A asks for evidence to back up B's reason.]

B: History of Art, Intro to Design. [B offers evidence to back up his reason.]

A: Why will taking courses in your major make a difference? [A doesn't see the relevance of B's reason to his claim that he will do better.]

B: When I take courses I'm interested in, I work harder. [B offers a general principle that relates his reason to his claim that he will do better.]

A: What about that math course you have to take? [A objects to B's reason.]

B: I know I had to drop it last time I took it, but I found a good tutor. [B acknowledges A's objection and responds to it.]

If you can see yourself as A or B, you'll find nothing new in the argument of a research report, because you build its argument out of the answers to those same five questions.

- What is your claim?
- What reasons support it?
- What evidence supports those reasons?
- How do you respond to objections and alternative views?
- How are your reasons relevant to your claim?

If you ask and answer those five questions, you can't guarantee that your readers will accept your claim, but you make it more likely that they'll treat it—and you—with respect.

6.3 Assemble the Core of Your Argument

At the core of your argument is your claim, supported by your reasons for believing it and the evidence that grounds those reasons. To that core you will add at least one more element: you must acknowledge and respond to your readers' questions, objections, and alternative points of view. Most students

find these elements easy to understand when they think of them in light of the predictable questions they answer:

What do you want me to believe?

Why should I believe that?

How do you know that's true?

What about my ideas on this matter?

The fifth element, a warrant, is less common and more difficult to understand and use; you can build perfectly adequate arguments without them. So if you struggle with them, focus on the four elements that your readers will always expect to see.

Before you address the views and concerns of your readers, you have to be clear about your own. So your first step is to assemble the claim, reasons, and evidence that make up the core of your argument.

6.3.1 Turn Your Working Hypothesis into a Claim

In the early stages of your research, your job was to find a question and imagine a tentative answer. We called that answer your *working hypothesis*—the most promising answer to your research question that you would keep around, but only on probation. Now that you think you can build a case to support that hypothesis, it's time to take it off probation and think of it as your *main claim*. That main claim is the center of your argument, the answer to your question, the point of your report (some teachers call it a *thesis*).

SOME TERMINOLOGY

Your Claim's Many Names

Every good research paper is built around a main idea, a most important result, a conceptual head honcho that dominates all the rest. It has many names because you have to think about it from many points of view. From the point of view of your problem statement, it is your *main result*, the *answer* to your question. Doing your research, call it your *working hypothesis*. Making your argument, call it your *main claim*. Organizing your paper, call it your *main point*. You need so many names for this one idea because it plays so many roles in your paper.

6.3.2 Evaluate Your Claim

Start a new first page of your storyboard (if you already have one, replace it). At the bottom, state your claim in a sentence or two. Be specific, because the words in this claim will help you plan and execute your draft. Avoid vague value words like *important*, *interesting*, *significant*, and the like. Compare the following two claims:

Masks play a big role in many religious ceremonies.

In cultures from pre-Columbian America to Africa and Asia, masks allow religious celebrants to bring deities to life so that worshippers experience them directly.

Now judge the *significance* of your claim (*So what?* again). A significant claim doesn't make a reader think, *I know that*, but rather, *Really? What makes you think so?* (Review 1.2.) These next claims are too trivial to justify writing a report on them:

This report discusses teaching popular legends such as the Battle of the Alamo to elementary school students. (*So what if it does?*)

Teaching our national history through popular legends such as the Battle of the Alamo is common in elementary education. (*So what if it is?*)

Of course, what your readers will count as interesting depends on what they know. But that's hard to predict when you're early in your research career. So don't think you've failed if you can't find a convincing answer to *So what?* If you're writing one of your first reports, assume that the most important judge of the significance of your argument is you. It is enough if *you alone* think your answer is significant, if it makes you think, *Well, I didn't understand that when I started*.

But if *you* think your claim is vague or trivial, don't try to build an argument to support it. If you can find no reason to make a case for your claim, neither will your readers. Find a new claim.

