CHAPTER

2

What Is an Argument?

THIS CHAPTER WILL COVER

- How an argument in your paper differs from an (angry, yelling) argument in real life
- How an argument in your paper differs from an argument in a high school paper
- The qualities that should characterize your argument: excitement, tension, and drive
- A basic model for creating an exciting argument: the tennis serve

Arguments in College; or, Why Your Paper Is Not a Cage Fight

Good papers need to have an argument. What does this mean, exactly?

When I was a kid, I had arguments all the time. With my sister or the

obnoxious kid down the street. Usually at high volume. What does angry yelling have to do with the college essay?

The argument is the most important part of the paper. It's the driving force that compels a reader through your points. But an argument in a paper is different from an argument in real life. In life, we explosively voice our own point of view, driven by big emotions and lacking subtlety. In a paper, the rhetorical equivalent would be a statement in all caps: I AM RIGHT, AND YOU ARE WRONG.

In real life, it feels good to get the emotions out in a big way. But in a paper, these blunt tactics won't work to convince your reader that your idea is a good one. Readers resent getting hit over the head with the hammer of a reductive, simplistic argument.

In high school, paper arguments sometimes reflect this all-caps sensibility. VIOLENT VIDEO GAMES ARE BAD, AND HERE'S WHY. Or WE NEED GUN CONTROL NOW, AND HERE'S WHY. Essays written to defend political beliefs often have a single-minded, passionate drive that can lack nuance. All you need is three supporting points, and you're done with this kind of essay.

- In high school, we often write debate-style opinion pieces arguing for or against positions, pro or con.
- In life, we argue positions out of big, unsubtle emotions.

But in college, we have to master a new kind of argument. College professors are usually looking for something more sophisticated.

THINKING ABOUT AN ARGUMENT IN COLLEGE

- A historical event, a work of literature, a modern painting, a classic film: these things can't be understood in a single sentence. They contain multitudes.
- An argument about these subjects has to reflect their multifaceted, ambiguous nature.
- An argument in college must be complex, to capture the complexity of the thing it's analyzing.

In this light, "argument" doesn't seem like the right word at all to describe what a college essay does. You want to create an analysis with

subtlety and nuance. So why do we use the word "argument" to describe the central goal of the essay?

When we're talking about a college paper, the argument is not one side in a screaming match. Instead, the argument here refers to the driving force that makes the paper come alive. In Chapter 1, we observed that the writer's most important goal is to write an interesting paper. Where does interest come from? The paper's interest comes from the argument. An argument moves: it has tension and torque. It pushes against reader expectations to arrive at analysis that is surprising, unexpected, and original.

We're not screaming, yelling, throwing stuff, or using ALL CAPS.

But we're still passionate, nonetheless. A successful analytical essay will create propulsive energy through the paper by coming up with a great argument, something the professor never saw coming. She puts down her coffee and straightens up to look more closely at your paper. Now *this* is interesting.

So how does this work? How do we get here?

The Tennis Serve Model of Argument

The argument gets its power in the paper's very opening. This is true for a five-page analytical essay as well as for longer papers. The introduction is the most important part of the paper because that's when a reader decides whether to stick with your concept. Did you pitch the idea to keep the reader's interest?

A successful argument in a college paper can be modeled on a tennis serve.

If you're not super familiar with tennis, then head online to watch a video of what a tennis serve looks like. I recommend checking out footage of Venus Williams, one of the most powerful tennis players in the world.

The crowd is quiet. She assumes the proper stance, one foot next to the white line, getting ready. She has a ball in one hand and her racket in the other. She bounces the ball a couple of times. The tension builds. She tosses the ball high into the air, looking up and raising her racket. Then: wham! She slams her racket hard against the ball. It shoots over the net, traveling over 100 miles per hour. Her serve creates a screaming tennis missile, which her unlucky opponent now has to scramble to return.

The tennis serve is based on a simple premise: the player sets the ball through a toss and then converts the toss into a slam. Set-up, slam. You can use a similar process to create power for your argument.

HOW AN ARGUMENT IS LIKE A TENNIS SERVE

- The introduction paragraph creates the set-up. It throws the ball into the air.
- The paper opens with an apparent premise, a summary of what we would expect, the state of the field, or how things usually go. The ball rises into the air.
- Then comes the argument: boom! At the end of the introduction paragraph, the paper arrives at the thesis statement, which smashes the ball over the net.
- The thesis statement makes the argument. It pushes against reader expectations using words such as *however*, *although*, *yet this paper will argue*, or *despite all appearances*.
- In other words, the paper explains to us, explicitly, why the thesis statement is surprising and unexpected.
- The paper creates its own drama, right in the first paragraph. First we hear about how things seem; then the paper shows us how they really are.

