In writing an argument, you take a stand on a debatable issue. The question being debated might be a matter of public policy:

- Should companies be allowed to advertise on public school property?
- What is the least dangerous way to dispose of hazardous waste?
- Should motorists be banned from texting while driving?
- Should a state limit the number of charter schools?

On such questions, reasonable people may disagree.

Reasonable men and women also disagree about many scholarly issues. Psychologists debate the role of genes and environment in determining behavior; historians interpret the causes of the Civil War quite differently; biologists challenge one another’s predictions about the effects of global warming.

When you construct a *reasonable* argument, your goal is not simply to win or to have the last word. Your aim is to explain your understanding of the truth about a subject or to propose the best

---

**Constructing reasonable arguments**

**Academic English** Some cultures value writers who argue with force; other cultures value writers who argue subtly or indirectly. Academic audiences in the United States will expect your writing to be assertive and confident — neither aggressive nor passive. You can create an assertive tone by acknowledging different positions and supporting your ideas with specific evidence.

- **TOO AGGRESSIVE** Of course only registered organ donors should be eligible for organ transplants. It’s selfish and shortsighted to think otherwise.
- **TOO PASSIVE** I might be wrong, but I think that maybe people should have to register as organ donors if they want to be considered for a transplant.
- **ASSERTIVE** If only registered organ donors are eligible for transplants, more people will register as donors.

If you are uncertain about the tone of your work, ask for help at your school’s writing center.
solution to a problem — without being needlessly combative. In constructing your argument, you join a conversation with other writers and readers. Your aim is to convince readers to reconsider their positions by offering new reasons to question existing viewpoints.

6a Examine your issue’s social and intellectual contexts.

Arguments appear in social and intellectual contexts. Public policy debates arise in social contexts and are conducted among groups with competing values and interests. For example, the debate over offshore oil drilling has been renewed in the United States in light of skyrocketing energy costs and terrorism concerns — with environmentalists, policymakers, oil company executives, and consumers all weighing in on the argument. Most public policy debates also have intellectual dimensions that address scientific or theoretical questions. In the case of the drilling issue, geologists, oceanographers, and economists all contribute their expertise.

Scholarly debates play out in intellectual contexts, but they have a social dimension as well. For example, scholars respond to the contributions of other specialists in the field, often building on others’ views and refining them, but at times challenging them.

Because many of your readers will be aware of the social and intellectual contexts in which your issue is grounded, you will be at a disadvantage if you are not informed. That’s why it is a good idea to conduct some research before preparing your argument; consulting even a few sources can deepen your understanding of the debates surrounding your topic. For example, the student whose paper appears on pages 96–101 became more knowledgeable about his issue — the shift from print to online news — after reading and annotating a few sources.

As you write

Select a public policy debate and locate two documents arguing different sides of the debate. Briefly summarize the opposing positions. Which position seems more reasonable to you? Which author seems more credible? Why? Join the conversation by writing a letter to one of the authors to explain your position in the debate.
6b View your audience as a panel of jurors.

Do not assume that your audience already agrees with you; instead, envision skeptical readers who, like a panel of jurors, will make up their minds after listening to all sides of the argument. If you are arguing a public policy issue, aim your paper at readers who represent a variety of positions. In the case of the debate over offshore drilling, for example, imagine a jury that represents those who have a stake in the matter: environmentalists, policymakers, oil company executives, and consumers.

At times, you can deliberately narrow your audience. If you are working within a word limit, for example, you might not have the space in which to address all the concerns surrounding the offshore drilling debate. Or you might be primarily interested in reaching one segment of a general audience, such as consumers. In such instances, you can still view your audience as a panel of jurors; the jury will simply be a less diverse group.

In the case of scholarly debates, you will be addressing readers who share your interest in a discipline, such as literature or psychology. Such readers belong to a group with an agreed-upon way of investigating and talking about issues. Though they generally agree about disciplinary methods of asking questions and share specialized vocabulary, scholars in an academic discipline often disagree about particular issues. Once you see how they disagree about your issue, you should be able to imagine a jury that reflects the variety of positions they hold.

6c In your introduction, establish credibility and state your position.