6.3.3 Support Your Claim with Reasons and Evidence

It may seem obvious that you must back up a claim with reasons and evidence. But it's easy to confuse those two words because we often use them as if they mean the same thing:

What reasons do you base your claim on?

What evidence do you base your claim on?

But they mean different things:

- We *think up logical* reasons, but we *collect factual* evidence; we don't *collect factual* reasons and *think up logical* evidence.
- We base reasons on evidence; we don't base evidence on reasons.
- A reason is an idea, and you don't have to cite its source (if you thought of it yourself). In contrast, evidence usually comes from outside your mind, so you must always cite a reliable source for it. Even if you found your evidence through your own observation or experiment, you must show what you did to find it.

In short: *Reasons are your ideas that need the support of evidence; evidence is composed of facts that need no support beyond a reference to a reliable source.*

The problem is that what you think is a true fact and therefore hard evidence, your readers might not. For example, suppose a researcher offers the following claim and reason, backed up by this “hard” evidence:

Early Alamo stories reflected values already in the American character.^{claim} The story almost instantly became a legend of American heroic sacrifice.^{reason} Jones reports that soon after the battle, many newspapers used the story to celebrate our heroic national character.^{evidence}

If readers accept that statement as an unquestioned fact, they may accept it as evidence. But a skeptical reader, the kind you should expect (even hope for), is likely to ask: *How many is “many”? Which newspapers? In news stories or editorials? What exactly did they say? How many papers didn’t mention it?* Even if they think Jones is a reliable source, they expect the researcher to offer more specific facts: the numbers behind “many,” the specific forms of “celebration,” perhaps even quotes from news stories.

To be sure, we sometimes accept a claim based only on a reason, if that reason seems self-evidently true or is from a trusted authority:

We are all created equal,^{reason} so no one has a natural right to oppress us.^{claim}

Instructors in introductory courses often let students support reasons with no more than the reports of an authoritative source: *Wilson says X about religious masks, Yang says Y, Schmidt says Z.* Find out from your teacher if you can use the claims of authorities as evidence. But when you do more advanced work, you have to look for harder evidence than the word of an authority. Readers want evidence drawn not from a secondary source but from primary sources or your own observation (see 4.1).

Review your storyboard: Can you back up each reason with what your readers will think is evidence of the right kind, quantity, and quality? Might your readers think that what you offer as evidence needs more support? Or a better source? If so, you must find more data or acknowledge the limits of what you have.

Your claim, reasons, and evidence make up the core of your argument, but it needs at least one more element, maybe two.

6.4 Acknowledge and Respond to Readers' Points of View

Recall that we said a written argument is not a one-sided lecture to passive listeners but a two-sided conversation in which you speak with and for your readers. No argument is complete that fails to bring in your readers' points of view. You must acknowledge your readers by *imagining* questions and objections on their behalf, then by answering them.

6.4.1 Imagining Readers' Views

Readers raise two kinds of questions; try to imagine and respond to both.

1. The first kind of question points to problems *inside* your argument, usually its evidence.

Imagine a reader making any of these criticisms of your evidence. If one of them might be reasonable, construct a mini-argument in response:

- Your evidence is from an unreliable or out-of-date source.
- Your evidence is inaccurate.
- You don't have enough evidence.
- What you report doesn't fairly represent all the evidence available.
- You have the wrong kind of evidence for our field.

Then imagine these kinds of objections to your reasons. If one of them might be reasonable, construct a mini-argument in response:

- Your reasons are inconsistent or contradictory.
- You don't have enough reasons.
- They are too weak to support your claim.
- They are irrelevant to your claim and so do not *count* as reasons (see 6.5).

2. The second kind of question points to problems *outside* your argument. Those who see the world differently are likely to define words differently, reason differently, even offer evidence that you think is irrelevant.

Don't treat these differing points of view simply as objections. You'll lose readers if you insist that your view is right and theirs is wrong. Instead, acknowledge the differences, then compare them so that readers can understand your argument on its own terms. They might not agree, but you'll show them that you understand and respect their views. They are then more likely to respect and try to understand yours.

