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Writing Literary Arguments

Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- LO1** Plan a literary argument
- LO2** Use evidence effectively
- LO3** Organize a literary argument

Many of the essays you write about literature are **expository**—that is, you write to give information to readers. For example, you might discuss the rhyme or meter of a poem or examine the interaction of two characters in a play. Other essays you write, however, may be **literary arguments**—that is, you take a position on a debatable topic and attempt to change readers' minds about it. For example, you might argue that the boy's quest in James Joyce's short story "Araby" (p. 220) has symbolic meaning or that Sammy, the main character in John Updike's short story "A&P" (p. 131) is sexist.

When you write a literary argument, you follow the same process you do when you write any essay about a literary topic. However, because the purpose of an argument is to convince readers, you need to use some additional strategies to pre-sent your ideas.

LO1 Plan a Literary Argument

CHOOSING A TOPIC

Your first step in writing a literary argument will be to decide on a topic to write about. Ideally, your topic should

be one that you want to explore further. It stands to reason that the more your topic excites you, the more willing you will be to do serious research and some hard thinking. As a result, you are more likely than not to formulate an interesting and persuasive argument.

Your topic should also be narrow enough for you to develop within your page limit. After all, in an argumentative essay, you will have to present your own ideas and supply convincing support while possibly also addressing opposing arguments. If your topic is too broad, you will not be able to discuss it in enough detail.

Finally, your topic should be interesting. Keep in mind that some topics—such as the significance of the wall in Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall"—have been written about so often that you will probably not be able to say anything new or interesting about them. Instead of relying on an overused topic, choose one that allows you to write something original.

DEVELOPING AN ARGUMENTATIVE THESIS

After you have chosen a topic, your next step is to develop an **argumentative thesis**—one that takes a strong stand.

Because an argumentative essay attempts to change the way readers think, it must focus on a thesis about which reasonable people disagree. In other words, it must be **debatable**; that is, it must have at least two sides. A factual statement—one about which reasonable people do not disagree—is therefore not appropriate as a thesis for argument.

Factual Statement: Linda Loman is Willie's long-suffering wife in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*.

Argumentative Thesis: More than a stereotype of the long-suffering wife, Linda Loman in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* is a complex character.

One way to make sure that your thesis actually does take a stand is to try to formulate an **antithesis**—a statement that takes an arguable position opposite from yours. If you can construct an antithesis, you can be certain that your thesis statement is debatable. If you cannot, your thesis statement needs further revision.

Thesis Statement: The last line of Richard Wright's short story "Big Black Good Man" indicates that Jim was fully aware all along of Olaf's deep-seated racial prejudice.

Antithesis: The last line of Richard Wright's short story "Big Black Good Man" indicates that Jim remained unaware of Olaf's feelings toward him.

Note Your thesis statement is an assertion that your entire essay supports. Keep in mind, however, that you can never prove an argumentative thesis conclusively—if you could, there would be no argument. The best you can do is provide enough evidence to establish a high probability that your thesis is reasonable.

DEFINING YOUR TERMS

You should always define the key terms you use in your argument. For example, if you are using the term *narrator* in an essay, make sure that readers know whether you are referring to a first-person or a third-person narrator. In addition, you may need to clarify the difference between an **unreliable narrator**—someone who misrepresents or misinterprets events—and a **reliable narrator**—someone who accurately describes events. Without a clear definition of the terms you are using, readers may have a difficult time understanding the point you are making.

DEFINING YOUR TERMS

Be especially careful to use precise terms in your thesis statement. Avoid vague and judgmental words, such as *wrong*, *bad*, *good*, *right*, and *immoral*.

Vague: The poem "Birmingham Sunday (September 15, 1963)" by Langston Hughes shows how bad racism can be.

Clearer: The poem "Birmingham Sunday (September 15, 1963)" by Langston Hughes makes a moving statement about how dehumanizing racism can be.

CONSIDERING YOUR AUDIENCE

As you plan your essay, keep your audience in mind. For example, if you are writing about a work that has been discussed in class, you can assume that your readers are familiar with it; include plot summary only when it is needed to explain a point you are making. Keep in mind that you will be addressing an academic audience—your instructor and possibly some students. For this reason, you should be sure to follow the conventions of writing about literature as well as the conventions of standard written English. (For information on the conventions of writing about literature, see the checklist in Chapter 2, p. 28.)

When you write an argumentative essay, assume that you are addressing a skeptical audience—one that is not easily convinced. Remember, your thesis is debatable, so not everyone will agree with you—and even if your readers are sympathetic to your position, you cannot assume that they will accept your ideas without question.

