



# Academic Argument: Evidence-Based Defense of a Non-Obvious Position

*Adapted from Jerz's "Literacy Weblog" by Dennis G. Jerz, Associate Professor of English: New Media Journalism, Seton Hill University*

## Definition of the Academic Argument

An academic argument is an **evidence-based defense of a non-obvious position** on a complex issue (Jerz). Therefore, quality arguments require deep thinking about problems to arrive at more than surface-level pro/con or for/against conclusions.

## Dialing in our Understanding: How Arguments Differ from Other Essay Types

### **Arguments Differ from Personal Essays**

Personal essays rely on personal experience whereas academic arguments rely on research, the **analysis** and **synthesis** of ideas from multiple sources, and opposing positions.

### **Arguments Differ from Expository Essays (Essays that Explain Something)**

Expository essays seek to explain something without considering opposition.

\* **Analysis** is the act of taking something apart (like a reading) to understand its key ideas, assumptions, and the quality of evidence and reasoning it contains, for example.

**Synthesis** is the act of putting things together (like ideas or concepts from readings) in new ways to create new ideas and ways of thinking about problems.

In this course, **our focus is on producing academic arguments** because -

1. Arguments rely on research. This expands our knowledge and extends the scholarly debate.
2. Arguments respond to opposition which is an important "test" of how well the writer's position holds up. When we're reading an author's work, we're likely to think, "Yeah, but..." multiple times. We want the writer to respond to such points of opposition or we're left with many unfulfilled questions, especially when issues are complex and important.

### Academic arguments –

- Rely on evidence from credible sources, in the form of direct quotations, summaries, paraphrases, and statistical data and other facts
- Rely on sound reasoning (the logical way ideas and evidence relate to each other)
- Explain, define, analyze, and synthesize
- Present and respond to multiple oppositional positions related to a given main claim

## *Academic Arguments are Public Conversations*

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### *Academic Arguments are Scholarly Conversations*

Academic arguments are scholarly conversations that investigate main claims. Because these are conversations, academic argumentation is a public not a personal form of writing. In an academic setting, once a writer has placed his or her ideas on the table, everyone is allowed to discuss or dispute them according to common rules of evidence gathering and reasoning.

### *Therefore, Academic Arguments aren't Based on Personal Beliefs or Preferences*

Arguments based on personal beliefs, preferences, or opinions can't be debated because everyone is entitled to their personal beliefs. If someone believes dogs go to heaven, I must respect their belief, as I respect their autonomy. I can only hope my dogs go there, too. But, there's no basis in fact for informed, well-reasoned debate.

We cannot argue about preferences. If you like onion rings, great! Enjoy them. Why would anyone want to talk you out of it? Instead, academic arguments must rely on evidence and reasoning that anyone can question and dispute.

Because we can't argue about these things academically, doesn't mean they're not important or shouldn't be valued. It just means there are other venues to share such beliefs and opinions.

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*A successful academic argument is, therefore, not a squabble, a difference of opinion, or a clash of values or beliefs.*

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## *How do writers find topics and draw conclusions for successful academic papers?*

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- Writers look for topics that credible experts disagree about.
- They begin by investigating topics with an open-mind.
- They narrow their focus so they can investigate an idea fully, given the length of the work they're writing.

In our course, we are preparing for later academic work and developing the ability to look at focused topics in new ways; find areas of difference and common ground between sides; investigate and promote positions that aren't necessarily black and white; and develop positions as new evidence is found.

## *The Qualities of Successful Academic Arguments*

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- They support clearly identified, and focused main claims.
- They include necessary context, including the opposing sides, to provide necessary background for the reader. They assume a reader who hasn't read what the class or the writer has read.
- They are supported by subclaims (the individual points a writer needs to make to support

the overall main claim or point). These subclaims are, in turn, supported by credible evidence and sound reasoning.

- They are focused so an idea can be fully explored.
- They are opposed by actual (not made-up or conjectural) sources that are credible.
- They uncover new insights that can help readers think through problems in new ways.

### Academic Arguments REQUIRE Credible Opposition

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- An academic argument is NOT simply an involved explanation of an important problem (no matter how important the problem is). Without actual, expert opposition there is no argument because arguments require disagreement.
- An academic argument is part of a discussion that respects multiple viewpoints as long as those viewpoints are credible. If opposing positions are not credible, they are not to be considered by the writer.
- If NO credible challenges by experts exist, argumentation is not possible. Finding, quoting, and engaging with credible opposing evidence is part of the task of an academic writer.
- Arguing against poor opposing sources that are not credible undermines the writer's credibility. Strong arguments can withstand strong opposition; weak ones can't.
- If the writer's position on a topic is so strong that he or she cannot imagine that a rational person would disagree with them, then the writer should pick a different topic.
- If the evidence is overwhelmingly on the writer's side, the law is on their side, public opinion is on their side, and morality, ethics, and common sense are all on their side, then the writer isn't actually making a debatable argument. Reasonable, informed people already agree. There's no basis for argument.