Essays and Arguments: A Handbook on Writing Argumentative and Interpretative Essays

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1.0 Introduction

One of the single most important intellectual skills central to an undergraduate education is the ability to deal with arguments. In fact, in one way or another, almost everything you study as an undergraduate is connected with this task. While the subject matter will vary from one course to another, in almost all disciplines the major purpose of study is to develop students' ability to read, understand, evaluate, and construct arguments, written and oral.

The following sections form a basic introduction to some of the more important elements in the analysis and construction of arguments. The discussion begins with some very basic ideas and moves on quickly to a few points essential for effective written or spoken argumentation. The sections are structured so as to encourage students to develop skills which will make their arguments, especially their written presentations in essays or reports, more persuasive and which will improve their ability to analyze arguments.

Because this handbook is designed primarily for undergraduates in Liberal Studies and English courses, it pays considerable attention to what are probably the most important written assignments in these areas of college study, the argumentative (or persuasive) essay and research paper. However, most of the material applies equally well to other subjects and to spoken presentations.

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Essays and Arguments, Section Two

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2.0 Arguments: Some Simple First Principles

2.1 Initial Comments

Put most simply, an argument is an attempt to persuade someone of something. It is prompted usually by a disagreement, confusion, or ignorance about something which the arguers wish to resolve or illuminate in a convincing way. In the most general sense, arguments go on all the time; they are a staple ingredient of many conversations, as well as the heart of any enquiry into the truth or probability of something (as in, for example, the judicial process, a scientific research project, a policy analysis, a business plan, and so forth).

Arguments can also, of course, be internal, as, for example, when we are faced with making a difficult choice (Should I marry to this man? Is it right for me to oppose capital punishment? Why do I need to purchase a new home? Which candidate should I vote for? And so on).

The final goal of an argument is usually to reach a conclusion which is sufficiently persuasive to convince someone of something (a course of action, the reasons for an event, the responsibility for certain acts, the probable truth of an analysis, or the validity of an interpretation). Arguments may also often have a negative purpose: to convince someone that something is not the case.

2.2 Trivial Arguments over Matters of Established Fact

Some arguments are relatively trivial and easy to resolve. For example, if I argue that I am taller than you and if you disagree, then we may argue about the fact. However, this argument immediately suggests a quick resolution: we stand back to back and let one or more third parties observe the difference. Similarly, if I argue that Berlin is the capital of Germany and you argue that I am wrong, because Bonn is the capital, then we can resolve that argument quickly by referring to an acceptable authority on the subject.

Arguments like the ones above are easy to deal with so long as two conditions hold: first, that there is a quick authoritative way of resolving the difference (e.g., by standing back to back or by consulting a book) and, second, that all the disputants agree to acknowledge the authority referred to. In the above cases, if I do not trust the testimony of the third parties who are observing our height difference or if I do not trust the book we consult, then the argument is not resolved (because I refuse to be persuaded)--and it will continue to be unresolved until the disputants agree or are forced to agree to a suitable authority.

Such arguments are, as mentioned, usually relatively trivial. Their resolution is easy and quick because there is an immediate authority to establish the facts (i.e., what is true), and there is general agreement about that authority (like a dictionary or encyclopaedia).Thus, once that authority rules on the question, then the

argument is over. This example seems like an obvious point (and it is), but, as we shall see, it is really important that, if you are seeking to set up an argument (especially about literature), you should not base it on a trivial claim about which it is impossible to construct a significant argument because your claim can be resolved by a quick appeal to the agreed authorities.

Many student essays, for example, in which an argument is called for set the essay up as asserting something very obvious (a matter of fact). When that occurs, the essay ceases to be an argument of any consequence (and therefore the essay is a poor one) because the writer is defending the obvious. An essay with a central claim like one of the following, for example, is asserting something trivial or obvious (or both):

1. Hamlet is the prince of Denmark, and he dies at the end of the play.

2. The French Revolution which started in 1789 brought about many changes.

3. Socrates's argument in the *Apology* does not persuade a sufficient number of jurors to bring about an acquittal.

4. Child abuse is very frequent in modern industrial society.

5. There is much discussion in Canada today about aboriginal rights.

These are statements of established fact. We could dispute them (I suppose), but a prolonged argument would be very fruitless, since we simply have to check an authority (like the text of *Hamlet* or the *Apology* or the pages of the newspaper) to resolve the debate.

An important initial warning in your essay writing classes is going to urge you to avoid thesis statements like those above.

2.3 More Complex and Interesting Arguments

Arguments become more complex when we are not immediately certain about how to resolve them. For example, if I argue that I am a faster runner than you and if you disagree, we have an argument. It might seem that this difference of opinion could be easily resolved by having a race. But we will first have to agree on what form the race should take. In other words, we will have to reach agreement on

what the phrase *faster runner* means (are we talking about a sprint, a middle distance, a long distance, or some combination of races?). Until we find some agreement on what constitutes a proper measurement of the key term in the argument, we will not be able to resolve the issue. And obviously if I make a claim that I am a better athlete or more intelligent than you, the definition of the key term (*better athlete* or *more intelligent*) is going to be considerably more difficult to define.

This form of argument is extremely common in science and in social science, where the issue is often the adequacy of a particular research model or method which has come up with certain conclusions. The central issue then is whether or not the test which has been devised to resolve an argument is adequate (just as I might argue that a sprint is not an adequate test of running ability).

This point is even more obvious if we move to a really complex argument like the guilt or innocence of an accused person. Here we cannot simply stand the disputants back to back; nor can we devise a series of physical tests or consult a special book to resolve the question. To obtain a conclusion, we have to set up an agreed-upon process in which the different possibilities are presented, explored, challenged, in short, argued, and then finally adjudicated by a disinterested third party (a judge or a jury), all within the context of some acknowledged rules of what counts as evidence or acceptable presentation of a case and what does not. The entire complex process requires from the participants a shared agreement about the appropriateness of the means undertaken to resolve it and a long process of argument.

This example brings out once again the essential point that arguments cannot proceed to any sort of satisfactory conclusion unless the parties to the disagreement have a common understanding of the rule-governed process by which the argument can proceed to a resolution. At different times and in different cultures, the processes by which disagreements have been dealt with have varied enormously, from trials by combat (to judge the guilt or innocence of someone accused of treason), to inspections of animal entrails (to decide on the right course of military action), to casting the stones and bones or various sacred objects, to consulting scripture, oracles, designated holy persons, or the astrological signs, to flipping coins, and so on.

Any of these above methods will effectively resolve the argument provided all parties to it concur that the process (whose rules they understand and agree to) is the appropriate way to proceed. One of the major problems when different cultures collide is often that the different peoples do not understand each other's methods for dealing with arguments.

It is, of course, essential for any continuing peaceful order in society and in one's personal life that agreed-upon methods for resolving arguments be in place. Without them, certain decisions might be impossible to make with any hope of securing agreement, and at times the argument may degenerate into active hostility and physical violence (resolving the dispute by brute force, without any rules). The latter is generally a sign that whatever is supposed to be working to resolve disagreements is no longer effective. And when such violence takes over an entire society, its culture has broken down in the most serious way possible (i.e., in civil war).

For that reason, we insist that judicial arguments, legislative debates, industrial disputes, divorce mediation, and so on take place in specially designated places and according to agreed upon processes and rules, rather than in the back streets. And for the same reason we agree to abide by the processes we have set up to resolve the argument, even if the result is not always what we had hoped for.

Thus, for example, in Canada we agree that the winner in an election will be the leader of *all* the people and that the verdict of the jury will decide the matter once and for all in a murder trial. In any situation where we begin to abandon our agreement that such decisions will resolve the issue (for example, by taking the law into our own hands if the result does not satisfy us), the fabric of society starts to experience important and dangerous tensions.

2.4 The Importance of Reason

In our society, for causes too complex to discuss here, we long ago determined that the appropriate way in which arguments must be conducted and adjudicated is through proper reasoning. We will be looking more closely at what this means in later sections, but for the moment it is important to note that in making this decision we, in effect, rejected various other traditional ways in which arguments had been dealt with (e.g., by appeals to scriptural authority or to traditional rituals based on hereditary power and privilege or to variously irrational methods, like astrology, augury, the *I Ching*, spiritual revelation, dunking, and so on).

Thus, to construct effective arguments in the modern western world, one must, first and foremost, have an understanding of the rules of reasoning. The major aim of an undergraduate education in all disciplines is to develop such an understanding in students.

Of course, we are a liberal society, and we still allow people in their private lives to resolve their arguments or make their private decisions (which often amounts to much the same thing) in any manner they wish, short of inflicting physical harm on others. Soit is quite permissible in one's private affairs to consult scripture, toss

coins, use numerology, consult spirit mediums, or sit around a Ouija board in order to resolve private arguments (once again, however, all participants have to agree if the resolution is to be persuasive).

In the public world of work, politics, education, and the media, however, the primary requirement of an effective argument is that it must be rational (that is, follow the rules of reason). Of course, in this public world there is often a great deal of irrationality (e.g., in political speeches and in advertising). An important part of being an educated citizen is possessing the skill to recognize this irrationality, especially when it is posing as a reasonable argument, since manipulating citizens through misleading arguments is a major feature of modern life.

What are these rules of reason? Well, that is what this handbook is largely concerned with, at least on a fairly basic level. The sections which follow offer some specific guidelines about the nature of a reasonable argument, about how to produce one in an essay form, and about a number of the ways your written argument can go astray. There is no attempt here to offer a comprehensive treatment of what can be a very complex subject; at the same time the different sections do cover much of what an undergraduate needs to know in order to analyze and construct arguments.

2.5 An Overview of The Major Tools

Almost all reasonable arguments, even the simplest, require the use of three basic tools. We will be discussing each of these in more detail later, but for the time being you should make sure you have a firm grasp of the general meaning of each of these.

The first essential tool is **clear definition** of the basis of the argument (e.g., what is under dispute) and of all terms central to the argument. Obviously, if the parties to the dispute have different notions of what they are arguing about or of what key terms mean, then they will end up arguing about different things (what is called *arguing at cross purposes*). So an essential part of most arguments is clarifying exactly what you mean. For instance, in the second example above, a key term requiring definition is *better runner*. Until we define that term much more precisely, we cannot proceed intelligently to deal with the argument.

Clear definition is usually straightforward enough, but, as we shall see, it can present particular problems, especially if a key term has competing definitions (e.g., rival definitions of *a foetus* are central to debates on abortion, just as rival definitions of *death* and *right* are central to debates about the right to die). And a major source of confusion in student essays is often the fact that the writer does

not initially define what the argument is claiming. Such a mistake is often lethal to the rest of the essay (more about that later).

The second essential tool is something called **deductive reasoning** or **deduction**. This is a logical process by which we move from something we already all agree to be true to the application of this general truth to a particular case (e.g., Killing people is always wrong; capital punishment involves killing people; therefore, capital punishment is always wrong). We use deduction every time we begin the argument with something about which there is general agreement and then interpret a particular example in the light of that general truth (as in geometric proofs, for instance, which always start with an appeal to what already has been proven or agreed to as true).

The general truth we begin with in deductive reasoning must be something we all agree on (its validity must be established prior to the argument). If it is not, then the deductive argument cannot proceed effectively. In some deductive arguments, especially in science, the general truth we agree on may be hypothetical; in other words, we provisionally agree upon something in order to make predictions on the basis of it and then to test the predictions.

Making correct deductions is not always easy, for there are a number of pitfalls (we will be looking at some of them later). However, you need at this point to recognize that any argument which starts from a shared assumption about the truth of a general principle is a deductive argument and that the persuasiveness of the argument is going to depend, in large part, on the shared truth of that general principle.

Finally, the third tool of reasoning is called **inductive reasoning** or **induction**. This is the logical process in which we proceed from particular evidence to a conclusion which, on the basis of that evidence, we agree to be true or probably true. Such thinking is also often called **empirical reasoning** or **empiricism**. It requires evidence (facts, data, measurement, observations, and so on).

Induction is the basis of a great deal of scientific and technical arguments, those involving the collection of information and the creation of conclusions based upon that information. And it is the basis for most literary interpretation, historical analysis and argument, and so on. Any argument which relies for the persuasiveness of its conclusion on collections of data, on measurement, on information collected somehow (rather than on a general principle) is an inductive argument.

Most of your undergraduate courses spend a good deal of time dealing with induction, instructing you what counts as evidence in a particular discipline, how

one sets about collecting and classifying it (laboratory or field procedures, methods of reading literature), and what conclusions one is entitled to derive from it.

2.6 Exercise 1: Recognizing the Form of Simple Arguments

Here are some short arguments in which the writer presents a conclusion (which is in bold) and provides some reasons for that conclusion.

Indicate beside each argument whether it is an example of deductive or inductive reasoning (you can use the letters D and I). If you are not sure, use a question mark.

Note that this exercise is not asking you whether you agree with the argument or not or whether the argument is a good one or not. It is asking you only to indicate the form of reasoning used, inductive or deductive. Remember the key test here: Does the argument rely upon an appeal to a general principle or upon assembled data.

1. Things equal to the same thing are equal to each other. Therefore if A equals B and if B equals C, **then A must equal C**.

2. The doctrine of free speech is the most important element of our liberal democracy. **Therefore this student newspaper must be free to print opinions offensive to many people.**

3. Six out of ten test samples of the water in that lake, collected and analyzed by university researchers last week, revealed unsatisfactorily high levels of serious contamination. **We must investigate this problem further and post warning signs on the beach immediately.**

4. All human beings have the right to die with dignity when they wish. **Therefore this terminally ill patient has the right to an assisted suicide**.

5. In this essay the writer frequently uses words like "perhaps," "maybe," and "alternatively." **This feature of the style creates doubts in the mind of the reader about the writer's confidence in his analysis**.

6. Giving minority groups the right to political self-determination is fundamental to liberty. Therefore, if a majority of Quebec people vote for independence from Canada, **they must be allowed to separate**.

7. All people in a free society must be treated equally under the law. **Homosexual citizens in our society must therefore be granted full legal spousal benefits, equivalent to those of heterosexual Canadians**.

8. Model X gets better mileage, costs less to purchase and to maintain, and has a better all around rating in the Consumer Reports than Model Y. **Therefore, it makes more sense for me to purchase Model X rather than Model Y**.

9. Hamlet keeps wondering about why he is not carrying out the murder. He frequently gets upset with himself for delaying, and yet he still seems unable to carry it out. **Clearly, there is something internal preventing him from murdering his uncle**.

2.7 Some Brain Teasers

Here are three problems to experiment with. The important point here is not to get the correct answer but to think about the forms of reasoning you are using to resolve the difficulty.

1. You are a police officer on a highway patrol. You come across an accident in which two cars have collided in an off-highway rest area. Each driver claims that he has been at the rest area for over two hours eating lunch and sleeping and that the other driver drove in from the highway and ran into his car a few minutes ago. You cannot tell from the position of the vehicles which one is telling the truth. There are no witnesses. Can you think of how you might sort out the claims on the spot? What form of reasoning have you used?

2. Two friends of yours are having a bitter argument over the question of whether or not two women could have exactly the same number of hairs on their heads. They want you to determine the question. Can you think of some deductive way to resolve their problem? What would an inductive resolution of the issue require?

3. A man is walking to the town of Ipswich. He comes to a fork in the road, with the two branches leading in two different directions. He knows that one of them goes to Ipswich, but he doesn't know which one. He also knows that in the house right beside the fork in the road there are two brothers, identical twins, both of whom know the road to Ipswich. He knows that one brother always lies and the other always tells the truth, but he cannot tell them apart. What single question can he ask to whoever answers his knock on the door which will indicate to him the correct road to Ipswich?

4. Three men are placed directly in line facing a wall. The man at the back can see the two in front of him, the man in the middle can see the man immediately in front, and the man at the front can see only the wall. Each man has a hat on his head, taken from a supply of three black hats and two white hats (the men know this). They are told to remain in line silently until one of them can guess the colour of the hat on his head. That man gets a large cash prize. After five minutes of standing in line, the man facing the wall (at the front of the line) correctly identifies the colour of the hat on his head. What colour must it be? How did he arrive at the correct conclusion? Note that he did not guess.

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Essays and Arguments, Section Three

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3.0 Setting up the Argument: Definition (1)

Under the term **definition**, this section and the next include two different, but related concepts: first, establishing clearly what the argument is about (the concern of this section) and, second, defining any key terms essential to a clear understanding of the argument which is going to use them (the concern of the next section). The main point here is that an argument cannot usefully proceed until we all know exactly what the issue is..

In some arguments, the second requirement (defining key terms) may not be necessary because the central terms are all clear enough already (although, as we shall see, that is not something one should assume too readily). In all arguments, however, especially written essays and oral presentations, the first requirement is absolutely essential.

3.1 Defining the Argument: Some General Points

The first essential requirement of any argument is that it must establish clearly what the precise issue is. That is, the opening phase of the argument has to define very clearly the subject matter of the argument and the particular view of that

subject which the arguer is seeking to persuade the listener or the reader to accept. In almost all cases, you will need to do this before you start the main body of the argument (i.e., at the very beginning in a section commonly called the **Introduction**).

The introduction to an argument is so crucial that if it is done poorly then there is virtually no recovery. No matter how you deal with the rest of your case, if the reader is unclear about what you are trying to do, then the relevance of that case becomes unclear. This fault is particularly common in student essays and research papers, because students typically rush the opening of the essay and fail to define the argument with sufficient clarity.

There are a number of different ways to define an argument clearly, and we will be going through some examples shortly. However the writer sets out the introduction, it must cover three important components, as follows:

1. The introduction must alert the reader to the **general subject** area being considered (e.g., a film, a political issue, a social concern, and so on), in answer to the question: In general terms, what area of experience is this argument dealing with?

2. Second, the introduction must narrow down that general subject so as to define a very specific **focus** for the argument, in answer to the reader's question: Just what very particular part of this general subject area is this argument focusing on?

3. Third, the introduction must establish an argumentative opinion about the focus defined in Step 2 above. This argumentative opinion, which is the central claim you are making in the argument and which you want the reader to accept, is called the **thesis** of the argument.

As we shall see later, some arguments will require more introductory material than this, but all arguments, especially essays and research papers and talks, require these three parts in the introduction.

3.2 Two Simple Examples

In a relatively short essay, you can usually deal with the three requirements of an Introduction in a single substantial paragraph (almost invariably the opening paragraph). Here are two typical examples.

In the last ten years (at least) the sale of illegal narcotics in Canada has become an urgent social concern, and official disapproval of narcotics seems to get sterner year by year. Every day Canadians see in the media more stories about the need for increased severity and more strenuous action against drug dealers. However, as we redouble our efforts to cope with what we perceive as a major problem, the distribution and sale of illegal narcotics continue to increase, along with the enormous criminal profits from the enterprise. So the question inevitably arises: Is this war on drugs worth the price we are paying? If we think about that question, we should realize that it's about time we woke up to the fact that we are engaged in a futile, expensive, unnecessary, and counterproductive battle, one which is creating more problems than it is solving. This being the case, the only effective and reasonable way of coping with our so-called narcotics problem in Canada is to legalize the use of marijuana, heroin, cocaine, and their derivatives immediately. (178 words)

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is, by common consent an ambiguous play, with many conflicting interpretative possibilities. At the heart of many disputes about the play is the character of the hero himself. Just what sort of person is Prince Hamlet? The play puts a lot of pressure on us to explore this question, simply because the motivation for Hamlet's actions and inaction is by no means clear, and yet it is obviously important. A comprehensive answer to this issue is beyond the scope of a short essay. However, whatever Hamlet's character adds up to exactly, one very curious feature about it is his attitude to and relationships with women. For there is a distinctive pattern in Hamlet's language and behaviour whenever he is thinking about or dealing with Ophelia and Gertrude. This pattern is so distinctive that we can reasonably assume it indicates something important about the prince. In fact, Hamlet's peculiarly aggressive and often cynical view of these two women and, beyond them, of women in general, is an important indication of the general unhealthiness of Hamlet's character.

Notice carefully how these introductions proceed. The writers open by announcing a general subject (the sale of illegal narcotics in Canada, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). In the next few sentences the introduction narrows the focus, that is, restricts the subject matter to something very specific (our attempts to control the sale of narcotics, and then the futility of those efforts; the question of Hamlet's character and then the question about his relationship to women). And the introduction ends by establishing a firm opinion about this focus (we should abandon the war on drugs by legalizing marijuana, heroin, and cocaine; Hamlet's treatment of women is an important symptom of emotional ill health). By the end of this introduction the reader is fully aware of what the writers are trying to argue (both the particular subject matter and the opinion about that subject matter).

This structure is particularly useful if you are uncertain how to set up the opening to an essay or research paper, so you might want to consider the following model for an introduction. Notice the pattern.

1. In the opening sentence, announce the general subject (drugs, alcohol, a particular work of literature, a political event, a social issue, and so on). The general subject matter will often be contained in the topic for the essay which the instructor has set.

2. In the next two or three sentences, narrow the focus down to one particular aspect of that general subject, so the reader understands clearly that you are not dealing with any and all questions arising from that subject but only with one particular question or area of concern.

3. Finally at the end of the introduction in the last one or two sentences, announce the opinion about that focus, the thesis of the essay, so that the reader understands what you are arguing here.

By the end of the introduction the reader must have clear answers to three questions, as follows:

1. What is the general subject matter of this essay?

2. What particular part of this general subject is the writer focusing on? Is there any particular area which the writer is clearly not discussing?

3. What opinion about that focus is the subject matter of the argument? What does the writer want me to believe about it?

If you cannot answer these three questions clearly by the end of the introduction, if there is any confusion about them, then there is something wrong with the introduction. If you are concerned about whether or not you have set up a good introduction to your own essay, get someone to read the introduction and to answer the three questions above. If she cannot answer them correctly or is confused, then you need to rewrite the opening definition of the argument.

Notice also what the introductions above are not doing. They do not lead us into huge generalizations about society, a range of all sorts of social problems, the biography of Shakespeare, the nature of all of Shakespeare's works, and so on. They begin by defining a specific subject and then continue by narrowing down that subject to a particular focus.

3.3 Some Sample Openings

Here are some sample opening paragraphs to an argumentative essay reviewing a film (I made up the name). Comment briefly on the quality of each paragraph as the introduction to an argument. If you think it is inadequate, then indicate why.

1. The film *To Ragoon on a Slave Ship* tells the story of Martin, a teenage runaway on a cargo boat which sails from London to the Far East. On board the ship are two other stowaways, Gumby and Sian, two friends, who know nothing about Martin's presence. The ship is called the *Narnia*. The captain is called Fred Jones. He hates stowaways and is keen to punish them whenever he finds them. Rangoon is in the Far East. The story is set in the early 1900's. Pirates chase the ship at one point. At another time, the ship joins a group of navy ships sailing off to a war in the Pacific. Martin is nineteen years old. He is played by Adam Blimph. (124 words).

2. The film *To Rangoon on a Slave Ship* came out in 1995. It is the best film I have ever seen. Everything about it was splendid. Everybody should see it. (33 words)

3. *To Rangoon on a Slave Ship*, a recent adventure film, tells the story of some young stowaways on a trading vessel going to the Far East in the early years of this century. Martin, a young London boy, and two other teenagers, Gumby and Sian, escape from oppressive situations at home by stowing away on the *Narnia*, a trading vessel bound for exotic places. The ship and the young stowaways encounter all sorts of adventures, but ultimately the story resolves itself happily. The work contains many predictable elements, a wicked captain, some pirates, brave teenagers who help each other, a storm at sea, a mutiny, and so on. These scenes are quite familiar to anyone who has ever seen or read many sea yarns aimed at a young audience. However, for a number of reasons, particularly the script, the direction, and the acting of the lead characters, this is not just another conventional romantic adventure aimed at the younger set. It is in many ways a mature, amusing, and inventive reworking of a traditional genre, well worth the price of admission, even for sceptical adults. (186 words)

4. *To Rangoon on A Slave Ship* is a recent film directed by Terry Bright. I really like his films because they usually combine a good script with some excellent camera work. His first film, *Manhattan By Night*, won several prizes at film festivals, and in 1987 another work won him an Oscar for best screen play. Mr. Bright is a Canadian from Ontario. He attended film school in Toronto and was in the graduating class that produced a number of excellent film makers, including

Alice Jackson and Sue McPherson. I really like all their films. It's a shame that more Canadians don't support Canadian film makers by paying more attention to their films. That's why so many good directors go south to the United States. Anyway, Mr. Bright's work is another excellent example of the high quality work that can be done by Canadians.

3.4 The Importance of Defining a Focus

In setting up your own written or spoken arguments, you need to pay particular attention to defining the focus very clearly. Remember that you are in charge of the argument; you can define it in any way you like, indicating what you are looking at and what you are not looking at. Doing this properly will make constructing the argument very much easier to do properly. If you fail to define the focus, then the reader may legitimately ask why you have not looked at some things included in the general subject.

For example, suppose you wish to write an essay on *Hamlet*. This is a huge general subject, and you cannot proceed until you have determined what precisely you wish to examine in this large and difficult work of literature (and what you wish to leave out). So you will need to reflect upon what exactly in the play you wish to examine. The process of sorting this out may take a number of steps.

Suppose, for instance, you wish to look at the role of women in *Hamlet*. That narrows down the subject matter considerably, since there are only two women in the play. But you need not stop there. Do you wish to narrow the focus any more, for example, onto a consideration of one female character, Ophelia? And you can proceed from there to narrow the focus even further onto one aspect of Ophelia's life, her relationship with her father. If you wish the narrowest possible focus, you can further limit the essay to an examination of Ophelia's relationship with her father as it is revealed in a single scene or part of a scene.

By going through this process, you have taken a very large and complicated subject (which you would not be able to deal with satisfactorily in a short essay or even a large research paper), and selected from it a very specific part which will be much easier to manage in the written argument. In fact, as a general rule, the more narrowly and clearly defined the focus is, the easier the essay will be to write.

Remember to take charge of the argument at this stage. It is your case to make, and you can define it as narrowly as you wish, provided you are still looking at something important enough to enable you to make a case.

Students are frequently reluctant to narrow the focus because they are worried about not having enough to say (especially in research papers). Thus, they set themselves from the start an impossible task by choosing to set up the argument on a very wide topic. This mistake you should avoid at all costs.

It is much better to argue in depth and at length about a narrowly defined topic than to offer a superficial cursory look at something much wider. Make sure you understand this point, particularly in setting up a research paper. For example, a paper which looks in detail at, say, the opening three pages of Descartes argument in the *Meditations* and which confines itself to that small portion of the text will almost invariably produce a more manageable and persuasive paper than one which attempts to deal with the entire content of that complex work.

Students who do not define a clear and narrow focus for the paper almost always end up doing rather poorly, because they commit themselves to a subject too large for detailed treatment in a short paper.

Here are some more examples (in point form) which illustrate the transformation of a very large general subject, through a series of steps, into a sharp and particular focus.

Essay 1
General Subject: Pollution
Focus 1: Air pollution
Focus 2: Acid rain
Focus 3: Acid rain in BC
Focus 4: Acid rain in BC: effects on lakes and rivers
Focus 5: Acid rain in BC: effects on fresh-water fish
Focus 6: Acid rain in BC: effects on trout in the Cowichan River.

Essay 2
General Subject: Alcoholism
Focus 1: Alcoholism in the family
Focus 2: Alcoholism in the family: teenage drinking
Focus 3: Alcoholism in the family: teenage drinking in Nanaimo

Essay 3
General Subject: Popular music
Focus 1: Bob Dylan
Focus 2: Bob Dylan's early lyrics
Focus 3: Bob Dylan's first two albums: their impact on styles of song writing.

Focus 4: Bob Dylan's first two albums: their impact on styles of writing folk songs.

Essay 4
General Subject: The French Revolution
Focus 1: The causes of the French Revolution
Focus 2: The immediate causes of the French Revolution
Focus 3: The immediate causes of the French Revolution: the economic problem

Essay 5
General Subject: Modern Sports
Focus 1: The excessive salaries of top players
Focus 2: The excessive salaries of top players: the NBA
Focus 3: The excessive salaries of top players in the NBA: the New York Knicks

Essay 6
General Subject: *Hamlet*
Focus 1: The women in the play
Focus 2: The women in the play: Ophelia
Focus 3: Ophelia's relationship with her father
Focus 4: The scene in which Ophelia and Polonius first discuss Hamlet.

Notice what is happening in these lists. The opening subject, which is very large and vague, is being transformed into a very specific narrow sub-topic, which the essay is going to look at. You should always end up with a focus which is much more narrowly defined but which is manageable in a short argument.

An examination of the examples above indicates some of the ways in which you can narrow down the general subject. In dealing with a work of literature, for example, you can limit the focus by looking at a particular character or a particular scene or both. If the general subject is a social issue, you can restrict the focus geographically (by looking, say, only at BC or Nanaimo) or demographically (by considering only teenagers)

This process of narrowing the focus is absolutely essential. The failure to do it properly is a major cause of problems in student essays and especially research papers. Do not say you have not been warned.

3.5 The Importance of Defining a Thesis

Once you have determined a specific focus for the argument, then you need to develop an opinion about that focus. In other words, you need to present an

argumentative opinion about the narrowly defined subject matter you have selected.

This point is critical. You cannot base an argument merely on the focus you have defined. You must organize an opinion about that focus, something we can argue about. This opinion is called the **thesis**, and it is the single most important sentence or series of sentences in the entire argument.

For example, you cannot base an argumentative essay on teenage alcoholism in BC or on Ophelia in *Hamlet* or on the distribution of drugs in school. You must base the essay on an opinion about one of those. And, in general, the sharper the opinion and the more energetically you express it, the clearer the thesis will be, both to you and to the reader or listener.

The thesis should answer the question: What precisely is the presenter of this argument trying to persuade me to believe? If that is not clear, then the argument's central purpose is fuzzy or missing. So you need to take particular care to conclude the introduction with a precise definition of your thesis.

When you set out to do this, remember what we discussed in the previous section, namely, that certain statements do not make good arguments, because there is nothing we can usefully dispute in them. Make sure your thesis does not fall into this category (a great many students weaken their argument fatally by presenting a very poor thesis).

Notice, for example, that the following statements would make very poor thesis statements, because they are not sufficiently argumentative; they state matters which we can quickly confirm by an appeal to the text or to an existing authority:

1. Acid rain hurts fish.

2. Polonius is Ophelia's father, and when he dies, she goes insane.

3. Teenage drinking is very common in BC.

4. Bob Dylan started writing songs early in the 1960's.

These sentences are useless as thesis statements, because they present nothing we can usefully argue about. If that's all you offer at the end of your introduction, then the reader is going to be very puzzled about why you are striving so hard to argue

about something obvious. Notice the difference between the above statements and the following.

1. Acid rain is the single most important threat to our quality of life, and thus we must undertake decisive action against it immediately, no matter what the cost.

2. Polonius's treatment of his daughter reveals clearly just how poisonous the emotional climate of Elsinore really is. His attitude to life is the source of much of the evil in the court.

3. Teenage alcoholism in BC is a vastly overrated problem. If there are difficulties, these have been exaggerated in order to scare us into thinking we are facing a new crisis.

4. Bob Dylan's early lyrics introduced the most significant changes in song writing since the early days of Tin Pan Alley. In one way or another, they have decisively influenced almost every other major song writer in North America ever since.

These statements put something argumentative on the table. We can easily disagree (or be reluctant to be persuaded), and the writer is going to have to work to convince us. Such statements do not simply announce a matter of fact about which we cannot argue significantly.

If you don't set the essay up with a clearly argumentative thesis, then the logic of the argument will be defective, because the reader will not be clear about what you are trying to establish. Please make sure you understand this key point. The failure to establish a good thesis is the single most important logical error in student essays.

3.6 Exercises in Recognizing Potentially Useful Thesis Statements

Rate each of the following statements as a useful thesis, that is, something which might form a clearly opinionated basis for a good argument. Use the following scale: 0-really poor, nothing to argue about here; 1-okay, there's an opinion, but it's quite feeble and doesn't really challenge the reader; 3-workable thesis, which might be made more specific and energetic; 4-really good thesis, clear and energetic.

1. Socrates was a historical character, and Plato is the author of the Socratic dialogues.

2. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a vastly overrated play, contradictory in its presentation of characters, ambiguous in its literal details, and excessively melodramatic in many crucial scenes.

3. Modern North Americans spend a great deal of money on supplies, veterinary medicine, and food for their pets.

4. Modern North Americans spend far too much money on supplies, veterinary medicine, and food for their pets.

5. McIntyre and Robinson, two psychology researchers at McGill University, conducted five separate studies of foetal alcohol syndrome. They concluded that it is a serious problem in modern society.

6. The study by McIntyre and Robinson, two psychology researchers at McGill University, which concluded that foetal alcohol syndrome is a serious problem, is a badly flawed study which produced very misleading conclusions.

7. Frost's poem "Mending Wall" is constructed around a central image of two men repairing a wall between their two properties.

8. In Frost's poem "Mending Wall" the central image of the two men repairing a wall is really effective in bringing out the paradoxical feelings of the narrator.

9. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx argues that capitalism is inevitably doomed, because it generates inescapably the very forces which will lead to its overthrow.

10. Ariel Theatre Company's production of *Main Street* is interesting.

11. The major Hollywood film *Titanic* was directed by a Canadian, who also made *True Lies*.

12. I quite enjoyed the film the *Titanic*.

13. The *Titanic* is such a sentimental and poorly scripted and acted work that one wonders what on earth our public standards are coming to when it wins all sorts of awards and people all over the world flock to see it several times. Is Doomsday near, or have I missed something?

14. One common way of dealing with the declining salmon stocks is to increase samanoid enhancement programs.

15. We should be paying more attention to dealing with spousal abuse in our society.

16. Spousal abuse is a common problem in modern society.

17. The recent measures used by North American police forces to combat the sale of illegal narcotics are stupid, ineffective, and very expensive. Only some deranged bureaucrat or someone eager to give the police added powers could have devised such totally ridiculous procedures.

18. Homer's *Odyssey* is a well known story of wandering.

19. New Cadillacs are more expensive than new Honda Civics.

20. A new Cadillac is, in the long run, a much better investment than a new Honda Civic.

21. Hobbes begins his argument with an analysis of human nature on mechanical principles.

22. Descartes's argument for the existence of God (in the *Meditations*) is a fascinating, if questionable, part of his opening argument. It is well worth a close look.

23. What is most effective about Wordsworth's imagery is the way it so richly captures the ambiguity in the speaker's feelings, not just about the natural scene but about life itself.

24. Wordsworth's poetry is characterized by frequent images of nature or people in nature.

Evaluate the following as thesis sentences (3 = really clear and useful, 2 = satisfactory but weak, 1 = no use at all):

1. The Book of Genesis tells the story of the creation of the world and thus serves as an explanation for how the world is the way it is.

2. There are many similarities which we can draw between the Book of Genesis and life today.

3. In the Book of Genesis the central concern is the depiction of the nature of God, particularly His relationship to the earth and the people in it. What emerges from this is an overwhelming sense of the mystery, power, and ambiguity of God's actions among people.

4. The story of the sacrifice Isaac by his father Abraham is the clearest depiction we have of just how incomprehensibly barbaric the god of the Old Testament really is. A god who would treat His people this way is quite clearly an evil god.

5. The significance of Adam and Eve is that they disobey God and are thus expelled from paradise and have to suffer for the rest of their lives.

6. I find the story of the creation of Adam and Eve extremely puzzling for a number of reasons. It strikes me that this story is very revealing about the nature of God, but what it reveals is beyond any easy rational explanation. In that quality, perhaps, lies the power of the story.

7. The story of Adam and Eve tells why Christian cultures have always been so harsh on women and have featured so much patriarchal domination.

8. Human cultures are all really different. We can learn a lot about how cultures are different by reading Genesis and comparing it with our own world.

9. Of particular significance in the Abraham and Isaac story is the way in which the religious vision of Genesis (and Exodus) is so closely bound up with political questions. In fact, this vision of God and His people inextricably unites politics and religion. This feature makes the story particularly fascinating.

