

THE AP LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION ARGUMENT ESSAY

Most persuasive argument prompts contain a short selection in which an author takes a clear position. Students are asked to defend (agree), refute (disagree), or qualify (agree or disagree with certain limits or restrictions).

Effective essays present strong, well-argued opinions. "Depth of thought" is the primary scoring criteria for argumentative essays. In deciding what position to take, consider the following:

Terminology.

Consider: If we don't agree on what a word means, then how can we use that word in an argument? For example, what does the word *large* mean? Or *happiness*? If my understanding differs from yours, then the use of this word in an argument could set us at odds when perhaps we should agree. In the presented argument, look for words and consider their meaning. How do you understand the word? Does the author differ? If so, how does this affect the arguments? It is often wise to clarify the meaning of terms in argumentation.

Cause-Effect Argumentation.

In such arguments, the writer claims that *X* is the result of *Y*; that is, *Y* caused *X*. Is this true???? Might there be some other cause of *X* that the writer has not considered?

Deductive and Inductive Arguments.

In logical arguments, the writer draws a logical conclusion from presented facts. To counter such arguments, consider the given facts. Are they true? An errant, questionable, or debatable fact collapses the argument. If you can show one of the "building blocks" to be questionable, then the conclusion drawn from it is faulty. Also, one might ask: Can the same evidence lead to a different conclusion? –Never forget that the greatest minds in history have drawn starkly different conclusions from the same observable evidence.

Selection of Detail.

Never forget that a writer chooses what information to present in his or her argument. Can you think of evidence not presented that could call the writer's views into question?

History.

Look to history or contemporary society to augment your views (or to counter the author's). Effective counterarguments and supporting arguments cite specific evidence to support the given viewpoints. You must use specifics! (*Use specifics, use specifics, use specifics.*)

Specific Example.

Use specific examples (it's worth saying again): No better proof can be used than specific evidence from history or contemporary society to show why a particular viewpoint is right or wrong.

THE RHETORICAL TRIANGLE: KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Before writing, consider your audience: College professors and high school AP English teachers. This is a well-educated audience with broad knowledge.

Chances are, your audience knows the topic at hand far better than you. With this in mind, do NOT write about things that you are unfamiliar with. Your lack of knowledge will be obvious to your audience, and this will weaken your credibility.

It is better to write fully about a few familiar things than to touch upon matters that you don't fully understand.

Also know this about your audience: They are people who have given up one full week of their summer to sit in a room and grade thousands of student essays--most of which are poorly written. These people are not normal. They are intellectuals who enjoy the power of evaluating student work. How do you please them?

First, show intelligence. They seek people like themselves. You must present yourself as someone like them.

Next, show a broad knowledge. Use examples from history. Bring in current events. Indicate to them that you don't hang out and party all the time. That you study, learn, and remember. But don't make any mistakes: They will punish you if they sense that you haven't taken your academic studies as seriously as they have.

Last, entertain them. Be witty. Be creative. Be fun. They read thousands of terrible papers. Make yours stand out in a positive way. People with a strong, witty voice often score extremely high.

ARGUMENTATIVE VS. EXPOSITORY ESSAY WRITING

You are asked to write a persuasive argument – NOT to explain an issue or contemporary concern. In expository writing, a writer explains an issue or matter. In an argumentative essay, a writer targets an audience and directly appeals to them as to how and what they should think about an issue.

In an expository essay, the writer puts his ideas on paper and allows his reader to make a decision.
In an argumentative essay, the writer grabs the reader by the collar and tells them what to think.

Don't reflect. Direct.

Choose only to include subject matter that builds support for your position. The only things your reader needs to know are those that bring them closer to your own understanding.

NOTE: We live in an age with the prevailing attitude of "you decide: there's no right or wrong." Avoid that mindset when writing this essay. There is a right and wrong. It is your job to tell the reader--convincingly--what to think. The issue may be complex, and the other side might have some valid points, but--in the end--you offer the answer.

ESTABLISH A CLEAR THESIS

Most persuasive argument prompts give a short excerpt from a larger work in which an author takes a firm position on a current issue. With the writer's position clarified, the prompt will then give students three choices: Defend, Refute, or Qualify.

Defend: You agree with the author. Present a series of ideas with supporting evidence that clearly show that the author's position has merit and worth. Conversely, show why those who disagree with the author are wrong.

Refute: You disagree with the author. Present a series of ideas with supporting evidence that clearly show that the author's position is faulty. Conversely, show why those who agree with the author are wrong.

Qualify: The most difficult but generally the most appropriate response. To qualify is to take a position (agree or disagree); however, you (the writer) acknowledge that there are weaknesses or limitations. In other words, since a position has to be taken, you may choose to agree with the author; however, you recognize that there are problems or difficulties, and that the other point of view has some valid arguments. Most issues in this world are not black and white: They have shades of grey. Qualifying is essentially choosing one side but acknowledging the complexity of the decision.

IMPORTANT: You must choose a side. Too many students, when qualifying, essentially write a paper that explains both sides of an argument. **Your paper must clearly CHOOSE AND ARGUE FOR ONE SIDE OF THE ARGUMENT.** If your paper appears "to straddle a fence," then you cannot score above a "2." To connect to points above, "fence-sitting" is characteristic of expository writing, where the purpose is to explain an issue.

KEY: Make your position clear in each paragraph. The introduction should clearly establish your thesis. Each body paragraph should present one reason or idea supporting your thesis--ending, of course, with clear commentary explaining how and why the evidence presented supports the thesis. The final paragraph should be the final appeal, arguing WHY the taken position is the correct one. **There should never be any doubt what position you (the writer) hold to be correct.**

USE SPECIFIC, ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

Use specific, illustrative examples. Talk about particular people, places, and events. Historical and contemporary examples are highly effective, as they show your intellectual awareness of the world around you, adding depth of thought to your paper.