I develop specifics on how all this works in Chapter 13, on the introduction, and Chapter 14, on the thesis statement. But this is the broader philosophy.

A similar comparison is to think of the paper's opening as a dive off a diving board. As you frame your opening paragraph, always think about tension. What is the springboard for the essay? What are you pushing against, and do you maintain the tension throughout? An interesting essay creates its own drama by showing clearly how its ideas differ from the usual or expected accounts.

Now we're in a position to understand why some college essays fail to succeed—even though the writer has checked all the boxes. A paper might have an introduction paragraph, thesis statement, three body paragraphs with supporting evidence, and a conclusion: it should be good. But the paper comes back with a mediocre grade. What happened? The paper spent its pages trying to prove an argument that had no steam. The professor yawned.

This is a key insight for developing a successful essay.

- You need to choose an argument that is surprising, unexpected, or unusual to your reader.

If you pick something safe and uncontroversial—something any reader would agree with before even reading your essay—then you're not making an argument; you're just going through the motions. Argument comes from *pushing against*: a successful paper chooses an argument that actually needs to be proved. In order for a reader to be convinced of your argument, she will need to read your paper to be persuaded.

This is not to say that you should choose an argument that's wacky, unbelievable, or totally off-the-wall. Your paper still needs to engage a reader by making reasonable claims.

Instead, try to find that sweet spot between convention and innovation.

- Choose an argument that's surprising but still credible. It should be supportable by evidence from the thing you're analyzing.

See if you can develop an argument that's inherently complex, where there's no right answer. Look for ambiguities, tensions, or contradictions. Aim to present a many-sided account of the object you're studying.

College essays sometimes differ from high school essays in rewarding complexity rather than a one-sided argument. Canonical novels, famous artworks, world-changing historical events: the things we study in college are by definition complicated, with no single way of understanding them. See if your paper can do justice to that complexity by pointing out the unexpected dimensions.

Ho-Hum to Wow: Some Sample Arguments

Let's look at a few examples.

STUDENT THESIS #1:

> William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* is famous for its depiction of love. The play was written in 1597, more than four hundred years ago. The play can be read as a handbook of love. As this essay will show, the play portrays three major components of love: infatuation, sexuality, and commitment.

Hmmm. The problem here is that no reader is going to disagree with the essay's central claims. Yes, love depends on things like infatuation, sexuality,

and commitment. And yes, all these things appear in Shakespeare's play. These claims are so self-evident that the paper will probably spend most of its pages on plot summary.

In order to grab our attention, the paper needs to aim higher than stating the obvious.

PRO TIP: If most of your paper is devoted to plot summary, it's a likely warning sign that your argument is trying to prove the obvious.

If we want to say something interesting about the concept of love in *Romeo and Juliet*, we're going to have to get ambitious. Can we say something about the play that might surprise a reader?

STUDENT THESIS #2:

Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* is famous for its depiction of love. The two young lovers are so passionate in their bond that they ultimately die for each other. Yet the play's famous love theme has obscured some of its more troubling aspects. In fact, despite the play's reputation, this paper will argue that *Romeo and Juliet* creates the blueprint for a dysfunctional romantic relationship.

Now there's a surprise! After reading this paper, your professor will never see young love in the same way. The paper's counterintuitive claim really caught her attention, and she was curious to see what evidence you found to support the argument. If you can choose an unexpected or unusual angle for your paper—one that you can fully back up with evidence and specific examples—your reader will want to read on to learn more. The surprise of the argument works to create tension and propulsive drive in the essay.

WRITING EXERCISE

How would you compare and contrast the two following arguments, which are seemingly similar? Do you think one of the papers will be more successful? If so, why?

1. Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* portrays two powerful families whose members use violence to escalate their feud. This paper will

show that the violence is motivated by revenge, male pride, and a desire to control the city of Verona.

2. Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* portrays two powerful families engaged in a violent feud. Although the play was written in the sixteenth century, its portrayal of male violence shows surprising similarities to today's idea of "toxic masculinity," which the play ultimately critiques.

Taking a Moment to Answer the Skeptics

The skeptical student wants to know, "Does a paper always need to have an unexpected angle? Is it okay to simply examine something, without it being contrary to popular belief or instinct?"

One answer is that it depends on the assignment. If your professor just wants you to reiterate the contents of her lecture, then you can convey information without aiming to surprise or challenge.