When you are constructing an argument, make sure your introduction contains a thesis that states your position on the issue you have chosen to debate. In the sentences leading up to the thesis, establish your credibility with readers by showing that you are knowledgeable about the issue and fair-minded. If possible, build common ground with readers who may not at first agree with your views, and show them why they should consider your thesis.
In the following introduction, student Kevin Smith presents himself as someone worth listening to. Because Smith introduces both sides of the debate, readers are likely to approach his essay with an open mind.

Although the Supreme Court has ruled against prayer in public schools on First Amendment grounds, many people still feel that prayer should be allowed. Such people value prayer as a practice central to their faith and believe that prayer is a way for schools to reinforce moral principles. They also compellingly point out a paradox in the First Amendment itself: at what point does the separation of church and state restrict the freedom of those who wish to practice their religion? What proponents of school prayer fail to realize, however, is that the Supreme Court’s decision, although it was made on legal grounds, makes sense on religious grounds as well. Prayer is too important to be trusted to our public schools.

— Kevin Smith, student

**TIP:** A good way to test a thesis while drafting and revising is to imagine a counterargument to your argument (see 6f). If you can’t think of an opposing point of view, rethink your thesis and ask a classmate or writing center tutor to respond to your argument.

**6d Back up your thesis with persuasive lines of argument.**

Arguments of any complexity contain lines of argument that, when taken together, might reasonably persuade readers that the thesis has merit. The following, for example, are the main lines of argument that Sam Jacobs used in his paper about the shift from print to online news (see pp. 96–101).

**CENTRAL CLAIM** Thesis: The shift from print to online news provides unprecedented opportunities for readers to become more engaged with the news, to hold journalists accountable, and to participate as producers, not simply as consumers.

(continued)
SUPPORTING CLAIMS

- Print news has traditionally had a one-sided relationship with its readers, delivering information for passive consumption.
- Online news invites readers to participate in a collaborative process—to question and even contribute to the content.
- Links within news stories provide transparency, allowing readers to move easily from the main story to original sources, related articles, or background materials.
- Technology has made it possible for readers to become news producers—posting text, audio, images, and video of news events.
- Citizen journalists can provide valuable information, sometimes more quickly than traditional journalists can.

If you sum up your main lines of argument, as Jacobs did, you will have a rough outline of your essay. In your paper, you will provide evidence for each of your claims.

As you write

Study Sam Jacobs’s line of argument above. Draft an outline of your central claim and supporting claims, as he did. Ask a classmate to comment on the effectiveness of your thesis and claims. Do you have enough support for your thesis? Are your claims persuasive?

Support your claims with specific evidence.

You will need to support your central claim and any subordinate claims with evidence: facts, statistics, examples and illustrations, visuals, expert opinion, and so on. Most debatable topics require that you consult some written sources. As you read through the sources, you will learn more about the arguments and counter-arguments at the center of your debate.
Remember that you must document your sources. Documentation gives credit to the authors and shows readers how to locate a source in case they want to assess its credibility or explore the issues further.

**Using facts and statistics**

A fact is something that is known with certainty because it has been objectively verified: The capital of Wyoming is Cheyenne. Carbon has an atomic weight of 12. John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963. Statistics are collections of numerical facts: Alcohol abuse is a factor in nearly 40 percent of traffic fatalities. More than four in ten businesses in the United States are owned by women.

Most arguments are supported at least to some extent by facts and statistics. For example, in the following passage the writer uses statistics to show that college students are granted unreasonably high credit limits.

A 2009 study by Sallie Mae revealed that undergraduates are carrying record-high credit card balances and are relying on credit cards more than ever, especially in the economic downturn. The average credit card debt per college undergraduate is $3,173, and 82 percent of undergraduates carry balances and incur finance charges each month (Sallie Mae).

Writers often use statistics in selective ways to bolster their own positions. If you suspect that a writer’s handling of statistics is not quite fair, track down the original sources for those statistics or read authors with opposing views, who may give you a fuller understanding of the numbers.

**Using examples and illustrations**

Examples and illustrations (extended examples, often in story form) rarely prove a point by themselves, but when used in combination with other forms of evidence they flesh out an argument with details and specific instances and bring it to life. Because examples are often concrete and sometimes vivid, they can reach readers in ways that statistics and abstract ideas cannot.

