

4

Defending a Thesis in an Argumentative Essay

In conversations, letters to the editor, or online discussions, have you ever taken a position on an issue and offered reasons why your view is correct? If so, then you have *defended a thesis*. You have presented an argument, giving reasons for accepting a particular thesis, or conclusion. If you elaborate on your argument in a written paper, you create something even more valuable—a *thesis defense* (or *argumentative*) *essay*.

In a thesis defense essay, you try to show the reader that your view is worthy of acceptance by offering reasons that support it. Your thesis may assert your position on a philosophical, social, or political issue; or on the arguments or claims of other writers (including some famous or not-so-famous philosophers); or on the interpretation of a single work or several. In every case, you affirm a thesis and give reasons for your affirmation.

This type of essay is not merely an analysis of claims, or a summary of points made by someone else, or a reiteration of what other people believe or say—although a good thesis defense essay may contain some of these elements. A thesis defense essay is supposed to be a demonstration of what *you* believe and *why* you believe it. What other people think is, ultimately, beside the point.

For many students, this kind of writing is unknown terrain. This land can only be traversed by thinking things through for themselves and by understanding claims and the reasons behind them—and

students are seldom used to such a trip. The journey, however, is worthwhile and not entirely unfamiliar. In one form or another, you probably encounter thesis defense essays everyday. In advertising, political speeches, philosophical writing, letters to the editor, legal cases, special interest advocacy, press releases, position papers, and business communications of all kinds, you can see countless attempts to make a case for this view or that. Much of the world's work gets done this way (especially in the academic realm), and success or failure often depends on your ability to make your own case in writing or evaluate cases that come your way.

BASIC ESSAY STRUCTURE

Thesis defense essays usually contain the following elements, although not necessarily in this order:

- I. Introduction (or opening)
 - A. Thesis statement (the claim to be supported)
 - B. Plan for the paper
 - C. Background for the thesis
- II. Argument supporting the thesis
- III. Assessment of objections
- IV. Conclusion

Introduction

The introduction often consists of the paper's first paragraph, sometimes just a sentence or two. Occasionally it is longer, perhaps several paragraphs. The length depends on how much ground you must cover to introduce the argument. Whatever the length, the introduction should be no longer than necessary. In most cases the best introductions are short.

If there is a rule of thumb for what the introduction must contain, it is this: The introduction should set forth the *thesis statement*. The thesis statement usually appears in the first paragraph. It is the claim that you hope to support or prove in your essay, the conclusion of the argument that you intend to present. You may want to pose the thesis statement as the answer to a question that you raise or as the solution to a problem that you wish to discuss. However presented, your thesis statement is the assertion you must support with reasons. It is like a compass to your readers, guiding them from paragraph to

paragraph, premise to premise, showing them a clear path from introduction to conclusion. It also helps *you* stay on course. It reminds you to relate every sentence and paragraph to your one controlling idea.

In some argumentative essays—many newspaper editorials and magazine articles, for example—the thesis statement is not stated but is implied, just as in some arguments the premises or even the conclusion is implied. In philosophical writing, however, the thesis should always be explicit, asserted plainly in a carefully wrought sentence. Most likely, in any argumentative essay you write in college, you will be expected to include a thesis statement.

Your thesis statement should be restricted to a claim that you can defend in the space allowed. You want to state it in a single sentence and do so as early as possible. (More on how to devise a properly restricted thesis statement in a moment.) You may need to add a few words to explain or elaborate on the statement if you think its meaning or implications are unclear.

The other two parts of an introduction—the plan for the paper (B) and background information for the thesis (C)—may or may not be necessary, depending on your thesis and your intent. In more formal essays, you will need not only to state your thesis but also to spell out how you intend to argue for it. You will have to summarize your

How Not to Begin Your Philosophy Paper

Some starters are nonstarters. That is, student philosophy papers often begin poorly. They may open with a cliché, an irrelevant comment, an obvious or superfluous observation, or a long-winded lead-in to the thesis statement. Here are some examples:

- “Bertrand Russell [or some other philosopher] wrote many books.”
- “From the beginning of time, people have wondered about. . .”
- “This paper will examine the ridiculous ideas of the atheist Jean-Paul Sartre.”
- “The Bible tells us that . . .”
- “According to *Webster's Dictionary*, the word “necessity” means . . .”
- “As everyone knows, humans have free will . . .”

whole argument—each of your premises and conclusion—or, if your argument is long or complex, at least the most important points. Providing background information for your thesis is a matter of explaining what your thesis means (which includes defining terms and clarifying concepts), what its implications are, why the issue is so important or pressing, or why you have decided to address it. Sometimes the needed background information is so extensive that you must supply much of it after the introduction. At any rate, by adding the right kind of background information, you give your readers good reason to care about what you are saying and to continue reading.

