

How do I decide what I should argue?

Overview

Most arguments fall into recognizable types, depending on which angle of an issue the writer chooses to emphasize. Most often the central claim of an argument is referred to as the thesis. You can begin to develop a potential thesis by asking yourself what you found most interesting or provocative about the topic you've chosen to address. Your thesis must present an arguable position. In other words, you should aim for an argument that could be debated or reasonably interpreted in an alternative way. It may also be worthwhile to aim for the unexpected. Making a familiar or predictable argument is unlikely to hold your readers' attention.

General Considerations

The six most common types of claim are: **fact**, **definition**, **value**, **cause**, **comparison**, and **policy**. Being able to identify these types of claim in other people's arguments can help you better respond in your own writing. You can also use them to brainstorm possible arguments you might make about an issue you have decided to examine.

Six Types of Claim

- A **claim of fact** takes a position on questions like: What happened? Is it true? Does it exist? Example: "Though student demonstrations may be less evident than they were in the 1960s, students are more politically active than ever."
- A **claim of definition** takes a position on questions like: What is it? How should it be classified or interpreted? How does its usual meaning change in a particular context? Example: "By examining what it means to 'network,' it's clear that social networking sites encourage not networking but something else entirely."
- A **claim of value** takes a position on questions like: Is it good or bad? Of what worth is it? Is it moral or immoral? Who thinks so? What do those people value? What values or criteria should I use to determine how good or bad? Example: "Video games are a valuable addition to modern education."
- A **claim of cause** takes a position on questions like: What caused it? Why did it happen? Where did it come from? What are the effects? What probably will be the results on a short-term and long-term basis? Example: "By seeking to replicate the experience of reading physical books, new hardware and software actually will lead to an appreciation of printed and bound texts for years to come."

- A **claim of comparison** takes a position on questions like: What can be learned by comparing one subject to another? What is the worth of one thing compared to another? How can we better understand one thing by looking at another? Example: “The varied policies of the US and British education systems reveal a difference in values.”
- A **claim of policy** takes a position on questions like: What should we do? How should we act? What should be future policy? How can we solve this problem? What course of action should we pursue? Example: “Sex education should be part of the public school curriculum.”

In Practice

Brainstorming Using Types of Claim

Below, six types of claim express different angles on the topic of violent media effects on children. By aggressively brainstorming and devoting sufficient time to this stage of the writing process, you could certainly come up with more additional claims for each type. You could then choose to pursue the options that seem most promising and devise a course of action for expanding upon your ideas.

Fact: There is no solid evidence that violent media affects children.

Definition: A looser definition of the word “violence” makes it possible to define children’s animated cartoons as violent.

Value: Violence in animated children’s films improves the quality of the entertainment.

Cause: Exposure to violent media causes children to solve problems with physical violence rather than by communicating.

Comparison: Exposing young children to violent media has greater repercussions than exposing a teenager to violence.

Policy: To limit children’s exposure to violent media a new rating system should be put in place.

Combining Claims

Often two or more types of claims are combined to make a more complex central argument. By examining your issue through one type of claim, you may find it naturally leads to a second type of claim. This can lead to a more inventive and engaging argument. Remember that a “thesis” does not always have to be limited to a single sentence.

Claim of Cause + Claim of Value: Schools are failing because of a reduction of funds provided by the government; therefore, it is the government that is ineffective, not the schools themselves.

Claim of Definition + Claim of Policy: The definition of adult should not be based on age but on brain maturity. Given that the brain is still physically maturing until the early twenties, the legal adult age should be raised from 18 to 21.

Claim of Comparison + Claim of Fact: The similarities in math education between China and the US indicate that it is the cultural attitudes Americans have about math education, not how math is taught, that creates the difference in test scores.

Exercise

First write down an issue you might address in an essay. Then brainstorm to find some original angles using the different types of claims.

Fact: Think about which aspect of your topic is in question and answer one or more of the following questions. Is it true/not true? Did something occur? How did it occur? Does the problem really exist?

Definition: Make a list of the various key words or terms associated with your topic that answer the following questions: What is the intended meaning of this term? How do you think it should be interpreted? Does the meaning change in a particular context?

Value: Consider the aspects of your topic that can be evaluated and ask yourself the following questions: Is it good/bad? Is it effective/ineffective? Does it have value? To whom? On what criteria should we base its worth?

Cause: Identify an aspect of your topic that is caused by something else or has effect on something else? Consider the following questions: Why did it happen? What caused it? What short and/or long term effect will it have?

Comparison: Consider your subject in light of another subject, or, if your topic has two elements, compare them to each other. Answer one or more of the following questions: What can be learned about A when it is compared to B? Why is A better or worse than B? What do the similarities or difference between A and B say about your topic as a whole?

Policy: Determine if your topic or part of your topic requires a solution and ask yourself the following questions: What should be done to solve this problem? How should we take action? Why is this solution effective? Is it a feasible solution?

Once you have answered the above questions, look over them to see if any can be naturally *combined* to make a more complex argument. Brainstorm various connections.

Resources:

Wood, Nancy V. *Perspectives on Argument*. 3rd Ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001.

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