But college assignments often demand critical thinking. If the paper is supposed to have an argument, then it must pursue a claim that needs to be proved. If the reader will already agree with you before reading the paper, then you're not making an argument.

It's easy for me to say that you need to make a provocative, surprising argument. But this kind of writing is hard to pull off. Let's consider a crucial reason why.

As a beginning writer, it's often difficult to know what kinds of arguments will challenge a reader. If you're reading a book for the first time, or learning about a new idea or event, it's hard to have a sense of what the expected interpretation might be. How can you propose an interesting argument when you feel like you can barely summarize your subject's basic outlines?

This is one reason why it's usually easier for seasoned, mature critics—like professors—to write these kinds of papers. We already have a sense of the "master narratives," the familiar stories that critics and historians have used to describe certain well-known works or time periods. We know what kinds of ideas are accepted, versus what will seem surprising. It's harder work for a beginning writer to come up with an argument that is unexpected and compelling.

Having said this, I know you can do it! I've seen many acomplished undergraduate papers, as student writers have grasped the successful formula for crafting a surprising thesis. It *is* a formula, a pattern you can learn to master. You'll just have to start practicing how to do it.

Summing Up

WHAT IS AN ARGUMENT?

- An argument in a college paper differs from the usual definition of the word *argument*.
- Instead of making emotional, one-sided claims, an argument in a college essay is more subtle and complex.
- *Argument* here refers to the sense of tension a paper generates when it pushes against reader expectations.
- An argument needs to go beyond stating the obvious. It must be up for debate and supported by evidence. It should surprise or challenge the reader.
- A successful argument works like a tennis serve: the introduction sends the ball high in the air—describing the expected or usual ideas—while the thesis statement slams the ball over the net with a surprising, original claim.
- See Chapter 13, on the introduction, and Chapter 14, on the thesis statement, for more detailed advice about how to make an argument.

CHAPTER

3

Your Reader: Not Just Your Professor, but Also Your Roommate

Who is your reader, and why does it matter?

You might think that there's an obvious answer to this question: the reader is your professor, of course. She's the one who will be reading your paper and giving you a grade. She's the one who assigned the paper. She's the one who makes the whole world of your class possible.

This chapter is going to offer a slightly more sophisticated account of how to think about your reader.

THIS CHAPTER WILL COVER

- Writing for your professor
- But also, the problems that can arise if you assume that your professor is your only reader
- How to think of your reader as an intelligent roommate
- How to use the intelligent roommate to make sure that you're covering all of the paper's fundamental logical premises

First Off: Your Professor Is Your Reader

If you think of your professor as your reader, there are a few things to keep in mind:

- You need to be attuned to the unique quirks of each professor.
- Sometimes professors will give you direct instructions about what they're looking for in your paper. Make sure to pay attention to these cues.
- Writing a successful paper in college often involves performing an astute psychological assessment of your professor.

What are the special, unique values that make this professor tick? Are they deeply wedded to their own interpretations and expecting you to reflect these ideas back at them? Or do they emphasize critical thinking and creative arguments? Do they have a specific rubric stating what they are looking for in your paper? Your evaluation of your professor will lead you to shape your paper toward their expectations.

Students sometimes get frustrated with the divergent expectations across different classes, but *that's what writing is*. Our essays are always going to have to be flexible, nuanced, and responsive to real-time situations. We will accept these conditions with a Buddha-like composure and try to keep up as best we can.

But Your Professor Is Not Your Only Reader

The main thrust of this chapter is actually to get you thinking of your reader beyond your professor. In fact, if you assume that your professor is your *only* reader, this assumption can lead to difficulties in your paper. Here's why.

A paper needs to establish some basic premises for its argument. If you assume that the professor is your reader, then you're likely to omit crucial information from the paper. Here are just a few of the unconscious assumptions you might make if you think of your professor as your only reader:

- I don't need to define this term because we discussed it in class and the professor already knows what I'm talking about.

- I don't need to introduce the background information because the professor already included it in her lecture.
- I don't need to explain the stakes of my argument because the professor is teaching a class on the subject and she already knows it's important.
- I don't need to show how my argument pushes against expectations because the professor is smart enough to figure it out on her own. She's the expert on this stuff, after all!

These assumptions might explain the crushing sensation you feel when you get your paper back from your professor with a low grade—even though you knew the things the professor wanted to see in the paper. These ideas were percolating in your head, but they never made it onto the page. The best-case scenario is that your brilliant ideas find perfect expression in your paper. This is what writing *does* at its most basic level: it communicates to a reader with all the fullness of meaning you intended.