Please read the following article, which explains why (rhetorically speaking) specific, illustrative examples are needed in persuasive arguments:

"Illustrating general statements with specific examples will give you a sense of authority to you. When you want readers to grasp your ideas quickly, use personal and specific examples to illustrate your general statements. Writers all have to generalize at times. If they didn't, they could never get beyond the examples. But notice how often magazine or newspaper writers begin an article with specific examples that lead up to a broader statement they want to make."

In the following account of the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the impact of the larger statement about grandparent's taking on new families comes from the specific opening example:

Geneva Dunbar's days are a blur of snowsuits, snacks and subtraction problem. From early morning when she readies three children for school to nightfall when she tucks them into bed, she is like any bone-weary, two hands-aren't – enough mother. The difference is that Mrs. Dunbar, 51, has already raised her family [...] but when her daughter died in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, Mrs. Dunbar found herself part of a vast army of grandparents suddenly thrust into a second round of child – rearing. (**Jane Gross : Grandma Helps fills the void left by September 11**)

Watch how Anna Quintile illustrates her generalization about the success of the national school lunch program in this opening paragraph:

The school lunch program [...] has been by most measures an enormous success. For lots of poor families, it's become a way to count on getting at least one decent meal into their children. America's second harvest, the biggest nonprofit supply source for the food banks, talks of parents who go hungry themselves so their kids can eat, who put off paying utility and phone bills, who insist that their children attend remedial summer – school programs simply so they can get a meal. The parents themselves are loath to talk. Of all the humiliations attached to being poor in a prosperous nation, not being able to feed your kids is at the top of the list. (**Anna Quindlen : School's out for summer**)

Here's an example from the paper about Artemisia Gentileschi:

The sheer size of the canvases required for the history painting so highly valued in the renaissance posed problems for women [painters]. They were expensive and most women had no independent source of income. Moreover, an artist trying to work on such a large scale needed an apprentice. Almost no woman apprentices existed and male apprentices didn't want to work for a woman. If a woman painter did succeed in engagging a male apprentice, inevitably there were prurient rumors about a sexual relationship between them. Painters of historical subjects either biblical or from myth needed models. Not only where they expensive, but women painters weren't allowed to draw from nude models.

You strengthen your writing when you use specific examples:

- **Specifics add the weight of facts to your writing, anchoring it into the real world.** If you write about the effects of the nonprofit organizations on rural communities in central and South America, you'll have more impact if you tell specific stories about families in those regions who received heifers (or goats or rabbits) from specific projects such as Heifer International.
- **Specific details catch your readers' attention and give them stories that they can visualize.** If you are doing a project about the effect of poor child care on the careers of professional women in your community, then you could make the deficiencies of the U.S. system more vivid by comparing local child care to France's national child care system.
- **When you reinforce general claims with specific facts and details, you earn the confidence of your readers.** Those of us who are concerned about social issues such as racial injustice, inadequate health insurance coverage or violence in the public schools can generalize about such problems to little effect. But when we reinforce those statements with specific accounts and true – life stories and we suggest concrete solutions, we become credible witnesses.

Of course when you start giving your readers, specifics and details, you're taking a risk. If you were to generalize that public school teachers are underpaid, many of your readers would agree, but if you proposed starting salaries of \$50,000, some readers would protest that such salaries are unthinkable. Readers might agree in general that young people should be educated about healthy sexual practices, but some would be outraged if you were to suggest that high school student should learn about contraception. Nevertheless, if you want to gain your readers' trust and respect, you need to take the risk of giving them specifics and details.

ARGUMENTATIVE STRATEGIES

Consider using the following strategies to make your point:

- Analogies (or comparisons in general)
- Specific examples drawn from history or contemporary society. AP graders LOVE writers who are able to connect the prompt to the world around them.
- Use a connective theme (or thread) in your paper. Tie all your ideas together through a reoccurring motif. (For advanced writers only.)
- Use a dramatic, or well-placed sentence, to make a point. Show that you know how to manipulate your sentence structure for effect. Perhaps you use parallelism, or antithesis, or repetition, or.....
- Use cause-effect argumentation, if appropriate.
- Use emotionally-charged words (diction) to establish your tone or attitude.
- Show personality—this helps establish your credibility, as one whose opinion is worth knowing.
- Either refute the opposition or concede a point.
- A thoughtful simile, metaphor, or other figurative language can enhance your paper.

Remember: You can show why you are right—or why others are wrong. Either way, you draw people to your side. Above all else: If you are asked to write an argument, avoid logical fallacies.

ADDRESS THE OPPOSITION

Address the opposition! If you don't, just write off this test. Show how those who think differently are wrong—or show that, while they may have some points, your position still reigns supreme. Addressing the opposition shows your intellectual awareness, adding depth of thought to your paper.

IMPORTANT: What would my opponent say?

Ask yourself this question. Remember your audience. You are trying to change minds. In that audience, there are those who think differently than you. So, if you have doubters reading your paper, what might they say about your idea? How would they criticize your argument? your examples?

The more you think about the opposing views and arguments, the more effective choices you will make in your own paper.

NO TRICKS

Avoid fallacious reasoning. Your argument will be evaluated for its logical effectiveness. Remember your audience. If they see blatant misrepresentation or deception, you will be punished. Reason well. No lies.

HUMOR AND WIT IS GOOD

Worth repeating: Write with personality. Dry, dull, bland arguments don't score well.