10. The Book of Genesis clearly indicates that God made the world and everything in it in a week.

11. The story of the creation of men and women in Genesis is a wonderful story emphasizing the total moral freedom of both genders and the importance of their living in harmony together (under the divine sanction of God). In this story, part of God's plan calls for meaningful relations (in all senses of the term) between men and women as equals.

3.7 Some Hints on Forming Good Thesis Statements

Given the crucial importance of setting up a good thesis which will define the argumentative opinion you are making the central claim of the speech or essay, you should not rush this part of the argument. Here are some points to consider in selecting and refining the thesis:

1. The thesis must present your opinionated engagement with the focus you have defined. So it's a good idea to base it on a personal feeling you have about that focus, especially if you have strong feelings about it (e.g., "This lyric is extraordinarily moving, an example of song writing at its superlative best," "The use of Ritalin in schools is a major scandal which must be exposed before we turn one more generation of students into drug-addicted pill poppers," "The high salaries of NBA stars are ruining a fine game. Let's stop the excessive greed," "Hamlet is such a death-infected personality, so afraid of his own emotions, that there is no doubt that he, more than anyone else, is the source of the rottenness in Elsinore"). Notice the energy in these thesis statements; they leave no doubt about what the writer is committing herself to in the argument.

2. If you have no strong feelings about a particular subject for which you have to construct an argument, then you will still have to find a firm opinion on which to base your case. This may require you to think about the subject at length, to conduct a certain amount of reading about it, to discuss the matter with others, and, finally perhaps (if all these fail), to commit yourself to a position which you may not be sure about.

3. Remember that statements indicating that you find a particular subject confusing or difficult to sort out are opinions and often make good thesis statements: e.g., "The abortion debate I find impossible to resolve in my mind; there are such cogent arguments on both sides, without any middle ground, that it is impossible to rule out either the pro-choice or the pro-life arguments"; "Hamlet is such a confusing personality that I find the play quite frustrating; the inconsistencies in his portrayal are a serious flaw in the play"; "The arguments and counter arguments about the environmental crisis leave me incapable of making up my mind on this issue." Such statements are opinions, which you will have to argue; as such, they are useful thesis statement.

4. Similarly, a thesis statement can be a mixed opinion, in which you call attention to conflicting judgments of a particular subject: e.g., "The film has excellent acting and some superb cinematography. These make it really good. Unfortunately, the script in places is poor. Hence, the experience of viewing it is not as enthralling as it might be." Such mixed opinions are quite common as thesis statements in arguments about literary and philosophical subjects and in essays which review fine and performing arts events.

5. Do not rush the thesis. If necessary take two or three sentences (as in most of the above examples) to get the clearest possible statement of the precise opinion you are presenting and defending in the argument. Do not proceed with the argument until you have defined your thesis as precisely as possible.

6. Try not to be too timid in presenting the thesis. In particular, avoid limp words like *interesting*, *positive*, and so on. Often it's a good idea to overstate the opinion (i.e., really go out on a limb), so that you know you have a real job to do in making the case. At any event, make the thesis as bold and assertive as you dare. If it looks too aggressive once you have written the essay, then you can moderate it.

7. A particular subject area that causes trouble for those setting up the argument is one which is, at first glance, largely factual (e.g., a discussion of a nuclear reactor, or treatments for AIDS, or Galileo's astronomical observations). If you are going to discuss these, you must make sure that you cast the discussion in the form of an argument. You can do this by setting up the thesis as a statement about the significance of the focus: e.g., "Galileo's astronomical observations were a breakthrough in the history of science; they effectively challenged the traditional views of the universe and introduced a bold new method of understanding the heavens." In the course of the argument which follows, you will, of course, be discussing the details of Galileo's work, but the central point of the essay is an argument that this work was significant (which is an opinion about the focus).

8. If all else fails, then you can try applying the following formula. Write out a sentence of the following form: *In this essay I am going to argue the single opinion that* X (the particular focus of the essay) is very significant because (give your reasons for thinking the focus important). Then get rid of the words in italics.

3.8 The Start of an Outline for the Argument

All right, let's put all the above material together into the form of an outline. The initial preparations for the argument (which may take considerable time to develop) should result in something written down under the following headings:

General Subject:
Focus 1:
Focus 2:
(Focus 3, if necessary):
Thesis.

Here are some examples of the start of an essay outline:

General Subject A: Aboriginal Rights

Focus 1: Aboriginal Land Claims in BC
Focus 2: The Nishga'a Treaty

Thesis: (*In this essay I am going to argue the single opinion that*) Ratifying the Nishga'a treaty is essential for the political stability and political prosperity in British Columbia. While the proposed treaty may not satisfy everyone (or even a majority), we simply cannot afford not to proceed in good faith with what has been proposed.

General Subject B: The Ministry of Health and Welfare
Focus 1: The welfare system in BC
Focus 2: The distribution of welfare in BC
Focus 3: The distribution of welfare in BC: problems with the present system.

Thesis: (*In this essay I am going to argue the single opinion that*) Our system of distributing welfare in BC is gravely inadequate. It is creating a great many serious problems and failing properly to address those concerns it is meant to alleviate.

General Subject C: Warfare and Technology
Focus 1: The machine gun
Focus 2: The machine gun: its impact on forms of combat

Thesis: No modern weapon has had such a revolutionary impact on the conduct of warfare as the machine gun. It has transformed not only nature of combat but the way we think about battle.

General Subject D: The short story "The Chrysanthemums"
Focus 1: The main character, Elisa.
Focus 2: Elisa's dissatisfaction with life
Focus 3: Elisa's dissatisfaction with life: the causes

Thesis: The central point of this story is Elisa's inability to deal with what is frustrating her because of her lack of self-confidence and courage.

Such outlines look easy enough, but you may have to take time with them. And the time is worth spending, because if you do not clearly sort out for yourself and the reader just what you are arguing about (the subject, focus, and thesis), then it is not going to matter very much what you do in the argument itself. If the opening does not define the argument properly, then there is usually no recovery.

Every five minutes you devote to making this initial outline defining the essay will save you at least an hour when you come to write the introduction out in full.

3.9 Some Problems with Introductory Paragraphs

The introduction, which defines the main argument, should, as we have seen, move from a mention of the general subject, through a narrowing of the focus, to a clear and energetic thesis statement. This sounds simple enough, but there are a few common problems which you should take care to avoid.

1. Do not make the thesis too abrupt and awkward. Take the time to go through the steps outlined above. If you are doing that properly, then the introduction should be a fairly substantial paragraph of between 150 and 200 words (at least). Never offer as an introduction a one-sentence paragraph something like the following: "In this essay I am going to discuss how Odysseus is a fascinating character." That is much too abrupt and awkward. As a general rule, keep the expressions *I* or *this essay* out of your style.

2. Do not stuff the introduction with irrelevant detail (e.g., about the biography of the writer or the historical details of the book). Keep directing the reader to the particular focus and thesis you wish to concentrate upon. Stay directly on the contents of the discussion you want to present.

3. Make sure that the argument is clearly established by the end of the introduction. By that point the reader must be able to answer the following two questions accurately: What is this argument focusing on? What specific opinion about that does the arguer wish me to believe by the end?

4. Do not make the thesis a promissory note which lacks an argumentative edge: for example, don't make the thesis statement something like the following: "This essay will discuss the women in Hamlet's life." Establish clearly the opinion about the women in Hamlet's life which you wish the reader to accept as persuasive. "This essay seeks to show how Hamlet's attitude to women, especially his verbal and physical aggression against them, lies at the heart of what is rotten in Denmark."

3.10 Exercise With Sample Opening Paragraphs

Below are two pairs of opening paragraphs, the first pair on the *Odyssey* and the second pair on the Book of Genesis. Compare the two members of each pair. Which do you think is the more effective opening? Why? If you were in a position to recommend revisions to the writers of these paragraphs (especially the ones you find less effective) what would you say?

Paragraph A

Homer's *Odyssey* recounts the adventures of the Greek hero Odysseus, in his return home from the Trojan War. In fact, most of the book is taken up with various tests of this epic hero, encounters in which he has to demonstrate his ability to overcome obstacles of various kinds. In the process of following Odysseus through these adventures, we, as readers, come to recognize many important qualities of the central character. We also learn a great a deal about what he values and about the nature of the world he lives in. There are many episodes in this exciting story which might serve to introduce us to these issues, for in virtually every adventure we learn something important about the hero and his values. One obvious and famous example is the story of his encounter with Polyphemos, the kyklops. A close inspection of this incident tells us a great deal about what is most important in the poem. In fact, if we attend carefully to what is going on here, we come to understand some central features of Odysseus' character: his insatiable curiosity, his daring, his cunning, his ruthlessness, and his very strong, even egotistical, sense of himself. (198 words)

Paragraph B

Homer's *Odyssey* recounts the adventures of the Greek hero Odysseus, in his return home from the Trojan War. This is a very old story, composed by the poet Homer at some point in the eight century BC and handed down form many years before it was written down. At first the poem existed only as an oral composition; it was recited by bards. Only later was it put into the form in which we have it today. No one really knows whether or not a poet named Homer actually existed or not. Homer also composed the *Iliad*, the story of Achilles. Both of these books played a central role in Greek religion and education, and they have been important parts of the tradition in Western literature ever since. The *Odyssey* was probably written after the *Iliad*. The *Odyssey* is a much easier poem to read than the *Iliad*. The story moves much more quickly, and there are a lot more adventures. One adventure that is particularly well known and important is the encounter with Polyphemos. This essay will discuss this episode, focusing on its importance. (194 words)

Paragraph C

The Bible is one of the most important texts in Western society. Christianity has helped lay many of our moral foundations, and these are still an important part of modern society. For instance, many people still follow the ten commandments. However, not all of Christian beliefs still fit into our modern world. So the Bible is a source of oppression. There are many examples of this. For example the creation story clearly is oppressive to women. The dominion of people over nature also

endorses oppression of animals. And there is lots of killing of people by the Israelites in the name of the Lord. This also is oppressive. And the story of Abraham and Isaac is oppressive as well. (110 words)

Paragraph D

One of the central issues of the book of Genesis is the relationship between particular characters and the Lord. Repeatedly in the narrative, God selects an individual for special favours, and that individual becomes, in effect, an example of the appropriate relationship between God and humanity, a role model for the faithful. One obvious example of this point is Abraham, one of the most important of the patriarchs. He displays complete faith in God, and God rewards him with the Covenant. But Abraham's faith makes large demands on him, and we are forced to recognize in him just what a truly faithful relationship to the Lord demands. Many places in the Abraham story bring out this point, but we can best appreciate it by exploring the famous account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. No other section Genesis so explicitly and compellingly offers us an insight into the religious life defined and illustrated in the Old Testament, an apparently harsh but passionate and compelling belief. (164 words)

Here are two more pairs of opening paragraphs, this time not on literary topics.

Paragraph E

There's a lot of talk these days about how we just have to do something about guns. Guns have always been a part of civilization. Human beings have used guns for huntingand for sport for centuries. A gun is also an expression of human creativity. Many guns are fine objects of art. And anyway if we don't have guns the government will control us even more than they do now. Besides the right to protect ourselves is obviously important. And guns don't kill people; people kill people. If we cannot have guns then how are we going to be fend off the police when they start attacking our homes? Are we supposed to use kitchen utensils? So I say we should forget about any further gun control legislation. That's what this essay will argue. (135 words)

Paragraph F

The question of increased governmental control over guns raises a number of important issues. Of course, every story about someone (especially a child) running amok with a gun has a lot of people crying out for more regulations and restrictions on the sale of guns. In some quarters to oppose such legislation is seen

at once as a sign of one's right-wing, red-neck credentials. So anyone who proposes to argue reasonably that those opposing more gun legislation may have a good case, or at least a case worth paying attention to, is unlikely to get a proper hearing in many forums. However, the attempt to present such a case must be made, because bringing down more restrictive legislation on guns will not merely do nothing to deal with our concerns about lethal weapons in the wrong hands, but it will also threaten a number of other important personal rights which we take for granted. (154 words)

Paragraph G

For the past fifty years, Canada's domestic political agenda has been to a large extent driven by the question of Quebec's relationship to the rest of the country. Who on earth can keep track of the number of conferences devoted to the issue of Quebec separation or the money spent dealing with it? And yet we never seem to get any closer to a solution. Why is that? Well, one answer may very well be that no one in power in Quebec or in Ottawa has ever really wanted it solved. The Quebec issue is, to a large extent, a false crisis kept alive by federal and provincial governments in order to make sure Quebec gets a disproportionate share of governmental handouts in exchange for supporting the Liberal Party as the only possible federal option and for persuading the rest of the country that only the Liberals can deal properly with Quebec. It's time we saw through this boondoggle and moved our concerns for Quebec's constitutional place in Canada onto a distant back burner. Let them eat cake, while we concentrate on more important matters.

Paragraph H

In Canada there is a major political problem with Quebec and the matter of separation. This essay will discuss this issue. It will talk about Rene Levesque and the origins of the Parti Quebecois. The visit of De Gaulle to Quebec will also be considered, as well as the Emergency War Measures Act invoked by Prime Minister Trudeau. Then the essay will consider the question of the referendum over sovereignty. And finally it will make suggestions about what lies ahead in the foreseeable future.

Look very carefully now at the various reasons you found one member of each pair better as an introduction to an argument. Then look at those reasons again. Remember these criteria when you have to evaluate your own introductory paragraphs.

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Essays and Arguments, Section Four

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4.0 Definition (2): Defining Key Terms

4.1 The Importance of Certain Key Terms in the Argument

One key to setting up and conducting an effective argument is often the establishment of clear, precise, and effective definitions for key terms in the argument, so that everyone agrees from the start what exactly is under discussion. And the analysis of an argument requires you to pay the closest attention to any definitions, simply because a devious or inadequate or misleading definition can produce something that looks plausible but which is, in fact, problematic because the initial definition is self-serving or ambiguous.

Let's take an obvious example. Suppose I wish to construct an argument that we must do something at once to alleviate the growing poverty in Canadian society. An essential prerequisite here will be defining just what I mean by *poverty*. That is, I shall have to make sure that everyone following my argument shares the same definition. If I simply let each reader bring to bear her own understanding of that term, then I am inviting confusion. And the plausibility of my argument is going to depend, in large part, upon the adequacy of that definition. If, for example, I set a higher income level than normally recognized as the defining line, then I can easily show poverty is much worse than others have claimed; if I set a low income level, then I can show poverty is decreasing or is not so bad as other writers state.

4.2 Organizing Definitions

Where does one find definitions which satisfy the criteria mentioned above? Well, the most obviously places are those texts recognized as authoritative in a particular area, that is, dictionaries or specialized handbooks. An important part of study in an academic discipline (e.g., Criminology, Sociology, History, Psychology, Chemistry, English, and so on) is learning where one finds the most current and acceptable definitions. In many cases, you can find an acceptable definition in such a book.

However, sometimes you are going to have to adapt such definitions or else come up with one of your own. When you are defining something, there are some important principles to keep in mind:

1. Fit the descriptive detail in the definition to the knowledge of the people who will be attending to your argument. The definition of, say, AIDS for a general readership will be different from the definition for a group of doctors (the latter will be much more technical).

2. Make sure in the definition you focus on what something *is*, not just on what its effects are or what it is used for (that may come later). For instance, a definition of, say, *foetal alcohol syndrome* which says only that it is "a condition which affects many pregnant mothers and which can have very harmful effects on the children, including alcoholism, brain damage, behavioural problems, and stunted growth" is not immediately very useful since it has not said exactly what the condition is.

3. Extend the definition so that it exactly covers what you want the reader to understand. This may mean that you will want to expand on the dictionary definition (most definitions from standard language dictionaries are too short to serve by themselves). Make sure definitions are full and complete; do not rush them unduly. And do not assume that just because the term is quite common that everyone knows just what it means (e.g., *alcoholism*). If you are using the term in a very specific sense, then let the reader know what that is. The amount of detail you include in a definition should cover what is essential for the reader to know, in order to follow the argument. By the same token, do not overload the definition, providing too much detail or using far too technical a language for those who will be reading the essay.

4. It is often a good idea to supplement a definition, where appropriate, with what it does not include, so as to prevent any confusion in the reader's mind. For example,

By poverty here I mean an urban family living on a combined income from all sources of 32,000 dollars a year or less. This definition does not include families living outside of urban centres or those which have some means of supporting themselves outside the cash economy (e.g., by hunting, fishing, or farming). The term also excludes all single people and couples without children at home.

5. Normally, you should not invent a definition for anything which already has a clear and accepted definition in place (but see the paragraphs below on disputed definitions). This is particularly important when there is a specific definition in place which deals with a term in the context you are discussing it. For instance, if you are writing an essay about the law on, say, murder, then you will have to bring into play the legal definition of the term (rather than using one of your own).

6. Definitions should normally be presented in a disinterested way. That is, you should not load them up with words which indicate to the reader your judgement about what you are defining (even if the purpose of the essay is to evaluate some aspect of that term). Keep the definition neutral. Do not, for example, write something like the following:

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) is a really unfair invention of the Mulroney government. It arbitrarily imposed a grievous burden on all hard-working Canadians by making them pay a 7 percent surcharge on every article and on every service they purchased, from books and toys to meals in restaurants and real estate. While a few things were exempt, almost every item on a consumer's slender budget was subject to this nasty provision to send more money to that sink- hole bureaucracy in Ottawa.

You may want the reader to share this very unfavourable view of this tax, but don't impose that view on the definition. It makes you sound hopelessly biased from the start. Instead give an impartial definition of the GST and let your emotional attitude to it emerge later.

7. Finally, once you establish a definition, do not change its meaning in the middle of the argument (another very common and misleading fallacy). So make sure, when you establish the definition initially it states exactly what you mean for the purposes of the entire argument, and then stick to that meaning of the term.

Disputed Definitions

Sometimes you will have to deal with a **disputed definition**, that is, a term for which there are different and conflicting definitions. In such a case, it is often useful to review the existing definitions and then to stipulate the definition you are going to use in the argument.

For instance, suppose you are constructing an argument about how we should deal with the problem of aboriginal rights for Native Canadians. You will have to define precisely what you mean by the term Native Canadian. Does this term

include all people who call themselves Native Canadians? Is the term restricted to those whom the governing bands or the federal government or the census designate as Native Canadians? Is a Native Canadian anyone who is married to or descended from a Native Canadian? Is there a legal definition of the term? And so on. In such a case, it is a good idea to indicate that the term is disputatious and briefly to review some of the options. Then for the purpose of your argument you stipulate the particular definition which you are going to use.

Many of the most contentious arguments today hinge on disputed definitions, for example, the abortion debate (where the definition of *a foetus* is central), the politics of Israel (where the definition of the term *Jew* is central), pornography (where the definition of what *pornography* means is central) and some feminist arguments (where defining the similarity or difference between men and women is central), and so on. Such arguments are often particularly difficult to resolve, because the disputants cannot agree on how to set up the argument.

A number of arguments do not require definition of key terms because they do not involve any which the general reader cannot readily understand. Such is the case usually with essays on literary subjects, especially those which focus on character analysis or plot structure. Even here, however, if the argument involves as a central point some specialized term, like, say, *Romantic irony*, the writer is well advised to define the term clearly before proceeding, especially if there is some chance that a few readers will not understand or will misunderstand it.

4.3 Self-Serving Definitions

When you construct an argument and especially when you analyze someone else's argument, be very careful about definitions which are intentionally twisted to support a particular argument, a very common tactic in misleading arguments. Often, the entire logic of an argument depends upon a particular definition, so if you accept it too casually, then you may find it difficult later to avoid conclusions which do not sound plausible but which do seem to arise logically from the points made.

In analyzing an argument, in fact, you should immediately slow down when the writer is defining something and ask yourself whether or not this definition is adequate. Getting readers quickly to accept a loaded definition is one of the commonest methods of sounding reasonable and yet playing a devious logical trick.

Here is an example of a two-paragraph argument, which begins with a definition and moves from that to a conclusion.

What is science? Well, we all agree that science is an activity in which we observe and measure a natural occurrence. We carry out this process repeatedly until we have a sense of how this process might work mechanically. On the basis of this sense, we construct a theory and a mechanical model, and this theory will enable us then to predict various things about the process under observation. Once this theory is in place, we proceed to test it by further observation and experiment involving the process we are explaining. At the heart of the scientific endeavour is this constant return to detailed observation of the natural process under investigation. Unless the process is observed directly, the study of it is not scientific.

Now evolution is obviously something we cannot observe. By the evolutionists' own admission, the time spans involve millions of years--far beyond the capacity of any single human being or of any collection of human beings to investigate according to the very processes which science itself requires. Thus, while evolution is clearly a theory, an idea, it cannot be scientific. It cannot be tested because it cannot be observed. Thus evolution, no matter what its supporters might claim, has no scientific validity.

This argument, you will notice, is deductive in structure. It begins by setting up a definition of science which, it claims, is shared by everyone. Then, in the second paragraph the writer applies this definition to the theory of evolution, in order to conclude that evolution does not fit the definition and is, therefore, not scientific.

Is this argument persuasive? Well, if we accept the definition of science in the first paragraph, then the conclusion given at the end of the second paragraph would seem inescapable. So the key question here is this: How adequate is that definition of science?

4.5 Exercise 4: Definitions

Provide full definitions for two of the following. Each definition should be at least as long as the examples provided after the list:

fly fishing
basketball (the game)
a shovel
Nanaimo
the Second World War
blank verse
aerobic exercise

Romantic irony
foetal alcohol syndrome
murder
a sonnet

Example 1: A full-time student in the university program at Malaspina University-College is any student, male or female, in any year of any undergraduate program concurrently taking three or more 3-credit courses at Malaspina University-College (that is, the student must have a course load of 9 or more approved credits at this institution). This definition does not include any courses which do not have university credit (e.g., continuing education offerings or preparatory courses) or which are offered by other institutions (e.g. the University of Victoria or the Open University), nor does it include any courses which a student may be taking on an audit basis or from which a student may have recently withdrawn. (112 words)

Example 2: Before discussing the notion of a right to die, we need to clarify precisely what the term *legal right* means. In common language, the term *right* tends often to mean something good, something people ought to have (e.g., a right to a good home, a right to a meaningful job, and so on). In law, however, the term has a much more specific meaning. It refers to something to which people are legally entitled. Thus, a legal right also confers a legal obligation on someone or some institution to make sure the right is conferred. For instance, in Canada, children of a certain age have a right to a free public education. This right confers on society the obligation to provide that education, and society cannot refuse without breaking the law. Hence, when we use the term *right to die* in a legal sense, we are describing something to which a citizen is legally entitled, and we are insisting that someone in society has an obligation to provide the services which will confer that right on anyone who wants it. (181 words)

Notice that these definitions are extensive, making use of examples to clarify precisely a point and indicating in places what the definition does not include. Such definitions are much more helpful than a one or two sentence quotation from a dictionary.

4.6 Descriptive and Narrative Definitions

The need to define the terms central to an argument may also sometimes include a requirement to provide a **descriptive or narrative definition**, often of some length, of a term which refers to a particular place, institution, law, person, or event. In other words, you may need, as a preliminary step in an argument, to provide the reader an accurate descriptive or narrative definition.

For example, if you are writing an argument about logging in Clayoquot Sound or about the Gustafson Lake conflict, it is important that the readers fully understand what you mean by the Clayoquot Sound or the Gustafson Lake conflict. So you will need to provide a descriptive definition of the key term. In the first case, this will normally require a brief geographical description (locating the Clayoquot and describing it sufficiently so that the reader has an understanding of the area you are talking about); in the second case, this descriptive definition will require a short narrative definition in which you briefly give the location, dates, main events, and conclusion of the Gustafson Lake conflict. Since you cannot assume that all readers will have accurate information about these matters, you will need to define them.

In such definitions you should keep your tone as neutral as possible (the argument has not yet started). All you are doing at this point is making sure that every reader clearly understands and shares a common factual understanding of something essential to the argument. Do not, by introducing an evaluative tone (i.e., taking sides), suggest to the reader that this definition is being set up to prove a contested issue. All you are doing is setting the stage for the argument you are about to start.

The point is (and we will be returning to this later) that, if there is a chance that your readers may have a ambiguous or uncertain sense of something central to what you are presenting, then you must clear that up (usually very early in the presentation), so that they all share a common meaning. In deciding what you need to define in this way, keep in mind the knowledge of the audience you are addressing. Your expectations from a general readership (e.g., your classmates) will be quite different from your expectations from a very specialized audience (e.g., the Williams Lake city council or Greenpeace).

4.7 Extended Definitions

Definitions can sometimes be quite extensive, when you need to make sure that the readers have a full grasp of all the necessary details of a particular topic. So in some cases you may need to take more than one paragraph to include all the necessary facts you want readers to know. While such extended definitions are not really common in a short essay, they are often a key part of the introduction to a longer research paper.

Suppose, for instance, that you are writing a long argument (in the form of a research paper) about the dangers of the new cloning technology. Before going into the argument, you want people to have a very clear understanding of the factual background to this topic. In other words, you have to define a few issues. You might want to include a number of paragraphs defining and describing the issue of cloning in various ways, as follows:

Paragraph 1: Introductory Paragraph, setting up the subject, focus, and thesis of the research paper (an argument that we need to impose some strict regulations on research into cloning techniques).

Paragraph 2: Formal definition of cloning (what does the term mean, what are key elements in the process). From this the reader should derive an accurate sense of what cloning is and what you mean by the term and what you do not mean by the term in the rest of the essay.

Paragraph 3: Descriptive definition of the development of cloning, in the form of a narrative: When did it start? What were the key experiments in the history of the process? Where are we now? From this the reader should derive a precise idea of the developing history of the process.

Paragraph 4: Descriptive-definition of the present laws on cloning: What is the legal status of the process right now? From this the reader should understand exactly what the present law does or does not say about the procedures.

Paragraph 5: Start of the main part of the argument.

The first four paragraphs, you will notice, are not arguing anything (this is an important point). After the introduction, which sets up the argument, the next three paragraphs areproviding the key factual background upon which your argument will draw once you launch it. Their purpose is to give all readers a shared sense of the necessary facts, without which they may become confused once the argument begins.

The process of setting up an extended definition in this way is essential in many research papers. But there is one important danger: you must not overload these paragraphs, letting the extended definition run away with the paper. If the purpose of the paper is an argument, then the introduction to it must focus briefly and succinctly only on those matters essential for an understanding of the argument. You have to be careful not to let this introductory material grow so long that it takes over the paper.

So you have observe three principles in such extensive definitions: (1) only include matters relevant to what you are going to say later, (2) provide that factual description quickly and clearly, and (3) keep the tone neutral (don't launch into the argument in this section of the introduction).

We will be coming back to this important matter in the later discussion of the structure of the research paper.

4.8 Some Summary Points on Definition

To conclude the last two sections of this handbook, let us review briefly the main points about definitions.

The first task in any argument is to set it up properly, so that the listener or the reader clearly understands what is being put into debate, what is not being included, and what essential information is required to follow the argument.

In most cases, the argument will be defined in the opening paragraph (the Introduction) and the definitions (if necessary) will follow in one or two subsequent paragraphs. Here, for example, are some sample outlines for the opening paragraphs of a longer argument in which some definition is necessary before the main argument commences.

Example 1

General Subject: Unnecessary drugs
Focus 1: Ritalin and Attention Deficit Disorder
Focus 2: Ritalin and Attention Deficit Disorder in the Public Schools

Thesis: The present use of Ritalin the public schools is a major scandal which is enriching the drug companies and perhaps making the lives of elementary school teachers less troublesome but which is turning thousands of children unnecessarily into addicts.

Paragraph 1: What exactly is Ritalin (paragraph goes on to define what Ritalin is chemically, giving an idea of what it is and how it works, but briefly).

Paragraph 2: Ritalin is routinely prescribed for a condition known as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). The standard definition of this condition is as follows. (Paragraph goes on to define ADD).

Paragraph 3: What's wrong with this? Well, for a start. . . . (the argument starts here with the first point in support of the thesis).

Example 2

General Subject: Modern poetry

Focus 1: The Imagist Movement
Focus 2: The Imagist Movement: Stylistic Innovations

Thesis: The Imagist Movement, in fact, marked a decisive break with traditional way of writing poetry and clearly initiated the major features which have dominated the writing of poetry, especially lyric poetry, ever since. As such, it is the most important development in English poetry in the past century.

Paragraph 1: The Imagist Movement began with a small meeting of a few young writers in London in 1914. . . (Paragraph goes on to give a narrative description of the facts surrounding the beginning of the Imagist Movement).

Paragraph 2: The basic principles of this new movement were few and easy to understand. (Paragraph goes on to define in further detail just what the Imagist Movement consisted of).

Paragraph 3: These principles marked a decisive break with tradition. (Argument starts here with attention to the first point in support of the thesis).

Example 3

General Subject: Natural Science
Focus 1: Evolution and Creationism
Focus 2: The flaws in the Creationist argument.

Thesis: The standard arguments from Creationist thinkers who insist on the scientific validity of their theories are so basically flawed that it is difficult to understand how any rational person can take seriously anything they say about evolution.

Paragraph 1: What exactly does the term Creationism mean? (Paragraph goes on to define this key term).

Paragraph 2: Before exploring the argument, we must also establish clearly what modern science means by evolution and by Natural Selection, since these terms are commonly confused. (Paragraph goes on to define these two key terms)

Paragraph 3: The first problem with the logic of the Creationist is clear enough. (Paragraph starts the argument here with the first point in support of the thesis).

To repeat a point made more than once in this section: not all essays will need definitions of this sort, and the arguer can launch the argument immediately after the introductory paragraph. This will normally be the case in short essays,

especially those on literature. But in a longer research paper, such definition is frequently essential, especially when you are writing for a general audience which has no expert knowledge of the subject matter you are looking at.

4.9 Defining the Scope of the Essay

An important part of defining the argument is often an indication of the scope of the argument, that is, a clear indication of what it does not include. If the precise extent of the claim you are making is not clear to the reader or listener, then she may bring to theargument expectations which you have no intention of fulfilling. Thus, it is usually very helpful to provide some information about how far your argument reaches. Notice how the following sentences, inserted in the opening paragraph before the statement of the thesis, help to resolve this issue.

1. By looking closely at this scene (and only at this scene), we come to understand some really important features of Hamlet's personality.

2. A full examination of the social problems of alcoholism would require several books. However, even a cursory look at the problems of teenage drinking in Nanaimo reveals some important points about our perceptions of the problems.

3. The Native land claims issue in BC is full of legal, moral, historical, and economic complexities, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these concerns. What is relevant here is the particular response of the federal government to the crisis at Oka.

4. The causes of the French Revolution have been much discussed and disputed. Clearly there were many factors involved over a long period of time. What is of particular concern here is the immediate economic crisis faced by the government. If we set aside all the other important factors and focus on that, we can see how the revolution was almost inevitable.

Notice how these sentences alert the reader to the important point that you are not discussing all the issues raised by the subject you are dealing with. You are identifying something very specific and indicating at the same time what you will not be considering.

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Essays and Arguments, Section Five

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5.0 Deduction and Induction

5.1 General Comments

We have already reviewed the most general characteristics of deduction and induction. You should therefore remember that, simply put, deduction begins with a general principle upon which we all agree and applies that to a specific case; induction, by contrast, starts with a collection of observations, measurements, research results (in short, collections of facts) and moves to a general conclusion from that collection of data.

5.2 Deduction: Some Points to Observe

The strength and validity of a deductive argument depend upon three things: first, there must be agreement about the general principle with which the argument begins; second, the special application must be correct and clear, with no disputes about its validity; and, third, the conclusion must be derived properly from putting these two together. Here is a simple example:

All human beings must eventually die.
Mr. Jones is a human being.
Therefore, Mr. Jones will eventually die.

We all accept the truth of the opening statement, based on our education and experience. We accept the truth of the second statement through our perception of Mr. Jones. And the conclusion (the third statement) seems to follow logically from the first two (i.e., the principle has been applied to the specific case correctly).

Now, what is important to notice about such a deductive argument is that the truth of the conclusion is compelling. If we are rational, then we have to agree. To accept the truth of the first and second statements and to agree that they have been

combined reasonably, and then to decline to accept the truth of the third would be to violate a basic principle of reason. I am free in a modern liberal society to reject that conclusion, but I cannot do so and claim that I am acting rationally, unless I can prove that there is something wrong with either of the first two statements or with the way they have been put together.

If I find, for some reason, that the conclusion is not true (i.e., Mr. Jones continues to live apparently for ever), then something must be wrong with my opening statements (see Section 5.5 below on falsification for a brief discussion of this point).

The power of deductive arguments comes from this compelling rationality. That is, as you may know, one of the great attractions of mathematics, especially geometry, which is entirely deductive in nature. Hence, someone who can frame an argument in a deductive structure has the most powerful rational means of persuasion available.

That is one reason why we are always searching for mathematical ways to quantify and resolve really difficult arguments, the ones we have trouble agreeing about, like those involving moral issues or the guilt or innocence of an accused person, something we have so far been unable to do after almost three hundred years of trying. If we could find a convincing way to frame these problems in mathematical terms, then the decisions we have to make (e.g., the question whether this person is guilty or not) would be rationally compelling for everybody (as compelling as, say, a geometric proof). The subject known as Risk Analysis seeks to do this, so that we can evaluate what we ought to do in a particular situation in a quasi-mathematical (and thus, people believe, more certain) manner.

5.3 The Opening General Principle

Where do we find the general principles upon which we base a deductive argument? Well, these can come from a number of places. The important thing is that we all acknowledge them as true or as things which we ought to do or to think or things which hold true in nature.

1. Some truths are self-evident and require no proof. Mathematics, for example, starts with some general principles which are self-evidently true, that is, everyone agrees that they must be true (e.g., The whole of a figure is made up of the sum of its parts and is greater than any single one of its parts; things equal to the same thing are equal to each other; if I subtract the same amount from two things which are perfectly equal, the remainders will be equal; and so on). We cannot prove

these, but we agree that they are true, and we would tend to believe that anyone who denied their truth was irrational.

2. We share certain basic moral principles (through our culture or our training or as human beings); for example, torturing innocent victims for pleasure is wrong; society has a duty to help the mentally ill, criminal acts against society ought to be punished, and so on. Again, these are not capable of iron-clad proof, but we (or most of us) agree with most of them without further discussion. Members of a particular social or religious group will often share a very clear set of principles which enables them to construct and conclude arguments among themselves on these principles (although often in the multicultural world beyond the meeting house the public will not accept the principles that work inside it). That, indeed, is one of the attractions of a small group: decision making is much easier among people who share a common set of principles (it is, of course, also a potential danger to clear thinking, since members might not be tempted to examine the truth of those shared principles).

3. Certain documents enshrine principles upon which we, as citizens of Canada or of the world, are expected to share. These are the documents which form declarations of various human rights (constitutions of various countries, the United Nations charter, Magna Carta, and so on). The decisions of the Supreme Court are constantly informing us about what these principles amount to in particular cases.

4. Even where we do not agree on certain moral principles, we (or most of us) agree on the general principles that in a liberal democracy the elected government has the right to make the laws and that the citizens under normal circumstances have an obligation to follow the laws. Thus, the statement of a legal requirement (i.e., a law as defined by present legislation) can be the opening to a deductive argument. If we all agree that we ought to obey the law, and if we agree that a certain law prohibits certain things, then we should all agree that we ought not to do that thing.

5. An opening general principle may be a hypothesis which we wish to test by constructing an argument upon it and then testing the conclusion. This procedure is central to the process of thinking we call *scientific reasoning*. We may not know that this general principle is true, but we agree to it provisionally in order to produce a conclusion which we can test.

6. Many (perhaps most) starting general principles in a deductive argument will be well-known truths or probabilities whose reliability has been established through experiment and observation (i.e., inductively). The proofs have been so reliable that we now take the general principle as universally agreed upon and can construct a deductive argument upon it (e.g., People who drive while intoxicated

pose a great danger to other drivers; many people who practice unprotected sexual activity contract serious venereal diseases; at higher altitudes there is less oxygen in the atmosphere than lower down; and so on). Many scientific arguments rest on a deductive structure which starts with a principle of this sort, a shared truth which has been established beyond all reasonable doubt.