If you're a new researcher, you'll find these questions hard to imagine because you might not know how in fact your readers' views differ from your own. Even so, try to think of some plausible questions and objections and then respond to them. It's important to get into the habit of asking yourself, *What could cast doubt on my claim?*

But when you do more advanced work, you will be expected to know the issues that others in your field are likely to raise. So practice imagining and responding to disagreements. Even if you just go through the motions, you'll cultivate a habit of mind that your readers will respect and that may keep you from jumping to questionable conclusions.

Add those acknowledgments and responses to your storyboard where you think readers will raise them.

WORKING IN GROUPS

Ask Friends to Object

If you cannot imagine objections or alternatives to your argument, enlist help from your writing group. Ask them to read your draft and make the longest list they can of objections, alternative conclusions, different interpretations of evidence, and so on. Ask them not to censor themselves—you want even their nuttiest ideas. You may find in their views a question to acknowledge and respond to; and if not, their list might give you an idea of your own.

6.4.2 Acknowledging and Responding

When you acknowledge an anticipated question or objection, you can give it more or less weight. You can mention and dismiss it, summarize it quickly, or address it at length. Do not dismiss a position that your readers take seriously; do not address at length one for which you have no good response.

Standard Forms for Acknowledging

We order these expressions from most dismissive to most respectful. (Brackets and slashes indicate choices.)

1. You can downplay an alternative by summarizing it in a short phrase introduced with *despite*, *regardless of*, or *notwithstanding*:

[**Despite / Regardless of / Notwithstanding**] Congress's claims that it wants to cut taxes,_{acknowledgment} the public believes that . . . *response*

You can use *although*, *while*, and *even though* in the same way:

[**Although / While / Even though**] Congress claims it wants to cut taxes,_{acknowledgment} the public believes that . . . *response*

2. You can signal an alternative with *seem* or *appear*, or with a qualifying adverb, such as *plausibly*, *reasonably*, *understandably*, *surprisingly*, *foolishly*, or even *certainly*.

In his letters, Lincoln expresses what [**seems / appears**] to be depression._{acknowledgment} But those who observed him . . . *response*

Liberals [**plausibly / reasonably / foolishly / etc.**] argue that the arts ought to be supported by taxes._{acknowledgment} But we all know . . . *response*

3. You can acknowledge an alternative without naming its source. This gives it just a little weight.

It is easy to [**think / imagine / say / claim / argue**] that taxes should . . .

There is [**another / alternative / possible / standard**] [**explanation / argument / possibility**] . . .

Some evidence [**might / can / could / would / does**] [**suggest / indicate / lead some to think**] that we should . . .

4. You can acknowledge an alternative by attributing it to a more or less specific source. This construction gives it more weight.

There are [**some / many / few**] who [**might / could / would**] [**say / think / claim / charge / object**] that Cuba is not . . .

[**Most / Many / Some / A few**] administrators [**say / think / claim / charge / object**] that researchers . . .

Jones [**says / thinks / claims / charges / objects**] that students . . .

5. You can acknowledge an alternative in your own voice or with concessive adverbs such as *admittedly*, *granted*, *to be sure*, and so on. This construction concedes that the alternative has some validity, but by changing the words, you can qualify how much validity you acknowledge.

I [**understand / know / realize / appreciate**] that liberals believe in . . .

It is [**true / possible / likely / certain / must be admitted**] that no good evidence proves that coffee causes cancer . . .

[**Granted / Admittedly / True / To be sure / Certainly / Of course**], Adams stated . . .

We [**could / can / might / would**] [**say / argue / claim / think**] that spending on the arts supports pornographic . . .

We have to [**consider / raise**] the [**question / possibility / probability**] that further study [**could / might / will**] show crime has not . . .

We cannot [**overlook / ignore / dismiss / reject**] the fact that Cuba was . . .

Readers use the words of your acknowledgment to judge how seriously you take an objection or alternative. But they will base that judgment even more on the nature of your response. If your readers think an alternative is a serious one, they expect you to respond to it in some detail, including reasons and evidence to support that response. Do not dismiss or attack a position that your readers believe strongly: if you cannot make a convincing argument against it, simply show how it differs from yours and explain why you believe as you do.