In a paper arguing that online news provides opportunities for readers that print news does not, Sam Jacobs describes how regular citizens armed with only cell phones and laptops helped save lives during Hurricane Katrina by relaying critical news updates.
Using visuals

Visuals—charts, graphs, diagrams, photographs—can support your argument by providing vivid and detailed evidence and by capturing your readers’ attention. Bar or line graphs, for instance, describe and organize complex statistical data; photographs can immediately and evocatively convey abstract ideas. Writers in almost every academic field use visual evidence to support their arguments or to counter opposing arguments. For example, to explain a conflict among Southeast Asian countries, a historian might choose a map to illustrate the geography and highlight particular issues. Or to refute another scholar’s hypothesis about the dangers of a vegetarian diet, a nutritionist might support her claims by using a table to organize and highlight detailed numerical information. (See pp. 24–25.)

As you consider using visual evidence, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the visual accurate, credible, and relevant?
- How will the visual appeal to readers? Logically? Ethically? Emotionally?
- How will the visual evidence function? Will it provide background information? Present complex numerical information or an abstract idea? Lend authority? Anticipate or refute counterarguments?

Like all forms of evidence, visuals don’t speak for themselves; you’ll need to analyze and interpret the evidence to show readers how the visuals inform and support your argument.

Citing expert opinion

Although they are no substitute for careful reasoning of your own, the views of an expert can contribute to the force of your argument. For example, to help him make the case that print...
journalism has a one-sided relationship with its readers, Sam Jacobs integrates an expert’s key description:

With the rise of the Internet, however, this one-sided relationship has been criticized by journalists such as Dan Gillmor, founder of the Center for Citizen Media, who argues that traditional print journalism treats “news as a lecture,” whereas online news is “more of a conversation” (xxiv).

When you rely on expert opinion, make sure that your source is an expert in the field you are writing about. In some cases, you may need to provide credentials showing why your source is worth listening to. When including expert testimony in your paper, you can summarize or paraphrase the expert’s opinion or you can quote the expert’s exact words. You will of course need to document the source, as Jacobs did in the example just given.

**Anticipating and countering opposing arguments**

To anticipate a possible objection (see 6f) to your argument, consider the following questions:

- Could a reasonable person draw a different conclusion from your facts or examples?
- Might a reader question any of your assumptions?
- Could a reader offer an alternative explanation of this issue?
- Is there any evidence that might weaken your position?

The following questions may help you respond to a reader’s potential objection:

- Can you concede the point to the opposition but challenge the point’s importance or usefulness?
- Can you explain why readers should consider a new perspective or question a piece of evidence?
- Should you explain how your position responds to contradictory evidence?
- Can you suggest a different interpretation of the evidence?

When you write, use phrasing to signal to readers that you’re about to present an objection. Often the signal phrase can go in the lead sentence of a paragraph:

Critics of this view argue that . . .

Some readers might point out that . . .

Researchers challenge these claims by . . .
Revising with comments

Develop more

UNDERSTANDING THE COMMENT

When readers suggest that you “develop more,” the comment often signals that you stopped short of providing a full and detailed discussion of your idea.

The student has not included enough evidence or developed a thorough analysis of that evidence. To revise, she might look for specific examples and details from Rodriguez’s essay to support her claim that Rodriguez “removed . . . and distanced himself” from his family. Then she might develop the claim by analyzing how and why Rodriguez’s “desire to become educated” removed him from his family.

SIMILAR COMMENTS: undeveloped • give examples • explain

REVISING WHEN YOU NEED TO DEVELOP MORE

1. Read your paragraph to a peer or a tutor and ask specific questions:
   What’s missing? Do readers need more background information or examples to understand your point? Do they need more evidence to be convinced? Is it clear what point you are making with your details?

2. Keep your purpose in mind. You aren’t being asked to restate what you’ve already written or what the author has written.

3. Think about why your main point matters to your readers. Take another look at your points and support, and answer the question “So what?”

More advice on using specific evidence: 6e
6f Anticipate objections; counter opposing arguments.