5.4 The Importance of Step 2 in a Deductive Argument

Even when we agree about the opening general principle, a deductive argument may run into difficulty in the specific application, because we may have trouble agreeing on the definition of the specific application.

Here is an example containing two very powerful and persuasive deductive arguments which reach opposite conclusions about a common modern experience, even though few people would have trouble agreeing with the opening principles of each one.

Argument 1

General Principle: Killing an innocent person is always wrong.
Specific Application: A foetus is an innocent person.
Conclusion: Therefore, killing a foetus is always wrong.

Argument 2

General Principle: Every woman must have the right to full control over her own body at all times.

Specific Application: The foetus is a part of a woman's body.

Conclusion: Therefore every woman has the right to full control over her own foetus at all times.

Most people have no trouble accepting the opening general statements of both of these arguments. And it is clear that they are both put together properly (that is, the application of the particular case to the general principle is valid). The difference of opinion concerns the claims made in the two Specific Application statements, which concern the definition of the foetus. If one accepts the definition given in Argument 1, then one must accept the conclusion; if one accepts the definition given in Argument 2, then one must accept the conclusion of the second argument.

How is one to adjudicate between these two definitions of a foetus? That is the heart of the abortion argument. Attempts to resolve it involve a number of different strategies including appeals to religious authorities (like the Pope or fundamentalist doctrines), appeals to scientific studies of conception and embryonic development, or appeals to the law or human rights. Because there is no agreement about who has final authority in defining the foetus, the deductive structures, while very persuasive to some people, fail to resolve the issue.

Many of our most interesting arguments are of this sort, where we are trying to insist that a particular example fits under a specific application of a general principle. That is the basis for most murder trials, for example, whose overall logic goes something like this:

General Principle: A person who has a strong motive, a convenient opportunity, and a direct link to the murder weapon is a very strong suspect in a murder trial.

Specific Application: Mr. X had a strong motive, many convenient opportunities, and a direct link to the murder weapon.

Conclusion: Therefore Mr. X is a strong suspect.

The general principle is given to us by experience. Most of the trial focuses on the second step, one side arguing that it is a true statement, the other arguing that it is not (or that there is some doubt about it). That argument always involves induction (facts like DNA samples, fingerprints, shoe patterns, telephone records, and so on).

5.5 The Importance of Deduction in Falsification Theories of Science

Many scientists claim that the essence of science is the construction of deductive arguments whose conclusions are then tested to see if they fail to meet a test of truth. If they do fail, then the argument is wrong and thus the initial starting principle must be false.

Here is an example from the history of science of how this might work in scientific practice.

General Principle: All planets in our solar system move in circular orbits around the sun.

Specific Application: Mars is a planet in our solar system.

Conclusion: Therefore, Mars moves in a circular orbit around the sun.

The logic of this argument is compelling if we accept the General Principle and the Specific Application. For many years, the General Principle was accepted without question, since circularity was seen to be a divine property appropriate to heavenly creation. However, once people started rigorous and repeatedly testing the conclusion to this argument by observing Mars (i.e., by induction) with improved instruments, they quickly learned that the conclusion is false. Mars's orbit is not circular. Therefore there is something wrong with this argument: either Mars is not a planet (and thus the definition in the Specific Application is incorrect) or the General Principle must be wrong.

Astronomers had to go back and come up with another argument, and Kepler posited the hypothesis that planets in our solar system move in ellipses, with the sun at one focal point. The conclusion to the new argument (i.e., that therefore Mars moves in an elliptical orbit around the sun) then became subject to rigorous testing.

According to this view of science (which has its critics) science never asserts what is true; rather, it is constantly testing claims by drawing deductive conclusions from those claims and subjecting the conclusions to inductive testing. What remains is not necessarily something true, but something which has not yet been proved false. This, such falsificationists say, accounts for the fact that science is progressive, that is, its knowledge gets increasingly more secure (i.e., less false).

We should stress here the importance of this method of arguing in science (and science students especially should take note). Science is not simply the collection of evidence in order to construct a theory. It is better characterized as the construction of a theoretical general principle (a hypothesis) on the basis of which certain conclusions are derived in the form of predictions. The predictions are then independently tested by experiment and observation (Does what is predicted occur as the hypothesis indicates?). In this process, the number of experiments may be quite small, but they will be crucial tests of a theory.

5.6 The Deductive Structure of Listing the Alternatives

A very powerful and common deductive structure for an argument involves listing all the alternatives and then by negative proofs showing that all but one of the alternatives are impossible or entirely impractical. This then leads naturally to the

conclusion that the one remaining option must be advisable or true or highly probable. In other words, you establish the truth of the conclusion, not so much by focusing on it directly, but by eliminating all other possibilities. Notice the following typical examples:

Argument 1

Only two people's fingerprints were found on the murder weapon, those of Ms Smith and of Mr. Wesson. Thus, one of the two must have fired the fatal bullet.

At the time of the murder, Ms Smith was on an extended holiday in Europe; she did not return until three days after the killing.

Therefore, Ms Smith could not have fired the fatal shot, and Mr Wesson must have.

Argument 2

We have three options for dealing with this crisis: we can ignore it and hope it will solve itself, deal with it immediately ourselves, or work co-operatively with the provincial government to resolve it.

The issue is too serious to ignore, and we simply do not have the money necessary to deal with it immediately ourselves.

Therefore we must work co-operatively with the provincial government to resolve it.

Argument 3

Hamlet delays killing Claudius either because he is a coward, because he never has a suitable opportunity, because he is suffering from some inner problem, or because he does not believe the ghost.

We know that Hamlet is not a coward, and he repeatedly states that he believes the ghost. Moreover, he has frequent and easy access to Claudius, so there is no lack of opportunity.

Thus, he must be suffering from some inner problem.

Notice that the overall structure of each of these arguments is deductive. That is, if the first and second statements are true then the conclusion is rationally compelling (i.e., we must agree). However, the truth of the second stage of each argument will usually require an inductive argument (facts, experiments, specific details of the text, and so on). Most of the argument will be taken up with this task.

This form of argument is extremely important and common in business, political and social policy, literary interpretation, and science, anywhere where one has to adjudicate between competing options and does so by showing that all of them except one are impossible or very inadvisable or that all of them are less persuasive than a particular one. It is also common in many people's methods for resolving their own personal decisions.

The structure discussed here (listing alternatives and resolving the argument by dismissing all options but one) is a common one in risk analysis, where we list all the different possible outcomes of a decision or event and then, if we can, eliminate all but one by analyzing what each option involves. This is an important principle in business decisions, for example, about the level of environmental protection and control a company will undertake.

This form of deductive reasoning is the basis for one of the most famous arguments for why we should believe in God (the argument is known as **Pascal's Wager**). It goes something like this:

1. Either there is a God who eternally rewards those who believe in Him and eternally punishes those who do not, or there is no such God.

2. If I do not believe in God and He does exist, then I shall be eternally punished.

3. If I do not believe in God and He does not exist, then nothing bad or good will happen to me.

4. If I do believe in God and He does exist, then I shall be eternally rewarded.

5. If I do believe in God and He does not exist, nothing good or bad will happen to me.

6. Conclusion: I have a great deal more to lose and to fear from not believing and being wrong than I do from believing and being wrong. Therefore, it is prudent to believe.

Notice how this argument depends upon listing alternatives, evaluating the consequences of each one, and deciding on the basis of the possible outcomes.

A similar form of reasoning used to be called in the press the **Maximin Strategy**. It involves, as a start to resolving a difficult personal decision, listing all the worst possible consequences of all the various options you face. You select that option, the worst possible outcome of which is preferable to the worst possible outcome of any of the others. This form of thinking is highly recommended for conservative pessimists.

5.7 The Problem of Hidden or Misleading Assumptions

The full study of the ways in which deductive arguments can go astray is complex and difficult. However, here it is important to note a few basic ways in which the logic of a deductive argument can create problems.

The first thing to be careful of in analyzing a deductive argument or in constructing one of your own is any assumption hidden in the argument, that is, a general principle which is necessary to the argument but which is implied rather than stated openly.

For example, here is a deductive argument:

Canadian fishermen have the exclusive right to harvest those fish, because the fish are coming to Canadian rivers to spawn.

There's a hidden assumption here on which the conclusion depends. The assumption is a general principle something like the following: "The fishermen of the country where fish come to spawn have the exclusive right to harvest those fish." The assumption, which may or may not be true or agreed upon, is not stated.

Hidden assumptions can be very misleading because, since they are not clearly stated, the reader may not focus upon them the critical attention they merit. Notice that a hidden assumption is not necessarily wrong; it might be quite acceptable. But unless you as reader are aware that it is there, you cannot evaluate it.

5.8 Exercise in Hidden Assumptions

Notice the following examples of short arguments in which deriving the conclusion has required a general principle which is not stated. Identify the hidden

assumption and state whether, in your view, the assumption is a general principle about which we agree or not.

1. You should not vote for that candidate for the federal parliament. He has been married twice.

2. We must provide more money and time for the faculty to conduct scholarly research. We all want to improve the quality of the student's learning at this institution.

3. Hamlet is much given to moody speculation. Clearly he is not fit to be the king of Denmark.

4. Which would you rather have, a healthy environment or unemployment? Without the clear-cutting of old growth forests, we will have unacceptably high unemployment levels.

5. The person should not be admitted to the course on combat flight training. After all, she is a woman.

6. The government should not permit the people of Quebec to separate because the break-up of the country will hurt the Canadian economy.

7. Elisa and Henry do not talk to each other very much. Clearly, their marriage is not going very well.

8. People who smoke inflict damage on themselves. Therefore, Medicare should not pay their medical expenses for treating conditions related to their smoking.

9. Podunk College is a much better university than Folsom University. At Podunk College 89 percent of the faculty have PhD degrees; whereas, at Folsom University only 75 percent of the faculty have PhD degrees.

10. The Canadian military must pay for that soldier's sex change operation, because outside the military Medicare covers such medical procedures.

5.9 False Dilemma

A particularly common and often persuasive mistake in deductive arguments is the one called the **False Dilemma**. This occurs when the arguer gives the argument a deductive structure by listing the options or alternatives at the start and then goes

on to disprove all the possibilities but one (see Section 5.6 above). However, the list of alternatives is not complete but is, deliberately or not, misleading because it does not include all the options.

Here are some simple examples of the False Dilemma mistake in deductive structure:

Argument 1

We have only two choices in dealing with a worker who is drinking on the job: we can ignore the problem or we can fire the worker for cause.

We cannot afford to ignore the problem, because the drinking creates dangers for the other workers and hurts productivity.

Therefore we have to fire any worker who is drinking on the job.

Argument 2

Everyone agrees that there are only two probable accounts for the creation of animal and plant species, the one in Genesis and the one provided by Darwin.

Clearly, there are inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and errors in Darwin's account.

Therefore, the only probable account for the creation of animal and plant species is the one in Genesis.

Argument 3

Either we give back all our land to the Native communities, as they are demanding, or we require them to become fully fledged and equal citizens, just like everyone else.

We cannot afford to give back all the land.

Therefore, we have to require them to become fully fledged and equal citizens just like everyone else.

Each of these arguments begins with a list of options or alternatives, and each list is incomplete and misleading. If you accept the list, however, as a genuine and

complete statement of all the options, then you may be easily misled by the rest of the argument.

In any argument, therefore, where you are considering a range of options, make sure the list is complete. If you are excluding something, make sure you explain why that is not an option. This is also a very important analytical tool in evaluating arguments, especially from politicians and policy makers.

5.10 Overstating or Understating the Conclusion

One common problem in deductive arguments is a tendency to overstate or understate the conclusion. You need to be careful that the degree of certainty in your conclusion matches the degree of certainty in your general principle and specific application. Here is an example of this point:

General Principle: Teenage drivers are often more reckless than mature drivers.

Specific Application: Jack is a teenage driver.

Conclusion: Therefore, Jack must be more reckless reckless than mature drivers.

The conclusion here is overstated, because the general principle does not include *all* teenage drivers. You are not entitled to make such a quick conclusion about Jack's driving. A better conclusion would be something like "Therefore Jack may be a reckless driver."

Here is another example:

General Principle: Many native land claims are perfectly justified by Canadian law.

Specific Application: This petition represents a native land claim.

Conclusion: Therefore, this petition is perfectly justified by Canadian law.

The conclusion here is very firm (*is perfectly justified*), but the initial principle doesn't entitle you to such a firm conclusion, since the opening claim does not say *all*.

A common source of trouble here are words like *never*, *always*, *none*, *all*, and so on, words which are all inclusive of a group. Do not use these words when your opening assumptions entitle you only to say *some*, *a few*, *many*, and so on. For example:

General Principle: Many college students in Canada require financial aid in order to continue their schooling.

Specific Application: This group of students at Malaspina are Canadian college students.

Conclusion: Therefore, they all need financial aid in order to continue their schooling.

Again the conclusion here is overstated, showing a degree of certainty not warranted in the General Principle. Your conclusion should thus be more tentative: "Therefore some them may well need financial aid. . . . "

5.11 Analogies

Deductive arguments often make use of an analogy, that is, a comparison with some other example of a similar case. Here is an example:

General Principle: The attempts to prohibit the manufacture and sale of alcohol in the US during Prohibition were a massive failure.

Specific Application: The present attempts to deal with illegal narcotics are just like that earlier situation with alcohol.

Conclusion: Therefore, the present attempts to deal with illegal narcotics are a massive failure.

Notice very carefully this form of argument (which is common). To persuade the reader or listener of the conclusion, the arguer has introduced an analogy (or comparison) between attempts to eliminate alcohol and attempts to eliminate narcotics. The strength of the argument here is going to depend on the extent to which the arguer can persuade the reader that the analogy is a good one.

Now, analogies are dangerous things, simply because no two situations are exactly the same, and one can always find some differences which work against the arguer's purpose in introducing it. So they need to be used with extreme care, with full attention to the following points:

1. Never introduce an analogy unless you are well informed about the details of the example you are calling attention to and are prepared to defend the similarity between the two things being compared. The argument will suffer from a False Analogy if the reader fails to see the similarity or sees only differences. This is particularly true if you are going to use historical analogies (e.g., What is going on in Quebec today is just like the student unrest of the mid-1960's).

2. Be very careful of extreme analogies, that is, bringing into the argument an example of something so extraordinary that the comparison is suspect. For example, be very cautious about comparing anything with Nazi Germany's treatment of the Jews. That may be rhetorically effective, but unless the situation you are describing is as horrific as the original event, the analogy simply indicates to the reader that you do not understand what you are talking about or are exaggerating wildly for the sake of it.

3. In general, stick to analogies which bring together things which are, indeed, very similar. For example, if you are arguing that the high salaries of NBA players are spoiling the game, you might want to make an analogy with what is happening with high salaries in the NFL. Those situations are close enough to make the comparison carry some persuasive weight. Similarly, if you are arguing about an educational issue in BC, you might want to draw an analogy with what is happening in the same area in, say, Alberta or Washington State.

4. If you are not sure whether to introduce an analogy or not, you probably should leave it out. Analogies are not all that persuasive most of the time, and if they are stretched or inappropriate they weaken the argument. If there's any doubt that the reader might not see the similarity between the two cases, then you might have to argue it. For example, if you wanted to make the argument that the prohibition of alcohol was very like the prohibition of narcotics, then you might have to make that point in detail, rather than just assuming that the reader sees it clearly.

5. Analogies, in general, should not carry the weight of the argument. They are often very useful for illustrating and emphasizing points you have already made in other ways, but in themselves, unsupported by other arguments, they are quite weak (although frequently popular, especially among politicians).

5.12 Induction

As mentioned previously, a second manner of conducting arguments is called **induction** or **inductive reasoning**. Induction or inductive reasoning involves, as we have remarked already, facts, observations, experimental data, perceptions, and so on, in other words, individual acts of sense experience. The inductive process starts with a single perception: e.g., "That pine tree has cones," "When it first appears, the Ghost in *Hamlet* is dressed in armour," "The patient has red spots on her arms," and so on.

The basis of all induction is repeated observation, so that the facts about similar experiences accumulate to the point where one sees a repetitive pattern and can draw a conclusion about it. Having repeatedly observed in similar circumstances the same event or one very similar, you draw a conclusion about the pattern you have seen.

Suppose, for example, you observe a crow and notice that it is black. You continue to observe crows repeatedly, and every time you notice that the colour is black. After a certain number of similar experiences, you will draw a conclusion: "All crows are black." And, on the basis of this generalization, you can now make a prediction: "My cousin Jane has written to tell me she has a pet crow. It must be black, because all crows are black."

Notice the nature of this conclusion. You have not observed all crows in the world (that would be impossible). You have seen only a sample, but you feel confident that the conclusion is a good one. You would, of course, be forced to change it, should you ever perceive a purple, white, yellow, or polka-dotted crow (in scientific terms, you would have falsified the hypothesis that all crows are black).

This final point introduces a vitally important point about induction: it is never finally certain. Since the process involves making a large generalization on the basis of a limited number of observations, the conclusion is only more or less probable, rather than iron clad. Induction can, however, provide important and conclusive negative results; that is, a particular observation or set of experimental results can serve to prove a general claim wrong (e.g., seeing a yellow crow would prove the assertion "All crows are black" false).

5.13 Making Inductive Generalizations

The single most challenging part of inductive reasoning is dealing with these questions: How many repetitive observations do I have to make before I draw a conclusion? What sort of conclusion am I entitled to draw? How confident can I be that this conclusion is valid? Much of your study at college will be dealing with

these questions, particularly if you are a student of social science, where the statistical analysis of inductive evidence is a crucial (and for some students a very difficult) part of the curriculum.

There is not time here to go into the details of what can be a very complex subject, but at a very basic level we can suggest the following points to watch in inductive arguments:

1. The strength of the conclusion is going to depend upon the quality and the quantity of the observations (evidence) you introduce. No inductive argument based on a single piece of unreliable evidence is very persuasive.

2. The evidence you put into an inductive argument must be good evidence. Again, you will be learning what that phrase means in different subjects, but, in general, the evidence should meet the following criteria: it should be accurate, up-to-date, based on a reliable source, and easy to verify or replicate. It should not be subjective, fabricated, or based on a clearly biased or suspicious source. In literary arguments, the evidence normally will come directly from the text under discussion or from secondary sources (i.e., books or articles written about that text). It will not come from something not directly provided by the text (e.g., what you think the childhood experiences of the heroine might have been like). And it is important to note that the quality of the evidence is always more important than the quantity: a few excellent examples are much more persuasive than a much larger quantity of inferior material.

3. Part of the previous point requires you to identify clearly any special authorities to which you appeal for evidence. You should never just refer vaguely to experts (in phrases like "Scientific studies have shown . . . ," "Many critics maintain that . . . ," "It has been verified that. . . ." and so on). If you want to use phrases like that, then you are going to have to provide specific references.

4. Most importantly, the language in the conclusion must match the degree of certainty in the evidence. An inductive argument, especially one about literature, will normally entitle you only to talk about what is probably the case rather than to use a vocabulary indicating certainty (so words like *prove*, *demonstrate*, and so on--which indicate a firm certainty--are generally less advisable than words like *suggest*, *raise the possibility*, *perhaps indicate*, and so on), unless the probability is so high as to be almost certain (e.g., I can be certain that if I throw some heavy object out of the window it will fall to earth).

Note very carefully that a tendency to overstate the conclusion, that is, to make the conclusion much more definite than the evidence suggests or to offer insufficient or poor evidence is a quick way to make inductive arguments look suspect.

5.14 Exercise in Simple Inductive Argument

Below are some simple inductive arguments, with some evidence presented and a conclusion (which is in bold). Score each argument out of 4, as follows: 0-very poor; 1-some probability perhaps, but not very convincing; 2-partially true perhaps, but the evidence is not as good as it could be to support the conclusion; 3-good; 4-excellent, with a conclusion arising naturally out of the evidence. If you think the conclusion might be improved, then provide an improved version.

1. The ghost in Hamlet spends more time complaining about his ex-wife's remarriage than the fact that his brother murdered him. **Clearly this demonstrates he is obsessed with his inadequate sexuality**.

2. The ghost in Hamlet comes into Gertrude's bedroom to confront Hamlet, but his ex-wife cannot see him. **This suggests something interesting, that Hamlet Senior, renowned as a warrior king, may not feel quite so commanding and competent in the bed room.**

3. The driver's blood alcohol level was three times the legal limit. Three separate witnesses indicate that he was driving on the wrong side of the road without lights on, and the preliminary analysis indicates that he was speeding well above the limit. And the brakes on the car are defective. **He might be to blame in the accident.**

4. We have conducted an experiment ten times under standard conditions in which we added a small piece of zinc to hydrochloric acid. Every time hydrogen gas was produced. **Thus, the interaction of zinc and hydrochloric acid under similar conditions will always produce hydrogen gas.**

5. The people of Quebec clearly do not want to separate from Canada. In the last referendum on separation, the people of Quebec rejected the referendum question by a margin of 51 to 49 percent.

6. In this poem, nature is always described as "green," "verdant," "ripe," "blooming," and "fertile." **The writer is here suggesting that nature is a rich source of life.**

7. Odysseus obviously has a very cruel streak. We see this when he grinds out the eye of Polyphemos, the Cyclops, with a sharpened and burning pole and at the end when he slaughters the suitors and punishes the servants, some of them very brutally.

8. The Liberal candidates promised that they would repeal the GST. Once in office, they refused to carry out that legislation. **They are all liars**.

9. Some released sex offenders have committed new offences. **We should never release any sex offenders, since they will always reoffend.**

10. Several scientists have said that greenhouse gases are increasing. **We must urge governments to pass strict legislation controlling industrial and automobile emissions.**

11. My astrologer and the Ouija board have told me repeatedly me that it will rain on Friday. **I think we should call off the picnic.**

5.15 Some Potential Problems in Inductive Arguments

We have already mentioned three very common ways in which inductive arguments can go astray: first, generalizing on the basis of insufficient evidence, second, stating the conclusion with an inappropriate level of confidence, and, third, using poor evidence (inaccurate, unreliable).

There are some other problem areas, as follows (this list is not intended to be exhaustive).

1. Don't end up **begging the question**, that is, assuming the truth of what you have set out to prove. For example, consider the argument: "The government must reduce spending because the government is spending too much money." This argument is using as evidence what it set out to prove or recommend. Here are other examples: "People should not break the law because breaking the law is bad," "Odysseus spends little time at home because he is always away," "I failed the course because my marks were too low."

2. Be careful not to bring in a **non sequitur**, that is, some evidence which is apparently irrelevant to the point you are trying to argue (e.g., "Hamlet is clearly insane because Polonius doesn't want his daughter associating with him"). Here the evidence doesn't seem, as stated, to have anything to do with the claim. Another example is as follows: "I failed the course because my teacher was

overweight" or "I won't vote for Candidate Jones because her father is a communist." If there is a connection between the teacher's weight and your failure or the political beliefs of Candidate Jones's father and your voting decision, you will have to lay that out in detail. As it stands, the teacher's weight and the father's political beliefs here seem like a non sequitur, something irrelevant to your conclusions (the connection is not apparent to the reader).

3. Remember that **coincidence is not cause**. That is, just because B happens after A, that does not necessarily mean that A causes B. For example: "That girl is a bad influence; my Jimmy didn't drink until he met her." She might be the cause, but simply asserting the fact as stated is no proof. Of course, if there is repeated evidence (i.e., every lad she ever has gone out with has developed a drinking problem), then the argument would be more persuasive; it would not, however, be air tight. This error, as you may learn if you study correlation in statistics, is a major source of mistakes in certain areas of social science.

4. Do not simply **appeal to the authority** of someone well known, even if that person is an expert, unless you can point to a specific study or facts associated with the name: e.g., "Henry Kissinger says we are right to be fighting the communists. So we should be." Henry Kissinger might be right, but simply mentioning his name doesn't provide any meat to the argument. Appeals to authority may be useful in supplementing an argument, but in themselves they are not very useful.

5. Concentrate on the facts and principles of an argument. Don't try to make a case simply by attacking the motives, the appearance, or the other beliefs of those who do not support the position you are advancing.

5.16 Exercise in Evaluating Short Arguments

Comment on each of the following arguments. Note that some are deductive and others inductive. If you can perceive a specific problem, then identify it. If you think the argument is quite persuasive, then indicate that.

1. Of course, his argument is hopelessly wrong. After all, he's a Roman Catholic priest. What do you expect?

2. The survey questionnaire on plagiarism was completed by 85 percent of the faculty. Three-quarters of the respondents said they definitely felt that plagiarism in first-year papers was on the increase. I think we have a problem here which we should investigate further.

3. I've had ten cats at different times; they all ran away. Obviously, cats make bad house pets.

4. In the opening of the *Odyssey* the gods repeatedly state that anyone who violates someone else's home must be punished. This strongly suggests that there is some divine moral order in the world of this book.

5. The economy started to go downhill right after the NDP government was elected. Clearly, they don't know how to run a provincial economy.

6. The people who oppose my reforms all have vested interests in keeping things the way they are. As far as I am concerned, their snouts are so deeply immersed in the trough, they are incapable of any intelligent discussion more than grunts to each other while they chow down on the public purse.

7. This is a really good poem because it has a sonnet structure, with a basic blank verse rhythm, and a strong repetitive rhyme scheme.

8. Look, this player for the entire season led the team in scoring, in rebounding, in assists, and in blocked shots, and he played in every game during the season. He is clearly a strong candidate for the most valuable player on the team.

9. Students should all have to study first-year English at college because they all need at least two semesters of English. And my mother is all in favour of the regulation, too.

10. Women are obviously different from men in some important ways, but their similarities are much more significant than their differences. And thus they must receive equal treatment, if we believe in equality under the law.

11. That film is pornographic; two or three scenes feature full male and female nudity.

12. Macbeth gets very keen on becoming king after he meets the witches. This proves that they are the cause of his ambition.

5.17 Induction in Arguments on Literary Topics

Many essays on literary topics are principally inductive arguments. In them the arguer is examining the text of a work of literature, locating patterns (e.g., patterns

of imagery, or behaviour, description, and so on), and drawing conclusions on the basis of those patterns.

The most clearly argumentative essay on a work of literature is a review in which the arguer evaluates the text or something in it by focusing on very particular features in the work itself and explaining how these facts affect the quality of the work for better or worse. For example, in a film review, the critic will usually refer to patterns in the characterization, the camera work, the special effects, and the dialogue (or in some of these) to argue for a certain judgement (two thumbs up or down or one up and one down).

When you write an argumentative essay on a work of fiction (poem, play, film) or on a painting or piece of music, the quality of the argument is going to depend upon the way in which you can point to direct evidence in the work and persuade the reader of your review that your assessment of those details is persuasive. Unless the argument is very firmly anchored on the specific details of the work (i.e., has a firm inductive basis), it will not be very persuasive.

We will be addressing this matter again, but for the moment it is important to remember that any evaluative argument about a literary work which does not deal with the facts of the text is not going to be effective. Thus, you should not turn an evaluative argument about a work into a digressive study of the biography of the author, a summary of her other works, a psychological self-assessment of your mood at the time, or a weighty discussion of matters outside the work you are considering.

5.18 Deduction and Induction in Combination

Most arguments combine both deduction and induction. Deduction supplies the shape of the argument and induction establishes agreement about one or more stages in the argument. Notice the following examples:

Argument 1

General Principle: Many forms of bacterial infections can be successfully treated with antibiotics.

Specific Application: Many cases of ulcers are bacterial infections.

Conclusion: Therefore, many cases of ulcers may be capable of being treated successfully with antibiotics.

Argument 2

General Principle: In a democracy, all candidates for public office who accept donations from foreign governments must be forced to resign.

Specific Application: Candidate Jones, who has just been elected in a democratic process, has accepted cash donations from the governments of several foreign countries.

Conclusion: Therefore, Candidate Jones must be forced to resign.

In these two arguments, it is easy enough to agree to the General Principle. But before accepting the conclusion, we will need to know if the statement in the Specific Application is true. To establish the truth of that in each case, the arguer will have to provide some inductive reasoning (e.g., facts, experimental results, investigative data, and so on). Here's another example of deduction and induction used in combination:

General Principle: All cholesterol is damaging to the human circulatory system.

Specific Application: Brand X contains a significant amount of cholesterol.

Conclusion: Therefore, Brand X is damaging to the human circulatory system.

In this deductive argument, the opening General Principle is not something we all agree on; most of us probably don't know one way or the other. So, before going any further, the arguer will have to establish the truth or high probability of that claim. This will require an inductive argument. Once, the arguer has persuaded the readers that the opening statement is correct, then the argument can proceed to the next step, which would be to establish the truth of the Specific Application (again by induction).

Here's another combination argument, one which begins with two General Principles:

General Principle 1: All animals must come from at least one living animal parent.

General Principle 2: Some animals species were on earth before others.

Specific Application: Invertebrate animals were alive on earth long before vertebrate animals appeared.

Conclusion: Therefore, vertebrate animals must have come originally from invertebrate animals.

Before accepting the conclusion, we will want to confirm the validity of the General Principle 2 and of the Specific Application. Establishing these will require inductive evidence. If these principles are correct (and they both have been established beyond reasonable doubt for many years), then the conclusion is rationally compelling. The above argument is the best single proof for the truth of evolution.

The point of these examples is to show that deduction and induction are commonly combined, with deduction providing the overall structure and the basic logic leading to a conclusion and induction confirming the truth of the statement in the general principle or the specific application. The inductive part of the argument will normally take up most of the space, since the presentation and interpretation of evidence is more time consuming than the deductive process.

This last point can be summed up in the famous example from Francis Bacon about the three sorts of scientists: ants, spiders, and bees. Ants spend all their time collecting facts (they are purely inductive); spiders spend all their time spinning amazing designs out of their own abdomens (they are purely deductive). But bees collect material from the natural world and transform it into complex organized structures (i.e., they combine induction and deduction). Bacon encouraged would-be scientists to become like bees.

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Essays and Arguments, Section Six

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6.0 Organizing the Main Body of An Argument (I)

6.1 General Remarks

Once an argument has been defined in the opening paragraph(s), so that the reader fully understands what is at issue, then the argument can proceed with what is called here the **Main Body**. This section consists of a series of points the arguer makes in support of the position advanced in the thesis. An important quality of this part of the argument is that it must be clear. The reader must always understand precisely where she is in the context of the total argument.

While there are a number of ways you can organize the presentation of the argument (and we will be reviewing some of these) in order to make it as clear as possible, here are a few basic principles which apply to all arguments. We will start with some simple principles and, in later sections, move to more sophisticated structures for written arguments.

1. The Main Body of an argument must proceed one point at a time. The writer introduces the point, discusses it so as to bring out its relationship to the thesis, and then moves onto the next point. Normally this will take at least one paragraph, sometimes more. The important things to remember here are that you should never try to deal with more than one point at a time and that you should say what you have to say about a single point and then move on. Do not jump back and forth to and from the same point.

2. In most arguments you can never include everything that you might want to include. You have to select the best points you can muster in support of your thesis and present those thoroughly, leaving the others out of the essay. A few points thoroughly discussed are almost always more persuasive than a great many more points dealt with casually (see further details below on this point).

3. Once the Main Body of the argument starts, you should not digress off the line established in the thesis. Everything in the argument from this point on must be directly relevant to what you have set up as the argument.

We will be looking at these points in more detail below.

6.2 The Length of the Argument: Approximate Paragraph Count

The first step in organizing how you are going to set out the Main Body of the argument is to decide how long the argument is going to be. In most college essays

this length will be established by some guidelines with the assignment, normally a recommended number of words or pages.

The most important structural feature of a written argument, however, is not the page or the word, but the paragraph, which is the building block of the essay (for reasons which we will be going into later). And you cannot organize the essay until you have sorted out how many of these building blocks you have at your disposal (since that will determine just how many points you can establish in the argument).

You should never think of a written argument primarily as having to be a certain number of pages or words. The key idea is that it has to be within a certain number of paragraphs. A typical short essay, for example, calls for an argument of about 750 to 1000 words; a research paper tends to be longer, up to 2000 or 3000 words. These figures are not very useful until you can sort out just how many paragraphs this amounts to.

How do you do that? Well, again for reasons we will be going into later, paragraphs should be substantial sections of prose, in most cases about 200 to 300 words long. Hence, to get a rough sense of how many paragraphs the written argument should contain, divide the recommended word length by (at the least) 150 or 200. Thus, a 750-word assignment is calling for an argument of about 4 or 5 paragraphs; a 2000 word assignment is calling for an argument of about 10 to 12 paragraphs. Obviously these figures are approximate, but they will provide an initial idea of how you should organize the Main Body of the argument.

Why does this matter? Well, if you follow the principle which we will be stressing later that one paragraph can deal with only one main point in the argument, then a calculation of the approximate number of paragraphs tells you how many points you will be bringing to bear in support of the thesis. In a short essay, for example, where you have, say, five paragraphs to deal with, the first will present the introduction, the last will offer a conclusion; that will leave three paragraphs for the main body of the argument. In organizing the paper you can use as a guide the idea that you have to present three main ideas in support of your thesis (you may want to adjust this later, but as an initial guideline you need to have this sense of how the argument is going to be structured).

In a longer research paper, where you have, say, ten paragraphs to organize, you may be using the opening three for defining the argument, the final two for establishing conclusions and recommendations; that leaves you five paragraphs to make your case (i.e., five separate points).

You cannot proceed to organize the argument without knowing how many paragraphs you have at your disposal. If you try simply to write the argument without any organization, there is a great danger that you will end up confusing the reader and probably yourself as well.

6.3 Selecting the Topics for the Argument

Once you have estimated how many paragraphs you have at your disposal for the main body of the argument, you then have to select the points you are going to include and exclude. Remember the key point: you cannot include everything you might want or be able to say on the thesis; you have to reduce the argument to the few best points and argue each of them thoroughly.

Let's take a particular example. You wish to write a short review of a film (up to 1000 words). This means you will be constructing a five paragraph essay, with an introduction (Paragraph 1) and a conclusion (Paragraph 5). The main body of the argument will thus be three paragraphs long. You need to select the three most important and persuasive things that shaped your opinion of the film. Do not be too quick to determine those three points; pause to reflect on what you might include.

The first stage in the selection is usually a brainstorming session in which you jot down all the things you might say. Such a list would cover a wide range of different topics: the acting of the principal characters, the acting of the supporting actors, the cinematography, the special effects, the music, the dialogue, the story, the direction, in short, all the elements of the work which had an effect on you and which are within the limits you have set for the essay.

Then, by a process of elimination, you select the most important of those elements, the ones which were, in your view, the most important in determining your view of the film. The best way by far to go through this process is a discussion with other people who also saw the film. They may not share your view, but the conversation will clarify for you more quickly than anything else what you most need to say in order to support your point of view (and the other people will also be the source of some interesting arguments you might wish to incorporate).

The result of this process must be a list of the three items which will form the core of your argument, the key elements that made you like or dislike or have a mixed view of the film you are reviewing. By offering a detailed discussion of each of these in turn, you will be trying to persuade the reader that your opinion of this work is worth attending to.

The process is the same for a research paper, except that you have more paragraphs to deal with. This enables you not only to include more points in the argument but, as we shall see, to offer a more complex structure to the argument.

6.4 Rethinking the Focus and Thesis of the Argument

Organizing the main body of the argument in this manner works only if you have a very specific idea of what you are setting up as the main argument and if that is manageable within the space available. It is almost impossible to develop a sense of the structure of the argument if you do not have a very specific focus and a clear thesis or if these are too unwieldy for the space available.. Thus, if you find you simply cannot decide what to leave out and that there is just too much you might say on the topic, then you should go back to the definition of the argument and restrict the focus further.

