

# ELEMENTS OF ACADEMIC ARGUMENT<sup>1</sup>

## Harvard College Writing Program

### What the essay is about:

**1. Thesis:** your main insight or idea about a text or topic, and the *main* proposition that your essay demonstrates. It should be true but arguable; be limited enough in scope to be argued with available evidence; and get to the heart of the text or topic being analyzed (not be peripheral). It should be stated early and it should govern the whole essay.

### Why it matters:

**2. Question, Problem, or What's at Stake:** the context or situation that you establish for your argument at the start of your essay, making clear why someone might want to read an essay on this topic or need to hear your particular thesis argued (why your thesis isn't just obvious to all, why other theses might be less persuasive). In the introduction, it's the moment where you establish "what's at stake" in the essay, setting up a genuine problem, question, difficulty, over-simplification, misapprehension, dilemma or violated expectation that an intelligent reader would really have.

### What the thesis is based on:

**3. Evidence:** the data – facts, examples, or details – that you refer to, quote, or summarize to support your thesis. There needs to be *enough* evidence to be persuasive; the right *kind* of evidence to support the thesis; a *thorough* consideration of evidence (with no obvious pieces of evidence overlooked); and sufficiently *concrete* evidence for the reader to trust.

### What you do with the evidence:

**4. Analysis:** the work of interpretation, of saying what the evidence means. Analysis is what you do with data when you go beyond observing or summarizing it: taking it apart, grappling with its details, drawing out the significance or implication not apparent to a superficial view. Analysis is what makes the writer feel present, as a thinking individual, in the essay.

### Evidence and analysis add up to . . .

**5. Argument:** the series of ideas that the essay lays out which, taken together, support the essay's thesis. A successful argument will do more than *reiterate* the thesis, but rather make clear how each idea develops from the one before it (see "Structure," #7 below). The argument should show you not only analyzing the evidence, but also reflecting on the ideas in other important ways: *defining your terms* (see #8 below) or assumptions; considering *counter-argument* – possible alternative arguments, or objections or problems, that a skeptical or resistant reader might raise; offering a *qualification* or limitation to the case you've made; incorporating any *complications* that arise, a way in which the case isn't quite so simple as you've made it seem; drawing out an *implication*, often in the conclusion.

### Where the evidence comes from:

**6. Sources:** texts (or persons), referred to, summarized, or quoted, that help a writer demonstrate the truth of his or her argument. In some arguments, there will be one central primary source. In others, sources can offer (a) factual information or data, (b) opinions or interpretation on your topic, (c) comparable versions of the things you are discussing, or (d) applicable general concepts.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Karen Heath for this adaptation of Gordon Harvey's "Elements of the Academic Essay."

### How to organize the argument:

**7. Structure:** the sequence of an argument's main sections or sub-topics, and the turning points between them. The sections should follow a logical order that is apparent to the reader. But it should also be a progressive order -- they should have a direction of development or complication, not be simply a list of examples or series of restatements of the thesis ("Macbeth is ambitious: he's ambitious here; and he's ambitious here; and he's ambitious here, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious"). In some arguments, especially longer ones, structure may be briefly announced or hinted at after the thesis, in a road-map or plan sentence.

### The argument is articulated in part through:

**8. Key terms:** the recurring terms or basic oppositions that an argument rests upon. An essay's key terms should be clear in their meaning and appear throughout; they should be appropriate for the subject (not unfair or too simple -- a false or constraining opposition); and they should not be clichés or abstractions (e.g. "the evils of society"). These terms can imply certain *assumptions* -- unstated beliefs about life, history, literature, reasoning, etc. The assumptions should bear logical inspection, and if arguable they should be explicitly acknowledged.

### You keep the reader clear along the way through:

**9. Transitions and signposts:** words that tie together the parts of an argument, by indicating how a new section, paragraph, or sentence follows from the one immediately previous (transitional words and phrases); and by offering "signposts" that recollect an earlier idea or section or the thesis itself, referring back to it either by explicit statement or by echoing earlier key words or resonant phrases.

### ... and through:

**10. Orienting:** brief bits of information, explanation, and summary that orient readers who aren't expert in the subject, enabling them to follow the argument, such as: necessary introductory information about the text, author, or event; a brief summary of a text or passage about to be analyzed; pieces of information given along the way about passages, people, or events mentioned.

### Addressing your readers involves:

**11. Stance:** the implied relationship of you, the writer, to your readers and subject. Stance is defined by such features as style and tone (e.g. familiar or formal); the presence or absence of specialized language and knowledge; the amount of time spent orienting a general, non-expert reader; the use of scholarly conventions of format and style. Your stance should be established within the first few paragraphs of your essay, and should stay consistent.

### ... and:

**12. Style:** choices made at the word and sentence level that determine *how* an idea is stated. Besides adhering to the grammatical conventions of standard English, an essay's style needs to be clear and readable (not confusing, verbose, cryptic, etc.), expressive of the writer's intelligence and energetic interest in the subject (not bureaucratic or clichéd), and appropriate for its subject and audience.

### And last (or first):

**13. Title:** should both interest and inform, by giving the subject and focus of the essay as well as by helping readers see why this essay might be interesting to read.