

## **Crafting Strong Arguments (and a few notes on introductions)**

**Strong arguments usually have the following characteristics:**

**1. Specific Terms, Narrow Claims:** Be sure your thesis can be reasonably argued in the space you have. Avoid broad terms like “good,” “evil,” “negative,” “positive,” “mankind,” etc.; the more specific you can be, the better. In a short essay, you cannot expect to cover how imperialism affects modernist literature, for example, or how Joyce uses language.

Compare the following two thesis statements:

- a. Wilfred Owen presents the negative aspects of war in many of his poems.
- b. In the poem “Strange Meeting,” Owen’s speaker descends quickly into hell, a journey that nevertheless bares traces of a dark quest; when he meets what is essentially an embodied voice, the speaker (and the reader) find an unexpected source of bitter enlightenment, one that moves from exposing harsh truths about the war to revealing the speaker’s own complicity in that darkness.

The first argument is too broad: What does the author mean by “negative”? What aspects of war will be discussed? The second argument is better, offering a reader a much more specific picture of the argument that will follow.

**2. Tension:** A good argument usually offers some kind of tension that will be considered in your paper. This tension might be presented as

\*a progression (e.g., “while at the start of the novel, X is true, by the end of the novel, Y seems dominant”).

\*a contrast (e.g., “Both characters confront the evils of imperialism, but Kurtz is finally destroyed by his own complicity, while Marlow survives. . .”).

\*a surprise (e.g., “while the narrator at first appears to be X, close attention to Y suggests an alternative reading. . .”).

Compare the following two thesis statements:

- a. In Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*, the narrative voice has several moods.
- b. In Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*, the narrative voice is infused with the desolation and confusion experienced by the priest. As the story unfolds, the voice follows the priest’s inner thoughts, shifting from his vague attempts to reestablish his identity, to his memories of his past life, to his own religious struggles. These shifts suggest. . .

The first argument is bland and offers the reader little sense of progression, contrast, or surprise. The second argument offers a sense of progression and contrast.

**3. Not Obvious:** In order to be effective, an argument should not be obvious. That is, it should be the sort of statement with which a reasonable, well-informed person might conceivably disagree. By contrast, if no reasonable person can disagree with your argument, then the argument is already obvious, and there’s little point in writing about it.

To test your argument, negate it. That is, put the word “not” in it. If no reasonable, well-informed person can believe your negated argument, then the original argument is obvious, and it’s unlikely to produce an interesting essay. The following arguments, for example, are obvious:

1. Conrad writes about a man who sees the effects of imperialism.

2. Yeats often uses natural imagery in his poems.

Both of these statements are true, but neither one makes an argument that could be contested. They simply state the obvious.

By contrast, consider this argument:

In *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway uses the central relationship between Henry and Catherine to reveal the subtle ways that traumatic experience may alter ideas of romantic exchange. From the courtship to the birth of their child, the two characters move from. . .

N.B: You don't need to write a far-fetched or a wacky argument; concentrate on avoiding an obvious one.

**4. Supportable:** An argument is supportable if it is possible to find evidence to back it up. In literary criticism, evidence sometimes comes from information about the author's life and historical moment, but more often it comes from the text itself—the story, poem, or play that the claim is about. As a rule of thumb, if your argument cannot be supported by observations about the text at hand, then your argument is probably not supportable. For example, the following argument cannot be supported:

Conrad wrote *The Heart of Darkness* to show that women in his society were weak, and that he himself would not want to be married to someone as naïve as Kurtz's Intended.

Unless you're going to take a detailed look at outside information, you can't prove that Conrad wrote his novel to show that women are weak. Base your arguments on evidence from the text at hand:

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad details the profound ignorance of the two "civilized" women: Marlow's aunt and Kurtz's Intended. The aunt embraces imperialist rhetoric without any knowledge of the Congo or the Company's activities, while the Intended remains firmly and stubbornly misguided about Kurtz's character and actions.

**5. Literary:** In a literature paper, arguments must be literary. That is to say, they must be about literary texts, their authors, or the cultural circumstances in which they are produced and studied. They should not be about human nature in general, the state of the over-all society, general claims about morality, etc. Though certainly interesting in their own right, these topics are not strictly literary. So avoid arguments such as the following:

The narrator deserves his suffering because he acted immorally to many people, and immoral people deserve the punishment they receive.

The above claim is not really about literature, but about broader questions of morality. The following claim, however, is literary:

In these three poems, the writer suggests a subtle redefinition of Christian notions of redemption and salvation, repeatedly suggesting that both the soldier's "sins" and his sufferings offer a redemption unavailable to more conventionally "pious" observers.

Both claims are in a sense about morality, but the second claim is literary, because it focuses on "morality" as it is represented in a specific work of literature.

## Q & A on Introductions

1. **How long should the thesis statement be, and where should I put it?** For a short essay (under 8 pages), a reader expects your thesis statement to appear at the end of the first introductory paragraph. A thesis statement is generally 1-3 sentences long. If you think about it, this placement makes sense: you're giving your readers the central idea of your paper as they move into the main body of the essay.

2. **If thesis statements come at the end of the introductory paragraph, what should come before the thesis?** Think about what your readers need to understand your paper. You need to tell them the text and the author you'll be discussing, ideally in the first sentence (e.g., "In his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce investigates. . ."). You also need to get right to your topic. Do NOT start at the beginning of recorded history and move forward ("Throughout history, wars have been fought in many places. . ."). Do NOT have lots of "throat clearing" sentences that say little (e.g. "Yeats uses language and imagery and includes many interesting themes"—what else would a writer use but language and imagery?). Start with your topic. If you're writing about wave imagery in Joyce, introduce this topic and the work in question in the first sentence, then introduce the topic more fully, and have this opening lead you naturally to the specific argument you're making.

\*\*Some of the above information adapted from Claim Game, University of Virginia Teaching Website.\*\*