For instance, suppose you decide you want to write an essay on, say, the importance of nature in *Huckleberry Finn* or the abuses of the present system of welfare in BC. In the planning stages you get hopelessly bogged down because there seems to be far too much material for you to cover and you simply cannot decide. In such a case, you should rethink the definition of the essay. Instead of writing something on the importance of nature in *Huckleberry Finn*, restrict that to an argument about the importance of the river (i.e., narrow the meaning of nature); similarly, instead of writing about welfare abuse in general, restrict the meaning of that wide topic to something much more specific: welfare abuse in rents.

Since students very commonly select subjects far larger than they can possibly deal with adequately in a short paper, this problem is particularly common. It is perhaps a result of the fear many students have that if they restrict the focus too much they will not have enough to say. But this is often a serious mistake which creates insoluble problems for the writer and the reader. As a previous section stressed, organizing the argument is very difficult and often impossible if you set yourself a focus that is much too wide for the space available. I cannot emphasize this point enough.

6.5 Developing an Outline: Topic Sentences

Once you have a sense of the three or four main points you would like to make (assuming we are still dealing with a relatively short argument), you need to frame those points in the form of **Topic Sentences**. A topic sentence, as the name suggests, announces to the reader a particular topic (or stage) in the argument, a new point which you are now going to present. As such, they are key signals to the reader, indicating the direction of the argument.

The Topic Sentences you draw up will introduce each paragraph in the main body of the argument. They will announce to the reader the argumentative point you are now starting to make in support of your thesis. The clarity of the argument in the main body of the essay is going to depend, more than anything else, on the clarity and energy of these topic sentences.

In framing a good topic sentence, you should strive to answer the questions: What exactly am I arguing in this paragraph? What argumentative point do I want the reader to accept? A sentence in answer to those questions will usually provide a helpful and energetic opening to a new stage of the argument. Here are some examples:

Example A
(In an essay exploring the deficiencies in the present system of welfare in BC)

The present system by which welfare deals with rental payments to landlords invites dishonesty on the part of the welfare recipient and has created widespread abuse of the system. In fact, the present system encourages such fraud.

Example B
(From an essay arguing that the ghost in Hamlet is a major cause of what is rotten in the state of Denmark)

In this conversation between Hamlet and the ghost of his father we get a clear impression of the harsh, egotistical, sexist, and brutal sensibilities of the old warrior king. He comes across as a very unpleasant character.

Example C
(From an essay evaluating a particular poem)

The images in the poem are very unsatisfactory. They constantly rely on vague, imprecise language appealing to a warm sentimentality rather than to clear vision, rather like a commercial for some product for intimate hygiene.

Example D
(From a film review)

Another feature of the film which contributes to its quality is the excellent special effects. Again and again these provide unexpected excitement and, at times, real humour to the film.

Example E
(From an essay arguing that the use of Ritalin is a dangerous trend that should be stopped)

The widespread use of Ritalin in the schools also indicates a massive failure on the part of our education system to deal properly with the basic situation in the typical classroom. It illustrates yet again the way in which we would much sooner reach for thechemical answer to a problem, rather than use our intelligence to reorganize a conventional way of doing business.

There are some important things to notice about these topic sentences, as follows:

1. First, and most important, they all express argumentative opinions. They put on the table some specific points related to the thesis and thus advance the argumentative stance of the essay. They are not stating matters of fact (more about this later). This, as we shall see, is crucial.

2. Second, the writer takes time to establish the topic firmly, if necessary taking two (or perhaps three) sentences to get the argumentative point on the table.

3. Thirdly, they all announce single, specific points. There is no doubt about the one point that this paragraph is now going to deal with.

4. Finally, they are not putting particular evidence into the argument (that is about to come). They are setting up a new point, indicating to the reader what this paragraph is now going to deal with.

6.6 The Commonest Error in Topic Sentences

It is particularly important to notice what the topics sentences listed in the previous section are not doing: they are not stating matters of fact. That is, they are not simply stating something obvious about which there is no disagreement, but they are advancing an argumentative case.

This is a crucial point, because the most frequent way in which student arguments in essay form weaken themselves and become confusing occurs when the topic sentence is not an argumentative opinion but a statement of the obvious. Notice the difference between the above sentences and the following:

(From an essay on the abuses in the welfare system in BC): Under the present scheme of welfare, the monthly cheque pays for rental expenses.

(From an essay arguing that ghost of Hamlet's father is a major source of what is rotten in the state of Denmark): In the next scene of the play, Hamlet and his father meet on the battlements of the castle. They have a long conversation about Gertrude and Claudius. And Hamlet Senior reveals some things about his present residence in Purgatory.

(From an essay evaluating a particular poem): This poem contains a lot of images. Some of these are images of natural scenes, and others are dream images.

(From a film review): The film contains many special effects. These include a train blowing up, aliens destroying Malaspina University-College with a sticky goo, and massive explosions which knock the earth off its axis.

(From an essay arguing that the use of Ritalin is a dangerous trend that should be stopped): Ritalin is prescribed by doctors for many young school children. The parents agree with the prescription. This has been going on for many years.

These sentences do not express argumentative opinions. They express facts. There is nothing to argue about here. Hence, as topic sentences they are inherently unsatisfactory, because they do not indicate to the reader where the argument is going. And, what is particularly important, they invite the writer to abandon the argument and to devote the paragraph to a lot of obvious facts, something which is a major flaw in many arguments.

This is particularly the case with essays on literary subjects. A topic sentence like the second one above (about *Hamlet*) which simply points to a particular scene and mentions what goes on there (without offering an argumentative opinion about it) will almost certainly lead to a paragraph which simply summarizes what goes on in that scene (i.e., which offers a rehash of the obvious events of that scene). This feature obviously contributes nothing to the argument; it tells the reader only what he already knows if he has read or seen the play (the obvious details of the story). Summarizing the plot in this way is one of the commonest mistakes in essays on literary subjects, and it stems from the writer's refusal to take an argumentative stance in the topic sentence.

At any point in the main body of an argument, if you find yourself simply providing a catalogue of obvious facts (like the details of the plot in a literary fiction, the events in a historical narrative, or statistical details of a social problem), then you are not advancing the argument. You may be using up a lot of words, but you will not be doing what the essay requires.

6.7 Exercise in Topic Sentences

In the light of the remarks given in Sections 6.5 and 6.6 above, indicate which of the following series of statements would make a good topic sentence or sentences and which would not. Remember the key point: the topic sentence should announce an argumentative point and not a statement of fact about which there is no dispute.

1. Robert de Niro has appeared in many different films. He has been a leading actor for many years. He has received a number of prestigious awards for acting.

2. Later in the novel Huck meets up with two confidence men. Together they plan a number of tricks on the citizens of small towns along the river.

3. Some of the salaries paid to average professional athletes are very high. It is not uncommon to read about a regular player receiving a salary of over a million dollars a year.

4. The descriptive language in this poem is particularly effective at bringing out a feeling of extreme anger tinged with regret. Again and again, the writer focuses our attention on this mood with evocative language.

5. What sort of person is Ophelia anyway? She seems throughout most of the play to be passive and confused, as if she is always having to guess what is going on around her.

6. The political actions of the Mulroney government during the Meech Lake debate created a series of problems from which we are still trying to recover. The failure of that process and its poisonous legacy were the direct results of the cynical political tactics of the government.

7. Walt Disney's film *The Lion King* was very popular a few years ago. Recently it has been transformed into a Broadway show which has been nominated for some major awards.

8. AIDS affects a number of people in Canada, and the number is increasing. Most of the victims first develop HIV infection. The main sources of infection are dirty hypodermic needles among drug users and unprotected sex.

Make sure you understand this point how about topic sentences must advance an argumentative opinion relevant to the thesis and not just offer a statement of fact.

If you have trouble formulating a proper topic sentence, then try to set it up by completing the following sentence: *In this paragraph I wish to argue in support of my thesis the single point that*. . . If you complete the sentence with something we can argue about and then get rid of the above introductory clause, you should have a workable opening to an argumentative paragraph.

6.8 Drawing Up a Simple Outline (for a Short Essay)

The result of your preliminary organization for an argumentative essay should be a relatively detailed outline which does two things: first, it defines the argument (with a clear focus and thesis) and, second, it sets down the series of topic sentences which you intend to follow in developing the argument. These you may (perhaps) wish to adjust in the course of writing the essay, but you should not start on that project until you have an outline in place, so that you know where you are going in the total argument.

The following are two sample outlines for a short essay (about 1000 words). At this point there is no need to worry about the conclusion (we will be dealing with that later). The abbreviation TS indicates Topic Sentence (the opening of each paragraph).

Essay 1: On *Hamlet*

General Subject: *Hamlet*
Focus 1: Polonius
Focus 2: Polonius's treatment of his family

Thesis: Polonius is particularly important in the play because his attitude to his family reveals to us very clearly the emotional sterility of the court in Elsinore.

TS 1: Polonius, an important court official, is so addicted to lying, manipulation, and routine deception, even in his family life, that he has no understanding of emotional honesty.

TS 2: The relationship between Polonius and his son, Laertes, provides an important sense of Polonius's priorities, especially the way in which his values are dominated by practical worldly success rather than by genuine feelings of love.

TS 3: In his dealings with Ophelia, Polonius is a cruel bully.

Essay 2: On Narcotics

General Subject: Illegal Narcotics
Focus 1: Illegal Narcotics and the Law
Focus 2: The need to legalize narcotics

Thesis: The only appropriate solution to our present drug problem is to decriminalize all derivatives of marijuana, heroin, and cocaine immediately.

TS 1: The present situation, in which so many narcotics are illegal, is the major cause for a much bigger problem than narcotics, urban crime.

TS 2: The idea that the police and the courts, given lots of money, can somehow prevent or even reduce the supply and the consumption of illegal narcotics is totally misguided.

TS 3: Since we have many harmful narcotics legally available throughout the country, making less harmful substances illegal is foolish.

Notice how such an outline provides a very clear sense of what the essay is focusing upon, what the thesis is, and how each paragraph of the argument will start. Pay attention also how the key elements here are complete sentences (the thesis and the topic sentences) rather than just jotted points. These sentences will appear in your essay in the appropriate places.

The above outline may look simple enough. But it will usually take a good deal of thought and discussion. For some arguments you may have to do some research in order to determine just what main points you wish to include. So drawing up such an outline may be quite time consuming. But you should not start the first draft of the essay until you have something like this in place. Every five minutes you spend working on a useful outline will save you at least an hour in the writing of the paper.

6.9 Checking the Outline

Once you have an outline like one of the above samples in place, review it carefully with the following points in mind:

1. Is the thesis a clearly assertive argument, something we can dispute? Is it clear in your mind precisely what you are arguing and what you are not arguing? Can you make it any more specific and clear?

2. Is each topic sentence an opinionated assertion, something we can argue about? Are you certain that the topic sentence is not just making an obvious statement of fact?

3. Is each topic sentence stating very clearly just one important and specific opinion? Are there any ambiguities or contradictions in the topic sentence which you might clarify?

4. Are the topic sentences in the most persuasive order? If parts of your argument are much stronger than others, then normally, you should put the most persuasive point last, the second best point first, and the least persuasive point in the middle.

6.10 Some Sample Formats for Topic Sentences

Topic sentences form the major pieces of the logical framework of the argument, and thus you need to pay particular attention to framing them correctly. The following notes offer some advice on how you might like to formulate and vary the topic sentences in the essay.

A. Standard Format: Interpretative Assertion (Opinion)

A common form of topic sentence is a statement of the assertive opinion you are now going to deal with in the paragraph. The following examples illustrate the style:

1. The store itself obviously plays an important role in Sammy's decision to leave, for his walking out is a rejection of what it stands for.

2. The crucial factor in the economic crisis was the inability of the French monarchy to repay its debts.

3. Capital punishment does not, as many of its supporters claim, deter crimes of violence.

4. Odysseus's most obvious characteristic is an insatiable curiosity which overcomes all thoughts of potential danger to himself or his men.

B. Standard Format Emphasised: Interpretative Assertion (opinion) Followed by Clarification, Extension, or Emphasis.

Here the topic sentence is basically the same in form as the first, except that the writer expands on the opening sentence, making it more emphatic and clear. This is a particularly useful and common style for a topic sentence.

1. The story itself obviously plays an important role in Sammy's decision to leave, for his walking out is a rejection of what it stands for. In fact, if we attend carefully to Sammy's descriptions of where he works, we come to understand his feelings about the life he faces if he remains doing what he is doing.

2. The crucial factor in the economic crisis was the inability of the French monarchy to repay its debts. For years the King had insisted on borrowing money to conduct expensive foreign wars and glorify the court; now the money urgently needed for social problems was not available.

3. Capital punishment does not, as its supporters claim, deter crimes of violence. There is, in fact, repeated evidence that imposing capital sentences for murder has no effect whatsoever on the frequency of such crimes.

4. Odysseus's most obvious characteristic is an insatiable curiosity which overcomes all thoughts of potential danger to himself or his men. In spite of the fact that the world is full of great dangers, like the Kyklops or the Sirens, Odysseus must experience first hand all that there is to experience.

C. Question: Simple Direct Question for Emphasis

A good way to add emphasis and variety to your style is to set up the topic sentence as a question. The paragraph will then become an answer to the question.

1. What exactly is the importance in the story of the main setting of the store?

2. Why was the economy in such difficulty at this stage?

3. Does capital punishment effectively deter crimes of violence?

4. Why is Odysseus so curious about the world?

D. Double Question: Two Questions, the Second Expanding on the First, for Greater Emphasis

A really emphatic way to open a paragraph is to set up a double question, the second emphasising the point raised in the first.

1. What exactly is the importance in the story of the main setting, the store? What role does that play in Sammy's decision to leave?

2. Why was the economy is such difficulty at this stage? Why was a country as rich and powerful as France unable to meet the financial demands of the new situation?

3. What about the argument that capital punishment deters crime? Is it not the case that the threat of a lethal punishment makes potential criminals more reluctant to commit murder?

4. Why is Odysseus so curious about the world? Why, that is, does he never temper his thirst for new experience with some common-sense prudence which might lead him to avoid dangers rather than embrace the risk of them?

E. Statement of Fact and Question: Directing the Reader to a Fact in the Argument and Raising an Issue About It

Earlier in this section, we stressed that a paragraph should never open with a matter of fact, and that principle is still an important one. However, it is permissible, but only if you immediately direct the reader's attention to an argumentative point about that fact.

1. Sammy works in a standard supermarket in a small town. What is significant about this fact in the story?

2. By the mid-1780's the poverty of the agricultural classes and the poorest groups in the major cities had reached critical proportions. Why had this come about, especially in a country apparently so economically well off?

3. Supporters of capital punishment often claim that it is an effective deterrent for some people who might commit murder. But is this true?

4. Odysseus has no particular reason for visiting the Kyklops. So why then does he incur the risk, especially against the wishes and entreaties of his men?

F. Statement of Fact and a Double Question

Again, one can make the previous style of topic sentence more emphatic:

1. Sammy works in a standard supermarket in a small town. What is significant about this fact in the story? What role, if any, does the store play in Sammy decision to leave?

2. By the mid-1780's the poverty of the agricultural classes and the poorest groups in the major cities had reached critical proportions. Why had this come about, especially in a country apparently so economically well off? What was there about this particular moment that turned a widespread social problem into the fuse that lit a revolution?

3. Supporters of capital punishment often claim that it is an effective deterrent for some people who might commit murder. But is this true? Do the statistics of murder rates bear out this common contention?

4. Odysseus has no particular reason for visiting the Kyklops. So why then does he incur the risk, especially against the wishes and entreaties of his men? What is there in his character that almost requires him to undertake whatever adventures this island will bring?

6.11 Topic Sentences to Avoid

The following are some common forms of ineffective topic sentences. They are not immediately useful in an argumentative structure because they do not alert the reader to anything directly relevant to a new development in the argument. You should check to make sure that you are not offering up as topic sentences statements which fall into one of the following categories:

1. Statements of Fact which stand by themselves (i.e., which are not immediately followed by something of interpretative interest or a question, as in the examples above).

2. Major generalizations about life, liberty, morality, the nature of the world, or anything not directly related to the details of the text you are considering (e.g., "People have always wanted to believe in a God who is merciful, kind, and rational"; "Curiosity is a trait we always admire, especially in children"; "Working in a small store is always a depressing experience"; and so on).

3. Any topic sentence which introduces a point not directly relevant to the thesis you have established.

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Essays and Arguments, Section Seven

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7.0 Organizing the Main Body of the Argument (II)

By now you should have a clear idea of how to set up an outline which defines the focus and thesis of the essay clearly and which offers a series of topic sentences, each of which will initiate a new step in the argument. The main purpose of such an outline is to provide you with a clear sense of where you are going in the argument, step by step. It is really important to have this in place before you start to write the first draft.

The purpose of this section is to offer some advice on different structures for the series of topic sentences, that is, for the overall logic of the main body once you have defined the argument. There are a number of options here, especially in a longer research paper where you have more paragraphs at your disposal.

7.1 Simple Additive Structure

Once you have defined the argument in the opening paragraph, the simplest way to organize the series of topic sentences is in what we can all an additive sequence, that is, a structure in which each paragraph introduces a new argumentative point in support of the thesis. This is a very common structure for short essays on literary subjects. Here is an example (of a fictional film):

General Subject: A Film Review
Focus 1: A review of *Banana Loaf*

Thesis: The recent film *Banana Loaf* is an excellent example of what is really good and really bad about modern adventure films. While it has some obvious merits, there are also some significant problems.

TS 1: The best thing about *Banana Loaf*, a quality which brings it constantly alive, is the superb cinematography, which constantly intrigues and delights the viewer.

TS 2: A second feature of the film which enthralls the viewer is the special effects, which are consistently inventive and absorbing.

TS 3: Unfortunately, the same quality is not manifested in the characterization or the acting. These really detract from one's appreciation for the film.

Notice that in this structure each topic sentence is a separate point, each dealing with a part of the opinion established in the thesis. In this case, that main opinion is mixed (some things were good, some things were bad). The writer has established a linear structure in which each separate part of the main body adds a point to the argument.

Such a structure (which amounts to a list of separate points) is simple and effective. It is additive in the sense that the argument proceeds in a direct linear way as a series of separate points. Each paragraph is going to argue in detail the point it announces, and each paragraph in the argument introduces a new point.

This structure is particularly appropriate for a short essay, in which you present a firm thesis and a series of reasons why you think that thesis is valid. It works well in short essay on literary subjects, for example.

7.2 Acknowledging the Opposition

An important alternative to the additive structure described above is a technique for incorporating into your argument a position which does not agree with the thesis you are presenting. Notice the following sample outline:

General Subject: Pollution
Focus 1: Air Pollution
Focus 2: Acid Rain
Focus 3: Acid rain and fresh water fish

Thesis: If we do not act immediately to deal effectively with acid rain, soon we will not have fresh water fishing available to tourists or commercial fisherman except as a camp-fire memory.

TS 1: Many people do not have the faintest idea just how serious the threat of acid rain really is.

TS 2: According to many spokespeople, the cost of doing anything effective about acid rain is prohibitive; we simply cannot afford the sorts of measures that will significantly affect the problem for the better.

TS 3: But these views about the prohibitive cost totally misrepresent the problem and the real costs involved.

TS 4: Besides, we cannot afford to quibble about the price; what we stand to lose is priceless.

Notice that in this essay, which is arguing that we must do something right away about acid rain, the organization makes room in the second paragraph of the main body (TS 2) for an opposing point of view. The argument is here going to call attention to something which people who oppose the thesis will bring up (i.e., the argument is *acknowledging the opposition*).

Notice, too, that in the paragraph immediately following this introduction of the opposition's viewpoint, the argument answers that point; in other words, it counters the opposition's point.

Here are some more examples of this technique. Notice how the second outline uses the technique twice in a row.

Essay 1
General Subject: Criminal Justice System
Focus 1: Capital punishment

Thesis: There is no acceptable reason why any state should punish a criminal with death. Capital punishment should be universally illegal.

TS 1: The first cogent argument against capital punishment is that it does not deter future crimes of violence.

TS 2: Supporters of capital punishment often point to the enormous expense of keeping murderers incarcerated for years, arguing that this is an unnecessary expense.

TS 3: However, this cost analysis is seriously misleading.

TS 4: Moreover, there is always the horrible possibility that an innocent party will be convicted of a capital offence and executed.

Essay 2
General Subject: Shakespeare's *Hamlet*
Focus 1: The character of Prince Hamlet
Focus 2: The character of Prince Hamlet: Why does he delay carrying out the revenge?

Thesis: Why Prince Hamlet does not immediately kill Claudius is something of a puzzle. But a careful study of the text reveals that this delay stems from some fundamental inner emotional problem in Hamlet, something which transcends the immediate context of the murder and has something to do with his inability to escape the corrupting influence of his father.

TS 1: Hamlet is clearly suffering from some profound emotional dissatisfaction with the world. We learn of this repeatedly in the play. It is the most significant aspect of the hero's character.

TS 2: What is the origin of this dissatisfaction? Well, the scene with the ghost of his father strongly suggests that its roots lie in the overbearing nature of the old warrior king.

TS 3: Some interpreters have suggested, of course, that the delay has nothing to do with Hamlet's inner condition, but is simply a matter of a lack of opportunity.

TS 4: This apparently plausible idea, however, simply does not match the facts of the play, which show that Hamlet has frequent and easy access to Claudius.

TS 5: Other interpreters agree that Hamlet's problem is inner, but suggest that the issue is a lack of courage or a chronic inability to do anything decisive.

TS 6: This approach, too, is clearly contradicted by specific actions in the play.

TS 7: Given, therefore, that some evidence points to the relationship with his father as the source of Hamlet's problem, what additional parts of the play can we point to as supporting this claim?

This technique of admitting into the argument opposing or alternative views so that you can counter them is very useful in a number of ways. It shows the reader that you are aware of views different from your own and are prepared to meet them head on. It thus brings into the argument some variety, breadth, and sophistication.

Acknowledging the opposition in this way is not always necessary or possible, but it is almost always strongly advisable when you are dealing with a topic which is well known as disputatious and for which there are recognizable differences of opinion (e.g., welfare reform, capital punishment, abortion, the character of Hamlet, and so on) or alternative competing options.

When you are organizing an essay, and especially when you are dealing with a long argument in a research paper, ask yourself the following question: What is the single most important point someone who does not agree with my thesis is likely to bring up against my position? If there is such a single, clear opposing argument, you might thinkabout incorporating it in the essay in the above manner.

However, if you are going to apply this structural technique in an argument, make sure you observe the following principles. Otherwise you may end up weakening your argument.

1. Make sure you represent the opponent's position fairly and use his best argument. Do not create the logical fallacy of a straw-man argument; that is, do not set up a simplistic, trivial, fictional, or obviously erroneous point just so that you can knock it down. The opposing view has to be serious and substantial, and you must not distort it or simplify it.

2. Do not introduce the opposing point of view unless you are prepared to answer it in the paragraph immediately following. Obviously you cannot end the essay with a view opposing your view, so you have to make room in the essay for a proper reply to your opponent. Since a short essay has only a very few argumentative paragraphs, the technique is not nearly so common there as in a research paper, where you have room to use it repeatedly.

3. Do not introduce the opposing viewpoint unless you really can answer it convincingly. If you end up making your opponent's case sound much more logical and persuasive than your own, then the purpose of the technique is defeated.

4. Do not use the technique of acknowledging the opposition just for the sake of it. It is appropriate when there is a clear and substantial point in opposition to your own, a point which someone arguing against your position is likely to raise.

If you keep this technique in mind when you are conducting research into a topic on which you are going to be writing an essay, then you should be on the look out for opposing points of view which you might like to incorporate. Do not immediately dismiss them because they do not support the thesis you are advancing.

7.3 The Structure of a Comparative Argument

Many essay topics call for a comparison between two elements (e.g., two characters in a story, two different economic theories, two different philosophical theories or scientific explanations, two different historical actions or characters or policies, and so on). Such essays introduce special factors which you need to take into account in designing the structure of the argument.

General Observations on Comparative Arguments

The key principles to remember in a comparative essay featuring two items are that you must, first, clarify for the reader precisely what you are comparing and, second, that you must keep the comparison alive throughout the essay. One of the commonest faults of a poor comparative essay is that the comparison becomes unbalanced, that is, the essay turns into an extensive discussion of one of the two items and gives a distinctly less important place to the other.

To clarify for the reader the precise nature of the comparison which the essay is exploring, you must in the introduction to a comparative essay specify exactly a very particular focus, so that the reader understands the limits of your comparative treatment of the subjects. For example, you cannot in a short essay or even in a longer research paper compare Marx's view of human nature with Freud's. That comparison is far too large. You must, therefore, narrow down the focus of the comparison considerably to compare one aspect common to both thinkers (e.g., by comparing Marx's view of the origins of evil with Freud's views of the same subject and by omitting everything else). The reader must understand what you are looking at and what you are not looking at in the comparison.

The thesis of a comparative essay will normally be a statement of a preference for one of the two things being compared or an interpretative assertion about the differences or similarities between the two. Thus, the argument will be an attempt to establish the validity of your interpretations of the two items.

Sample Openings to a Comparative Essay

The following illustrations show how one can introduce an argument based upon a comparative evaluation. Notice that the introduction follows the customary format (subject, focus, thesis).

Essay 1: A Comparison of the Theories of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud

Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud are obviously two of the most influential thinkers of modern times. Both developed enormously important and comprehensive views of human nature and society, theories which have exerted a major and continuing influence on the way we think about ourselves and our fellow citizens. Of particular importance for us are the views of these two thinkers about the nature of evil in society. For their theories on the origin of human evil have shaped in large part the way we understand and therefore the methods we attempt to deal with the eternal problems of evil. And the differences between these two men's ideas have created continuing debates about how we should organize ourselves to mitigate human suffering. What does seem increasingly clear, however, is that, of the two great thinkers, Freud developed a much more subtle and enduring understanding of the origin of human evil; Marx's writings on the subject, though complex and still fascinating, now appear by comparison in many respects inadequate.

Essay 2: A Comparison of Two Literary Characters

In many ways Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Elisa in John Steinbeck's short story "The Chrysanthemums" face similar circumstances. Each woman lives with a husband who does not understand her intelligently, in confined circumstances with little prospect for significant change. And in the course of both stories, each woman comes to discover just how much she is being brutalized by men. However, the two women react very differently to the crisis which that recognition brings: Elisa collapses and retreats, and Nora abandons her family for a life on her own. By examining the characters of these two women and their reactions to the most important emotional crises in their lives, we can better understand the very human tensions created by married life and the enormous difficulties of finding a proper response to that situation.

Notice how in the first sample, the writer introduces the general comparison first (Marx and Freud), pointing out the basis for the similarity (two great thinkers with theories of human nature), then moves onto a very specific aspect of that general

subject (the different views on the origin of evil), and finally establishes a thesis by declaring a preference.

In the second sample above, the writer again starts with a general point which establishes the similarity between the two fictional heroines. Then the introduction moves to the specific focus of the essay (their response to an emotional crisis in their lives), and then finally establishes a thesis in an interpretative assertion. This is not the statement of a preference but an argument about the significance of the two stories.

The Structure of a Comparative Argument

Once the comparison and the basis of the argument have been defined, then you need to organize, as before, the sequence of paragraphs in the main body of the argument. In setting up the sequence of the paragraphs, you have some options, as follows:

1. You can keep the comparison alive in every paragraph, so that the argument discusses each half of the comparison in each paragraph. For example, in comparing Elisa and Nora, you could begin with a paragraph comparing their two situations, follow that with one comparing how they each react to the realization of how men have treated them, and finish with a comparison of how each woman ends up as a result of the conflict. The advantage of this structure is that it keeps the comparison between the two subjects constantly before the reader, and forces you to pay equal attention to each side of the comparison.

2. A second method for organizing the sequence of paragraphs in the main body of a comparative essay is to alternate between the two subjects. In the first paragraph of the argument, for example, you can focus on Elisa's relationship with her husband, pointing out how that defines certain things about her and her life. Then in the second paragraph of the main body, you discuss Nora's relationship with her husband, pointing out how that defines certain things about her and her life. Then in the third and fourth paragraphs you repeat the process, looking at another point in the comparison. The method gives you the chance to discuss each point in greater detail, and it also keeps the comparison alive for the reader, provided you keep alternating and making sure that you continue to discuss the same aspect of each character's life.

3. The third way of dealing with comparative essays is to say in a series of paragraphs all you want to argue about one side of the comparison and then, when you have said all you want to about that subject, switch to consider the other side of the comparison. Thus, the main body of the essay would tend to fall into two

parts: in the first you consider the first element in the comparison, and in the second half you consider the second element in the comparison. The danger with this method (and it is a considerable and common problem) is that the comparison will become lop sided, that is, you will end up writing a great deal more about one of the two items than the other. The other real danger is that you will discuss both elements, but switch the criteria of the comparison in the second half, so that you discuss different features of the second item in the comparison from those you considered in the first. If this happens, then the comparison will fall apart, because you are not comparing the same features of the two things (like comparing, say, the body styling, the fuel economy, and the interior size of one car model with the engine capacity, the transmission, and the trunk space of another car model; such a comparison is difficult to follow because the writer does not compare the two models under a common feature).

Generally, in a short essay comparing two items it is better to follow the first or the second structural design for the comparison, rather than the third. If you are comparing three items, then you need to use the second or third principle, since dealing with three or four separate items in a single paragraph will make that paragraph too bulky.

7.4 Additional Samples of Outlines for Comparative Essays

Here are two more samples of detailed outlines for essays whose central argument involves a comparison. Notice the different structural principles in the two: the first follows the first structural principle mentioned in Section 7.3 above; the second essay follows the second structural principle.

Comparative Essay A

Subject: Homer's Poems
Focus 1: Achilles and Odysseus from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*
Focus 2: A comparison between the two heroes' attitudes to war

Thesis: Odysseus in the *Odyssey* and Achilles in the *Iliad* are both frequently tested by hostile forces and combat. However, they differ in their characteristic range of responses to critical situations. A study of these two men in this regard reveals some really significant differences about the visions of life in the two poems.

TS 1: At first glance, Achilles and Odysseus share many things in common. (Paragraph goes on to discuss the similarities between the two men)

TS 2: However, they differ completely in their attitude to the war and the warrior code.

TS 3: From these differences in attitude arise the different ways Odysseus and Achilles respond to physical danger, one of the most remarkable differences in this comparison.

TS 4: Given the above, it is not surprising that Achilles and Odysseus differ considerably in the way they treat other people who face dangers with them.

Comparative Essay B

General Subject: Conflicts over Land Use
Focus 1: Foresters and Ranchers on Crown Land
Focus 2: Foresters and Ranchers on Crown Land in the BC Interior

Thesis: Both foresters and ranchers have legitimate, though different, demands on crown land. These we must recognize and accept in order to devise an equitable method of sharing a public resource.

TS 1: It is not widely recognized just how much ranchers and foresters operate together on certain public lands in the BC Interior. (Paragraph goes on to describe the similarities between the two things being compared)

TS 2: Foresters claim, with justice, that the timber on crown land is economically essential to their industry.

TS 3: However, the ranchers have a persuasive case that the same land is vital to the well being of their industry.

TS 4: The foresters accept the ranchers' statistics but argue that grazing cattle are constantly destroying newly planted seedlings.

TS 5: The ranchers, by contrast, argue that grazing cattle do not damage seedlings and are, if anything, beneficial to the newly planted areas.

TS 6: How is one to sort out these competing claims?

Notice that in both these sample outlines, the argument starts by insisting that the two things being compared are sufficiently similar to bear the comparison. That is often an important point. You should not launch a comparison without indicating

why you think these two items belong together in a comparison. For instance, if you set up a comparison in which you compared, say, roller skates and automobiles, the reader might genuinely wonder about what these things have in common that enables the comparison between them to make any argumentative sense.

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Essays and Arguments, Section Eight

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8.0 Paragraph Structure

Up to this point we have been concentrating on the overall logic of an argument. The emphasis has been on developing a clear logical framework for the argument, in the form of a detailed outline, so that you know from the start the central claim of the essay and the way in which each paragraph will contribute to that argument.

If you can now formulate a clear focus, thesis, and sequence of topic sentences, then your essay will have a firm logical framework. It will be clear what you are trying to achieve and how you are proposing to achieve the argumentative point of the essay or speech. No matter what you write further, if you stick to the outline you have proposed and if it is a good one, the reader will be clear about the purpose and direction of the argument. Now, we must turn to the matter of the specific details of the argument which will turn that framework and intention into a convincing complete argument.

The next two sections focus on the paragraphs which you construct on the basis of the topic sentences you have established for the main body of the argument. That is, they discuss various ways in which the particular details of the argument, which flesh out theoutline you have drawn up, can be constructed.

This section deals primarily with those paragraphs which will make up the main body of the argument in a short essay. In a later section we will discuss further some paragraphs that you may need to write as part of the definition of the argument or as ways to supplement the argument in a longer research paper.

8.1 Paragraphs in the Main Body of the Argument

Once you have defined an argument and settled on an outline for the main body, you then need to construct the details of that argument, paragraph by paragraph. If you have thought carefully about the series of topic sentences and have written them down in sequence, then you should know how you intend to proceed. These topic sentences in the outline will form the opening sentences for each paragraph of the argument.

The key principle to bear in mind, as you set out on the argument, is that any single paragraph can deal with only one item: the argumentative point established in the topic sentence. Hence, the major purpose of the paragraph is to provide the argumentative details which will make that topic sentence persuasive to the reader. That means, in effect, that each paragraph forms a sub-argument related to the main thesis; it advances a point in support of that thesis and argues it.

The argument in the paragraph will be either a deductive argument, an inductive argument, or, less commonly, a combination. What that means is that in each paragraph you will either establish a common and agreed upon general principle and apply it to a specific case, to produce a deductive conclusion, or you will provide facts, research data, quotations from the text and produce an inductive conclusion.

Here are two examples of paragraphs taken from the main body of an argument against capital punishment. Each has a clear topic sentence, and each conducts the reader to a conclusion at the end which reinforces and repeats the topic sentence. Notice that the first has a deductive structure (no collected information is introduced; the argument comes entirely from principles), and the second has an inductive structure (note that the statistics and the references in the second are fictional; they are there only as examples of the style).

Sample Paragraph A

The first compelling argument against capital punishment is that it is morally indefensible. If we consider the argument from a Christian standpoint, we have the prohibition on killing in the Ten Commandments. In addition, we learn from the Bible that vengeance belongs to the Lord. However we describe capital

punishment, it clearly involves killing another human being and, in many cases, assuming responsibility for avenging the death of someone else. From the point of view of secular human rights, too, there are many principles in place which encourage us to agree that the deliberate taking of a human life, especially in circumstances where the person killed is defenceless against the invincible power of the state and where the state's action constitutes cruel and unusual punishment, is morally wrong. It may well be that our feelings are often outraged at the particular barbarity of the original murder, that the guilt of the murderer is beyond doubt, that he or she shows no signs of repentance, and that society carries a considerable cost for incarcerating a murderer for life, all that may be true. None of it, however, removes from us the awareness that for a group of rational human beings to sanction the state killing of an individual, especially when there is no immediate threat to any other individual or to the state collectively, is never morally justifiable. (226 words)

Sample Paragraph B

The argument that we need capital punishment in order to reduce the cost of maintaining the penal system is quite misplaced. There is no evidence that executing murderers will save us money. A number of studies of this question have shown that, on average, it costs about $50,000 per year to keep a maximum security offender in jail (Schneider, 1990; Ross and Sinclair 1996). A person who serves, say, a 25-year sentence, therefore, costs the state about $1,250,000. However, in countries which show some concern about the rights of the accused to a full and fair process, a system which has capital punishment for murder requires far more elaborate trials and a much lengthier and more expensive appeal process for capital offences than for non-capital offences. In addition, the cost of the execution itself is not insignificant. Recent studies by Gardner (1998) have shown that in the United States the cost of the various judicial processes and of the execution for convicted murderers is up to 30 percent higher than the cost of keeping them in jail for life. Other similar studies by McIntyre (1990) and Jackson (1995) have come to the same conclusion. There is, in other words compelling reason seriously to question one of the most frequent claims made in support of capital punishment: that it will reduce costs significantly. In fact, if saving money is the main concern in the penal system, we should get rid of capital punishment immediately. (244 words)

Both of these paragraphs are opposing capital punishment. The first is arguing deductively. It does not appeal to facts but to agreed principles which it applies to the example of capital punishment. The second is arguing inductively. It presents information, data, statistics gathered by research.