The strategies you use to convince your readers will vary according to your relationship with them. Somewhat skeptical readers may need to see only that your argument is logical and that your evidence is solid. More skeptical readers, however, may need to see that you understand their reservations and that you concede some of their points. Of course, you may never be able to convince hostile readers that your conclusions are legitimate. The best you can hope for is that these readers will acknowledge the strengths of your argument even if they do not accept your conclusion.

REFUTING OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

As you develop your literary argument, you may need to **refute**—that is, to disprove—opposing arguments by demonstrating that they are false, misguided, or illogical. By summarizing and refuting opposing views, you make opposing arguments seem less credible to readers; thus, you strengthen your case. When an opposing argument is so strong that it cannot be easily dismissed, however, you should **concede** (admit the strength of) the argument and then point out its limitations.

Notice in the following paragraph how a student refutes the argument that Homer Barron, a character in William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily," is gay.

Opposing argument

A number of critics have suggested that Homer Barron, Miss Emily's suitor, is gay. Actually, there is some evidence in the story to support this interpretation. For example, the narrator points out that Homer "liked men" and that he was not "a marrying man" (Faulkner 124). In addition, the narrator describes Homer as wearing yellow gloves when he took Emily for drives.

Concession

According to the critic William Greenslade, in the 1890s yellow was associated with homosexuality (24). This evidence does not prove that Homer is gay, however. During the nineteenth century, many men preferred the company of other men (as many do today). This, in itself, did not mean they were gay. Neither does the fact that Homer wore yellow gloves. According to the narrator, Homer was a man who liked to dress well. It is certainly possible that he wore these gloves to impress Miss Emily, a woman he was trying to attract.

Refutation

LO2 Use Evidence Effectively

SUPPORTING YOUR LITERARY ARGUMENT

Many literary arguments are built on **assertions**—statements made about a debatable topic—backed by **evidence**—supporting examples in the form of references to the text, quotations, and the opinions of literary critics. For example, if you stated that Torvald Helmer, Nora's husband in Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll House*, is as much a victim of society as his wife is, you could support this assertion with relevant quotations and examples from the play. You could also paraphrase, summarize, or quote the ideas of literary critics who also hold this opinion. Remember, only assertions that are **self-evident** (All plays include characters and dialogue) or **factual** (*A Doll House* was published in 1879) need no supporting evidence. All other kinds of assertions require support.

"Many literary arguments are built on assertions—statements made about a debatable topic—backed by evidence—supporting examples."

ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY

Some people bring **credibility** with them whenever they write. When a well-known literary critic evaluates the contributions of a particular writer, you can assume that he or she speaks with authority. (Although you might question the critic's opinions, you do not question his or her expertise.) But most people do not have this kind of credibility. When you write a literary argument, you must constantly work to establish credibility. You do this by *demonstrating knowledge, maintaining a reasonable tone, and presenting yourself as someone worth listening to*.

Demonstrating Knowledge One way to establish credibility is by presenting your own carefully considered ideas about a subject. A clear argument and compelling support can demonstrate to readers that you know what you are talking about.

You can also show readers that you have thoroughly researched your subject. By referring to important sources and by providing accurate documentation for your information, you present evidence that you have done the necessary background reading. Including a range of sources—not just one or two—suggests that you are well acquainted with your subject. Remember, however, that questionable sources, inaccurate (or missing) documentation, and factual errors can



tone Attitude of the speaker or author of a work toward the subject or the audience, as determined by the word choice and arrangement of ideas.

undermine your credibility. For many readers, an undocumented quotation or even an incorrect date can call an entire argument into question.

Maintaining a Reasonable Tone Your **tone**—your attitude toward your readers or subject—is almost as important as the information you convey. Talk *to* your readers, not *at* them. If you lecture your readers or appear to talk down to them, you will alienate them. Generally speaking, readers are more likely to respond to a writer who seems fair and respectful than one who seems strident or condescending.

As you write your essay, use moderate language and qualify your statements so that they seem reasonable. Try to avoid words and phrases such as *all*, *never*, *always*, and *in every case*, which can make your points seem simplistic, exaggerated, or unrealistic. Also, avoid absolute statements. For example, the statement, In “Doe Season,” the ocean obviously symbolizes Andy’s attachment to her mother, leaves no room for other possible interpretations. A more measured and accurate statement might be, In “Doe Season,” the use of the ocean as a symbol suggests Andy’s identification with her mother and her realization that she is becoming a woman.

