**BUILDING AN ARGUMENT[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**How to write analytically**

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| **AIMS**:   * To make students think about what makes an argument persuasive and logical. * To equip students with an argument-building structure to use in their assignment(s). * To demonstrate how factual information/evidence and other authors’ argument can be used most effectively. * To improve critical thinking and approaches to reading and writing, by asking questions about what “good evidence” entails and how it can be best employed to support an argument. * To improve argumentative style in writing through the discussion of positive and negative examples drawn from previous assignments. |

**SECTION ONE: Opener [5 minutes]:**

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| Q: What makes a good, argumentative essay?  Ask the class, brainstorm some ideas, then use as lead-in to the lecture outline saying “these are some of the aspects of a well-built argument we are looking at today” |

Provide an overview of the lecture: Structure; Description vs. Analysis; Facts & Evidence vs. Opinion; Quantitative & Qualitative Evidence; Nuance & Persuasion

**SECTION TWO: Structure [15 minutes]**:

Let’s start by looking at an example question:

*How does Mahmood Mamdani explain mass participation in the 1994 Rwandan genocide? Do you find his arguments convincing? If so, why?*

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| Q: What does this question ask you to do?  A: Briefly summarise how Mamdani explains the Rwandan genocide.  Evaluate his explanation, i.e. build an argument around whether his arguments are convincing or not. |

Structure is important to build a convincing argument. In order to convince your reader, your argument not only has to be backed up by evidence, it also needs to flow logically. This applies to the structure of the essay overall, as well as the structure of each paragraph and point within the essay, which we will look at later.

**Introductions** are a first indication of the overall layout of your essay and can actually help you keep track of your structure while you are writing. A good introduction should contain one or two sentences leading into the topic, a clear **thesis statement**, followed by a brief outline of your argument. After reading your introduction, your reader should have a clear idea about what you are going to argue and how.

**What is a thesis statement?**

* Your thesis statement is the main point you are going to argue in your essay, condensed into one or two sentences.
* Providing a clear thesis statement does not mean that your argument has to favour one side. If you want to take a balanced position between two sides, you can still do that. A clear thesis statement in that case would look something like “while the view of A can be seen as valid when it comes to X, B’s argument seems more persuasive when looking at it from perspective Y.”

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| ***Class activity***: Introductions  Let us look at some introductions [see slides with excerpts from past student papers].   * Example of bad intro (exhibit A) - class question → do you have any idea after reading this about what the author is going to argue? * Example of good intro - class activity 🡪 spot the thesis statement, make an outline of what the paragraphs of the essay are going to be. |

Leading to example outline:

An ‘analytical’ essay could look like this [See slide]:

* Introduction.
* 1. Brief summary of main author’s argument.
* 2. Main author’s strong points – analyse and support with other authors and context/background.
* 3. Point of weakness 1 – criticise using other authors, background and context.
* 4. Point of weakness 2 – criticise using other authors, background and context
* 5. Point of weakness 3 – criticise using other authors, background and context
* Conclusion

It is important to demonstrate that you have carefully considered the argument made by the main author. If you agree with them, it should be clear why you think that their argument is more convincing than arguments made by other authors. Similarly, if you disagree with them, you should demonstrate why other arguments are more convincing. Remember, you need not be extreme – you may generally agree but think the argument needs to be somewhat amended.

Avoid ‘Descriptive’ Essays! [See slide]:

* Intro
* The history of the conflict
* Summary of Main Author argument
* Summary of Supplementary Author X
* Summary of Supplementary Author Y
* Analysis
* Conclusion

Analysis and discussion should happen throughout, not just in your final paragraph!

Every argument is made up of **sub-arguments**, e.g. in order to argue that Mamdani has downplayed certain factors, the student has to convincingly argue that these factors are important.

Sub-arguments come in **two types**:

1. Supporting your main argument with logic and evidence giving credibility to your position.
2. Supporting your main argument by discrediting someone else’s opposing/alternative argument with logic and evidence.

Structure obviously adapts to the question you have been asked. The example above was for an evaluative question, i.e. what are the strong and weak points of someone else’s argument/explanation? If asked to come up with your own explanation, you can bolster your argument by:

1. Providing evidence that supports your explanation.
2. Show with contradictory evidence how alternative explanations are less credible.

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| ***Class activity***: “What was the main cause of the RUF insurgency in Sierra Leone?” [see slide].  Example outline:  Thesis statement: The economic decline in the country was the main cause.  Sub-Argument 1 – The RUF had no real political ideology. (Refute political grievance)  Sub-Argument 2 – All recruited members of the RUF were poor and unemployed.  Sub-Argument 3 – The RUF made a habit of looting and raiding civilians, and diamond mines. (Refute political grievance)  Therefore: Economic issues far outweighed political issues. |

While overall structure is important, you also need to pay attention to how you formulate and structure every sub-argument you make, which takes us to the second part of this lecture.

**SECTION THREE: Description vs. Argumentation & Analysis [5-10 minutes]**:

Throughout the body of the text, you need to support your arguments with logic and evidence. You can do this by drawing upon factual evidence, as well as other authors’ arguments.

A weak essay would be descriptive in its use of factual background information and simply regurgitate what other authors say.