Notice that each paragraph begins with a clear topic sentence which announces the opinion being presented in the paragraph, and each finishes by bringing the reader back to that opinion. And each paragraph is substantial, more than 200 words. It deals with the point thoroughly.

8.2 Paragraphs Making Inductive Argument

Most of the argumentative paragraphs you write will resemble the second example above, that is, they will be presenting inductive arguments, based upon evidence. As we have already discussed, the strength of this argument is going to depend, in part, upon the nature of the evidence you present. No inductive argument which lacks reliable evidence will be persuasive.

Sources of Evidence

Evidence comes from many places, depending upon the nature of the argument you are making. Here are some of the principal sources for evidence in inductive arguments:

1. In essays on literature, the evidence comes almost entirely from the text of the work you are evaluating, that is, from the words on the page. Hence, an important principle in writing convincing arguments about literature is sticking closely to the text and anchoring what you have to argue on specific details which are really in the text, either with direct references to such details or with quotations.

2. Essays about films or the fine and performing arts get their evidence from what the work itself contains. For instance, a film or a CD review should base itself closely on what people actually see and hear. A review of a painting or an art exhibition bases itself what is in the art works.

3. Evidence can also come from your own research, that is, from data you yourself have collected as part of field work (e.g., questionnaire results) or experimental data you have collected in the laboratory.

4. Evidence also comes from secondary sources, that is, from books, articles, reports about the subject you are discussing. This is particularly the case in social science and science arguments (like the second example in Section 8.1 above) and in research papers generally. In using such evidence, as we have mentioned before, it is important that you select an up-to-date and reliable source (and one that is recognized as reliable).

Evidence does not come from sources which cannot be checked (for example, imagined details of a fictional story or unacknowledged secondary sources or subjective recesses of the writer's memories) or vague appeals to unspecified authorities or named celebrities.

Interpreting Evidence

A really important principle of inductive arguments is the following: Evidence by itself is rarely persuasive, unless the writer interprets the significance of that evidence. In other words, once you have placed some facts into the argument, you must discuss those facts to show how they establish the point you are arguing in the paragraph.

This is a crucial point, especially in arguments about literature. It is never enough in a paragraph arguing about a point in literature simply to offer a quotation from the text or a series of such quotations. While such evidence is essential, it is unpersuasive unless the writer then interprets that evidence, that is, offers a discussion about what the quotation contains which suggests that the point of view advanced in the paragraph is valid.

The same point holds for statistical evidence. Simply presenting a table of data, for example, in support of an argumentative point is not very persuasive, unless, immediately after the table, the writer then directs the reader's attention at those details in the table which are relevant and explains how they support the argumentative point which the paragraph is trying to make.

Here is an example of a paragraph from an essay on *Hamlet* in which the writer is presenting an inductive argument, using details from the text to support a claim about the play. Notice that the argument does not just offer evidence; it interprets that evidence to show how it helps to endorse the claim made in the topic sentence:

Hamlet's opening soliloquy in 1.2 reveals immediately that he is in a very peculiar emotional state, in contrast to everyone else at court. The prevailing sense is clearly that of a personality morbidly obsessed with death and preoccupied in a most unhealthy way with female sexuality. The emphasis on death comes out clearly in the references to suicide (129-132). And there runs throughout the speech a sense of hatred for fertility and sexuality in the world. Notice especially the following lines:

'Tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. (135-137)

Here we see what later emerges as a characteristic tendency in Hamlet to reduce human experience to the lowest, most unsatisfactory terms. For him life is a "garden," but he rejects all the conventionally pleasant (even paradisal) associations of that term, by seeing the place as "unweeded," a place where vigorous and unchecked wild nature has taken over in a riot of reproductive energy. The adjectives "rank" and "gross" convey a strong sense of disgust, with marked sexual undertones, and the last word in the sentence, "merely," sounds almost like a sneer. If we recognize from his refusal to participate in the action at the court a sense that he is, right at the start of the play, alienated from the social life of the court, then his manner of expressing himself to himself, that is, of thinking aloud, creates an initial feeling of an overreaction arising from some desire to see the worst. It is true that Hamlet has just lost his father, and his mother has remarried his uncle. But this does not appear to upset anyone else unduly, so the very strong language he uses here to express his deepest thoughts immediately conveys to the reader the suggestion of an unhealthy and excessively morbid response to loss. (302 words)

Notice that in the above paragraph the writer has selected a few details from a particular part of the text and drawn the attention of the reader to them. But she has not simply left the evidence there for the reader to figure out. She takes almost all the second half of the paragraph to comment on the evidence she has introduced, explaining to the reader how it brings out the point which she has announced as the topic for the paragraph (i.e., interpreting the evidence).

Make quite sure you understand this point. Evidence requires interpretation which links the facts to the point being made in the topic sentence of the paragraph. It will not satisfactorily carry the argument unless the writer makes this connection for the reader. Thus, if your inductive arguments merely present evidence, with no interpretation, they will not be very persuasive, no matter how much evidence you introduce, because the reader will fail to understand the ways in the which the evidence substantiates the points you are trying to establish. Do not think that the quantity of evidence (smothering the reader with quotations, statistics, and other data) will carry the argument without your interpretative explanations.

Now, interpretation is something students tend at first to find difficult (hence they tend to supply far too much evidence without discussion). Interpretation requires an educated response to data (an eye for significant detail) and a suitable vocabulary to express that response. Hence, much of the work in undergraduate

courses involves educating students in ways of interpreting the data most relevant to the field of study. And if your arguments are going to be at all persuasive in the details you present, you have to learn how to carry out such interpretation.

Once you begin to grasp and to practice this principle of interpreting the evidence you introduce, you should be using up most of the paragraph for this purpose (as in the above example). And your argumentative style will begin to change, so that you introduce less evidence but discuss in greater detail the evidence you do introduce.

When students complain, as they often do, of not having enough to say about a particular topic, of having said all they have to say and still having many hundreds of words to complete the requirements of the argument, the reason is always the same: there is insufficient interpretation. The essay may be establishing good topic sentences and putting useful evidence on the table. But a main part of the argument, the interpretation of evidence, is missing. By contrast, students who learn to interpret properly then often face a problem of not having enough space, since thorough interpretation takes up much of the essay.

In general, the best essays tend to be those with a relatively narrow focus, in which the evidence presented is good evidence but not overwhelming in volume, and in which the interpretation of the evidence presented is first-rate and thorough. The quality of the interpretation, in fact, is one of the key features characterizing an A essay.

8.3 Some Important Symptoms of Poor Argumentative Paragraphs

Given the points mentioned above, you can often recognize quite easily by some characteristic symptoms whether your essay is fulfilling the requirements of a good inductive argument.

1. If your paragraphs are quite short (i.e., less than, say, 150 words), then they are almost certainly not carrying out a thorough argument. As should be clear from the various examples given above, introducing the topic sentence, presenting evidence, and interpreting the evidence in detail should take up a substantial amount of space. So if, when you look at the visual appearance of your essay, you notice that the paragraphs are changing very five or six lines, then something is wrong. It most cases, the problem will be that you are not doing enough interpretation.

2. As you review your essay, look carefully at those places where you have quoted some material, either from the text which is the subject of the argument or from a

secondary source. Ask yourself this question: What is going on in the essay immediately after the quotation? If you are not at that point discussing the significance of the quotation for the argument the paragraph is making (i.e., interpreting the quotation), then you are probably neglecting an essential part of the argument.

3. Finally, how much of each paragraph is taken up with quotations from the text or from secondary sources? If these make up the major part of the paragraph, then you are probably overloading the argument with evidence and not providing sufficient interpretation of the evidence. As a general rule, select the best evidence available, and interpret it thoroughly, rather than trying to stuff the essay with quotations.

8.4 Paragraph Unity

A key characteristic of good paragraphs is that they exhibit unity, that is, everything in the paragraph is linked directly to the main point announced in the topic sentence. There are no digressions into other subjects or additional points brought into the middle of the paragraph. Everything is relevant to the single argumentative point of that paragraph.

Notice in the following paragraph how the logic of the argument announced in the topic sentence begins to go astray as soon as the writer introduces another point, not directly linked to the topic:

Elisa's main problem in this story is that she is uncertain about her femininity. We sense this problem in the way she dresses, something emphasised in the opening description of her. Her figure looks "blocked and heavy." She wears a man's hat pulled low over her face. She does wear a dress, but that is almost totally concealed under a heavy apron, so that we get the impression of a woman who is hiding something, a sense that is strongly reinforced by the narrator's description of her clothes as a "costume," something worn by actors impersonating someone else. The setting also sound quite isolated and lonely, as if there is no daily human contact with a community of friends. And the fact that the story is set at a time when the fields are "brown" and without a crop evidently coming to fruition, a time of "waiting," creates a sense that Elisa has no immediate fulfilment in her daily life. Elisa's conduct when the stranger arrives is thus quite understandable; she is uncertain about how to deal with a sudden intrusion, especially a strange man. All these details reveal clearly that Elisa has some significant emotional insecurities.

This paragraph begins by announcing a very specific topic, the relationship between the description of Elisa's clothing and our sense of her uncertainty about her femininity. And the first few details focus on that well, with evidence and useful interpretation. But then the writer switches to something else (the setting) and then, a bit later, to something else (the arrival of the stranger). Hence, by the end the reader has lost contact with the specific point announced at the start. Thus, the unity of this paragraph has disappeared.

It is important to concentrate on paragraph unity and to keep out of a paragraph things not immediately relevant to what the topic sentence announces. If you suddenly decide that there is an important point you must include in the argument, make it in a separate paragraph.

One way in which inexperienced writers commonly interrupt the unity of the paragraph (and the argument) is suddenly to stray into large questions far outside the scope of the focus you have defined. Once you start the argument, you should stay specifically on that, without invoking huge generalizations which lie outside the specific area you have defined. If you want to link the argument to bigger questions, then do that in the conclusion.

For example, if you are writing an argumentative essay about the significance of Hamlet's abusive treatment of women in *Hamlet*, then stay on that particular subject. Do not stray into generalizations about men and women or about the history of Denmark or gender-based violence or the treatment of the same theme in other plays. If you find yourself writing about something in general, something not directly pertinent to the specific details of the argument as you have defined it, then you are almost certainly weakening the unity of the argument.

8.5 Paragraph Coherence

A second important characteristic of argumentative paragraphs is that they must be coherent, that is, the argument going on in them must flow logically from sentence to sentence, so that the reader moves from the opening declaration of the topic (in the topic sentence), through the evidence and interpretation, to the conclusion of the paragraph in a clear linear fashion, with no erratic jumps or confusing interruptions.

A Useful Blueprint for Achieving Paragraph Coherence

The most logically coherent form for a paragraph presenting an inductive argument is as follows:

1. Topic sentence, an argumentative assertion announcing the main point the paragraph is seeking to make, perhaps followed by one or two sentences reinforcing and clarifying the argumentative stance in this paragraph;

2. Evidence in the form of direct references to the text, quotations, statistics, summaries of relevant research data, and so on.

3. Interpretation of the evidence, a section which discusses in detail how the particular evidence you have introduced helps to back up the argumentative point announced in the topic sentence;

4. (Optional) Any qualifications you want to introduce to limit the argument, and especially to clarify the reliability of the evidence and thus the interpretations you have made of it (for examples, see below);

5. Final summary point bringing the reader back to the point stressed in the topic sentence.

This is by no means the only possible coherent structure for an argumentative paragraph, but, if you follow it closely, the resulting argument will be coherent, since this follows the standard logic of an inductive argument: This is what I am claiming; here is my evidence; this is what the evidence indicates; here are any reservations I haveabout the evidence; and thus I have established the claim I began with.

Notice how this format works in the following paragraph, moving from topic sentence(s) to evidence, to interpretation, to qualification, and finally to a restatement of the original point. Here again, the references are imaginary, included simply to show anexample of the style.

It is clear that our attempts to control the spread of illegal narcotics are not producing the results we had hoped for, and it is thus high time we assessed the value of our anti-drug measures. As we redouble our efforts and give the police additional powers, the street price of illegal narcotics continues to decline, a sure sign that the supply is becoming more plentiful (Jackson, 1997). A recent study of the street trade in Vancouver confirms our worst fears: addiction is increasing in the city, street prices are falling, and the illegal infrastructure is growing in power (Callows, 1998). Other studies of the same city have shown that there is an increasing supply reaching school children (Smart, 1995; Stuart, 1997). This increase is naturally producing more young addicts (Thomas, 1997). What do these results indicate? It doesn't take much brain power to figure out that the war on drugs, for which we are paying so much money, is not having much success, if

reducing or eliminating the supply is still a major goal. It's true that we have to be careful with the results of some of these studies, for their methods are not always as reliable as they might be, and there are often political agendas at work in the studies of our narcotics problem. Nevertheless, the recent literature, none of which offers any firm evidence that our combat against narcotics is achieving anything positive (other than enriching criminals and empowering police forces) must surely give us reason to pause before we hurl millions more dollars into programmes which are not working. For there is no evidence at all that such an expenditure will achieve anything socially helpful. The money will, we can be certain, largely go to waste. (292 words)

Transition Words as Logical Indicators

The key to sustaining the coherence of a paragraph is often the appropriate use of transition words. These are words or phrases, usually right at the start of a sentence, which indicate the logical direction of the new sentence in relation to what has just been said. They link what has just been written to what is now being offered.

Here are a few examples (the transition elements are in bold).

In addition to this point, there are many studies which establish a relationship between the income of one's parents and success in school.

By contrast, other passages of the poem suggest a totally different mood.

This emphasis on pharmaceutical intervention, **however**, brings with it real dangers. **For example**, the medication often brings immediately harmful side effects. **Moreover**, it can **also** create long-term addiction. **Beyond that**, there is the question of the expense. **This being the case**, one wonders why we are so keen to continue with this medication.

Moreover, rock 'n' roll music has exercised an important influence on civil rights in North America. **In fact**, in popular music since the 1950's, more than in any other activity (with the possible exception of professional sports), black people have won fame, fortune, and lasting status among the white middle-class. **For example**, thousands of eager white people all over North America have lined up to attend concerts by Prince, Michael Jackson, Chubby Checker, Tina Turner, the Supremes, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and many, many other black performers. **In addition**, black singing stars have ever since the late 1950's been in demand with companies seeking high-profile figures to endorse products aimed at the white middle classes. **Indeed**, it is now a common sight to see white and black

performers working together on prime-time television, without regard to the colour of their skins. **This** phenomenon, we sometimes forget, is very different from the situation before the 1950's. **Then**, in some places no white group could appear on stage with a drummer (white or black), because the drum was considered a black instrument. **Moreover**, there was a rigidly enforced distinction between black music and white music. Radio stations, **for instance**, played one type of music or the other, not both. **However**, since the advent of rock 'n' roll all that has altered. **To be sure**, many other factors were involved in this important and complex social change. **That** cannot be denied. **Still**, we should not deny our popular musicians the credit which is their due. **For** without their pervasive influence and talent, often in difficult conditions, **this** improvement in race relations would have come about much more slowly than it did.

Look carefully at these words in bold. Most of them could be removed from the sentences, without damage to the sense. What would be lost, however, is the constant presence of words and phrases linking elements in the argument and providing the reader a sense of the logical relationship of the element coming up to what has gone before.

An intelligent use of transition words really helps to create and sustain the coherence of a paragraph, enabling the reader easily to follow the logical connections from one sentence to the next.

A Catalogue of Transition Words

The list below indicates some of the common transition words indicating logical connections between sentences and paragraphs. The words are grouped according to the logical function they carry out (this list is not meant to be comprehensive).

1. Words indicating a continuity with what has gone before: *and*, *in addition*, *moreover*, *furthermore*, *also*, *indeed*, *besides*, *secondly*, *next*, *similarly*, *again*, *equally important*, *beyond that*.

2. Words indicating an example or illustration of a point introducing evidence: *for example*, *for instance*, *as an illustration*.

3. Words adding emphasis to a point which is reinforcing a previous point: *in fact*, *in other words*, *that is*, *indeed*, *as a matter of fact*.

4. Words indicating a conclusion from or a result of what you have just been discussing: *thus*, *hence*, *therefore*, *consequently*, *as a result*.

5. Words indicating a contrast with what has just been said: *but*, *however*, *nevertheless*, *by contrast*, *on the other hand*, *conversely*.

6. Words indicating a qualification, doubt, or reservation about what you have just been discussing: *no doubt*, *of course*, *to be sure*.

7. Words indicating a summary statement is coming up: *in short*, *all in all*, *in brief*, *in conclusion*, *to conclude*, *given all this*.

8. Pronoun and adjectival links to something which has gone before: *this*, *that*, *the above-mentioned*, *such*.

9. Words establishing time relationships (important in narrative paragraphs): *after*, *afterwards*, *then*, *later*, *before*, *while*, *at the same time*, *immediately*, *thereupon*, *next*, *meanwhile*, *subsequently*, *previously*, *simultaneously*.

10. Words indicating spatial relationships (important in physical descriptions): *above*, *beside*, *next to*, *on the other side*, *facing*, *parallel*, *across from*, *adjacent*.

An Exercise in Transition Words

In the spaces provided in the following paragraph, provide from the list above (or from other similar phrases) transition words or phrases which will help the logical coherence of the following paragraph. Read the paragraph once or twice before starting to fill in the blank spaces. Then, when you have finished, read the passage over again, making sure the words are helping to clarify the logic of the sequence of sentences.

The claim is often made that conducting conventional research and publishing the results in academic journals is essential to maintain a high quality of instruction of undergraduates. ______________ this claim is so common, that it is part of the official policy of the Canadian Association of University Teachers. ______________ it is not uncommon for evaluations of the quality of teaching at a post-secondary institution to factor in the research output of the

faculty. ____________ is this claim true? __________ is it the case that college teachers cannot do a good job unless they maintain a research output? Well, a number of studies suggest that there is no basis for this belief. _________________ a study by Johnston (1991) which explored the various studies of this question concluded that results consistently show no relationship between the quality of undergraduate instruction and research output. ______________ there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence which claims the same thing. _______________ there is no reliable evidence that there is a significant connection between the two activities, something which would support the common claim. _____________ the frequent emphasis on the importance of research to maintain an acceptable level of undergraduate teaching would appear to be unproven, a cultural myth perhaps designed to perpetuate what faculty want to do rather than what the most urgent priorities of the institution really are. ___________ this is a difficult question, because teaching quality is notoriously difficult to assess. ___________, given the amount of money spent to reduce the number of classes taught in order to promote research activity, one would think that some evidence would be required to justify the practice. ___________ this does not seem to bother most institutions. __________ they cheerfully continue to spend instructional money to support research. _________ the faculty

keep demanding more time away from class in order to be better

teachers.

8.6 Concluding Paragraphs

An argumentative essay should normally finish with a conclusion and sometimes, depending on the subject, with conclusions and recommendations. The conclusions and recommendations (if there are any) should be placed in the last paragraph(s).

Good conclusions are often difficult to write. It is best to leave them until you have finished the first draft of the paper, so that you have a complete sense of the argument as you have presented it. Now you are ready to leave the reader with some final concluding thoughts.

In thinking about how to write a conclusion, you might benefit from onsidering the following ideas:

1. The conclusion should not continue the argument by introducing new material. It is a place to sum up the argument which has come to an end in the final paragraph of the main body of the argument. Hence, you should never introduce new points in the conclusion.

2. The main purpose of the conclusion is to sum up the argument, to re-emphasize the thesis, and to leave the reader thinking about the importance of the argument, perhaps in a wider context. In a sense, its purpose is the reverse of the introduction: the conclusion moves the reader from the particular emphasis of the argument and takes it out into a wider context (if this seems confusing, check some of the examples below).

3. There are a number of things a writer should be careful not to do in the concluding paragraph. You should not, as mentioned, suddenly introduce a new point, nor should you disqualify the argument you have just presented with a comment like "But all this is just my opinion," or "But I really don't know that much about the subject." Make sure the conclusion is a confident reassertion of the main point of the argument.

4. Here are some things you might do in a conclusion: you can sum up the argument you have conducted and re-emphasize the thesis you set down at the beginning, you can move back from the specific focus and place the argument in a

larger context (see example below), you can leave the reader with some specific recommendations or questions to think about, or you can point to the future and invite the reader to consider what you have said in that context.

Here are some sample conclusions. Notice how the writer does not continue the argument (which is over) but tends to draw back to place the issue in a wider perspective and, at the same time, to reinforce for the reader the central argument which the essay has been presenting.

Conclusion A (from an essay arguing that Hamlet's character is not that of the ideal prince but is badly flawed)

All of the above points indicate quite clearly that, whatever the origin of the evil in Elsinore, the prince himself is one source of the sickness in the court. As we have seen, again and again in the play Shakespeare brings out Hamlet's essential immaturity, morbidity, aggressive hostility to women, and characteristic duplicity. Of course, there is more to the man than just these elements and more to the play than just the character of the prince. Moreover, Hamlet's character, like the play, is very complicated and ambiguous. It will always have elusive elements. However, as this essay has argued, the emphasis on the unhealthy aspects of Hamlet's personality is so strong and frequent in the play that, however we finally assess the hero, we must take into account his own obvious inadequacies, all too clearly a source, if not the only source, for the "something . . . rotten in the state of Denmark."

Conclusion B (from an essay arguing that the failure of the Meech Lake Accord was a direct result of the ineptitude of the federal government)

Well, we no longer have a Meech Lake debate. And the federal government's next initiative on the troublesome question of the Canadian constitution and the status of Quebec is anybody's guess. Given the feelings generated by the almost interminable Mulroney-sponsored debate over the accord and the many miscalculations of the national mood, factors which scuttled government strategy, it seems unlikely that the federal Conservatives will be eager to resurrect a national soul-searching on constitutional questions. Besides, it appears as if Quebec and the native people will be setting the agenda in the months ahead. But when the time comes for another national effort on the constitution, we can only hope that the federal government will be considerably more astute than the Mulroney Tories, who turned a potential agreement into a nation-wide desire to separate.

Conclusion C (from an essay arguing that the only rational solution to our narcotics problem is to legalize all drugs)

Surely it's time we recognized the facts of life: that our efforts to stamp out illegal narcotics are only succeeding in enriching organized crime, providing the police with dangerous new powers, filling our prisons with young people, and encouraging many others to break the law. And, as I have mentioned, we need to remember that the narcotics we are trying to stamp out are less dangerous than many legal substances in widespread use. So instead of devising new utopian and increasingly expensive and futile schemes to eliminate drugs, we should move at once to change the law and to make cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and their derivatives as legal as tobacco, alcohol, Valium, and Ritalin.

Notice carefully what each writer does in the above samples.

Conclusion A (about Hamlet) opens by summarizing the main thrust of the argument throughout the paper, reminding the reader one more time of what each paragraph has been presenting. Then the writer moves back to consider the topic in the context of the entire play, adding a qualification to indicate that she realizes there is more to the topic than one short essay can deal with. Finally, the concluding sentences answer the qualification by stressing the main point: the unhealthy aspects of Hamlet's character are a significant part of the play. This strategy of using the conclusion to place the specific issue of the essay in the wider context of the entire work is often useful in conclusions to essays on literary subjects.

Conclusion B (about Meech Lake), now that the argument is over, speculates about the future. What is going to happen next? In offering a couple of general answers to that question, the writer calls attention to the main points in the essay, the incompetent handling of the issue by the federal government. There is no call here for future action, because the writer is not recommending anything. He is making a tentative prediction (or mentioning a future hope). This enables him to reinforce the main point of the essay. Such a conclusion is often helpful in an essay discussing a modern political or historical issue.

Conclusion C (about narcotics) opens with a quick but very specific summary (almost in the form of a list) of the main points of the essay (each of which has been discussed in detail during the main argument), and finishes with a specific recommendation for future action. Such a structure is quite common in the concluding paragraph of an essay exploring a modern social issue and demanding action.

8.7 Recommendations

Sometimes the argument you are conducting will require recommendations, in fact, your thesis may well be in the form of one or more recommendations. Such a requirement is quite common in arguments which are urging the need for particular social or political responses to problems.

The first thing to note is that a recommendation is not the same thing as a conclusion. A conclusion arises, as we have seen, out of a deductive or inductive argument. It is the logical result of a process of reasoning, and it indicates the completion of a thought process. A recommendation is, as the name suggests, a statement urging action. Alternatively put, a conclusion says, in effect, "This is the case" or "This is very probably the case"; a recommendation says "This is what we must (or should) do about the case."

Logically speaking, recommendations should normally follow conclusions. That is, the thought process and argument which result in our understanding a problem better should come before the proposals for how we should address the problem. This, I take it, is generally obvious enough. We cannot review options and recommend a course of action, until we have drawn conclusions about what the problem is.

None of this is something you need worry about, unless the argument is leading up to a series of recommendations, unless, that is, the major purpose of the argument is to urge the readers to think about a series of practical measures which should be implemented. Such a requirement is not uncommon in papers exploring social problems or policy analysis, but it is rare in arguments about literature or philosophy. If you are leading up to a series of recommendations as a major purpose of the argument, then separate the conclusions from the recommendations, present the conclusions first, and then in a separate paragraph present the recommendations, usually in the form of a numbered list.

Notice the following example of the end of an argument in which the conclusions precede the recommendations and the latter are presented in the form of a list:

Sample Conclusion and Recommendation Ending to a Paper

As this argument has pointed out repeatedly, there is no reliable evidence that the quality of teaching in universities and colleges is linked at all with quantity or quality of conventional research and publishing activities. Simply put, the frequent claim that conventional research is essential to good teaching has no basis in fact. It may be true, of course, but there is as yet no evidence to support the claim. Indeed the consistent result of studies into this question, as we have shown,

confirm the lack of a relationship. Given this well known point, it is indeed curious that university and college faculty, whose major task is educating undergraduates in correct reasoning, should continue to insist upon such an unsubstantiated assertion in such an illogical fashion, to the point where it has become an article of faith in faculty culture, a myth. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore why that might be the case; suffice it to say that we should keep this conclusion in mind when we evaluate how to spend the money we allocate for undergraduate instruction.

On the basis of this well established conclusion, however, we should insist upon some important reforms in undergraduate education, especially in the university-colleges, which, unlike most large universities, have no mandate to conduct research:

1. The instructional budget should provide no release time for instructors to conduct research (i.e., we should not cut classes and courses to fund independent faculty research), unless there is some exceptional need for a particular project to deal with a problem of immediate importance to the institution.

2. Instructors should, under no circumstances, be ranked or evaluated according to their research output.

3. The processes of hiring new faculty should cease to consider research qualifications and performance and concentrate exclusively upon the teaching experience and qualifications of the candidates as the major criteria.

4. The curriculum should be much more closely designed to meet the learning needs of the students rather than the research interests of the faculty.

5. If prevailing faculty culture insists that research time is essential to maintain the quality of instruction, then we should inform them firmly and repeatedly that, in the interests of reason, we will listen to any arguments they wish to present, provided only there is some reliable evidence to support their claim. Until such time, however, we are going to proceed with the reforms listed above.

Notice how in this example, the conclusions come first. They sum up the argument which has already concluded. The final paragraph lists some specific recommendations and finishes by urging that we implement these.

Such a structure is, as mentioned, of particular importance only in those arguments whose main purpose is to analyze a problem, reach some conclusions about the source of the problem, and make recommendations about how we might deal with it.

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Essays and Arguments, Section Nine

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9.0 Paragraph Functions

In the previous sections we considered some basic properties of paragraphs, particularly the introductory paragraph(s), the concluding paragraphs, and the structure of paragraphs in the middle of an argument. In this section, we continue to look at paragraphs, but in a more complex way. The material here will be particularly relevant to organizing and writing a longer research paper.

9.1 The Basic Functions of Paragraphs

In the previous section, we stressed that any one paragraph can make only a single point, if we wish to maintain the unity and coherence of that paragraph. Another way of saying the same thing is to state that any one paragraph can carry out only a single function. Once you have decided on what you want that paragraph to do, then it becomes easier to fit it into the developing logic of the entire argument.

To develop a fuller understanding of paragraphs as having particular functions, here is a list of all the things which paragraphs in an argument can do.

1. Introduction to an Argument: We have already discussed this in some detail earlier in this handbook (the subject-focus-thesis paragraph at the start). You should be very clear about the key function this sort of a paragraph carries out.

2. Definition: The paragraph can offer an extended definition of a key term or series of terms, of the sort we have considered earlier in this handbook.

3. Narration: A paragraph can serve the function of telling a story, a chronological series of details which will clarify for the reader facts important for the argument.

4. Physical Description: A paragraph can describe at length a particular scene or object, in order to clarify important details for the reader.

5. Illustration: A paragraph can provide a single detailed example at some length (of a person, a sample of a text, and so on).

6. Analysis: A paragraph can serve the function of breaking a complex topic up into its component parts so that the reader understands just what is involved in the larger term (e.g., the paragraph might analyze the various parts of a nuclear reactor or, to take something more bewildering, the administrative structure of a college).

7. Comparison: A paragraph can compare two different objects or characters or styles under a common heading.

8. Argument from Causes to Effects: A paragraph can make the argument that certain factors will lead to certain results (e.g., how the present abortion law affects the lives of pregnant women for the worse).

9. Argument from Effects to Causes: A paragraph can make the argument that certain effects have particular causes (e.g., Hamlet behaves the way he does because he is terrified of his father).

10. Argumentative Assertion: A paragraph can present a case for an argumentative assertion that does not fit one of the above categories (as we outlined in the previous section).

11. Conclusion to an Argument: A paragraph can serve to conclude an argument (with or without recommendations included), as we considered at the end of Section 8.

It's important you review this list carefully. It tells you the various tools you have for structuring your argument. Notice that some of these paragraphs (especially the first six and the last) do not usually have an argumentative function; instead they define, clarify, illustrate, or in other ways supplement the argument (i.e., present information necessary to follow the argument).

Some of these tools have designated places and very specific functions (e.g., the Introduction and the Conclusion). Others you might want to use in different places, or you might not want to use them at all.

9.2 Exercise in Topic Sentences Announcing the Function of a Paragraph

Below is a list of topic sentences. Indicate what function you, as a reader, are expecting the rest of the paragraph to serve. You can refer to the numbered list above.

1. First, it is important we all understand exactly what acid rain is.

2. The Ministry of Forests is a complex bureaucracy made up of a large number of different divisions.

3. The present ministry regulations create some severe problems for the sports fisherman in BC.

4. Of all the coastal native people, the Haida have the proudest history.

5. There are a number of features of the style of this poem which contribute to a sense of emotional tension.

6. Consider the case of Anita Jones, a chronic user of heroin who has been asking for help for years.

7. To some extent we can see the hero's frustration as the direct result of the home environment in which he lives.

8. Before considering this point in more detail, we should clarify precisely what the present law concerning adoption in BC states.

9. To understand the political sensitivity of west coast oil drilling, one needs to know something about the environment and communities of the Gulf Islands.

10. Just who was Georges Cuvier?

11. In British Columbia there are a number of reasons for the widespread dissatisfaction with the federal government's attitude to Quebec.

12. Hamlet's conversation with the ghost provides some important insights into the prince's emotional nature.

13. The use of Ritalin to treat attention deficit disorder creates special problems, not least of which is the expense.

14. What exactly is this new wonder pill Viagra?

15. The description of the setting in the story very quickly establishes a mood of anxious expectation.

9.3 Organizing an Essay by Paragraph Function

Once you become familiar with the range of functions paragraphs can carry out, then planning the essay or research paper takes on a more sophisticated character. Planning the argument then becomes a series of answers to the questions "What do I want to do at this stage?" "How can I clarify or strengthen the argument at this stage?" "Are there some useful ways I can vary or enliven or enrich the argument?" Thus, planning the structure of the argument becomes a series of choices.

We have already reviewed some of these functions in earlier sections. For example, early in the essay or research paper (usually at the very start) you will require an Introduction, which defines the argument (subject, focus, thesis), and you will often want to follow that with one or two Definition or Narration or Physical Description paragraphs to provide the necessary background material, before you start the argument. In fact, thinking in terms of the function of paragraphs in an argument, you will generally need to do something like this (at the start):

Introduction
Definition Paragraph
Additional Background Information (Narration)
Argumentative Point 1
Argumentative Point 2, and so on.

What is happening in such a structure is that after the Introduction, you are seeking to answer the question: "What do I need to tell the reader so that she can understand the argument?" In the above outline, the writer has decided to define the key terms and has added an additional paragraph to place the argument in a historical context (to give the reader the details of the story necessary to grasp the argument).

However, as we shall see in this section, there are some interesting ways to modify this basic manner of starting an argumentative paper.

9.4 Paragraphs of Illustration, Narration, and Description

We have already talked about using paragraphs of narration and physical description and definition as part of the introduction to the argument. Sometimes it is preferable to hold back on such background information until the appropriate point in the argument (i.e., when the reader first needs it). In other words, instead of giving the reader right at the start of the argument all the background facts he is going to need to understand every part of your argument, you reserve some of the information that you might put in the essay as part of the introduction and insert it where it is first needed.

Inserting Paragraphs of Narration, Description, or Analysis in the Middle of An Argument

Sometimes in the middle of the argument you may wish to pause in order to provide additional background explanatory material before continuing. Normally, this will occur just before you move to a point that requires such information (provided you have not already given all the necessary details in the introduction).

Suppose, for example, you are writing an essay on Aristotle's *Ethics*, and, in the middle of that argument, you wish to consider his criticisms of Plato's Theory of Forms. Since you cannot assume that the reader of the essay will be familiar with Plato's theory, you wish to devote a paragraph to outlining in summary form Plato's theory before continuing the argument with Aristotle's treatment of Plato's ideas.

Similarly, in an essay on, say, immigration policy, you might in the middle of the argument wish to discuss the experience of the Jewish immigrants to Manitoba early in the twentieth century. Before discussing the details of their lives in Canada, however, you want to interrupt the argument to make sure everyone understands some important facts about this immigration.

Here is an example of such an insertion into the middle of an argument. Here the thesis of the essay is arguing that the death of Alexander the Great was an event of great political significance. The introductory paragraphs have been omitted.

The first crisis provoked by the unexpected death of Alexander in 323 BC was confusion in the leadership of the Macedonian armies, largely because the traditional method of determining a successor did not work. (Paragraph argues this point)

Of all the generals who rose to sudden prominence at this juncture one of the most interesting was Ptolemy, son of Lagus. His association with Alexander went back many years. (Paragraph goes on to give biographical details of Ptolemy; it is not advancing the argument, but it is making sure that the reader has the necessary background details to understand who Ptolemy was)

Ptolemy's immediate response to the crisis was a decision that the most important part of the Empire was Egypt. He was probably right. At the time, Egypt. . . . (Paragraph goes on to describe some background details of Egypt; here again, it is not continuing the argument, but it is providing necessary background details)

To gain a hold on this prized territory, Ptolemy carried out a bold and aggressive military strategy. (Paragraph resumes the argument by trying to persuade the reader that Ptolemy's tactics were effective)

Pay close attention to what is going on here in the second and third paragraphs above. The writer has stopped the argument to provide background information: in the first, some biographical details of Ptolemy, in the second, some geographical and economic facts about Egypt. Once these have been dealt with, the essay resumes the argument.

This is an important and useful technique, especially in longer research papers. You should use it with care, however, making sure that you introduce only narrative or geographical or analytical details which are essential to the argument. Do not use it simply to pad the essay (i.e., to add irrelevant material).

If, in this example, the biographical details of Ptolemy are not really necessary, but you want to make a brief mention of who he was, you can often do that most conveniently in a footnote.