Presenting Yourself as Someone Worth Listening To When you write a literary argument, you should present yourself as someone your readers will want to listen to. Make your argument confidently, and don’t apologize for your views. For example, do not use phrases such as “In my opinion” and “It seems to me,” which undercut your credibility. Be consistent, and be careful not to contradict yourself. Finally, avoid the use of *I* (unless you are asked to give your opinion or to write a response paper), and avoid slang and colloquialisms.

BEING FAIR

Argument promotes one point of view over all others, so it is seldom objective. However, college writing requires that you stay within the bounds of fairness and that you avoid **bias**—opinions based on preconceived ideas rather than on evidence (see p. 47, 50). To make sure that the support for your argument is not misleading or distorted, follow these guidelines:

- **Avoid misrepresenting evidence.** Be careful not to misrepresent the extent to which critical opinion supports your thesis. For example, don’t try to make a weak case stronger than it actually is by saying that

“many critics” think that something is so when only one or two do.

- **Avoid quoting out of context.** When you take words from their original setting and use them in another, you run the risk of quoting out of context. When you quote a source’s words out of context, you can change the meaning of what someone has said or suggested. For example, you are quoting out of context if you say, “Emily Dickinson’s poems are so idiosyncratic that they do not appeal to readers” when your source says, “Emily Dickinson’s poems are so idiosyncratic that they do not appeal to readers *who are accustomed to safe, conventional subjects*.” By eliminating a key portion of the sentence, you alter the meaning of the original.
- **Avoid slanting.** When you select only information that supports your case and ignore information that does not, you are guilty of slanting. You can eliminate this problem by including a full range of examples, not just examples that support your thesis. Be sure to consult books and articles that represent a cross-section of critical opinion about your subject.
- **Avoid using unfair appeals.** Traditionally, writers of arguments use three types of appeals to influence readers: **logical appeals**, which address a reader’s sense of reason, **emotional appeals**, which play on a reader’s emotions, and **ethical appeals**, which emphasize the credibility of the writer. Problems arise, however, when these appeals are used unfairly. For example, writers can use **logical fallacies**—flawed arguments—to fool readers into thinking a conclusion is logical when it is not (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of logical fallacies). Writers can also use inappropriate emotional appeals—appeals to prejudice, for example—to influence readers. And finally, writers can undercut their credibility if they use questionable support—books and articles written by people who have little or no expertise on the topic. This is especially true when information is obtained from the Internet, where the credentials of the writer may be difficult or impossible to assess. If you want your readers to accept your position, you must be careful to avoid logical fallacies and unfair appeals.

USING VISUALS AS EVIDENCE

Visuals—pictures, drawings, diagrams, and the like—can add a persuasive dimension to your essay. Because visual images have an immediate impact, they can sometimes make a strong literary argument even stronger. In a sense, visuals are another type of evidence that can support your thesis. For example, suppose you are writing an essay about the play *Trifles* in which you argue that Mrs. Wright’s quilt is an important symbol in the play. In fact, your research leads you to conclude that the process of creating the quilt by piecing together its log cabin pattern parallels the process by

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- **Introduction:** The introduction should orient readers to the subject of your essay, presenting the issue you will discuss and explaining its significance.
- **Thesis statement:** In most literary arguments, you will present your thesis statement in your introduction. However, if you think your readers may not be familiar with the issue you are discussing (or if it is very controversial), you may want to postpone stating your thesis until later in the essay.
- **Background:** In this section, you can survey critical opinion about your topic, perhaps pointing out the shortcomings of these opinions. You can also define key terms, review basic facts, or briefly summarize the plot of the work or works you will discuss.
- **Arguments in support of your thesis:** Here you present your arguments and the evidence to support them. It makes sense to move from the least controversial to the most controversial point or from the most familiar to the least familiar idea. In other words, you should begin with arguments that your readers are most likely to accept and then deal with those that require more discussion and more evidence.
- **Refutation of opposing arguments:** In a literary argument, you should summarize and refute the most obvious arguments against your thesis. If you do not address these opposing arguments, doubts about your position will remain in your readers' minds. If the opposing arguments are relatively weak, refute them after you have presented your own arguments. However, if the opposing arguments are strong, you may want to concede their strengths and discuss their limitations *before* you present your own arguments.
- **Conclusion:** Your conclusion will often restate your thesis as well as summarize the major arguments you have made in support of it. Your conclusion can also summarize key points, remind readers of the weaknesses of opposing arguments, or underscore the logic of your position. Many writers like to end their essays with a strong last line—for example, a quotation or a memorable statement that they hope will stay with readers after they finish the essay.