In many philosophy papers, the background information includes a summary or sketch of the views of other philosophers—what they have said that is relevant to the issue or to your thesis. Providing this kind of material can help the reader understand why your topic is worth exploring and why your argument is relevant.

Argument Supporting the Thesis

Between your paper's introduction and conclusion is the *body* of the essay. The basic components of the body are (1) the premises of your argument plus the material that supports or explains them and (2) an evaluation of objections to your thesis. Each premise must be clearly stated, carefully explained and illustrated, and properly backed up by examples, statistics, expert opinion, argument, or other reasons or evidence. You may be able to adequately develop the essay by devoting a single paragraph to each premise, or you may have to use several paragraphs per premise.

Whatever tack you take, you must stick to the central rule of paragraph development: Develop just one main point in each paragraph, embodying that point in a topic sentence. Make sure that each paragraph in turn relates to your thesis statement.

If your essay is a critique of someone else's arguments, you should examine them in the body, explaining how they work and laying out the author's response to any major criticisms of them. Your account of the arguments should be accurate and complete, putting forth the author's best case and providing enough detail for your readers to understand the import of your own argument. After the presentation of the author's side of things, you can then bring in your critique, asserting and explaining each premise.

Some premises, of course, may be so obvious that they do not require support. The determining factor is whether your readers would

be likely to question them. If your readers are likely to accept a premise as it is, no backup is required. If they are not, you need to support the premise. A common mistake is to assume that a premise would be accepted by everyone when in fact it is controversial (Rule 3-8).

In any case, you should present only your strongest premises. One weak premise can spoil the whole argument. To the reader, one flimsy premise is a reason to be suspicious of all the rest. It is better to include one good premise that you can support than five bad premises that are unsupportable.

Recall that in a good argument the conclusion logically follows from the premises, and the premises are true. Your task in the body of your essay is to put forth such an argument and to do so plainly—to clearly demonstrate to your readers that your premises are properly related to your conclusion and that they are true. You should leave no doubt about what you are trying to prove and how you are trying to prove it. In longer papers, you may want to back up your thesis with more than one argument. This is an acceptable way to proceed, providing you make the relationships between the separate arguments and your thesis clear.

Assessment of Objections

Very often an argumentative essay includes an *assessment of objections*—a sincere effort to take into account any objections or doubts that readers are likely to have about points in your essay. (In some cases, however, there may be no significant objections to assess, as is the case in the essay on cultural relativism in Chapter 1.) You must show your readers that the objections are unfounded, that your argument is not fatally wounded by likely criticisms. Contrary to what some may think, when you deal effectively with objections in your essay, you do not weaken it—you strengthen it. You lend credibility to it by making an attempt to be fair and thorough. You make your position stronger by removing doubts from your readers' minds. If you don't confront likely objections, your readers may conclude either that you are ignorant of the objections or that you don't have a good reply to them. An extra benefit is that in dealing with objections, you may see ways to make your argument stronger.

On the other hand, you may discover that you do not have an adequate answer to the objections. Then what? Then you look for ways to change your arguments or thesis to overcome the criticisms. You can weaken your thesis by making it less sweeping or less probable.

Or you may need to abandon your thesis altogether in favor of one that is stronger. Discovering that your beloved thesis is full of holes is not necessarily a setback. You have increased your understanding by finding out which boats will float and which will not.

You need not consider every possible objection, just the strongest ones. You might use objections that you have come across in your reading and research, or heard from others, or just dreamed up on your own. Whatever you do, do not select pseudo-objections—those that you know are weak and easily demolished. Careful readers (including your instructor!) will see through this game and will think less of your paper.

Where in your paper you bring up objections can vary. You may choose to deal with objections as you go along—as you present each of your premises. On the other hand, you may want to handle objections at the beginning of the essay or near the end after defending the premises.

Conclusion

Unless your essay is very short, it should have a *conclusion*. The conclusion usually appears in the last paragraph. Many conclusions simply reiterate the thesis statement and then go on to emphasize how important it is. Others issue a call to action, present a compelling perspective on the issue, or discuss further implications of the thesis statement. Some conclusions contain a summary of the essay's argument. A summary is always a good idea if the argument is complex, long, or formal.