Make sure you understand this technique; it is a really helpful way to keep the reader fully informed about all the necessary details without having to provide

them all at the start or trying to insert them into the middle of argumentative paragraphs.

Inserting a Detailed Example into the Argument

A really useful way of making an argument more interesting and bringing it a lot closer to the reader is to stop the argument somewhere in the middle to dwell in detail upon a single specific illustration or example.

For instance, suppose you are presenting an argument on the unfairness of the present system of distributing welfare in BC. You have made your first and second argumentative points (that the system is slow and that it discriminates unfairly against some people). Before moving onto your next argumentative point, you might want to insert a paragraph in which you describe in detail a particular example. The topic sentence might read something like this, "To see these problems at first hand, one has only to consider the case of Terry Jackson." The paragraph will go on to describe Terry Jackson's situation in detail, so as to illustrate the points you have made previously in the argument.

Or, to take another example, suppose you are writing an argumentative interpretation of a work of literature. You have made one or two argumentative points. You might now insert into the argument a very specific example from the text which will illustrate the points you have been making (i.e., a detailed look at one particular passage in the text).

Here are some more examples of topic sentences which introduce illustrative paragraphs in which the writer is going to look in detail at a particular example.

Essay A

(The opening series of paragraphs discusses important elements in the new style of poetry introduced by Imagism, arguing that these are significant changes)

One can get an excellent sense of what these new views of poetic style meant in practice by looking at "Oread" by H.D., a well-known representative of the new style. (Paragraph goes on to discuss how particular details of this poem illustrate the points she has been making in the previous paragraphs)

Essay B

(The opening series of paragraphs discusses important defects in the federal government's strategy in the debates on the Meech Lake Accord)

These various misjudgments on the part of the Mulroney Conservatives created some embarrassing incidents. What happened at a town meeting in Fort Jackson, a small town in Alberta, is typical. (Paragraph goes on to provide narrative details to illustrate what has been said already).

Notice what these paragraphs will be doing: they will provide a close look at a single illustration. Thus, they do not contribute very much to the evidence you are putting into the argument (for the illustration is only one case). However, if the illustration is a good one and you discuss it well, it will bring your argument alive and will enable you to consolidate the points you have already made (a particularly important strategy in essays on public issues about which there are strong feelings). Thus, used effectively, an illustration paragraph can make your overall case very much more persuasive. One word of caution, however: you should not overuse this technique, unless the purpose of the paper is a series of case studies.

Here are a few more examples (in brief).

Example A (from an essay arguing that Descartes's argument is problematic but interesting)

Descartes' argument creates difficulties, however, when he tries to connect the "proven" world of the mind with the external world of the body. (Difficulties discussed and defined)

To illustrate this difficulty, consider the following passage in detail. (A detailed examination of a particular spot in Descartes's text which illustrates in his own argument the point made in the previous paragraph)

This difficulty aside, however, we need to note the great strength of Descartes logic in approaching questions of knowledge in this way. (Argument resumes on the next point).

Example B (from an essay arguing that the Chipko movement is a significant indication of the power of uneducated women to affect government policy)

The Chipko movement won support among a wide variety of women because it addressed their concerns directly. (Paragraph goes on to discuss the appeal of the movement).

To appreciate this point more fully, we can examine the case of AB. (Paragraph goes on to illustrate the point in the previous paragraph by a particular case study of a single woman involved).

But the movement was significant for reasons other than its popularity. (Paragraph resumes the argument with the next point).

Example C (from an essay arguing that Thoreau's Walden is a fine example of American Romanticism)

Thoreau's attitude to nature is clearly what we might characterize as intensely Romantic and spiritual. (Paragraph goes on to explain what these terms mean).

This point is made over and over again in Thoreau's text. The following passage brings out eloquently his characteristically enthusiastic sense of the spiritual value of the woods around his house. (Paragraph goes on to examine in detail a particular example).

But there's more to his views than this. For there is also a shrewd Yankee at work in his imagination which creates a different perspective. (Paragraph goes on to consider the next point)

This quality is nowhere more evident that in Thoreau's attitude to the railway. (Passage goes on to illustrate the point of the previous paragraph)

Example D (in an essay arguing that a particular legal judgement was correct)

An important principle, crucial to the prosecution's case, was the controversial issue of family assets. (Paragraph goes on to discuss why this was important).

The importance of this point emerged clearly in the summing up of one of the judges, in the following remarks. (Paragraph goes on in detail to examine one portion of the remarks of one judge)

Another determining factor in the judgment was the definition of work on the farm. (Paragraph resumes the argument with a new point).

Notice again in these examples how the illustrative paragraph works. It follows a paragraph which is making an argumentative assertion and serves to provide an in-depth analysis of a particular chunk of the text, case study, or personal example. The illustrative paragraph thus does not advance an argument, for it is introducing nothing new. Its purpose is to consolidate a point already made, to make sure that

the reader understands the point by being confronted with a detailed look at a very specific example.

It is possible to use more than one illustrative paragraph to consolidate a point. This is particularly common in essays which are interpreting literary styles or literary characters. Notice the following example.

Hamlet is clearly a very insecure character, uneasy about the public world of Elsinore. (Paragraph goes on to argue this point, using small pieces of evidence).

We can see this aspect of his character very clearly in his reaction to his situation in 1.2. (Paragraph gives a detailed look at parts of this scene).

Another place where Hamlet's social insecurity manifests itself is in the scene immediately before the play within the play. (Paragraph goes on to show how parts of this scene illuminate the point introduced two paragraphs before).

In private, however, Hamlet's character is very different. (Paragraph goes on to discuss a new point).

In the same way, one might offer more than one illustration for any of the argumentative points made above.

While using illustrative paragraphs like this really helps to consolidate and liven up an argumentative point, you should be careful not to overuse it. Remember that detailed discussions of very particular examples really help to illustrate a point and consolidate an opinion, but once the point has been illustrated, the argument is not really helped by multiplying illustrations unnecessarily. So once you think the reader should have grasped the point, move onto to another topic.

Setting Up a Narrative or Descriptive "Hook"

In a longer paper, you can sometimes add variety and interest to the paper by starting with a narrative or descriptive paragraph which draws attention to a particular example in a graphic way and enables you to lead into the introduction after you have grabbed the reader's attention.

Notice the following example; these are the opening paragraphs to an essay on acid rain (the example is fictional, here to illustrate the style):

Paha Lake is situated about fifteen miles north of Sudbury in a beautiful forest. The lake, about ten miles long and half a mile across at its widest, is justly celebrated as one of the most beautiful in the entire region, with moderately steep sides of granite interspersed with lower regions often covered with wild flowers. There are many places on the lake which make good natural campgrounds providing easy access to the water and panoramic views of the much of the shoreline. A visitor today also notices immediately the wonderful clarity of the water, which seems to catch the sun in unusual ways and, when the light is at the right angle, to shimmer invitingly. Only gradually does one get the sense that there is something odd about the scene. At first, there no clear indication what that might be. And then one realizes--there are no birds around, none of the usual crowd of gulls or loons or ducks. And there are no other people, no avid fishermen out for a weekend's adventure. And then the reason dawns: Paha Lake is a dead lake. Its waters support no life at all, because Paha Lake has become one more victim of acid rain.

There are many Paha Lakes in Northern Ontario, and their numbers are increasing every day. Where only a few years ago, in a single afternoon one could catch one's limit of pike, pickerel, lake trout, and bass, there are now no fish at all. The water is too acidic to sustain life. The problem is acid rain, one of the most toxic side effects of our industrial processes. It is slowly killing the life in the forest. We have all heard about acid rain, of course, and we probably know about some of the steps various governments and industries have taken to meet the problem. What we may not realize as urgently as we should is how serious the problem still is and how quickly it is growing in Northern Ontario. In fact, it seems evident that if we do nothing more against the threat than we are presently doing, our provincial Canadian Shield will soon have no fresh water fish; the life which those fish sustain will then leave; and sooner or later the acidic waters will destroy much of the forest life. It is thus imperative that we make dealing with the causes of acid rain in our northern forest a top priority, no matter what the economic cost.

Notice here how the first paragraph does not introduce any argument. It serves to catch the reader's attention with an example. The point of the example is not announced until the last line. Then the writer moves directly into the introductory paragraph, which announces the subject, focus, and thesis. Such an opening paragraph could equally well be a short narrative, designed to arouse the reader's interest, before the main introduction.

This technique of opening an argument with an illustration or narrative is very common in journalism, where the technique is known as the "hook." In many essays you do not have the space to try it, but in longer research papers, you might want to experiment with such an opening.

If you are going to use a narrative or descriptive hook, then make sure you observe the following principles:

1. The "hook" should not be too long. You should be able to present it in a single paragraph. If the "hook" starts getting too long, it will overwhelm the introduction.

2. Try to structure the "hook" so that the main point of the illustration or narrative does not emerge until the very end (as in the above example). That makes it inherently more interesting. The technique loses much of its effect if the reader gets the point of the example in the very first or second sentence.

3. Follow the "hook" immediately with the standard introduction in which you announce the subject, focus, and thesis of the essay in the usual manner (as in the above example).

4. Do not provide more than one narrative or illustrative "hook." If you have a number of examples, select the best one. Remember the purpose of this technique is to arouse the reader's interest, not to carry any of the argument.

9.5 Organizing an Argument in Paragraph Clusters

Once you begin to get a sense of the different functions of paragraphs, you can then start thinking of the argument, not as a series of paragraphs, but rather as a series of paragraph clusters (perhaps with three or four per cluster). Each cluster of paragraphs will be introducing, arguing, and consolidating a single point in the argument. Thus, even in a fairly substantial research paper, the argument will become relatively few separate points (perhaps only two or three), but each one will be presented in a series of paragraphs.

This last point is an important one to remember. An effective argument will generally consist of relatively few points in support of a very clear (and usually narrowly defined) argument. But each point will be presented in some detail in a sequence of paragraphs, so as to be as persuasive as possible. This is an especially important principle for writing research papers.

Here, for example, are two full outlines for a research papers, one on a literary subject and one on a public issue. Notice the particular function of each paragraph.

Research Paper A: The Imagist Movement in Modern Poetry

General Subject: Modern poetry
Focus 1: Imagism
Focus 2: The significance of the stylistic innovations of Imagism

Thesis: Imagism is the most significant development in modern poetry; in fact, this movement marked the start of what has come to be called the modernist movement in English literature, which marked a decisive break with traditional ways of writing poetry.

TS 1: How did this new movement begin? Well, like many artistic movements it started as a small experiment in the hands of few young artists. (Narrative paragraph, giving background historical details to the origin of the term)

TS 2: The most remarkable contributor to these new ideas was a young expatriate American, Ezra Pound. (Narrative paragraph, giving background details of Ezra Pound)

TS 3: Pound and his friends were reacting very strongly against the prevailing styles of popular poetry in England, particularly the Georgian poets. (A paragraph of analysis and definition, providing specific details of the sort of poetry which these young poets found objectionable)

TS 4: In contrast to this style, the new school demanded adherence to a vital new principle, the overriding importance of clear evocative imagery. This was a particularly significant point. (Argument starts here with the first point about Imagism)

TS 5: One can get a sense of what this principle meant in practice by looking closely at the poem "Oread" by HD, a work much admired by the Imagists. (This is an illustration, providing a detailed look at just one short poem in order to consolidate the previous point and make it more interesting)

TS 6: Another, and more immediately startling change was Imagism's rejection of traditional verse forms. (This paragraph continues the argument about the nature of Imagism)

TS 7: Not surprisingly, many readers found the new style difficult, and Imagism drew many hostile and often sarcastic responses from English critics. (This paragraph is acknowledging the opposition--letting those who disliked the new style have a chance to enter the argument)

TS 8: While these objections have some obvious force in the case of many poems, they were answered decisively by the one great poet Imagism produced, T. S. Eliot. Before considering Eliot's contribution, however, it is interesting to consider his origins. (Paragraph breaks the argument to provide some background details of T. S. Eliot)

TS 9: Eliot's early poetic style demonstrated the full power of Imagism in the hands of a great artist. (Paragraph continues the argument by arguing for the quality of Eliot's style)

TS 10 A second vital contribution Eliot made was that he overcame the inherent difficulty of writing a long Imagist poem. (Paragraph continues the argument about the quality of Eliot's poetic style)

TS 11 These qualities in Eliot's early poems culminated in the greatest poem of the century, *The Waste Land*. (Paragraph offers an analysis of parts of one poem to consolidate the previous points)

TS 12 Eliot's influence was decisive on a series of young poets. (Paragraph provides evidence for this assertion)

TS 13 Even today, long after the death of Eliot and Pound and the other original Imagist poets, the evidence of their revolutionary redefinition of poetic style can be seen in any anthology of modern poetry. (Concluding paragraph, summing up the argument. This might be extended with examples)

Research Paper 2: Modern Medicine and the Law

Subject: Modern Medicine
Focus 1: The Terminally Ill
Focus 2: The Right To Die with an Assisted Suicide

Thesis: We should not alter the legislation concerning assisted suicides, and we should certainly not press for any legislation which might confer on citizens what has been called the "right to die."

TS 1: What exactly do people mean when they encourage us to demand the right to dieor the right to die with dignity or the right to an assisted suicide? (Paragraph goes on to define in detail a key element in the argument)

TS 2: To understand this demand in context, we should consider what the law presently states about such matters. (Paragraph goes on to define what current law says on this matter)

TS 3 Before considering just what this law means in practice, we need to clarify what the term *right* means in law. Many of those demanding the right to die seem unaware of the legal meaning of what they are seeking. (Paragraph goes on to define the concept of a right)

TS 4 Given this legal meaning of the term *right*, many doctors are justifiably worried about conferring the right to die on citizens generally. (Argument starts here by stressing that any change in the law will make the situation difficult for doctors)

TS 5: In addition, there is the problem of what has been called the "slippery slope." Once we admit legal killing into our hospitals openly, then where will that process end?

TS 6: Many people, however, are not convinced by these arguments. They believe that citizens should have the right to die with dignity. (Paragraph here acknowledges the opposition, by giving the case against the thesis some room in the argument)

TS 7: Supporters of this position often cite the case of Sue Rodriguez, the terminally ill native of Victoria, BC. (Paragraph goes on to provide an illustration of the opposition's point by giving details of a single well known example)

TS 8: But Sue Rodriguez lost her legal battle, and for good reason. The judges were quite correct in their assessment. (Paragraph uses some details of the legal judgement to support the thesis)

TS 9: But many do not agree with this decision. They point to the example of Holland, where assisted suicide is legal. (Paragraph gives the opposition another hearing, this time using examples from another country)

TS 10: Those who make this argument, however, overlook some of the problems of this policy which the Dutch themselves have admitted. (Paragraph answers the opposition's point in the previous paragraph)

TS 11: What complicates this issue is a matter no one wishes to discuss openly, the fact that every day in Canada, doctors and families do make decisions about assisting death. It is not the case that people with a powerful wish to die never get the assistance they crave. (Paragraph discusses this point about the real situation in the hospitals)

TS 12: However, the existence of this practice is insufficient reason for establishing a legal process which must be followed in every case. (Paragraph argues why the present situation should not be changed)

TS 13: Concluding paragraph, summing up the argument and looking ahead.

Research Paper C: An Essay on William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

General Subject: William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*
Focus 1: The value of James's book
Focus 2: The importance of the message and the style of argument

Thesis: James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* is a valuable book because it not only explores religion is a very meaningful way but also redefines the nature of philosophy.

TS 1: One of the great strengths of James's case is his firmly empirical base which creates a basis for this views on a host of particular examples. (Paragraph evaluates James's empirical method).

TS 2: What makes this work so effectively is that James's definition of religion brings with it no restricting assumptions. (Paragraph makes the second important point about James's argument).

TS 3: Some critics have contested this point, arguing that James's definition of religion is too closely patterned on his Protestant background. (Paragraph acknowledges the opposition)

TS 4: There is obviously some plausibility in this point, but to concede it does not damage the strength of James's method. (Paragraph answers the opposition)

TS 5: Others have pointed out that James's all encompassing view of religion commits him to an essentially relativist position and all the philosophical problems which that entails. This is an important criticism. Before we can evaluate it, however, we need to clarify just what is meant by relativism. (Paragraph goes on to define relativism, not advancing the argument, but providing a necessary definition).

TS 6: Given this sense of relativism, critic MN has argued, James's method is suspiciously feeble. (Paragraph goes on to examine critic MN's argument against James).

TS 7: The basis of MN's sense of James's weakness can be best illustrated in the following passage. (Paragraph illustrates the previous point by looking at one very short part of MN's argument).

TS 8: This is a grievous charge, but it misrepresents James's main point about value. (Paragraph answers the points made by MN and reviewed in the previous two paragraphs).

TS 9: This discussion of James's sense of value brings us to the heart of his method, the system of thinking he calls Pragmatism. This term was first put into philosophical debates by Charles Pierce (Paragraph offers a historical and definition paragraph to make sure the reader understands what is meant by the term Pragmatism).

TS 10: James, in his other works, repeatedly seeks to give us a clear sense of this term. (Paragraph goes on to define the term Pragmatism in terms of what James has said about it).

TS 11: With this understanding of Pragmatism in mind, we can see why the charge of relativism is not entirely accurate. (Paragraph continues the refutation of relativism by reference to the definitions of Pragmatism given in the previous paragraphs).

TS 12: In fact, if we examine this concept of Pragmatism more closely, especially as James discusses it in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, we can see that it applies to much more than a study of religion. James is seeking to redefine the philosophic enterprise. (Paragraph goes on the discuss how James's use of the term in the text is significant in terms of how one conducts philosophy).

TS 13: Not surprisingly, many philosophers have found this approach to philosophy unacceptable for a number of reasons. For example, XY points out what he considers a basic flaw in James's position. (Paragraph goes on to outline some of the major objection to the Pragmatic approach)

TS 14: A further objection comes from another quarter. (Paragraph outlines a second major objection to Pragmatism of the sort James practices).

TS 15: However, these objections fail to take into account James's views on the nature of dogmatic assertions about the truth. (Paragraph answers the objections raised in the previous two paragraphs about James's method).

TS 16: In fact, if we look very closely at one section of James's argument we can see that he has already anticipated and answered some of these points. (Paragraph

illustrates the point made in the previous one by a very close look at a particular section of James's text).

The important point to notice in these outlines is the way in which the writers use a mixture of functions, mixing argumentative paragraphs advancing the thesis with paragraphs acknowledging the opposition, paragraphs providing illustrations, definitions, and narrative backgrounds. These papers will be quite long (probably about 3000 words), but they do not make a great number of different points. However, they really go into detail about the points which they do mention.

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Essays and Arguments, Section Ten

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10.0 Writing Arguments About Literary Works

Some courses, particularly in Liberal Studies, Philosophy, and English, require argumentative essays about literature; that is, the assignments will call for an evaluative response in the form of an essay about another book. This task is difficult to carry out if you are not entirely clear what the essay is supposed to do. This section focuses, first, on that issue and, secondly, on various ways you can address the question of organizing a suitable argument.

Engaging in discussions and arguments about books (and other works) is a very common form of human interaction, something we routinely carry out for pleasure in our coffee and pub conversations or read about in the newspapers. It stems from a human desire to engage our imaginations in other people's visions of the world, to discuss them with others, and to evaluate them, especially in conversations.

Such discussions and arguments obviously emerge out of the interaction which occurs when we read another text, and the quality of what we have to say is going to depend in large part on the quality of our reading. Thus, in order to clarify just how one might set about constructing arguments about texts, it is necessary first to

say a few things about reading, particularly about intelligent reading or what is called in the following section reading beneath the surface.

These paragraphs deal mainly with works written in prose. A later section concerns itself with writing arguments about lyric poetry, a form of literature which can cause special difficulties for students.

10.1 Reading Beneath the Surface

Careful reading, the kind which gets you beneath the surface of a book, is an important skill which students continue to develop throughout their undergraduate program. One of the main goals of those courses which require arguments about literary texts is to encourage the students to become better readers.

In courses which deal with literary texts, the books we study fall, very roughly, into two groups: some tell fictional stories (novels, epic poems, plays) and some present arguments. Some texts, of course, do both (and these books are often relatively more complex because of that). As we read, therefore, we tend to select a main emphasis arising out of the book (story or argument) and then to focus upon either the creation of an imaginary world in which particular people act out a story in a specific environment (e.g., the *Odyssey*) or on the presentation of a structured argument about philosophical, political, or scientific issues (e.g., *On Liberty*, short argumentative essays). This division may sometimes be simplistic, but it makes a useful starting point.

Reading Stories

Once we begin to sense that the book we are reading is mainly a fictional narrative (i.e., a story), then, if our imagination is at all engaged with the world of the fiction, we will find ourselves to some extent in the position of a judge. We will be following the actions of certain people in particular places and situations, and we will almost certainly develop a distribution of sympathy for the characters (some we like, some we do not like). This process of getting sympathetically involved in the fictional world is, of course, one of the major pleasures of reading stories.

Hence, our first entry into an intelligent appreciation of a fictional narrative will usually be a reaction to the characters. William Empson once observed that all characters are on trial in a civilized narrative. This is a useful observation to bear in mind, since it places us in the position of a judge and invites us to render a series of verdicts on the fictional people we encounter. Out of this we can normally construct many useful arguments based on why we like, dislike, or have a mixed reaction to one or more characters (as we so often do after seeing a film).

All this is natural enough, but there are some initial dangers to avoid. In order to judge the characters fairly (and, in the process to extend our own imaginative powers), we need to understand them. And that will require a good deal more than simply translating them from the text into our immediate world and applying criteria from the world around us. Eventually, of course, we may want to do something like that, but before rushing to judgement, we need to take the time to sort out why the characters are behaving the way they are. This caveat is particularly important when we are dealing with stories which come from a culture very different from the one around us (either because the stories are very old, or because they come from non-western cultures, or both), since what the characters do and believe in such stories will almost certainly strike us as odd in some ways.

In close intelligent reading we need to do a great deal more than simply follow and judge immediately what characters do. In many of the stories we read, for example, characters do things which, by modern standards, are odd, abhorrent, sexist, self-destructive, incomprehensible, or lunatic. If we do not penetrate beneath these actions toexplore the reasons--the beliefs which prompt the action--then much of the book will remain concealed from us. Thus, we should not be too quick to impose our twentieth-century judgments upon such matters until we have wrestled somewhat with the underlying beliefs about the world which inform the actions of the characters.

Another way of putting the same point is to stress the old saying that human beings imitate in action their vision of the nature of things. We will not properly understand the significance of what characters in fictions do unless we grasp something of their vision of reality which guides their actions. So if we find ourselves intrigued, enthralled, disgusted, confused, or otherwise moved by how people behave in a fiction, we can profitably ask ourselves: Why are they acting in this way? How is this action linked to what they and their society believe about the world?

We should not be too quick, as I have said, to judge the case by modern standards, no matter how strange or unacceptable we find the action or opinion. We need to take the time to ponder an answer or series of possible answers, which must come from the context of belief given in the fiction itself. That does not mean that we have to refuse to judge the characters but rather that we have to understand them as fully as possible before judging them.

In assessing questions of this sort in a story, we should pay particular attention to the setting of the action, the world in which the characters live, and, above all, to what they believe about it (e.g., its origins, the possibilities of change in it, the divine ruling powers which have set that world up or control it, and so on). For example, if the characters believe that the world is governed by irrational, hostile,

unpredictable, and amoral forces and if they live in a very demanding environment, their standards of behaviour will probably vary considerably from those who believe that the world runs according to moral, rational, and benevolent laws and whose immediate surroundings are fertile and secure. Whether we share the same beliefs or not, it is important for us to get a grasp of the world view developed in the fiction. Otherwise our understanding of the characters' motives will be very tenuous.

Consider an example. The Old Testament narrative of the Israelites leaving Egypt and living for years in the desert presents a picture of human beings following a very demanding code of life in a frequently very aggressive way and demonstrating many characteristics which we do not particularly approve of in modern North American society and held together by strict rules we would almost certainly not welcome. All that makes their culture very strange to us, and it is easy enough to start criticizing. However, before simply imposing on the Israelites or on their God or on their leaders our own immediate values, we should reflect more deeply on what they believe, why they believe it, what understanding of the world they derive from such a belief, and, finally, how that understanding of the world endorses certain actions rather than others.

In going through this process of intelligent reading we should not impose on the fiction ideas which we may have which are irrelevant to the story, for example, our understanding of Christian interpretations of this part of the Old Testament or our feelings about present day Arab-Israeli conflict or our awareness of modern debates about sexism. We cannot, of course, simply empty our minds of everything we know and believe, but we can try to avoid letting all that modern consciousness too quickly and peremptorily determine our evaluation of the story.

Remember that one of the great values of reading fictions from cultures very different from our own is that the visions of experience portrayed in these fictions can act, if the stories are imaginatively exciting, as a challenge to our modern beliefs (which may, after all, be quite limiting). We cannot transport ourselves back to Ancient Israel or rid ourselves of our modern consciousness; we should not on that account drag the text forcefully into the modern age, as if it had been written last week. We have to meet it half way, and let the strange vision meet and enter into a conversation with our modern consciousness. We may then discover some important things about ourselves, as we try to come to terms with the value of the fiction.

For this reason, there are two important approaches to avoid when dealing with a strange text, if one's interest is in an intelligent evaluative argument. The first mistake is that of the scholar who says that we can only understand this work properly if we immerse ourselves in the facts surrounding its production (the

biography of the author and the full cultural context of the work). The second mistake is that of the historically or culturally unimaginative reader who says that we can evaluate it without taking into account its difference from us. The challenge of intelligent reading requires us to combine the best features of both of these approaches, without letting either one take over the entire process.

This, of course, is a important justification for the value of reading: letting ourselves be challenged by the unfamiliar, not so that we will be converted to an unfamiliar belief system (although we might be) but so that the challenge forces us to re-examine our own values and beliefs. If we use the beliefs we bring to the fiction as a quick way of summing it up, of judging it, of holding it at arm's length, then that vital challenge cannot take place.

Thus, in reading the text of a fiction, we should inform ourselves as best we can about the vision of life it presents (in particular by examining the belief systems which prompt the characters to act and feel the way they do) and then explore whether that particular way of looking at the world has any value. We might usefully ask ourselves questions like the following: What useful things would people derive from such a vision of life? How would it enable them to cope? How would I feel in such a culture (can I see any important advantages or benefits that such a vision possesses which mine does not, or not to the same extent? We may decide, after letting the text speak to us as eloquently as possible, that the vision of life it offers is unacceptable, limiting, immoral, sentimental, or whatever. But we need to give it a fair hearing first and reflect upon why we feel about it the way we do.

Reading Arguments

In the same way, if we are reading a book which is mainly an argument (e.g., a work of moral or political philosophy), we need to attend to more than just the details of the argument or a specific list of recommendations or conclusions which emerges from it. In many cases, the most important part of an argumentative work in politics or philosophy is not the particular details of what the author is recommending but rather the method of the argument.

The issue of the method is a crucial point: the greatest, most interesting, and most influential thinkers are not necessarily those who came up with "answers"; they are rather those who redefined the issues, the vocabulary, and the style of important arguments. If all we are interested in is their answers to designated problems, then we will miss what matters most.

This matter is worth stressing again. When we come to class, we often want to concentrate on the most obvious recommendations developed in an argument,

those details which prompt an immediate response (e.g., Plato's recommendations about the treatment of women, Hobbes' view of the sovereign having absolute power, Rousseau's treatment of individuality, Marx's views on the inevitability of the class war, and so on). These are interesting and important. But until we arrive at some understanding of why the writers are making these proposals, of how they reached them, that is, of the assumptions and methodology which have led up to them, then we may be missing the most important part of the text.

Of particular importance in any argumentative text is the opening section, in which the writer typically establishes certain assumptions about the nature of the world and about the appropriate methods for discovering how best to deal with it. We need to read very slowly and carefully here in order to establish a clear sense early in the text of the starting points for the entire argument: these will include the basic assumptions about nature, human life, and the proper ways of reasoning. Useful questions we might ask include the following: What does the writer assume as axiomatic (self-evident) about our human nature and the cosmos? How does the divine fit in this vision? How does the writer define the key term(s) he is introducing (especially about human nature)? In asking the questions he does about the world, what does the writer reveal as central to his method of enquiry? What does the writer introduce as evidence or logic to advance the argument (and what does he exclude)? What does the writer recognize as the criterion for judging good from bad arguments? What is the writer's attitude to traditional systems of belief? And, of particular importance, what views of the world is he reacting against and why?

In many arguments, once these starting points and the basic methodology are conceded, the rest of the case is relatively persuasive. A disagreement with a particular recommendation or conclusion at the end of the argument may stem from something latent in one of the initial assumptions to which we have too easily given assent.

Most books which develop arguments also at some point attack some alternative views (in many cases, the books were written in direct response to a prevailing belief or series of beliefs). So it *extremely* useful to pay very close attention to those passages where an argumentative writer directs hostile criticism against an eminent opponent (e.g., Plato's attack on Homer, Aristotle's criticism of Plato, Hobbes' attack on scriptural interpretations, Galileo's contempt for his Aristotelian opponents, Wollstonecraft's remarks on Rousseau, Freud's dismissal of communism, and so on). If we keep posing the question "Just what is this writer objecting to and why?" we will often have a direct entry into something really central to the argument. And such a question often makes a particularly useful essay topic.

10.2 From Reading to Shaping An Evaluative Argument

Building on Our Own Reactions

The most valuable help to constructing an oral or written argument about a text is our own reactions (which will vary from one reader to another). This sounds obvious enough, but it's an important point: we should develop our arguments out of how we feel after we have dealt with the book as honestly and intelligently as we can. The very best way to sort out how you feel about a book is to discuss it with others, testing your initial tentative views against theirs and exploring together where certain interpretative possibilities lead. The value of this social process of interpretation, especially as a means of fostering initial insights and argumentative possibilities, cannot be overstressed.

One good technique to help us probe beneath the surface details to the point where we are thinking about creating an argument is constantly to examine our own reactions to the text. If we find ourselves confused, irritated, excited, challenged, or bored with part of the text, we can ask ourselves why (and we should re-read such passages with particular care). Can we isolate some key features of the argument, style, characterization, belief, and so on which the book presents, in such a way that our own response to the book becomes more intelligible to us? It may be worth spending considerable time on a relatively small portion of the text (getting assistance from others, where necessary). If we can come to understand one confusing or exciting or repellent section of, say, Plato's *Republic* or Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* or Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, then we will have learned something important about the entire work.

Often a strongly negative reaction to a text can provide an important learning opportunity. We may sometimes find ourselves turning away from a book in total disagreement (e.g., over Aristotle's discussion of slavery, the killing in the *Iliad*, Rousseau's discussion of marriage in *Emile*, de Beauvoir's view of female sexuality, and so on). If we have such a response, then we should not be too quick simply to write the text off. We should rather take the time to explore the reasons for our own response and some possible reasons for the author's particular treatment of that subject. We do not have to agree with the various writers: our exploration may well confirm our first snap judgment. However, we should make the effort to understand the sources of the author's vision and of our own rejection of it, before we finally make up our own mind. That process will often generate imaginative insights useful for an evaluative discussion.

If we have a really strongly negative reaction to a text or to a part of it, we might want to set ourselves a challenging assignment: defend the writer's vision of experience on this point. For example, suppose we find Marx's argument in the

Communist Manifesto unacceptable because, as good liberals, we cannot agree with what he has to say about the middle-class family. If we want to challenge our argumentative powers, we could try to set up an argument in which we support Marx on that point, in which, in other words, we try to justify that conclusion on the basis of the principles Marx introduces. That will force us to come to grips with what Marx is really saying in a new, exciting, and challenging way.

Even if you are writing an essay critiquing Marx's views of the family, an important part of your case might be at some point giving Marx's argument a fair presentation, acknowledging the strengths of it, and then demonstrating its inadequacies (a technique this handbook discussed earlier under the label Acknowledging the Opposition).

The point is that you should never dismiss something merely on the ground that it immediately offends what you believe. Use that reaction to engage the argument, to seek to understand it, and, if possible, to expose where it goes wrong (or what it overlooks).

Using Comparisons

As your undergraduate education progresses, you should find yourselves tempted to compare a book you are studying with one you have studied earlier in the same course or perhaps in a different course. This activity is an important learning technique (which will come into play in seminar discussions). You should get into the habit from time to time of calling attention to the way in which a book you are reading is similar to or quite different from an earlier one. And you might like to consider such a comparison as the basis for an evaluative argument about the two books.

At a very basic level, these comparisons might start from a simple personal preference (e.g., for Mozart over Beethoven, for Rousseau over Mill, for McKinnon over Rich, for Odysseus over Achilles, and so on). Working from such an immediately personal response and exploring it further in order to understand it better, you will often be able to come to a fuller appreciation of both texts. Some questions you might like to ask yourself when you find yourself making such comparisons might be some of the following: How are these works similar? How are they different? Why do I prefer one to the other? What criteria am I using to make this judgment? What would I say in order to persuade someone else to share my view? Can I see why someone might prefer the one I think inferior? Out of such questions, some interesting and provocative argumentative stances can emerge.

Developing intelligent comparisons between different works is one of the great tools of criticism, informed discussion, and cultural enrichment. Learning to develop such comparisons will also help to remind us that just because we have finished with one work and are moving on to another, that is no reason for setting the first one aside. As we progress through Liberal Studies, English, and Philosophy courses, we are continuing and enriching a life-long conversation with and about our culture, a process which will include more and more material for comparison and argumentative discussions.

10.3 Evaluative Argument versus Prose Summaries

An assignment to write an argumentative essay about a work of literature is calling for an evaluation of some aspect of that work. That means the essay must be anchored upon some opinion, some argumentative stance, and not be simply a summary of the content of the work.

This principle is vital; its importance cannot be stressed sufficiently. The failure to observe it is one of the major reasons why essays on literary subjects often do not work. So make sure you understand the difference between a summary and an evaluation. Briefly put, the important difference is as follows: a summary delivers the contents of a book; it simply translates what the book says into the essay writer's own words. But it does not take a stand or make a judgment about the book or a part of it. An evaluation, by contrast, is an argument about the significance, the value, or the interpretation of a text or a part of it.

For example, a summary of a film will simply retell the obvious details of the film. If we have already seen it, then a summary will simply tell us what we already know. If the summary is an accurate one, then there is nothing to discuss. An evaluation or argument about the film will offer a judgment of the film or some part of it. It will probably generate a discussion because not everyone will agree with it.

Thus, when you come to organize an essay on a literary text (e.g., a novel or philosophical text) you must structure the essay as an argument (unless you are specifically asked for a summary). Details from the text will provide the evidence, but however you structure the argument, you must not simply re-describe the content of the text. The failure to remember this principle is a major reason for poor essays on literature, because the essay turns into simply a summary of large parts of the fiction or of the argument.

The key symptoms which indicate that you are writing a summary rather than an evaluative argument are the absence of an argumentative thesis and the pattern of topic sentences. If there is no thesis about which we can argue, then the essay will

probably be largely summary, because the essay writer has put nothing argumentative on the table. If you are routinely starting each paragraph with a sentence which simply calls attention to another point in the story or another part of the argument, without making any judgment about that part, then you are almost certainly providing a summary of the argument and not an evaluation of it. This point goes back to something stressed at the very opening of this handbook: one cannot write an interesting or useful argument about what is obvious.

10.4 Structuring an Argumentative Essay on Fiction

As mentioned above, the best way to begin to organize an argumentative essay about literature is to select something very particular in the story or the argument, something which creates a reaction in you, and to explore the importance of that.

In sorting out how you could write an argumentative essay about a fiction, you might like to think of the following possibilities (this list is by no means exhaustive):

1. What is the significance of a particular character (or a particular moment in the career of a single character)? Why is that important? What human possibility does that part of the fiction hold up to us? And what is of importance, if anything, in how the incident resolves itself?

2. Does a particular character learn or fail to learn something important in the story? If the resolution of a narrative depends upon the education of a main character, then a major interpretative point in the story will undoubtedly be what that character learns. This question is often very fruitful if a major point in the narrative is a journey of some kind (Is the main character the same person at the end of the journey as at the start? If not, what has happened? Why is that significant?).