When writing fails to communicate what we hoped for, we know there's a problem. We need to get out of our own heads, to get some distance from what we've written. The words might look fine when we read them over to ourselves, but then our professor points out all the things that are missing, misdirected, or unclear.

If there's one idea to take away from this book, it's to think of your reader. Writing might seem like a narcissistic, self-involved act that we do alone in our rooms, isolated as monks. But it's not all about us!

- Successful writing anticipates how the reader will respond. It takes the reader's point of view.

Enter: The Intelligent Roommate

In order to get thinking about a reader beyond the lone professor, let's engage in a little thought experiment.

Who is your paper's ideal reader?

We want this person to be both smart and friendly. Someone who's on your side, willing to entertain your ideas. This person is vaguely familiar with your material; maybe they read that book or studied that historical event a while ago but need a quick refresher. They've got some innate skepticism,

and they may ask some probing questions. But ultimately, they're driven by curiosity about your work.

I like to think of this person as your intelligent roommate.

Imagine the following scenario:

You've been working on your paper for a few hours, and you head into the kitchen to take a break. As you're digging into a bowl of cereal, scrolling through the latest posts on social media, your roommate wanders out.

Your roommate might be a sibling, a romantic partner, a grandma; they might be a student down the hall, a fellow dormmate, or your teenage kid. The main quality defining the roommate is their curiosity—and the fact that they're not in your class. You're going to have to explain a thing or two so that they'll understand what you're up to.

"What are you working on?" your roommate wants to know.

Since they're not in your class, you have to give them a few sentences of context so that they'll understand what you're doing.

"Wait, remind me how it goes?" They read the book you're writing about back in high school, but you have to add a sentence of plot summary to refresh their memory.

"Well, what's the paper's argument?" You can explain it to them, but first you have to tell them what was said in class so that they know how what you're doing is actually different.

"Okay—but why does it matter?" Since they're not your professor, you have to explain to them the stakes of the argument, the big payoff themes that the paper is tackling.

- All the words you just conveyed to your roommate are the ingredients of a paper's successful opening paragraph.

In other words, if you can imagine that you're explaining your idea to a curious, interested, yet largely ignorant reader, you'll be sure to include all the logical elements the reader needs to understand what you're doing and why it matters.

As you explain your topic to your roommate, you spice up your description, adding drama and excitement to pique their interest. In conversation, you know what to say to grab their attention. These techniques need to be translated onto the page.

A surprising yet important truth:

- When you write a paper, you are teaching your reader about your subject.

It might seem odd to think of yourself as the teacher, but that is indeed who you are and what you are doing. As the writer, you're assuming the authority of a teacher. Can you teach the reader to understand the importance and content of your argument?

The intelligent roommate is smart, friendly, and engaged—but they're also pretty clueless. You have to explain everything they need to know in order to understand the surprise and challenge of your paper's argument. And while they're a well-meaning person, they're not inherently interested in your topic. It's up to you to spark their interest and get them to want to hear more.

Here's a secret about paper writing: even if your reader has no clue about your paper's subject matter—they've never read the book, seen the movie, or heard of the artwork—in a good paper, this clueless reader should still be able to understand the paper's argument.

The intelligent roommate is a reader figure who will recur throughout this book. You'll need to think of your reader as you contemplate questions of argument and paper structure. These elements don't happen in a vacuum.

- Anticipating how a typical reader would respond to an idea helps to make your writing more persuasive.

WRITING EXERCISE

The following paragraph is pretty flawed. It's supposed to be an introduction paragraph, but it's missing some key information. The paragraph was written by a student who was thinking of their professor as their reader. What do you notice about the paragraph? What would you say is missing here? In your role as the intelligent roommate reader, what questions would you ask of the writer? What would you like to know in order to understand and improve the writer's argument?

> In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Tybalt is the most violent male character. When he duels with Mercutio, his

masculine aggression and pride lead to his death. Romeo murders Tybalt but feels remorseful. By the end of the play, many of the young men have died, showing how the play criticizes toxic masculinity.

Summing Up

YOUR READER

- Your professor is a key reader of your paper, which means that you need to pay attention to their cues about what they're looking for.
- But you can't assume that your professor is your only reader. If you do this, you might omit crucial information that your paper needs to support its claims.
- Successful writing anticipates how the reader will respond: it takes the reader's point of view.
- Imagine your reader as an intelligent roommate. Think of them as well-intentioned, curious, and slightly clueless.
- What does your intelligent roommate need to know in order to understand your paper's argument?
- When you write a paper, you are teaching your reader about your subject.