

UNDERSTANDING ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING (PODCAST 14 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to talk about argumentative writing, which is sometimes called persuasive writing. For the sake of simplicity, in this podcast I am going to use the term argument, but please understand that what I have to say about argument applies to persuasion as well.

Many folks bristle at the thought of writing an argumentative essay, something that may sound confrontational and imposing and perhaps even unpleasant. However, the simple truth is that the word “argument,” at least in a writing sense, means nothing more than opinion or point. Arguing, or expressing your opinion, is something we do on a daily basis either at home or at work or somewhere in between. In fact, if you think about how many times you express your opinion to others, you will realize that you already have lots of experience with argument. So relax!

An argumentative essay, of course, is a different form of argument (it is, after all, written and not spoken), but what you are trying to accomplish remains the same: You are expressing a personal opinion on a subject and you want others to be convinced by what you say. That opinion is your argument—what you are trying to get your audience to understand about your topic.

Writing argument does require careful thought and planning. Your purpose when writing an argumentative essay, as is your purpose when you express an argument orally, is to persuade your audience that your view is the right view on an issue, that what you claim to be true about your subject is fair and accurate and valid. At the very least, when you argue a position, you want your audience to take what you have to say seriously and see the merit in your position.

So how do you accomplish such a purpose? First off, keep in mind that you already have experience expressing your opinion orally, so think about what you do in such a context. Do you just wave your arms and assert, “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” Or do you make your assertion and then back up what you claim to be true with evidence—details, facts, examples, statistics, testimony, logic, personal experience—that seems relevant to what you are trying to prove? Probably the latter, right? After all, simply making an assertion but offering no proof will not get you very far, especially if you consider the needs of your audience.

In a sense, you are like a trial lawyer. A trial lawyer would not merely claim an individual is guilty, right? Who would be convinced by such a claim? In order to present a compelling case, a trial lawyer would not only need to claim that an individual is guilty, he/she would also have to go about proving that an individual is guilty by using evidence and showing the relationship of that evidence to what he claims to be true. While you may think it’s a no-brainer, what’s equally critical to your success writing argument is to keep your purpose in mind when writing—just being aware of what you are trying to accomplish is helpful in articulating a message that is, indeed, argumentative. I cannot tell you how



many argumentative essays that I've read that were not argumentative. Seriously. So do yourself a favor and keep your purpose in mind when you compose.

You also need to keep your audience in mind. While your audience may be a complicated mix of people who do not share your opinion, are not motivated to act, or do not have a strong opinion on the issue, at the core, you are writing to convince your audience of something, so you need to tailor your message accordingly. Who is this group? What do they know about the topic? What would their likely reaction be to your stance? To the points you make in the essay? What do you understand about the counterarguments? Do some of those counterarguments have merit? How would you refute counterarguments? The more you know about your audience and why they do not share your view, the better off you are going to be, so take some time while planning or drafting to give careful consideration to your audience.

Another way to write effective argument is to be conscious of your language. Argumentative writing has a bit of an edge to it, not an in-your-face edge, but, rather, the sense that the writer is choosing phrasing carefully so as to have the best impact on readers. In other words, when you write argument, you need to argue your stance—that is, sustain the writing so as to convince your audience that what you have to say is valid and you need to use language that reflects that purpose. Use words that suggest you are trying to argue a position.

What's more argumentative?

A. It's important to think about the environment and be green.

or

B. Individuals need to think more about the environment and do what they can to be green.

B, right? While the first sentence makes an assertion—the idea that it is important to think about the environment and be green—it's not an assertion with any teeth to it. It's not making a strong enough statement. The second statement has phrasing like "need to think more" and "do what they can," both of which seem argumentative. That's the kind of edge you need in your writing, not in every last sentence but in enough sentences that it becomes clear you are trying to get your view across and compel readers to have a good listen to what you have to say.

Writing argument can be a challenge, but understanding the nature of argumentative writing will help you be more successful. The tips provided in this podcast will get you on the right track. In future podcasts, I will discuss other aspects of argumentative writing, so be sure to check back.

Until then, thanks so much for listening. Happy writing.