A strong essay makes explicit links between factual information and the argument, it draws connections between what different authors say and demonstrates why what a certain author says is valid/invalid, rather than just claiming that something is valid.

Whatever point you make, you need to show how it is relevant to your argument. Always link back to your thesis statement. At the end of every point you make / paragraph you write, ask yourself: “so what?” Then explain in a sentence or two how what you just wrote is relevant to the question and to your thesis statement.

Always be explicit about your train of thought. Don’t just throw something at your readers and assume that they will know how it fits in!

**A. Using background information/factual evidence**

First of all, let us have a look at how students in previous years have used background information to support their arguments. [See slides]

When using background information/examples/factual evidence, avoid lengthy descriptions. Get to the point; show how it ties in with your argument!

**B. Using other authors’ arguments to support your own**

Similarly, when you want to support your argument with something another author has argued, it is NOT enough to just regurgitate and summarise what the author said.

Demonstrate WHY what they are saying is valid and relevant.

Again, you also need to demonstrate how your point fits into your overall argument. [See examples on slide].

**SECTION FOUR: Fact & Evidence vs. Opinion [5-10 minutes]**:

We just talked about how you need to demonstrate that another author’s point is valid instead of just regurgitating it. You shouldn’t use someone else’s claims and arguments uncritically and leave them unsubstantiated in your essay.

In order to do this, though, you need to read critically:

* Question what sort of evidence an author bases his or her arguments on.
* Is his or her argument strong and well supported, or just an opinion?

Keep in mind: Just because someone with a big name said something, it does not automatically make their claims valid!

You as the student must decide how strong that argument is by critically evaluating the information and/or facts that author uses to support his/her argument.

**Warn students to avoid:**

… presenting other authors’ opinions as facts

… subscribing uncritically to someone else’s weak arguments

… misrepresenting an authors’ argument and twist it out of shape to support their own viewpoint

Let’s have a look at what Mamdani said on the position of the Tutsi in Rwanda [slide 19].

This is an example of the author explaining a commonly held opinion or belief – he is not stating a fact. Mamdani is not stating that the Tutsi were indeed an alien race to Rwanda, he is explaining that many in Rwanda believed the Tutsi to be an alien race- because this was a widespread belief does not mean it is a fact.

The main point of this then is watch how you phrase your reiteration of what he says. [next slide] Student A does this well. What is the key phrase he uses? [“It was believed that”]

What student B did is NOT okay – she turned a belief into a fact.

**Qualitative vs. Quantitative Evidence**

When engaging with other authors’ arguments, there is also a tendency to give quantitative research more credit than qualitative research. Here are some commonly held assumptions [see slide].

Are these assumptions valid?

Can you, for example, think of some “bad statistics”?

Can you think about how qualitative research can in some cases actually be more valuable?

* Get behind the meaning of things
* More detailed, can identify important factors that quantitative surveys may have overlooked

Any research, whether quantitative or qualitative, has to be looked at critically.

When looking at quantitative research, ask yourself…

* What are the assumptions behind the approach to the issue?
  + What sorts of questions are asked, and why?
* How are real-world phenomena turned into variables that can be quantified?
  + That a variable is the best approximation possible or that the data is the best that could be obtained does not mean that the research is without problems!

For example: How do you measure poverty? How do you collect data in a war zone?

* How is the data interpreted? What claims are made based on the data?
  + Numbers never just speak for themselves!
  + For example, in summer, the consumption of ice cream and sunburns tend to happen at the same time. Even though you could probably plot a nice graph that shows that the higher the consumption of ice cream, the higher the incidence of sunburn, this does not mean that ice cream causes sunburn!

When looking at Qualitative Research, ask yourself…

* Who are the participants, and what are their potential ulterior motives?
* How does the researcher relate to the participants?
* How is the data interpreted? What claims are made based on the data?
  + How transparent is the author about the process of interpretation?

Whether quantitative or qualitative, good research that produced good evidence…

* Is open about its assumptions, theoretical background and limitations.
* Is transparent about and rigorous in its methodology.
* Makes clear how data was interpreted in order to arrive at its conclusions.
* Does not make claims it cannot really substantiate.

**SECTION FIVE: Nuance and Persuasion [5 minutes]**

Stronger claims do not necessarily make your argument stronger. Rather, the opposite is true – they leave way more room for attack.

In the social sciences there is never just one answer, explanation or interpretation – to claim that yours is the absolute best, one and only answer is asking to be criticised!

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| **Class activity**: Making statements “safer”.  Discuss the phrases on slide 26 and discuss which ones are more persuasive/nuanced.  e.g. “this proves” could be “this suggests”. |

**SECTION SIX: Wrapping up [5 minutes]**

A good argumentative essay…

… is logically structured

… has a clear introduction

… makes explicit, why certain points/pieces of information and evidence are relevant

… does not misrepresent other authors’ arguments just to “prove” a point

… engages critically with the literature

… draws cautious conclusions rather than stark statements



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1. Given the range of topics presented in this lecture, it would be advisable to present it in two different sessions. Alternatively, a condensed version of this lecture could be presented, for example, a version that relates specifically to a piece of coursework. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)