Readers who already agree with you need no convincing, but indifferent or skeptical readers may resist your arguments. To be willing to give up positions that seem reasonable to them, readers need to see that another position is even more reasonable. In addition to presenting your own case, therefore, you should consider the opposing arguments and attempt to counter them. (See the box on p. 91.)

It might seem at first that drawing attention to an opposing point of view or contradictory evidence would weaken your argument. But by anticipating and countering objections, you show yourself as a reasonable and well-informed writer. You also establish your purpose, demonstrate the significance of the issue you are debating, and ultimately strengthen your argument.

There is no best place in an essay to deal with opposing views. Often it is useful to summarize the opposing position early in your essay. After stating your thesis but before developing your own arguments, you might have a paragraph that addresses the most important counterargument. Or you can anticipate objections paragraph by paragraph as you develop your case. Wherever you decide to address opposing arguments, you will enhance your credibility if you explain the arguments of others accurately and fairly.

As you write

Exchange drafts with your classmates. Pose objections to their arguments, and invite them to pose objections to yours. Practice using the language of counterargument: “Some readers might point out . . .” or “But isn’t it possible that . . .?” What do you learn about the persuasiveness of your argument from hearing objections? Do you need to revise your thesis? Modify your position? Consider new evidence? Which counterarguments would you need to address to convince readers that you are a reasonable and informed writer?

6g Build common ground.

As you counter opposing arguments, try to seek out one or two assumptions you might share with readers who do not initially agree with your views. If you can show that you share their concerns, your readers may be more likely to acknowledge the
Revising with comments

Consider opposing viewpoints

UNDERSTANDING THE COMMENT

When readers suggest that you “consider opposing viewpoints,” the comment often signals that you need to recognize and respond to possible objections to your argument.

For many American workers, drug testing is a routine part of their working life. In her book *Nickel and Dimed*, Barbara Ehrenreich observes how random drug testing leads to a hostile work environment (128). In addition, researchers Shepard and Clifton have found that companies using drug-testing programs are likelier to have lower productivity levels than those that have not adopted such practices (1). Drug testing in the workplace has shown no benefits for employers or employees.

In response to a comment about changes in the workplace, one student wrote this body paragraph.

The student jumps to a conclusion too quickly without recognizing any opposing points of view. To revise, the student might begin by reading two or more sources to gain a different perspective and to learn more about the debate surrounding her topic. As she reads more sources, she might ask: What evidence do those in favor of drug testing provide to support their point of view? How would they respond to my conclusion against drug testing? By anticipating and countering opposing views, she will show herself as a fair and reasonable writer.

**SIMILAR COMMENTS:** what about the other side? • counterargument?

**REVISION WHEN YOU NEED TO CONSIDER OTHER POINTS OF VIEW**

1. **Read more** to learn about the debates surrounding the topic. Ask questions: Are there other sides to the issue? Would a reasonable person offer an alternative explanation for the evidence?

2. **Be open-minded.** Although it might seem counterintuitive to introduce opposing arguments, you’ll show your knowledge of the topic by recognizing that not everyone draws the same conclusion.

3. **Introduce and counter objections** with phrases like these: “Some readers might point out that . . .” or “Critics of this view argue that. . . .”

4. **Revise your thesis**, if necessary, to account for multiple points of view.

More advice on considering opposing viewpoints: 6f and 7c
validity of your argument. For example, to persuade people opposed to controlling the deer population with a regulated hunting season, a state wildlife commission would have to show that it too cares about preserving deer and does not want them to die needlessly. Having established these values in common, the commission might be able to persuade critics that reducing the total number of deer prevents starvation caused by overpopulation.

People believe that intelligence and decency support their side of an argument. To be persuaded, they must see these qualities in your argument. Otherwise they will persist in their opposition.

6h Sample argument paper

In the paper that begins on the next page, student Sam Jacobs argues that the shift from print to online news benefits readers by providing them with new opportunities to produce news and to think more critically as consumers of news. Notice that he is careful to present opposing views fairly before providing his counterarguments.

In writing the paper, Jacobs consulted both print and online sources. When he quotes or uses information from a source, he cites the source with an MLA (Modern Language Association) in-text citation. Citations in the paper refer readers to the list of works cited at the end of the paper. (For more details about citing sources, see 59.)