3. What is the importance of the setting (the physical environment) or some aspect of it? How does this help to define for the readers the characters' sense of nature, of how the world operates, of the values of human life?

4. Is there an interesting recurring pattern in the fiction (e.g., in the importance of women, the significance of food, the depiction of the gods, the images of nature, the style of the clothes, and so on), which points to something important? People's attitudes to and use of money or clothes, for example, often serve to symbolize a moral pattern (e.g., in Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare, Dickens).

5. What role does the narrator play in your response to the story? Is that voice reliable, playful, ironic? Does the narrator understand the significance of the story?

Remember that in a short essay you can deal only with one very particular aspect of the fiction, so select carefully, and confine the argument to the significance of that one feature you have selected.

Once you have selected what you are going to focus on, derive a thesis for that focus, an argumentative opinion about it. Normally, this will take the form of a statement something like the following: "X (the item you have selected) is particularly significant in the story because . . ." If you complete that statement with an opinion, then you will have a workable thesis.

Structuring the rest of the essay, once you have a workable thesis, should follow the various principles outlined previously in this handbook. The result should be an outline something like the following:

Essay A: On John Steinbeck's Short Story "The Chrysanthemums"

Subject: "The Chrysanthemums"
Focus 1: Elisa's character
Focus 2: Elisa's character: her weak sense of her own femininity

Thesis: Elisa is a strong but very vulnerable woman, vital enough to have strong ambitions but so insecure about her own femininity that she is finally unable to cope with the strain of transforming her life. The story focuses on how that quality leads to her defeat.

TS 1: When we first see Elisa, we get an immediate sense that she is hiding her sexuality from the rest of the world. (Paragraph examines the opening descriptions of Elisa and interprets key phrases to point out how she appears to be concealing her real self)

TS 2: The speed and the energy with which Elisa later seeks to change herself bring out the extent of her dissatisfaction with the role she has been playing. (Paragraph discusses what happens as Elisa starts to respond to the crisis, arguing that she is seeking to move beyond her frustration)

TS 3: But Elisa's new sense of herself does not last. She does not have the inner strength to develop into the mature, independent woman she would like to be. In

the last analysis, no matter how sympathetic we find her, she is an emotional weakling.

Conclusion: This story narrates a series of everyday events, but the emotional drama Elisa goes through is really tense. (Paragraph goes on to summarize the main argument and reaffirm the thesis)

Essay B: Short Essay on Homer

General Subject: Homer's *Odyssey*
Focus 1: The importance of the home and hospitality
Focus 2: Home and hospitality in the *Odyssey*: the significance of food

Thesis: In the *Odyssey*, the frequent and detailed attention to food and the rituals surrounding it serve constantly to reinforce a central concern of the poem, the vital civilizing importance of the home.

TS 1: Throughout the Odyssey, we witness the way in which food taken communally can act as a way of re-energizing human beings, enabling them to cope with their distress. This, in fact, emerges as one of the most important human values in the poem. (Paragraph argues for the restorative values of food brought out repeatedly in the poem)

TS 2: The rituals surrounding food, especially the importance of welcoming guests to the feast and making sure everyone has enough, stress the warmth and central importance of open human interaction. (The paragraph argues the importance of hospitality as it is brought out by the references to food and feasting)

TS 3: The occasions in which food is consumed are also moments in which the participants celebrate the artistic richness of their culture. No where else in the poem is there so much attention paid to the significance of beauty in various forms. (Paragraph argues that all the things associated with the food-the serving dishes, the entertainment, and so on-reflect important values in the culture)

Conclusion: There is, of course, much more to the poem than the description of feasting, but we need to recognize these moments as especially important. (Paragraph restates and summarizes the central point of the argument)

Essay C: Short Essay on a Shakespearean Play

General Subject: Shakespeare's *Richard III*
Focus 1: The importance of Anne in the play.
Focus 2: The first scene between Anne and Richard (1.3)

Thesis: Anne's role in 1.3 is particularly important to the opening of the play because it reveals clearly to us not only the devilish cleverness of Richard but also the way in which his success depends upon the weaknesses of others.

TS 1: Richard's treatment of Anne in 1.3 provides a very important look at the complex motivation and style of the play's hero. (Paragraph goes on to argue how the Richard-Anne confrontation reveals important things about Richard)

TS 2: More importantly, perhaps, the scene reveals just how Anne's understandable weaknesses enable Richard to succeed. (Paragraph looks at how Anne's response to Richard's advances reveal important things about her character)

TS 3: We can best appreciate these points by considering a key moment in the scene, the moment when Richard invites Anne to kill him. (In an illustrative paragraph, the writer takes a detailed look at five lines from the scene, to emphasize the points mentioned in the previous two paragraphs)

Conclusion: In the wider context of the play, this early scene provides Richard with a sense of his own power and thus confirms for him that he really can achieve what he most wants. (Paragraph sums up the argument in the context of the entire play)

The points to notice particularly here are, first, the argumentative nature of the thesis, which sets up an interpretative claim and, second, the opinionated topic sentences, which continue the argumentative style. They do not degenerate simply into sections of summary (retelling what goes on in the story). And notice how each argument depends upon an initial narrowing of the focus, so that the argument is concerned with only one aspect of the narrative.

A Common Mistake in the Structure of An Argument About Literature

An argumentative essay on a work of literature is commonly asking you to focus upon a particular pattern in the work (e.g., the development of character, an important theme, a pattern in the imagery, the relationship of the narrator to the fiction, and so on) and to present an interpretation of that pattern. This requires you to construct an argument which presents the reader with an organized understanding of the importance of that pattern, its significance in the wider context of the fiction.

Be very careful you do not turn such an essay into a mere catalogue of examples of the pattern. Such a structure does not advance the argument and usually ends up telling the reader what she already knows quite well from having read the story.

For example, suppose you are organizing an interpretative essay on *Hamlet* and you have decided you want to explore some aspect of the prince's character. So you decide you wish to make the case that an important part of Hamlet's disagreeable character is the way in which he seems to abuse the women in his life, verbally and physically. This is an interesting and important aspect of the play, and you can certainly illuminate some key issues at work by dealing with it properly.

However, that illumination will not occur if you structure the essay merely as a list of examples of Hamlet's aggressive bullying, as in the following list of topic sentences:

Hamlet is very cruel to Ophelia early on in the play. He is insensitive to her distress and uses a very harsh language in talking to her.

Later in the play Hamlet is very hard on his mother. He attacks her physically and verbally and causes her great distress.

Such a structure is tending (as you can see) merely to re-describe part of the play and is not advancing our understanding of the importance of the pattern you are looking at.

To avoid this mistake, structure the essay, not as a series of examples, but as a series of interpretative assertions about the pattern you are looking at. Notice the difference between the topic sentences given above and ones like the following:

The first important point to notice about Hamlet's treatment of women is that he refuses to listen to them, as if he is afraid of what they might say. Characteristically, he is, at the first encounter, verbally very aggressive to them, putting them at once on the defensive and confusing them. This habit prompts some important reflections on the prince's character.

Hamlet seems also curiously prone to physical violence against women, as if they incite him to lash out against them. What makes this all the more curious, of course, is that both Ophelia and Gertrude love him very much (and he knows it).

Notice the key difference here. In the latter topic sentences, the focus is squarely on the significance of the pattern you are exploring, not upon a particular example. In both paragraphs based on these topic sentences you will introduce evidence, and that evidence can come from anywhere in the play (either Gertrude or Ophelia or both)

10.6 Structuring a Short Essay on the Evaluation of an Argument

In certain academic disciplines, a very common assignment invites the student to evaluate part of a complex argument presented in a classic text (e.g., Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Mill's *On Liberty*, Plato's *Meno*, Descartes's *Meditations*, and so on). There are many useful ways to analyze arguments. However, there are some characteristic ways in which essays evaluating arguments can go astray and some immediately useful things which may help to avoid such problems or to patch up essays which suffer from them.

A Note on the Process of Evaluating an Argument

In an essay which seeks to evaluate an argument (or a part of it), the basic task is to focus on one aspect of a characteristically complex position and to explore what the values or the limitations of this part of the argument might be and how that might illuminate other parts of the argument. In a short essay, you are not expected necessarily to pass final judgment on the entire argument.

In fact, it is probably a bad idea to think that your task is to deliver a final verdict on whether, say, Hobbes, Plato, Rousseau, Descartes, and so on are worth reading or are competent arguers. None of these thinkers is simple minded, and if you find yourself dismissing the entire position with one or two relatively casual points, then you are probably missing something central in the argument.

In other words, as an evaluator, begin with a considerable respect for the person whose work you are addressing. These books did not become classic works because they are easily neutralized or dismissed; they are onto something central in an interesting way. This fact does not mean that you have to agree with their positions, of course, but it does mean that you have to be careful about conducting your evaluation thoroughly. Thus, if you find yourself writing them off very easily, you are probably, as I say, missing an important point. Even if the argument we are dealing with is from someone we have never heard of, it is a good idea to give her the benefit of the doubt at first, and treat her case as coming from someone serious and intelligent. We may reverse that position later, but we should not do it too quickly.

In any case, our task, as mentioned above, is not a final yea or nay on the entire position. The task is somewhat humbler, but ultimately more rewarding: to explore one or two aspects of the argument and to offer our reflections on what is going on in this part of the text and the extent to which that is a fully or only partially useful insight into the issues.

In many cases, our evaluation of a text will be most useful if it simply raises some awkward questions and explores how this thinker's position might deal with them. Such a procedure might help to confirm a very enthusiastic response to the text or to point out some of the reasons for our sense of dissatisfaction or puzzlement with the argument. This stance, it should be clear, is very different from simply interpreting the business of evaluation as having to determine whether or not the text has anything useful to offer.

Thus, as a general rule in evaluating arguments, think of yourself as selecting for close scrutiny a particular part of the writer's case, praising strong points or exploring weak points or questioning inadequacies or testing the method of the thinker, rather than passing comprehensive judgment. With this stance, it is not unlikely that in many cases your response to a particular part of a complex argument will typically be mixed: the writer has an important handle on part of the issue and is quite persuasive within the framework of particular assumptions; however, the particular part of the argument which you are considering raises questions which create difficulties (how important those difficulties are can, of course, vary considerably and will be an important factor in your evaluation of how seriously limited this part of the argument is).

At the same time, remember the point stressed above, that an evaluation is not a summary. You are expected to bring to bear upon a selected portion of the text your own judgment--an argumentative stance. This may be polite, or mixed, or strong, or questioning, but it is a personal evaluation, not just a condensed review without evaluation of the argument you are addressing. Summaries of arguments have their uses, but they are no substitute in an assignment which requires an evaluative response (an interpretative opinion about the argument, not simply a précis of it).

Evaluate Arguments from the Inside not the Outside

A serious inadequacy in many student essays is that the evaluation takes places without any sensitive entry into the text under consideration. Here, for example, is a very common form of essay from inexperienced writers.

1. Thinker X (e.g., Rousseau, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Plato, and so on) makes a number of initial assumptions in developing his theory of the state. The most important of these assumptions are A, B, and C.

2. But Thinker X is wrong, because the true starting assumptions should not be A, B, and C, which are wrong (or inadequate), but M, N, and P, which are true.

3. Let's look at some examples of how Thinker X is wrong. Example 1 shows that because Thinker X does not believe or consider M, N, and P, he is wrong. If he had thought clearly about M, N, and P, he would have said something different.

The problem with an argument like this is that is consists of little more than mere assertion and does not deal at all with the nature of Thinker X's case. It may indeed be true that Thinker X's initial assumptions are things we no longer believe to be adequate or true (or do not wish to be true), but that does not necessarily make his argument worthless. You need to examine his case in the light of his own assumptions.

In addition, if your only case against Thinker X is a rival set of assumptions (M, N, and P), and you simply state these baldly without further ado, then we have no way of assessing in any detail the validity of Thinker X's position, except to recognize that you don't agree with him (and what gives you the authority to say that your initial unsupported assumptions are any better than Thinker X's?).

I call this common tactic *arguing from the outside*, because it involves the comparatively simple and generally unenlightening procedure of bringing to bear on Thinker X your own unproven assumptions and measuring a complex argument by some simple axioms that Thinker X has, at the start of his argument, not included.

All this process tends to achieve is to indicate that you do not agree with his or her initial assumptions, but it still leaves the business of evaluating the argument in any further detail up to the reader without assistance from you. It also leaves you unable to appreciate the value of arguments which are based on principles which have been replaced (e.g., the value of arguments about the nature of the earth based on outdated theories of the earth's age).

Now, suppose you do find Thinker X's initial assumptions problematic or you think they are only partially correct because they have omitted something that Thinker X needs to take into account. Rather than just baldly contradicting his assumptions and insisting upon the importance of your own, evaluate what he does with his initial claims (from the inside) and raise objections, questions, and so

forth at key places in the argument, so that your evaluation stems from a perceived deficiency or quality in a significant detail of the argument.

For example, suppose you are writing a paper evaluating Hobbes's views on sovereignty (about which you have strong reservations or even an active dislike). Suppose further that you recognize that one source of the problem may be in Hobbes's initial assumptions about human psychology. Rather than simply denying the validity of those assumptions, accept them hypothetically and see what Hobbes does with them.

So, for example, you can trace the logic of Hobbes's claim that giving all power to the sovereign is a logical outcome of his views of human nature, the state of nature, and the formation of the state. Now you can raise the awkward question: How does Hobbes propose to deal with the issue of power corrupting? Based on his own assumptions about human nature, how will his state protect itself from what Plato and Aristotle, among others, clearly saw as a major danger to civil order? If the sovereign is a human being, as Hobbes's describes them, then how will the state be able to fulfill its functions, once he has all the power?

The next step would be to explore what Hobbes has to say about this question (because, as many good thinkers usually do, he has anticipated the objection). But how adequate are his responses (that a corrupt sovereign is better than a state of nature, that the sovereign will not normally want to be corrupt anyway, that the sovereign cannot come for your life)? And in your analysis of these responses call attention to what you feel might be lacking.

Notice what is happening here. You are always operating in direct contact with the text, arguing from the inside, leading the reader to your basic objections about (or unease with) Hobbes through the details of what Hobbes himself actually writes, so that as the reader goes through your essay, she is learning a great deal about Hobbes and about where you sense particular aspects of the theory may be vulnerable.

Notice, too, what you are not doing: you are not simply imposing from outside a preformed judgment about what is or is not the best way for human beings to behave. You not raising issues which do not come directly from the text itself, and whatever problems you have with Hobbes are arising from *his* treatment of the subject not from some ideological position you prefer.

The same general principles would hold, for example, in an examination of, say, the importance of co-operation and Hobbes's apparent neglect of it, Machiavelli's treatment of virtue, Descartes's view of animals as machines, Ptolemy's treatment of the Phases of Venus, de Beauvoir's sense of female sexuality, or Plato's view of

the Social Contract in the Crito and so on. Tackle the argument through its own assumptions, explore how these lead to a particular treatment of an important issue, raise some questions about the adequacy of that treatment (if you have any), and evaluate that treatment, if necessary by a reference back to the initial assumptions. Thus, the reader comes to understand your position (approving, mixed, or disapproving) as arising from your encounter with the text and not as simply imposed by a fixed mind set from outside.

This process of arguing from the inside can be (very simply, perhaps too simply) summarized as follows:

1. Thinker X says that Y (some issue) is to understood in such and such a way.

2. Why does Thinker X make this claim? (An exploration of the basis of the argument)

3. What is valuable about this analysis?

4. However, Thinker X's treatment here does invite one to raise some questions, alternative scenarios, counterexamples.

5. How would Thinker X deal with such potentially awkward questions?

6. This seems like a (satisfactory, unsatisfactory, illogical, inadequate, strained, limited, and so on) explanation.

7. This point, in fact, suggests an overall problem with the entire theory (or indicates just how fertile and useful Thinker X's position really is).

8. We can appreciate this problem clearly by considering another point (repeat process d to f).

Note that in the above structure you are giving Thinker X a good hearing in at least three respects:

1. You link his position on a particular (and perhaps controversial) issue to the grounded argument he makes from first principles.

2. You concede the fact that there is something in this case (as there almost always will be if you are dealing with a thinker who is not thoroughly simple minded).

3. When you raise an objection or an awkward question, you give Thinker X the first chance to respond; in other words, you strive to understand the problem in the terms defined by the argument.

In the above structure, to a considerable extent your evaluation of Thinker X will therefore stem from the application of his principles to a particular problem, rather than from a rival set of assumptions. Of course you may introduce rival assumptions, perhaps as a reminder that there are alternative ways of dealing with the awkwardness in the argument, but do not make those unproven assumptions carry more weight in your argument than they can bear.

All of this is very different from simply dismissing Thinker X's case because you claim you have better (truer) initial assumptions than Thinker X does or because Thinker X lived a long time ago, long before the things we believe are true were known.

Select the Focus Carefully

The evaluative structure outlined above depends entirely on your selecting a very specific, clear, and important focus for your essay. You cannot hope to provide a useful evaluation of the entire argument. What you want is a key place in the argument which will enable you, in a close but restricted look, to offer significant insight into the entire structure of the argument.

In a sophisticated lengthy argument there are a great many potentially useful entry points, but some may be more fertile than others. So you need to give careful thought to what specific part of Thinker X's case is going to provide the best focus for your evaluation.

For instance, if you are uneasy about, or puzzled by, or supportive of Machiavelli's concept of political conduct, then some sections of his argument might be much more useful for an evaluation in a short essay than others (e.g., the chapter on cruelty or promises is probably of more immediate use to you than, say, the discussion of fortifications or the section on the unification of Italy). If you select carefully, you do not require a very extensive part of the text, but it must be one which will enable you to explore those matters which most concern you.

In any event, a close look at a carefully selected focus is almost always better than a "scattergun" approach where you roam throughout the entire text for examples often not obviously closely related to each other. For if you can call into question

certain issues in key parts of the argument, you will illuminate through that method many other parts which you do not deal with specifically.

Check Carefully Any Appeals to Context

Appealing the context is often a tempting way to deal with part of an argument. This is a risky procedure, however, for a number of reasons. In the first place, we often have no way of knowing precisely what contextual or biographical reasons prompt a writer to construct an argument in a certain way; thus, a good deal of often very questionable speculation is frequently involved. In the second place, and much more important, an appeal to context often falls into the major analytical error of believing that if one has accounted for the possible origin of a part of the argument, one has at the same time adequately dealt with the function of that part of the argument.

For instance, many students are tempted to account for Descartes's proof for God's existence in the *Meditations* merely as an attempt to fob off the religious authorities or as an appeal to the religious sensibilities of the readers. Having done this, the writer then moves on to other parts of the argument, as if making such an appeal to context properly deals with the place of the proofs of God's existence in Descartes's case.

But this procedure is avoiding the main issue: What is the function of the proof of God in Descartes's argument and, no matter what the origin, how adequate is Descartes's treatment of this section of the *Meditations*? The simplistic appeal to context has simply brushed aside one of the crucial stages of the central case Descartes is presenting.

In a similar fashion, students will often write off Hobbes's view of political obligation merely as a product of Hobbes's alleged devotion to capitalism or to the growing interest in capitalism in Hobbes's world. Once again, such an analysis misses the main point: What is Hobbes's analysis of the political state and how satisfactory is it?

Appeals to context are often a very important part of very detailed studies of the origins of particular ideas or artistic works, and they can often usefully explicate some things we may find puzzling in the language. But in evaluating the lasting merit of a particular work, the writer should be very careful that she is not simply using a reference to the context as a means of by-passing the main challenge of evaluating how a part of the text functions in relationship to the developing argument.

Use Counterexamples Intelligently

An important part of evaluating an argument is often the use of counterexamples, that is, of special scenarios or case studies which challenge Thinker X's theory.

For example, you might want, in an analysis of, say, Machiavelli, to offer counterexamples of Princes who have held to a traditional view of virtue and prospered (in Machiavelli's sense of prospering) or of those who have held unswervingly to Machiavellian principles and failed. Or, in an analysis of, say, Hobbes, you might want to offer the counterexample of co-operative behaviour or an emphasis on community. If the argument you are examining relies heavily upon examples (as, for example, Machiavelli's does), then counter-examples can be very useful (or, if not specific counter-examples, at least an examination of the adequacy of the examples in the argument).

Such counterexamples are, in themselves, never very satisfactory refutations of any complex position. However, they are often really useful ways of exploring the adequacy of Thinker X's position. So the value of counterexamples comes from how you use them to highlight strengths and weaknesses of Thinker X's case.

It is, of course, particularly important that, when you introduce a counterexample, you first apply to it Thinker X's method of analysis. How might Thinker X respond to what you are putting on the table? And then, in your analysis of that response you can illustrate the strengths or weaknesses or limitations of Thinker X's position. Obviously, if you can come up with a cogent counterexample which directly contradicts Thinker X's position or which his argument simply cannot explain, then you have a strong case for challenging the assumptions and the logic which have created that situation (provided, of course, that your own assumptions and logic are sound).

Be very careful in this process that you give Thinker X a fair hearing, because in some cases the problem may not be with Thinker X's case in itself but with the example. For instance, if you select an extreme counterexample of a corrupt sovereign in order to challenge Hobbes's claim that the corruption at the top is preferable to the alternative (say, for example, Hitler's treatment of the German Jews), then you will at least have to consider the point that that example might, in Hobbes's view, endorse his position rather than disprove it, since Hobbes is very clear that your obligation to obey ceases when the sovereign comes for your life and that you have then the right to fight back by any means at your disposal (i.e., if the Jews had broken their contract to obey and acted as if they were in the state of nature, they might not have died in such staggering numbers and the sovereign might have fallen; Hobbes argues that they had a full right to do so). This extreme example, I should add, might be developed further into a significant critique of

Hobbes's position, but by itself it is not necessarily a very strong case, until you have dealt with the way Hobbes's argument treats it.

In other words, when dealing with counterexamples, think very carefully about whether this instance is a challenge to the basis of Thinker X's argument or whether it might not be simply an example of an insufficiently rigorous application of his position.

Counterexamples can come from various sources. For example, other writers will often be a useful source (what about Aristotle's notion of community in a consideration of Hobbes's state or Harvey's notions of experimental evidence in a consideration of Descartes's method, and so on). That is the reason comparative essays are often so useful: one writer serves as a counterexample to the other.

Alternatively, counterexamples can come from historical events (for example, the defeat of the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War as a counterexample to Machiavelli's advice, modern communal social experiments as a challenge to Hobbes's atomised state, and so on). Be very careful of historical examples, however, since they are almost always complex and inherently ambiguous, there being many different interpretations of what really happened and why.

Counterexamples can also be made up as mini-thought experiments. These are often the most interesting and useful. For instance, to explicate Descartes's first proof for the existence of God you might want to ask the reader to consider the imaginary case in which you find your eight-year-old child completing a drawing of a highly sophisticated computer network. This, in fact, never happened, but you want to use the example to elaborate and explore Descartes's notion that some events must have a cause which contains at least as much reality as the event (i.e., it is reasonable to conclude that the source of the drawing is in a much more sophisticated mind than the child's).

Whatever counterexamples you come up with (and it is a very good technique to practice), remember that you are introducing them only to throw into relief particular features of the text you are considering. In other words, the counterexamples themselves prove nothing about the text or the world in general. They can, however, highlight certain questions about or problems with a part of the argument you are considering, so that if you then use the counterexample to see how Thinker X might deal with it, you can often illuminate both the strengths and the weaknesses of Thinker X's position in various ways.

You can only do this, however, if you give Thinker X a proper chance to deal with the counterexample. Notice the structure of the following paragraph in this

connection (which elaborates on the child's computer drawing introduced above, a summary point made by John Cottingham):

Now, Descartes's first proof for God's existence does have some initial plausibility. For example, if I discovered my ten-year-old daughter had drawn an apparently accurate diagram of a very sophisticated computer system, I would quickly infer that some mind other than the child's (and one much more informed about computers) had been at work (or else another diagram produced by such a mind) and was, in fact, the source of the idea. The analogy here seems clear and distinct enough, since obviously the child's mind could not have produced the diagram unaided. So to that extent Descartes's argument that the idea of God's perfection in an imperfect creature must come from a divine source seems fair enough. But, of course, there's a problem here, because Descartes's idea of God may not be all that similar to a complex computer design. Consider the same case of my child's drawing, but this time I find a picture of a black square box and a label "Very big computer" underneath it. In that scenario, I would be far less likely to have a clear and distinct perception that some mind greater than the child's produced the image. Descartes might deny that his conception of God is indeed like this simple diagram; however, if this second scenario is a better analogy to Descartes's notion of God than the first, then, for all the initial plausibility, Descartes's first argument for the existence of God does not appear all that sound.

Notice here that finding a potential weakness through applying a counterexample does not entitle one immediately to chuck out the entire argument. You have identified a key problem and will go on to explore how that affects your response to Descartes's case (or whatever part of it you have selected to focus upon), but you are not at once dismissing Descartes as a thinker no longer worth attending to.

10.7 Some Sample Outlines for Short Essays Evaluating Arguments

Here are some sample outlines for argumentative and interpretative essays on texts which present arguments. The assumption is that these are short essays of about 1000 words (i.e., four or five paragraphs). Notice, as before, how the outline narrows the focus to something very specific, how the thesis presents an argumentative opinion about that focus, and then how the topic sentences (other than the ones immediately after the introductory paragraph which define the issue further) all develop that thesis (and do not simply retell the argument).

Essay A

General Subject: Hobbes's argument in the *Leviathan*
Focus 1: Hobbes's concept of sovereignty
Focus 2: Hobbes concept of sovereignty: the dangers to the state of a corrupt monarch.

Thesis: One of the major questions one wants to raise about Hobbes's vision of the modern state is his insistence that the total power belongs to the sovereign. This would seem, on the face of it, a dangerous idea which would lead away from the very things Hobbes believes justify the establishment of the commonwealth in the first place.

TS 1: Before analyzing Hobbes's view of sovereignty, we should quickly review how he comes to define it the way he does. (Paragraph defines Hobbes's concept: this paragraph is defining the issue, not starting the argument)

TS 2: This concept obviously has some merits within the context of Hobbes's argument. (Paragraph argues that this concept makes sense in some respects)

TS 3: However, the first question one would want to raise about it is this: How is the commonwealth to be protected from the corruption of the sovereign? (Paragraph goes on to argue that this is a real danger, especially given Hobbes's view of human nature)

TS 4: There are two reasonable ways in which Hobbes seeks to answer this charge. (Paragraph goes on to argue that Hobbes's case takes care of this objection to some extent).

TS 5: However, these aspects of Hobbes's argument are problematic. (Paragraph goes on to argue that Hobbes's defence of this charge would not be entirely satisfactory)

TS 6: To appreciate these problem let us consider a typical case of a corrupt sovereign. (Paragraph uses a counterexample to consolidate the points made above).

Conclusion: The dangers of a corrupt sovereign are clearly something Hobbes takes into account. However, we have good reason to wonder about how satisfactory his treatment of this potential objection might be. (Paragraph sums up the argument)

Essay B

General Subject: Plato's *Republic*

Focus 1: Plato's views on art in Book X
Focus 2: Plato's views on art: censorship by the state

Thesis: Plato's discussion of censorship of art is of particular interest. It raises some key issues about the corrupting influence of certain forms of art, questions as much alive today as at the time this text first appeared.

TS 1: One key objection to certain forms of art raised by Socrates is that it encourages those aspects of the human psyche detrimental to the harmony necessary to proper living. This point arises naturally out of Socrates's conception of the human soul and, from a common sense point of view, is quite persuasive. (Paragraph argues that this point about art has a certain justification for the reasons Socrates brings up)

TS 2: A second reason for censorship is the particularly interesting point that debased art corrupts the understanding. Again, this point has considerable merit. (Paragraph argues that this defence of censorship is also persuasive)

TS 3: Most of us would still have some trouble agreeing with such censorship. (Paragraph brings to bear some objections to Plato's recommendations)

TS 4: However, if we recall the nature of those in charge of the censorship in Plato's *Republic*, perhaps we would find it much easier to accept the practice. (Paragraph gives Plato a chance to argue a response to the objections given in the previous paragraph)

Conclusion: Many discussions of the question of censorship today continue to take place within the framework defined by Plato in this section of the *Republic*. (Paragraph goes on to summarize the argument and restate the thesis)

Essay C

General Subject: John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*
Focus 1: Mill's concept of open free discussion
Focus 2: Mill's concept of open free discussion: some problems

Thesis: While justly famous as an eloquent statement of liberal principles, Mill's key concept of free and open discussion raises some important questions which Mill does not address.

TS 1: The first and most obvious question is this: Where are such free discussions to take place? (Paragraph argues that Mill's society does not have enough open places for discussion).

TS 2: A related criticism calls attention to those who are excluded from such forums. Mill's argument does not seem to have much place for them. (Paragraph argues that many people will lack the qualifications to take part).

TS 3: In defense of Mill, one might argue that these two objections are not lethal: there are ways of dealing with them in the context of his presentation. (Paragraph acknowledges the opposition and tries to answer the objections using Mill's theory).

TS 4: This sounds all very well in theory, but in practice many people are going to be excluded. That is clear from the way Mill insists the debates should take place. (Paragraph argues that the defense of Mill in the previous paragraph is not adequate).

TS 5: It doesn't take much imagination to visualize a society which implements Mill's recommendations and yet excludes a majority of its citizens from public forums. (Paragraph uses a counterexample).

Conclusion: The strength of Mill's case is the appeal of a rational liberal democracy, but its weaknesses stem from the same source. (Paragraph goes on to sum up the argument)

10.8 Writing Short Arguments About Lyric Poetry

An assignment students often have particular difficulty with is a short essay on a lyric poem. This creates problems because lyric poems do not usually deal with characterization, argument, or narrative, the three most common entries into a work of literature. In order to clarify what such an assignment calls for we need first to review quickly what a lyric poem is and how we are expected to read it.

Reading a Lyric Poem

Typically a lyric poem is a short reflective or meditative passage by a speaker, the voice uttering the words (who is not to be automatically identified as the poet). This speaker may or may not have a clear identity (i.e., the poem may provide some details about him or her, or it may not). In your essay, you should always refer to the speaking voice of the poem as the speaker (not as the author) and never interpret the poem simply as a biographical insight into the author. Generally it is a good idea to pretend that you do not know who the author is.

In the lyric, the speaker is typically meditating on some aspect of life, trying to communicate a feeling or a range of feelings about a common experience. The quality of the lyric poem will normally depend upon the extent to which the lyric communicates in an imaginatively moving way some insight into that experience. If you remember that popular songs are lyric poems and think about why you like some song lyrics better than others, you will sense better what a lyric poem is and why some are better than others.

The first task in reading a lyric poem is to clarify the literal level of the poem. This will take several readings. But you must develop some answers to the following questions: Who is the speaker of the poem (details may be few here, but learn as much as you can:age, gender, situation)? Where is the speaker (in the city, the country, looking at something)? What general experience is the speaker thinking about (love, time, loss, nature, growing old)? Is the poem looking backward into a memory or forward into a future or remaining fixed in the present, or, most importantly, does the speaker's attention shift from the present to the past and the future? Is the speaker addressing anyone in the poem (a lover, God, another part of himself)?

You cannot proceed to organize an interpretative argument until you are as clear as you can be about all these literal details. If you find a poem's literal details confusing or ambiguous (and that's not uncommon), then discuss it with someone else, so that you arrive together at some understanding of the literal details of the poem. If you come across words you do not understand exactly, make sure you look them up in a dictionary.

Once you have a sense of the literal details of the poem, search out the answer to this key question: What feelings or range of feelings is the speaker exploring about the experience he or she is dealing with? This is the crucial point of a lyric poem. As with popular songs, lyric poems generally deal with one of a short list of general subjects: love, memories, death, loss, nature. What distinguishes lyric poems from each other is the way in which the speakers respond to these common experiences.

In trying to sort out the speaker's feelings about the experience she is dealing with, pay particular attention to any changes in feelings or contradictions in feelings. Does the speaker's mood shift from despair to joy, from happiness at a past memory to resignation at future prospects? If this is a love poem, what is the full range of the speaker's feelings about the experience (joy, bitterness, frustration, guilt, anger, despair, melancholy or some combination)? Lyric poems (like songs) are often ambiguous, expressing contradictory and shifting feelings, and often they do not lead to a resolution of those feelings. They are not like rational arguments,

which seek a linear clarity and closure. As often as not, the speaker may be questioning her own feelings, unsure of what they all mean exactly.

As you interpret the poem, do not get confused about the time shifts. Pay attention to the verbs; these indicate whether the speaker is talking about the past, the present, or the future. This is particularly important in some meditative lyrics where comparing the past and the present is the central issue. In fact, if there is a shift back and forth like this, then that is almost certainly an important key to understanding the poem (e.g., the speaker recalls with joy the excitement of being young, turns to the present with sadness because that excitement is gone, and looks ahead to the future with despair: this temporal structure is very common in lyric poems and is especially common in rock 'n' roll, especially with Dylan, Springsteen, Waits, and many others).

Structuring a Short Interpretative Essay on a Lyric Poem

Once you have read and re-read the poem sufficiently to have a firm sense of the above issues, you can then move to organizing an essay which interprets the lyric or part of it. Remember that the function of this essay is to assist the reader to appreciate the poem. So you are going to present an argument (as you would in a film review), calling attention to something which, in your view, gives this poem a certain quality (good, bad, mixed, or whatever). The central issue to address in such an essay is this: How do one or more particular features of the style of the poem contribute to the quality of the exploration of feeling which is going on in the poem?

Generally speaking it is a good idea to start in the usual way with a Subject-Focus-Thesis paragraph. This will identify the poem you are dealing with, call attention to the speaker and the experience he is exploring, and establish a thesis which argues for a certain interpretative judgment about the poem. The main part of the argument (three orfour paragraphs) will seek to persuade the reader of that thesis by taking a very close look at certain elements in the style, that is, in the way the language of the poem makes it work well or poorly.

Here's a sample introduction which follows the standard opening for a short, argumentative essay, with some topic sentences for the argumentative paragraphs:

Sample Introduction and Outline for Essay A on a Lyric Poem

In Sonnet 73 Shakespeare returns to one of his favourite poetic themes, the disappointments of love. Here the speaker, addressing a lover or a dear friend, is clearly filled with a sense that something is coming to an end in their relationship.

It may be that he is old and trying to come to terms with his approaching death or that he is just feeling old and tired, emotionally empty and dead. In either case, the predominant mood of the poem, from start to finish, is a quiet resignation, a tired acceptance of the inevitability of what is happening. The style of the poem brings out repeatedly the speaker's sombre, unexcited, even passive acknowledgement that he is, emotionally or physically, about to die.

TS 1: We get a clear sense of this prevailing mood largely through the imagery (The paragraph goes on to discuss how the sequence of images reinforces this sense).

TS 2: The language, too, evokes a sense of resigned acceptance which speaks eloquently of the prevailing mood. (Paragraph goes on to interpret particular words and phrases to establish this point)

TS 3: What is most remarkable in this evocative and sad mood is that the speaker does not blame anyone, not even himself. The constant emphasis on natural processes and the subdued language suggest that the end is inevitably fated. (Paragraph discusses this point)

Notice how the main emphasis in this argument is not the experience the speaker is describing (the death of the relationship) but rather the speaker's response to that experience, the range of moods he goes through, as these emerge from the language, imagery, and rhythms of the poem.

To write a successful argumentative interpretation of a lyric poem, you must grasp this principle that the interpretation looks at how the language of the poem reveals things about the quality of the speaker's response. This is not easy at first, but unless you commit yourself to doing it, you will not be interpreting the poem. And please note, as before, that none of the paragraphs above is summarizing the details of the poem (that is, just translating it into another language). Do not simply recast the poem into your own words (first the speaker says this. . . . ; then the speaker says that. . . .).

Here is another sample. Notice once again the characteristic emphasis in the argument linking aspects of the style of the poem to the range of feelings of the speaker.

