

Argumentative Essays

An argumentative essay is one in which the writer (you) is expected to take a position on a topic or issue. This means that you have the opportunity to form your own opinion on the subject at hand. It does not mean that your opinion alone will stand as a valid essay. You must provide evidence to prove your claims, either from the primary source being examined or outside research. As the name suggests, an argumentative essay often takes a position against a pre-existing argument. If this is the case, the opposing side should be mentioned and countered early in the paper.

The first step is to carefully read the assignment prompt.

The word *argue* does not always appear in the prompt. Words like analyze, discuss, compare or examine also require you to develop an opinion.

Examples

The following examples are based on Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" (1729). This work is a classic example of satiric social comment. Giving vent to his frustration over English disinterest in the plight of the Irish, Swift suggests that poverty-stricken Irish families could sell their year-old babies to the English as meat. Despite the horrific nature of the proposal, his argument is calm, organized and entirely reasonable.

Argumentative essay structure

Question/prompt:

Examine Jonathan Swift's use of a fallible narrator in "A Modest Proposal".

Brainstorm:

- *A fallible narrator is one who cannot be believed.*
- *Swift writes in frustration and anger.*
- *At certain points, the tone changes from reasonable to genuine sarcasm.*
- *These points reveal his true opinion. *

The thesis statement of an argumentative essay should clearly state your position on the subject and how you intend to proceed.

The thesis should be something with which people might disagree.

If it is too obvious and everyone agrees, there is no point in reading your paper.

Thesis statement:

Although he goes to great lengths to present a cool, unfeeling narrator in "A Modest Proposal", Jonathan Swift's own voice breaks through in several places, revealing his true opinion.

The following essay would highlight the instances in which Swift's real feelings are apparent and suggest the effect this has on the work as a whole.

At this point, a solid outline will save you a great deal of time in revisions and, even worse, reorganizations later.

Outline

Introduction:

Thesis statement: *Although he goes to great lengths to present a cool, unfeeling narrator in "A Modest Proposal", Jonathan Swift's own voice breaks through in several places, revealing his true opinion.*

Paragraph one:

- Topic sentence: *Those who claim that the presentation as a reasonable solution is flawless overlook the cracks in the armour.*
- Supporting sentence one: *In the first instance of unmistakable ridicule, Swift (1729) claims that the infants would make perfect food for the landlords since "they have already devoured most of the parents" (340).*
- Evidence/example: *As there is no evidence of cannibalism in Ireland at that time, a reasonable person might conclude that this is meant sarcastically.*
- Supporting sentence two: *In a slightly more subtle suggestion, Swift (1729) says the infants would give their parents bargaining power with landlords.*
- Evidence/example: *In an allusion to the true state of affairs, Swift (1729) says this could be a solution to being unable to pay their rent "their corn and cattle being already seized, and money a thing unknown" (342).*

All subsequent paragraphs would follow the same structure as paragraph one. The number of paragraphs needed is determined by the length of the essay.

Conclusion:

Swift begins with the occasional sarcastic remark. The essay culminates in a list of recommendations that actually are reasonable – recommendations he had previously suggested to the government. These, too, are delivered in a sarcastic manner. It must be kept in mind that at the time it was published, the essay was met with a great deal of outrage. Some actually believed that Swift was serious. The points elaborated above are important to a true understanding of the essay.

The conclusion should not merely restate the main points of the essay. It should also suggest why these points are important.

References:

Swift, J. (1729). A modest proposal. In H. Rosengarten & J. Flick (Eds.), (1998). *The broadview reader* (pp.338-347). Broadview Press.