"Visuals are another type of evidence that can support your thesis."

which the two female characters in the play determine why Mrs. Wright murdered her husband. The addition of a photograph of a quilt with a log cabin pattern could not

only eliminate several paragraphs of description but also help support your conclusion.

Of course, not all visuals will be appropriate or effective for a literary argument. Before using a visual, make certain it actually supports the point you want to make. If it does not, it will distract readers and undercut your argument. To ensure that readers understand the purpose of the visual, introduce it with a sentence that establishes its context; then, discuss its significance, paying particular attention to how it helps you make your point. Finally, be sure to include full documentation for any visual that is not your original creation.

(See pages 42 and 56 for examples of visuals used as evidence in a student paper.)

LO3 Organize a Literary Argument

In its simplest form, a literary argument—like any argumentative essay—consists of a thesis statement and supporting evidence. Literary arguments, however, frequently use additional strategies to win audience approval and to overcome potential opposition.

WRITING A LITERARY ARGUMENT

The following student paper presents a literary argument about Dee, a character in Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use." The student author supports her thesis with ideas she developed as she read the story as well as with information she found when she did research. She also includes two visuals from a DVD version of the story.

The Politics of "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" focuses on a mother, Mrs. Johnson, and her two daughters, Maggie and Dee, and how they view their heritage. The story's climax comes when Mrs. Johnson rejects Dee's request to take a hand-stitched quilt with her so that she can hang it on her wall. Knowing that Maggie will put the quilt to "everyday use," Dee is horrified, and she tells her mother and Maggie that they do not understand their heritage. Although many literary critics see Dee's desire for the quilt as materialistic and shallow, a closer examination of this story, written in 1973, suggests a more positive interpretation of Dee's character.

On the surface, "Everyday Use" is a story about two sisters, Dee and Maggie, and Mrs. Johnson, their mother. Mrs. Johnson tells the reader that "Dee, . . . would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature" (256). Unlike her sister, Maggie is shy and introverted. She is described as looking like a lame animal that has been run over by a car. According to the narrator, "She has been like this, chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle" (256) ever since she was burned in a fire.

Unlike Dee, Mrs. Johnson never got an education. After second grade, she explains, the school closed down. She says, "Don't ask me why: in 1927 colored asked fewer questions than they do now" (257). Mrs. Johnson admits that she accepts the status quo even though she knows that it is unjust. This admission further establishes the difference between Mrs. Johnson and Dee: Mrs. Johnson has accepted her circumstances, while Dee has worked to change hers. Their differences are illustrated in a film version of the story by their contrasting dress. As shown in fig. 1, Dee and her boyfriend



Source © Denna Bendall/Worn Path Productions

Fig. 1. Dee and Hakim-a-barber arrive at the family home; *The Wadsworth Original Film Series in Literature: "Everyday Use,"* dir. Bruce R. Schwartz; Wadsworth, 2005; DVD.

Hakim-a-barber dress in a style that celebrates their African heritage; Mrs. Johnson and Maggie dress in plain, conservative clothing.

When Dee arrives home with her new boyfriend, other differences soon become obvious. As she eyes her mother's belongings and asks Mrs. Johnson if she can take the top of the butter churn home with her, it is clear that she is very materialistic. However, her years away from home have also politicized her. Dee now wants to be called "Wangero" because she believes (although mistakenly) that her given name comes from whites who owned her ancestors. In addition, she talks about how a new day is dawning for African Americans.

The meaning and political importance of Dee's decision to adopt an African name and wear African clothing cannot be fully understood without a knowledge of the social and political context in which Walker wrote this story. Walker's own comments about this time period explain Dee's behavior and add meaning to it. In her interview with White, Walker explains that the late 1960s was a time of cultural and intellectual awakening for African Americans. Many turned ideologically and culturally to Africa, adopting the dress, hairstyles, and even the names of their African ancestors. Walker admits that as a young woman she too became interested in discovering her African heritage. (In fact, she herself was given the name *Wangero* during a visit to Kenya in the late 1960s.) Walker tells White that she considered keeping this new name but eventually realized that to do so would be to "dismiss" her family and her American heritage. When she researched her American family, she found that her great-great-grandmother had walked from Virginia to Georgia carrying two children. "If that's not a Walker," she says, "I don't know what is." Thus, Walker realized that, over time, African Americans had actually transformed the names they had originally taken from their enslavers. To respect the ancestors she knew, Walker says, she decided it was important to keep her name.