Sample Outline for Essay B

Subject: Frost's "Mending Wall"

Focus: The ambiguity of the speaker's feelings about the process of mending the wall.

Thesis: Frost's language and, in particular, his imagery create throughout the poem a sense of the speaker's divided feelings about what he and his neighbour do every spring. The result is an intriguingly complex lyric.

TS 1: The images of spring and the speaker's interest in them evoke a feeling that he senses that there is something unnatural about the wall he and his neighbour are building. He is, to some extent, dissatisfied with the procedure. (Paragraph discusses one or two examples of these images to bring out the point)

TS 2: At the same time, however, the way he describes the wall and the process of rebuilding it suggests clearly that he finds the ritual enjoyable, almost magical, and, in a curious way, necessary. (Paragraph takes a detailed look at another part of the poem to establish this point)

TS 3: Particularly significant in the lyric is the description of the neighbour. This injects into the poem a sudden feeling of how the speaker is both fascinated and afraid of his co-worker. (Paragraph goes on to look at the description of the neighbour in detail).

Some Do's and Don't For Essays on Lyric Poems

Here are some points to consider as you think about structuring an outline for a short essay on a lyric poem:

1. Never simply translate the surface details of the poem into a prose summary of your own. Assume the reader of your essay has read the poem and needs help in understanding it. She does not need to be told what the poem contains; she wants to know the significance of parts of it, what the lyric adds up to.

2. Do not leap to instantly allegorical interpretations in which you simply translate the images into some symbolic equivalent. Deal with the poem on a literal level first: explore what it has to reveal about the feelings of the speaker, taking the images quite literally first (e.g., the tree is a tree, the sun is the sun, and so on). You can explore the wider symbolic possibilities (and you should) later in the essay.

3. For the same reason, do not translate the poem into an autobiographical comment on the author's life. There may be important connections between the

writing of the poem and the author's life, but treat the poem in your essay as a work independent of its author. Again, that is a point you can come back to, if you have to, near the end of the essay.

4. Be careful of your language when you are discussing a poem. Notice that there is an important difference between "a disgusting mood" and "a mood of disgust." The first means that you personally find the speaker's attitude repulsive (i.e., it really offends you); the second means that you sense that the speaker is reacting with disgust to the experience she is exploring.

5. Remember, too, that you are not in your essay trying to fix the exact meaning of the lyric. You are exploring possible interpretations. So don't be too ham-fisted in your language. Usually it's better to avoid phrases like "This line means . . ." or "The symbol obviously represents . . ." Generally speaking words like "suggests," "raises the possibility," "evokes a sense of," "expresses" and so on are more effective in conveying a sense of the emotional range of the speaker. This point is connected with the problem of overstating the conclusion of an inductive argument.

6. Never just quote a section from the poem and move on, without indicating in some detail why those lines or words help to establish what you are arguing as an interpretation in the paragraph.

7. Do not make the paragraphs of the essay simply a catalogue of examples ("There are some nice images in the first stanza," "There are more images of trees in the third stanza," and so on)

10.9 Sample Essay on a Lyric Poem

Here is a sample of a short essay on a lyric poem. Notice that the essay does not summarize the poem. Instead it sets up an opinion about the poem (the thesis) and then paragraph by paragraph discusses a particular part of the poem in order to substantiate that thesis.

Bob Dylan's "The Tambourine Man": An Interpretation

Bob Dylan's poem "The Tambourine Man" explores the feelings of a person who wants to escape from a fearful world in which he feels trapped, without the ability to move away or to imagine as he would like. The poem is basically a plea for help in escaping his present condition, if only temporarily. Although much of the work expresses a rather sentimental wish to deal with pain by immediate escape and

although much of the imagery is a bit fuzzy, on the whole the poem, and especially the imagery and sound patterns, succeed in conveying well the attractive longing of the speaker for imaginative release.

Much of the language in the poem suggests that the speaker finds no satisfaction in any past achievements and is seeking, even desperate for, some way out of an unwelcome present. As a result he feels trapped and unwilling to face the world in which he finds himself. For example, words like "vanished," "blindly," "weariness," "empty," "stripped," "numb," and so on constantly reinforce the sense that the speaker finds nothing enjoyable or creative in his present situation, largely because his nervous system and senses have ceased to function as he would like. Some of these expressions of dissatisfaction are rather puzzling. There is no mistaking the mood, but the precise situation remains elusive. Notice, for example, the following lines:

Though I know that evenin's empire has returned into sand
Vanished from my hand,
Left me blindly here to stand
But still no sleepin'.
I'm branded on my feet,
I have no one to meet,
And the ancient empty street's
Too dead for dreamin'. (5-13)

This passage is full of words evoking the speaker's sense of pain, loss, and frustration ("vanished," "ancient empty," and so on), but there is no precise sense of a particular reason. The intriguing image of "Evenin's empire has returned into sand" suggests something about the collapse of an experience that was truly rewarding, something that temporarily transformed his life from a desert into something much richer. The final line, "Too dead for dreamin'," brings out a sense that the root cause may be some imaginative failure, so that he has become the victim of an incapacity to respond as he would like. The notion of branding in line 9 reinforces this notion that the speaker feels like a prisoner of some sort. Later in the poem the most evocative language describes the speaker's fear of remaining where he is; he wants to move "Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow." This image presents a graphic and threatening sense of what he wants to escape from, a malignant and irrational creature which, if it ever catches him, will close him inexorably in sorrow. The image injects a note of real urgency into his desire for release.

The imagery, which is often a bit fuzzy, emphasizes that the speaker desires an immediate release from his present reality. Here the essentially escapist and sentimental nature of the poem show through clearly. For many of the images which express his desires are rather imprecise: "Magic, swirlin' ship," "the smoke rings of my mind," and "the circus sands," for example. These phrases evoke a sense of how much the speaker wants to discover a realm of imaginative release, but they are very close to clichés and do not clearly define what it is exactly that the speaker wishes to find. What, for example, does he mean by "I'm ready for to fade/ into my own parade." The wish is real enough, but it really does not convey anything much more precise than a vague wish to escape into his own personal feelings. The most dominant image, that of the Tambourine Man himself, to whom the poem is addressed, clarifies things somewhat. It gives us the impression that the speaker may be in need of some energizing rhythm (of the sort provided by a tambourine), so that he can "dance," that is, find within himself the co-ordinating energy to express a sense of his joy in life.

One feature of the style makes this lyric, no matter how escapist parts of it may be, really memorable: the tonal qualities of the language. Dylan succeeds here in conveying an infectious sense of the attractions of the rhythmic dance he wants the Tambourine Man to provide. This quality is obvious enough if one listens to the song, but it is also clear in the lyrics on the page. For instance, the lines contain a good deal of alliteration: "jingle, jangle," "swirlin' ship," senses . . . stripped," "for to fade," and so forth. This characteristic, combined with the very strong and obvious rhyme scheme throughout, gives to the lines an emphatic and attractive energy, so that as we read we can sense how the speaker's mood of frustration and fear about the world he has been in is being transformed into something energizing and attractive. Although much of the poem contains imagery suggesting the painful desolation of the real world, the tone of the poem is not mournful, for the energy in the language, and especially in the sound patterns of alliteration, rhythm, and rhyme, convey a sense that the speaker has not given up. He is full of hope that the Tambourine Man's gift of music will, in fact, liberate him.

"The Tambourine Man," like so many popular songs, is basically quite thin, answering to the speaker's (and perhaps to the reader's) desire to resolve the painfulness of life by a temporary escape into a joyous energy, a solitary dance far removed from present surroundings. What precisely the Tambourine Man represents is not clear, but it seems that he offers the speaker the energizing joys of music. He will not resolve the difficulties of the speaker's life, but he will, at least for a time, help the speaker to forget about them. What sets this poem above so many similar ones is the skill with which the poet has organized the words-especially the images and the sounds-to convey a memorable sense of the powers of the Tambourine Man. It may be escapist, but it's hard to resist.

Notes on the Sample Essay

Make sure you recognize the following points about the essay above.

1. The above essay is approximately 1000 words long. It consists of only five paragraphs: one introductory paragraph (with the subject-focus-thesis format), three paragraphs of argument, and a final concluding paragraph.

2. The opening paragraph begins by identifying the poem and establishes clearly the focus of the essay (the imagery and sound patters in relation to the speaker's feelings about life) and set up a clearly opinionated thesis (which is an interpretative opinion).

3. Notice particularly that the introductory paragraph gets right down to the point, without digressing into details of the author's life and times. And the opening directs our attention away from the poet onto the central issue: the feelings of the speaker.

4. Each argumentative paragraph (i.e., paragraphs two, three, and four) identifies an interpretative point in the opening topic sentence and then offers some examples, sometimes by quoting a few lines, sometimes just by calling attention to single words. And, once the writer has introduced such evidence, she then goes on immediately to interpret it; that is, she discusses how that particular material establishes the point she is making in the topic sentence. She never just quotes material and moves onto something else.

5. Nowhere does the essay attempt to summarize the poem. It assumes that the reader is already very familiar with the poem. And she deals with the imagery literally; she does not translate it into something else (e.g., the Tambourine Man must be a drug dealer, the experience the speaker wants is to get totally high on narcotics).

10.10 Writing Reviews of Fine and Performing Arts Events

A review is, like the normal college essay, an expository argument. You are presenting your opinion of what you have seen and are seeking to persuade the reader to share that opinion. Like any argument, a review must have a clear logic (based on a firm opinion, or thesis), with an introduction and a sequence of paragraphs presenting well organized evidence. The following notes may help you produce a better review. There is a sample short review at the end of these notes.

1. First of all, remember that you are writing the review for someone who is thinking of going to the event and would appreciate some advice and for someone who has seen the show and is interested in reading what someone else thinks about it. Neither of these people needs a descriptive rehash of the event. What they are looking for is an evaluation.

2. It is customary to open a review by indicating the name, place, and time of the event you are reviewing. Identify those responsible for putting on the event, indicating (usually) the general content of the show. You should do this briefly, with no digressions. The introduction normally closes with the writer's overall opinion of the event (the central opinion), which is, in effect, the thesis of the review.

3. Your coordinating opinion at the end of the introduction must present your considered opinion of the whole experience. Normally this opinion will fall into one of three categories: (a) unequivocal praise (everything is splendidly successful), (b) unequivocal criticism (everything is a mess), and, most commonly, (c) a mixed opinion (some things work well, but there are also some problems). A statement indicating your reaction must appear early in the review (at the end of the first paragraph).

4. Once you have introduced the event and your opinion, in the sequence of paragraphs which follows (the argument), you will discuss one element of the event at a time, seeking to indicate to the reader why you feel about the production the way you do. You will not be able to cover all aspects of the event, so select the three or four most important features which helped to shape your reaction most decisively.

5. Remember that the purpose of the review is **not** (repeat **not**) simply to describe the event or the background to it (e.g., to retell the story of the play, to provide details about the paintings, to give a history of the author or the organization sponsoring the event): your task is to describe why you feel about it the way you do. A very common mistake with review assignments is for the writer to digress into all sorts of other matters. So if you find yourself retelling the story of the play or talking at length about the writer or painter or anything not directly relevant to the argument, the review is going astray).

6. Be particularly careful with plays. The review is not a literary interpretation of the text (although that may enter into it briefly). The review is an evaluation of the production, which is an interpretation of the play (note that the terms *play* and *production* mean significantly different things: the production is what you are

concerned with, so in your review refer to the event as *the production*, not *the play*-unless you wish to say something about the script).

7. Discuss only one aspect of the event in each paragraph. Begin the paragraph by announcing how this aspect affected your response (e.g., "One really successful part of this play is the set design, which really brings out well the complex mood of the piece" or "Many of the paintings, however, are not very interesting, with banal subjects very conventionally presented"). Then in the paragraph discuss only that announced subject. Do not change the subject in mid paragraph. If you want to change the subject to discuss another aspect of the event, then start a new paragraph.

8. Once you have introduced the subject of the paragraph, then you must introduce evidence from the show and argue how that evidence shaped your reaction. The quality of the review stems in large part from the way in which you do this. If, for example, you start the paragraph by saying that the supporting actors are not very good, then you must provide evidence (facts) from the production. And that evidence must be detailed (see the next point).

9. The question of detail is all important. For example, if you say something like "The main actress is very good, but the male lead is not up to her standard," you have expressed an opinion, but we need more detail. What does the main actress actually do on stage which makes you think this way about her performance? What does the male lead do or not do which makes you think this way about his performance? Note the difference between the above statements and the following:

The main actress is very good, especially in the way she controls her gestures and her voice at the key moments of the production. This is especially apparent in the final scene, where she sits down throughout, yet manages with the gestures and the controlled anger in her voice to convey fully just what the character is experiencing. The male lead is not up to her standard. He moves much too woodenly and speaks as if he is having trouble remembering his lines. He needs to inject some real feeling into many passages, particularly in his declaration of love in Act II.

10. Notice that in this second example, there is enough detail for the actors whom you are praising and criticizing to understand why you feel the way you do, so that, if they wanted, they could do something about their performances (whereas if all you say is "good" or "not so good" they have very little to go on). Your review will not be successful if you do not get into this sort of detail. This means that you

should discuss fewer things in a review than you might want to in order to give a full treatment to what you do discuss.

11. This level of detail applies also when you are reviewing art. Don't just sum up a painter or a work of art with a word or two of general praise or censure. Provide the supplementary details (taken directly from the works you are looking at) so that the reader understands the particulars out of which your opinion arises. What this means, in practice, is that the review should consist of relatively few but substantial paragraphs rather than of many short paragraphs (in a 1000 word review, for example, you might have room for perhaps three paragraphs of argument after the introduction).

12. In organizing the review, you can choose to discuss what you want to. And remember that many things enter into the event apart from the most immediately obvious: the setting (the arrangement of the space), the price, the treatment of the audience or viewing public, the audience, the incidental music, the hanging of the paintings, the acoustics, and so on. At times these might be worthy of mention (if they affected your response significantly). However, some issues are central to the event, and you can hardly choose to ignore them. For instance, in a review of a play, you must make some detailed mention of the acting. In an art show, you must spend considerable space discussing specific paintings (even if you cannot deal with them all). In a review of a musical performance, you must discuss the quality of the playing or singing or both.

13. As you write the review, identify the people involved as you discuss them. "Mona Chisolm, who plays the heroine Janice, is well matched with Brad Ashley, in the role of Fred. . ."; "The direction, by Alice McTavish, is crisp and effective. . ."; "The first violin, Michael Tisdale, has difficulty in some places. . . ." You do not need to identify everyone in the production, but identify those artists you do discuss.

14. It is customary in many reviews to keep to the present tense when you are discussing what is going on in the production (even though you saw it in the past). So, for example, when you discuss what the actors did, keep to the present tense: "In the opening scene the actors seem quite nervous, but they gather confidence as the play progresses. The director needs to pay some attention to improving this part of the production." Similarly, in discussing works of art, stay in the present tense when you are discussing what is in particular works: "The colours in this work clash unexpectedly, but this makes the picture, in a curious way, effective, because it highlights the central focus." Use the past tense to discuss when you saw the play (i.e., in the opening paragraph), but stay in the present tense throughout the discussion of the work or works.

15. It is customary to offer a short conclusion in which you represent your overall opinion, together with some facts about the continuing run of the production.

16. One final piece of advice. A review is much easier to write if you attend the event with some others and discuss what you have seen together immediately after the experience. Your confidence in your own opinions and your command of the particular details needed to back up your feelings will grow fast, if you take the time to discuss your reactions with others.

Sample Short Review of a Dramatic Production

[Note that this is a review of an imaginary production. Pay particular attention to the way in which the writer introduces the review, establishes a central coordinating opinion, deals with one aspect of the production in each paragraph, and provides particular details to support the opinions which appear in the opening of each paragraph. Note also the use of the present tense in discussions of what goes on]

This week at Malaspina University-College Theatre, Mountain Valley Theatre Company is offering its latest production, *No Time Like the Present*, an engagingly written and, for the most part, successfully delivered comedy with some bitter sweet overtones. The play is something of a gamble for this young company, because the production style is mildly experimental in places, but, in spite of some unevenness in the playing and a few difficulties here and there, the production is well worth seeing.

The main asset in this production is the acting of the leading players. As Montague Jack, a middle-aged drifter down on his luck, Jim Beam provides an entertaining charm and a level of assured skill, both of which establish the character convincingly. His slow drawl and lazy, graceful movements, which explode into an extraordinary athletic energy in the brawl in Act II, keep our attention and provide an important dramatic quality to the production. His performance is matched by Nora Roberts, who plays Alice, the owner of the local saloon. She establishes, above all with her wonderful facial expressions and her gravely voice, an authentic sense of someone who has seen it all but is ready for more. I particularly like the opening conversation between them in Act I, where they both convincingly come across as two experienced road warriors testing each other out in full knowledge of what they are doing. The easy pace and significant physical interaction between them (for example, in the business of the whiskey bottle) evoke the characters and the mood perfectly.

The quality of these two leading players carries the main weight of the experimental dream sequences, when for a moment the action is suspended and we

are taken directly into the buried fantasies of people who have almost forgotten how to dream. Ms Roberts is particularly good at conveying the lyrical quality of her monologue: the intense longing in her voice and body movements generates a powerful sexual tension which suddenly illuminates the complexity of a character we may have been tempted to take too lightly. Mr. Beam delivers the goods here, too, although he has less to work with. The quality of his expressions as he works through his memories and hopes is very impressive.

The supporting cast is not up to the quality of the principal players. Too often the acting is rather wooden (particularly in the case of Alan Blake, as the Sheriff, who moves as if he is reluctant to be there and speaks in a monotone). The lesser players seem to have some trouble establishing convincing accents (which move from the Southern States to Ireland and back to New England via Scotland). However, Jennifer Braxton gives a wonderful but all-too-short cameo appearance as Wilma the inebriated singer. The quality of her voice really does suggest that she could deliver the goods if her neurons were all firing correctly, and she refuses to ham up the drunkenness, so that the comedy is always surgically precise (and all the funnier for that).

The direction (by Terry Stapleton) is, for the most part, deft. There are places, however, where the pace needs picking up (for example, in the long scene at the opening of Act II). And the blocking does get occasionally repetitive. Why, one wonders, are the chairs always arranged in the same position? There is room for considerably more visual variety than we get. The slowness of the scene changes is also irritating. However, the comic scenes are well managed, and there is a good deal of very interesting business in the use of various props (e.g., the fake six gun and the old guitar). And I particularly like the way in which the director has controlled the tone of the piece, allowing the ironic resonance to manifest itself without overwhelming the comedy. We really do get a sense of how ridiculous these people are, and yet we also care about them.

The major technical aspects of the production are good. The set (by Ryle Cannon) is splendidly evocative of a seedy old saloon. The colour of the wood and, above all, the floor provide just the right sense of a place which saw its best days long ago. I do wonder a bit about the stuff on the walls; the picture of the football team seems quite out of place and the antlers don't look as if they come from South Texas. Maybe I'm being too picky here. Lighting (by Patricia Foudy) is functional but unexciting (except in the dream sequences where the backlighting is spectacularly effective).

Other aspects of the production, in general, work very well. The costumes (by Christine Thompson) are really splendid, especially the shoes. The incidental music (composed by Claudia Smith and played by Wes Matchoff and Gloria

Minoff) provides just the right introduction to the play and adds interest to the excessively lengthy scene changes. Like the production itself, the bluesy-funk style establishes some entertaining ambiguities, and Gloria Minoff's voice is very easy to listen to. I have some reservations about the make up on the older towns people (Mabel Courtenay, in particular), which seems to highlight the fact that these are young actors pretending to be older folks (ditto for the hair).

No Time Like the Present, for all the criticisms one might like to make about this or that aspect of the production, is well worth the price of admission. It will make you laugh and yet leave you wondering about the way in which underneath the laughter there may be, as in much of life, a significant sadness lurking. The production continues its run at Malaspina University-College Theatre for the next two weeks.

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Essays and Arguments, Section Eleven

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11.0 Sample Outlines for Essays and Research Papers

The following pages contain a number of sample outlines in the format we have stressed in this book. Many of these outlines appear in earlier sections. If you are an inexperienced essay writer, feel free to model your outlines closely on some of these models.

A. Short Book Review

Subject: Book review of *Of Lice and Zen*: *The Slocan Valley Communes* by Jane Doe

Focus: A short review for someone who has not read the book

Thesis: *Of Lice and Zen* presents an intriguing and useful look at the life of some pioneer British Columbia families. On the whole, the book is a very good read, although it does suffer from some flaws which limit its usefulness as an undergraduate text.

TS 1: In *Of Lice and Zen* Jane Doe sets out to tell the story of Anne and Hank and a group of their friends, who try late in the nineteenth century to establish a communal experiment in the Slocan Valley. (Paragraph defines the content of the book for those who have not read it; this is not part of the argument and would not be necessary if the review was being written for an audience which had read the text)

TS 2: Particularly interesting is Doe's scrupulous attention to the everyday details of life on the farm. This really makes the situation come alive for the modern reader. (Paragraph presents evidence and interpretation to back up this point).

TS 3: And the author's style is very readable, with plenty of good humour and clear descriptions. (Paragraph presents evidence and interpretation to back up this idea)

TS 4: However, the total lack of illustrations, like photographs and maps, and the poor quality of the printing and editing create irritating obstacles. (Paragraph presents evidence and interpretation to back up this claim).

Conclusion: These faults are a shame, because in many respects Of Lice and Zen is an excellent book. However, its limitations will prevent it from being the best choice for an undergraduate text. (Paragraph concludes the argument by summing up)

This essay presents a three-paragraph argument, with one definition paragraph after the opening. Each of the argumentative paragraphs looks at one particular aspect of the book and explains how that has affected the writer's opinion of it. Notice that the thesis of this essay is a mixed opinion (some good things and some problems).

B. Short Essay Reviewing a Live Drama Production

Subject: A review of a live performance of *The Pure Product*

Focus: A short review of a performance for those who have not seen the production.

Thesis: The production provides a stimulating evening of theatre in spite of some erratic writing and the very uneven directing.

TS 1: *The Pure Product* is the story of a rock 'n' roll has-been, now on the comeback trail. (Paragraph acquaints the readers who have not seen the production with a few details of the story; this is not starting the argument but defining the subject matter)

TS 2: The naturalistic style demands a high calibre of acting from the performers. And the two leading actors come through extremely well. (Paragraph provides evidence and interpretation to back up this claim)

TS 3: Unfortunately, the same level is not maintained in the lesser roles. In part this is due to some sloppy writing and directing.

TS 4: Technically the production is very impressive.

Conclusion: Thus, in spite of some irritating problems, the evening is, on the whole, a great success.

Notice that this review does not try to deal with all aspects of the production. The writer has selected the three key elements which shaped his response more than anything else.

C. Short Essay on a Prose Fiction (Short Story)

Subject: John Steinbeck's short story "The Chrysanthemums"

Focus 1: Elisa's character

Focus 2: Elisa's character: her insecure sense of her femininity

Thesis: Elisa thinks of herself as strong, but she is, in fact, a very vulnerable woman. She may be vital enough to have strong ambitions, but she is so insecure about her own femininity that she is finally unable to cope with the strain of transforming her life.

TS 1: When we first see Elisa we get an immediate sense that she is hiding her sexuality from the rest of the world. (Paragraph examines the opening descriptions

of Elisa and interprets key phrases to point out how she appears to be concealing her real self)

TS 2: The speed and energy with which Elisa later seeks to transform herself really bring out the extent of her dissatisfaction with the role she has been playing. (Paragraph discusses what happens as Elisa starts to respond to the crisis, interpreting details of the text to show how she is changing)

TS 3: But Elisa's new sense of herself does not last, for she has insufficient inner strength to develop into the mature, independent woman she would like to be. (Paragraph looks at the final section of the story, in which Elisa fails to maintain her new self)

Conclusion: This story narrates an everyday series of events, but the emotional drama Elisa goes through is very significant. (Paragraph restates the argument in summary form, reaffirming the thesis)

This structure is a useful one to look at if you are writing on a character in a short story who is faced with a personal crisis. In many stories, one of the chief points is the way in which a character learns or fails to learn from (or to adapt to) a crisis in his or her personal life. If the essay is arguing about the significance of what has been learned or not learned, then this structure, which looks at Elisa at the beginning, during the key transforming process, and at the end, is often useful.

D. Short Essay on a Long Fiction

General Subject: Shakespeare's *Richard III*

Focus 1: The importance of Anne in the play.

Focus 2: The first scene between Anne and Richard (1.3)

Thesis: Anne's role in 1.3 is particularly important to the opening of the play because it reveals clearly to us not only the devilish cleverness of Richard but also the way in which his success depends upon the weaknesses of others.

TS 1: Richard's treatment of Anne in 1.3 provides a very important look at the complex motivation and style of the play's hero. (Paragraph goes on to argue how the Richard-Anne confrontation reveals important things about Richard)

TS 2: More importantly, perhaps, the scene reveals just how Anne's understandable weaknesses enable Richard to succeed. (Paragraph looks at how Anne's response to Richard's advances reveal important things about her character)

TS 3: We can best appreciate these points by considering a key moment in the scene, the moment when Richard invites Anne to kill him. (In an illustrative paragraph, the writer takes a detailed look at five lines from the scene, to emphasize the points mentioned in the previous two paragraphs)

Conclusion: In the wider context of the play, this early scene provides Richard with a sense of his own power and thus confirms for him that he really can achieve what he most wants. (Paragraph sums up the argument in the context of the entire play)

Notice how this essay drastically narrows the focus to one very short scene from a long play. You have to go through such a narrowing of the focus to construct a persuasive argument, because you simply do not have the space to argue about the entire work.

Note the use of the illustrative paragraph (in TS 3). This is very common in essay interpreting literature. It will not introduce any new points but will go into great detail about a few lines of text in order to consolidate the points already made.

E. Short Essay Evaluating an Argument in Another Text

General Subject: John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*

Focus 1: Mill's concept of open free discussion

Focus 2: Mill's concept of open free discussion: some problems

Thesis: While justly famous as an eloquent statement of liberal principles, Mill's key concept of free and open discussion raises some important questions which Mill does not deal with satisfactorily.

TS 1: The first and most obvious question is this: Where are such free discussions to take place? (Paragraph argues that Mill's society does not have enough open places for discussion).

TS 2: A related criticism calls attention to those who are excluded from such forums. Mill's argument does not seem to have much place for them. (Paragraph argues that many people will lack the qualifications to take part).

TS 3: In defense of Mill, one might argue that these two objections are not lethal: there are ways of dealing with them in the context of his presentation. (Paragraph acknowledges the opposition and tries to answer the objections using Mill's theory).

TS 4: This sounds all very well in theory, but in practice many people are going to be excluded. That is clear from the way Mill insists the debates should take place. (Paragraph argues that the defense of Mill in the previous paragraph is not adequate).

TS 5: It doesn't take much imagination to visualize a society which implements Mill's recommendations and yet excludes a majority of its citizens from public forums. (Paragraph uses a counterexample).

Conclusion: The strength of Mill's case is the appeal of a rational liberal democracy, but its weaknesses stem from the same source. (Paragraph goes on to sum up the argument)

Note that no paragraph in this essay summarizes Mill's argument. The assumption is that the reader of the essay is already familiar with it. Hence, the paragraphs make argumentative interpretative points about Mill's text. Notice the use of a counterexample in TS 5.

F. Longer Essay or Research Paper on a Social Issue

Subject: The Ministry of Health and Welfare

Focus 1: The Welfare System

Focus 2: The distribution of welfare

Focus 3: The distribution of welfare in BC: problems with the present system

Thesis: Our system of distributing welfare is gravely inadequate, because it is creating a great many serious problems and failing to address as it should those concerns it was originally meant to alleviate.

TS 1: How exactly is welfare distributed under present arrangements in BC? (Paragraph goes on to describe the present process; this is part of the introduction, an analysis of the present process, which all readers may not understand)

TS 2: This system obviously requires a complex bureaucracy for its administration. (Paragraph goes on to analyze the structure of the administration of welfare, making sure the reader will understand the key officials and offices which the essay will later refer to. Again, this is part of the introduction, providing necessary background information)

TS 3: The first major problem with this system is that it is excessively expensive to administer. (Paragraph starts the argument here with a cause-to-effect paragraph, in which the writer brings in evidence and interpretation to argue the excessive expense of the system)

TS 4: A second problem is the whole concept of confidentiality. (The paragraph goes on to argue the importance of this problem).

TS 5: Some people argue, however, that confidentiality is such an important principle that we simply have to put up with these difficulties in order to protect the rights of the welfare recipient. (Paragraph here acknowledges the opposition, presenting an argument against the thesis)

TS 6: However, there are ways to protect against discrimination and, at the same time, to deal with the problems created by the present treatment of confidentiality. (Paragraph goes on to answer the opposition's point in the previous paragraph)

TS 7: The present system also creates many difficulties for those who have to deal with welfare recipients, especially for landlords. (Paragraph goes on to discuss some of the problems landlords face because of the present system)

TS 8: Consider, for example, the situation of Jean Smith, who runs a rooming house for the unemployed and most of whose clients are on welfare. (This paragraph offers an illustration, not advancing the argument, but consolidating the previous point by a detailed look at a specific example).

TS 9: We could easily remedy the problems Ms Smith and others like her face every day if we were prepared to make some simple changes in the system of distribution. (The paragraph goes on to argue for two important changes to the present system).

TS 10: What would all this cost? Estimates vary, but informed studies suggest that we might actually save money and, at the same time, assist the welfare recipients to better housing. (Paragraph gives an economic analysis, showing the viability of the suggested reforms)

TS 11: In addition to these changes, we could also encourage a new attitude in the social assistance officials who deal directly with welfare recipients and with those who provide housing for them. (The paragraph suggests how this might be done and what advantages it would bring).

Conclusion: Clearly, it is time we did something to reform an inefficient welfare distribution system. If we continue to do nothing, the problems mentioned above will get worse. (A concluding paragraph makes some specific recommendations, repeating points made in the argument).

Notice how in this longer research paper the writer takes time to introduce the subject matter thoroughly before launching the argument. The second paragraph informs the reader about the present system (which the writer wants reformed), and the third paragraph gives the reader a basic understanding of the various departments and officials involved, so that the essay can refer to them later in the knowledge that the reader understands the present situation.

Unless you are writing for a very particular audience about whose knowledge of the subject you are well informed and can count on, you should normally not assume in the reader the specific background knowledge essential to understanding your paper. Therefore, you must devote some time in the introduction to providing the necessary information.

The fifth paragraph (TS 5) gives an example of the technique of acknowledging the opposition, and the paragraph immediately after than answers those points. The eighth paragraph (TS 8) considers a specific illustration in detail.

G. Longer Essay or Research Paper on the Historical Significance of an Idea, Book, Person, Event, or Discovery

Subject: Warfare and Technology

Focus 1: Modern weapons

Focus 2: The machine gun

Focus 3 The machine gun in World War I and World War II

Focus 4: The long-term significance of the machine gun: how it has transformed our thinking about warfare.

Thesis: No modern technological invention has had such a revolutionary impact on warfare as the machine gun, which has totally transformed our thinking about and conduct of human combat.

TS 1: What exactly is a machine gun? (Paragraph goes on to define clearly and at length exactly what this central term means).

TS 2: Curiously enough, this weapons of destruction was originally invented in order to minimize the destructiveness of war. (Paragraph provides historical background on the initial development of this weapon)

TS 3: Traditional military thinkers were not all enthusiastic about this formidable invention; in fact, many at first rejected the weapon. (Paragraph puts the invention into a historical context; this paragraph is still providing background)

TS 4: However, for all these objections, the military found it finally impossible to resist such an efficient killing machine. (Paragraph continues to provide historical background information on the adoption of the weapon)

TS 5: The first effect of this machine in World War I was enormously to multiply the casualties, to the point where people had to develop a new understanding of the cost of war. (Paragraph gives statistics from World War I and interprets the response to argue this point).

TS 6: These sorts of statistics revolutionized the realities of hand-to-hand combat, doing much to destroy traditional views of chivalry and knightly warriors. (Paragraph argues this point)

TS 7: Once the machine gun became an integral part of the armament of helicopters and warplanes, this transforming influence increased exponentially. (Paragraph argues how this point really changed our attitudes to war)

TS 8: This accelerating mechanization of the killing power of war, which the development of the machine gun initiated, may be leading to a world in which traditional battle is psychologically difficult, if not impossible.

Conclusion: Nowadays we have become accustomed, perhaps even numbed, by the destructiveness of warfare. It seems ironic that the machine which has done the most to promote this development was originally intended to reduce the destructiveness of war.

The above structure provides some guidance for a writer trying to organize a long essay on the historical significance of something. Notice the clear divisions into

which such a report falls. First (after the introductory paragraph, the writer defines clearly the thing, person, idea, event the essay is discussing. Normally this should be done as quickly and succinctly as possible (it should not take over the essay). Then the writer provides some historical context, so that the reader can understand the invention in terms of the immediate situation at the time of its invention.

H. Research Paper on a Cultural Movement

General Subject: Modern poetry

Focus 1: Imagism

Focus 2: The significance of the stylistic innovations of Imagism

Thesis: Imagism is the most significant development in modern poetry; in fact, this movement marked the start of what has come to be called the modernist movement in English literature, which marked a decisive break with traditional ways of writing poetry.

TS 1: How did this new movement begin? Well, like many artistic movements it started as a small experiment in the hands of a few young artists. (Narrative paragraph, giving background historical details to the origin of the term)

TS 2: The most remarkable contributor to these new ideas was a young expatriate American, Ezra Pound. (Narrative paragraph, giving background details of Ezra Pound)

TS 3: Pound and his friends were reacting very strongly against the prevailing styles of popular poetry in England, particularly the Georgian poets. (A paragraph of analysis and definition, providing specific details of the sort of poetry which these young poets found objectionable)

TS 4: In contrast to this style, the new school demanded adherence to a vital new principle, the overriding importance of clear evocative imagery. This was a particularly significant point. (Argument starts here with the first point about Imagism)

TS 5: One can get a sense of what this principle meant in practice by looking closely at the poem "Oread" by HD, a work much admired by the Imagists. (This is an illustration, providing a detailed look at just one short poem in order to consolidate the previous point and make it more interesting)

TS 6: Another, and more immediately startling change was Imagism's rejection of traditional verse forms. (This paragraph continues the argument about the nature of Imagism)

TS 7: Not surprisingly, many readers found the new style difficult, and Imagism drew many hostile and often sarcastic responses from English critics. (This paragraph is acknowledging the opposition-letting those who disliked the new style have a chance to enter the argument)

TS 8: While these objections have some obvious force in the case of many poems, they were answered decisively by the one great poet Imagism produced, T. S. Eliot. Before considering Eliot's contribution, however, it is interesting to examine briefly his origins. (Paragraph breaks the argument to provide some background details of T. S. Eliot)

TS 9: Eliot's early poetic style demonstrated the full power of Imagism in the hands of a great artist. (Paragraph continues the argument by arguing for the quality of Eliot's style)

TS 10 A second vital contribution Eliot made was that he overcame the inherent difficulty of writing a long Imagist poem. (Paragraph continues the argument about the quality of Eliot's poetic style)

TS 11 These qualities in Eliot's early poems culminated in the greatest poem of the century, *The Waste Land*. (Paragraph offers an analysis of one poem to consolidate the previous points: this analysis might be extended into several more paragraphs, if there is sufficient space)

TS 12 Eliot's influence was decisive on a series of young poets. (Paragraph provides evidence for this assertion)

TS 13 Even today, long after the death of Eliot and Pound and the other original Imagist poets, the evidence of their revolutionary redefinition of poetic style can be seen in any anthology of modern poetry. (Concluding paragraph, summing up the argument. This might be extended with examples)

Notice, once again, the use of various paragraphs, some advancing the argument, some providing background information, some providing detailed illustration. This structure might provide some useful advice for those planning a research paper on a particular artistic movement in poetry, drama, or fine arts.

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