A Well-Built Essay

How might all of these parts fit together to make an essay? To find out, read the brief paper by Kathleen Moore¹ and review the comments that follow. You will see that although it is short and structurally simple, it has all the major elements that longer and more complex essays do. (There are no references to the paper's sources here, something that would normally be included in such an essay. We explore documentation styles in Chapter 6.)

¹"Should Relatively Affluent People Help the Poor?" by Kathleen Dean Moore, following an outline written by her student, Brian Figur. Reproduced by permission of Kathleen Dean Moore.

Should Relatively Affluent People Help the Poor?

Kathleen Moore

1 As the world approaches the end of the twentieth century, the gap between rich and poor has never been wider. While some people have more money than it is possible to spend in a lifetime, no matter how lavishly they might make purchases, others are not able to provide even for their most basic needs. On all the continents of the world, people starve to death for lack of food, freeze to death for lack of shelter, die of diseases that could be prevented. The situation raises the issue of whether the affluent people of the world have a moral obligation to help the poor. I shall argue that people who are relatively affluent should give a certain fair percentage of their earnings to help reduce absolute poverty on a global scale.

2 My claim is that those who are relatively affluent, that is, people who would normally be defined as rich or wealthy in the context of a given society, have an obligation to give up a small but helpful percentage of their earnings. Peter Singer, an Australian philosopher, suggests ten percent. The money would be used to alleviate absolute poverty, a condition that Robert McNamara, the former president of the World Bank, defines as "characterized by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid

Introduces topic, provides background.

Thesis statement.

Defines relevant terms.

Imparts a sense of urgency to issue.

Source is quoted.

Normally an endnote would go at end of this quotation.

surroundings, high infant mortality and low life expectancy that is beneath any reasonable definition of human decency."

3 Many people argue that wealthy people should not have to help those who are needier than they, unless they choose to do so. The

Body of paper begins here.

strongest argument for this claim is articulated by Garrett Hardin, an

Writer paraphrases critic.

ecologist from the University of Southern California. He points to the

harmful results of helping people, claiming that by contributing to the

Writer explains objections to her thesis in this paragraph.

increased survival rates of those who would otherwise have a relatively

low life expectancy, wealthier people would increase the world's

population and thus increase the rate at which natural resources are

consumed and environmental problems arise. Although starvation is an

evil, Hardin says, helping the poor would create an even greater evil—

increased numbers of starving people and fewer resources to help them.

An endnote would go at the end of this sentence.

Others argue that just because affluent people have a relatively higher

income than others, it does not follow that they are morally responsible for

those who do not.

4 I believe, in contrast, that people do have a moral obligation to

help the desperately poor. For several reasons, it is not the case that

Writer launches counterarguments here.

helping the poor would necessarily increase population and thus increase

environmental degradation. First, while monetary aid could bring medical

supplies and food and thus increase population, it could also bring

contraceptive devices and increased education about population control.

And so, helping the poor could actually decrease the rate of population

growth and, in the end, save environmental resources. Secondly, helping

to reduce absolute poverty would also bring about more people who would

be in a position economically, socially, and medically to contribute to

cleaning up environmental problems and helping solve overpopulation

problems. Finally, from a purely practical point of view, it is important to

note that people are an economic resource at least as important as

firewood and fertile soil, and to allow people to sicken and die is to spoil

and waste that resource.

5 The obligation to help the poor is, to a certain extent, simply a

matter of human rights. We believe that our pets have a right to decent

treatment—enough food to live, shelter from the cold, medical care when

they are hurt or ill, and affluent people in America spend large amounts of

income to provide for these basic needs for animals. If animals have these

rights, then surely humans have at least the same basic rights. People

should be treated with more respect and consideration than animals by

being given the chance to live in better surroundings than those afforded to

animals.

Here is first argument for thesis.

6 However, the primary reason why the affluent have an obligation

to help the poor has to do with the moral principle that killing another

human being is wrong. If it is wrong to kill another person, then it is also

morally wrong to allow someone to die, when you know they are going to

die otherwise, and when it is within your means to save their lives at

relatively little cost to yourself. By not acting to reduce the harmful, lethal

Here is second argument for thesis.

effects of poverty on the world's poor, affluent people are violating a primary moral principle. Therefore, it is a moral responsibility of the rich to help the poor.

7 In conclusion, affluent people should give a certain percentage of their wealth to help do away with absolute poverty in the world, because people are not only living beings who have a right to decent lives, but because it is wrong to allow people to die when helping them live is well within your means.

*The paper's
conclusion and
a restatement
of the thesis.*