Along with adopting symbols of their African heritage, many African Americans also elevated these symbols, such as the quilt shown in fig. 2, to the status of art. According to Salaam, one way of doing this was to put these objects in museums; another was to hang them on the walls of their homes. Such acts were aimed at convincing whites that African Americans had an old and rich culture and that, consequently, they deserved not only basic civil rights but also respect. These gestures were also meant to improve self-esteem and pride within black communities (Salaam 42-43).

Admittedly, as some critics have pointed out, Dee is more materialistic than political. For example, although Mrs. Johnson makes several statements throughout the story that suggest her admiration of Dee's defiant character, she also identifies incidents that highlight Dee's materialism and selfishness. When their first house burned down, Dee watched it burn while she stood under a tree with "a look of concentration" (257) rather than grief. Mrs. Johnson knows that Dee hated their small, dingy house, and she knows too that Dee was glad to see it destroyed. Furthermore, Walker acknowledges in an interview with her biographer, Evelyn C. White, that as she was writing the story, she imagined that Dee might even have set the fire that destroyed the house and scarred her sister. Even now, Dee is ashamed of the tin-roofed house her family lives in, and she has said that she would never bring her friends there.

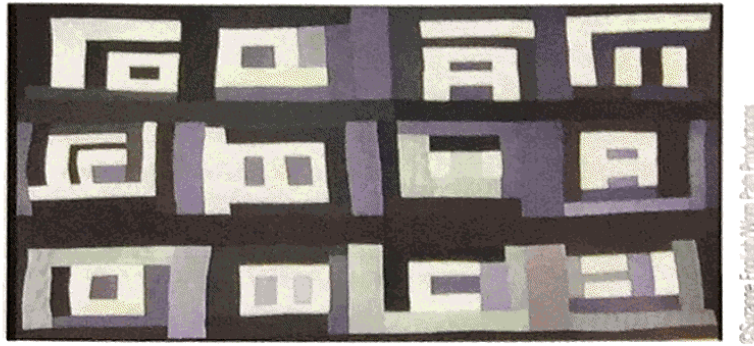


Fig. 2. Traditional hand-stitched quilt; Evelyn C. White, “Alice Walker: Stitches in Time,” interview, *The Wadsworth Original Film Series in Literature: “Everyday Use,”* dir. Bruce R. Schwartz; Wadsworth, 2005; DVD.

Mrs. Johnson has always known that Dee wanted “nice things” (257); even at sixteen, “she had a style of her own: and knew what style was” (257). However, although Dee is materialistic and self-serving, she is also proud and strong willed. Knowing that she will encounter opposition wherever she goes, she works to establish power. Thus, her desire for the quilt can be seen as an attempt to establish herself and her African-American culture in a society dominated by whites.

Even though Mrs. Johnson knows Dee wants the quilt, she gives it to Maggie. According to literary critics Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker, when Mrs. Johnson decides to give the quilt to Maggie, she is challenging Dee’s understanding of her heritage. Unlike Dee, Mrs. Johnson recognizes that quilts signify “sacred generations of women who have made their own special kind of beauty separate from the traditional artistic world.” According to Baker and Pierce-Baker, Mrs. Johnson realizes that her daughter Maggie, whom she has long dismissed because of her quiet nature and shyness, understands the true meaning of the quilt in a way that Dee never will (Piedmont-Martón 45).

Unlike Dee, Maggie has paid close attention to the traditions and skills of her mother and grandmother: she has actually learned to quilt. More important, by staying with her mother instead of going to school, she has gotten to know her family. She underscores this fact when she tells her mother that Dee can have the quilt because she does not need it to remember her grandmother. Even though Maggie’s and Mrs. Johnson’s understanding of heritage may be more emotionally profound than Dee’s, it is important not to dismiss Dee’s interest in elevating the quilt to the level of high art. The political stakes of defining an object as art in the late 1960s and early 1970s were high, and the fight for equality went beyond basic civil rights.

Although there is much in the story that indicates Dee’s materialism, her desire to hang the quilt should not be dismissed as a selfish act. Like Mrs. Johnson and Maggie, Dee is a complicated



Chase 4

character. In 1973, when “Everyday Use” was written, displaying the quilt would have been not only a personal act, but also a political act—an act with important implications. The final message of “Everyday Use” may just be that an accurate understanding of the quilt (and, by extension, of African-American culture) requires both views—Maggie’s and Mrs. Johnson’s “every day use” and Dee’s elevation of the quilt to art.

Chase 5

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