Standard Forms for Introducing Responses

You can respond in ways that range from tactfully indirect to blunt.

1. You can state that you don't entirely understand:

But I do not quite understand . . . / I find it difficult to see how . . . / It is not clear to me that . . .

2. Or you can state that there are unsettled issues:

But there are other issues . . . / There remains the problem of . . .

3. You can respond more bluntly by claiming the acknowledged position is irrelevant or unreliable:

But as insightful as that point may be, it [ignores / is irrelevant to] the issue at hand.

But the evidence is [unreliable / shaky / thin / not the best available].

But the argument is [untenable / wrong / weak / confused / simplistic].

But that view [overlooks / ignores / misses] key factors.

But that position is based on [unreliable / faulty / weak / confused] [reasoning / evidence].

6.5 Use Warrants if Readers Question the Relevance of Your Reasons

Sometimes readers question an argument not because they object to its evidence or see an alternative interpretation of events, but because they cannot see its logic. Consider this argument, made by the ex-basketball star and TV commentator Charles Barkley:

I should not be held to a higher standard in my behavior,_{claim} because I never put myself forward as a role model for kids._{reason}

He was immediately criticized. His critics agreed that his reason was true: In fact, Barkley never claimed to be a role model. But, they said, that reason was irrelevant: He was a role model to be held to a higher standard, whether he asked for it or not.

Barkley and his critics did not disagree about evidence or reasons: all agreed that Barkley had never asked to be a role model. What they disagreed about was the underlying principle of reasoning that should apply to that fact. For Barkley, the principle was something like this:

Whenever someone does not ask to be a role model, he is not responsible to meet the standard of behavior applied to role models.

But the critics applied a different principle:

Whenever someone willingly engages in an activity that makes him famous and admired, he is a role model whether he asked for it or not.

If we think Barkley's principle is the right one, then we must accept his claim; if we think the critics have the right principle, then we must reject his and accept theirs.

A warrant is a general principle that if one thing is true, then something else must also be true. It answers those who believe that your reasons are true but still don't see why they should accept your claim: they think your reasons are *irrelevant* to believing your claim because they do not know (or accept) the principle of reasoning that connects them.

As we said, warrants are less common than the other parts of argument. They are used most often when an argument is about politics and morality (where people hold many contradictory principles) or when an expert makes an argument for lay readers (because experts know lots of principles that lay readers may not).

CAUTION

Don't Let Warrants Intimidate You

If warrants still seem confusing, don't be dismayed. Warrants are most important when you write for readers who think in ways very different from you. They are least important when your readers are a lot like you. Since you're likely to have target readers who do think more or less as you do, you may not need warrants at all. So if one comes to mind as you draft, include it. But don't try to force yourself to include warrants. As you become more experienced and tackle more advanced research projects, you can revisit the issue of warrants and their uses.

6.6 An Argument Assembled

Here is a small argument that pulls together all five parts:

TV aimed at children can aid their intellectual development, but that contribution has been offset by a factor that could damage their emotional development—too much violence._{claim} Parents agree that example is an important influence on a child's development. That's why parents tell their children stories about heroes. It seems plausible, then, that when children see degrading behavior, they will be affected by it as well._{warrant} In a single day, children see countless examples of violence._{reason} Every day the average child watches almost four hours of TV and sees about twelve acts of violence (Smith 1992)._{evidence} Tarnov has shown that children don't confuse cartoon violence with real life (2003)._{acknowledgment of alternative point of view} But that may make children more vulnerable to violence in other shows. If they only distinguish between cartoons and people, they may think real actors engaged in graphic violence represent real life._{response} We cannot ignore the possibility that TV violence encourages the development of violent adults._{claim restated}

Most of those elements could be expanded to many paragraphs.

Arguments in different fields look different, but they all consist of answers to just these five questions:

- What are you claiming?
- What are your reasons?
- What evidence supports your reasons?
- But what about other points of view?
- How are your reasons relevant to your claim?

Your storyboard should answer those questions many times. If it doesn't, your paper will seem thin and unconvincing.