

Tips for Effectively Arguing a Claim

Know your subject

Presumably, since you're writing an opinion piece, you will know something about your subject. However, that doesn't mean your readers know about it, so it is important to present your knowledge sufficiently to your readers.

The key is to understand your target audience: try to *think* like them, anticipate what they may not understand. For example, if you're arguing about tort reform in the legal system, and you're writing for a newspaper, your readers may not know what "tort" means.

By the same token, however, if your intended publication is a newsletter for lawyers, you would not need to define "tort"--your readers would know it is a wrongful act, injury or damage not covered by a contract for which lawyers can sue.

To define a term, the first place to begin is usually with a dictionary definition, but very often that is insufficient. Other ways of defining terms include *stipulation*, *negation* and *examples*.

Stipulation means you're asking readers to accept a definition that may differ from a more conventional one. When a writer says "national security is at an all-time low because of current immigration laws," the term *national security* is being used in a way that may differ from, say, a military general.

In recent years terms such as "family" and "family values" have been the target of much stipulation as writers and politicians offer their opinion on them. Sometimes, stipulations are used to make negative ideas seem more positive, as when a terrorist group uses the word *liberation* to describe its activities.

Negation is also sometimes useful in defining terms. By saying what something is *not*, readers may get a fuller picture of what something *is*.

Examples also provide a means of defining a term and are among the most useful means by which a writer can illuminate difficult subjects. *Justice* is a term that is difficult to define in abstract, but a writer who gives examples of what it means to him gives readers something concrete by which to evaluate his argument.

Supporting your argument

Regardless of who you're writing for, you need to explain your subject and support your argument in ways that are both informative and persuasive. This is especially true of technical or complex subjects, such as economics or science.

One way is to draw comparisons and analogies that the typical reader can relate to. It is no accident that politicians in Washington arguing for a balanced budget compare our nation's spending to a family's financial situation--something most people are familiar with.

Other ways to support your argument is to use voices of authority, such as experts and statistics, and to appeal to the needs and values of your readers.

Obviously, having experts who agree with you is a boon to your argument. Keep in mind, however, that your readers may not agree who is an acknowledged expert. When Philip Morris issues a scientific report on the harmfulness of tobacco, most people view it skeptically because Philip Morris stands to benefit from a favorable report.

If you do use expert opinion, do so wisely, quoting exactly (if you quote) and establishing the credentials of your expert if he or she is unfamiliar to your readers. Often you can do this quite simply in the first attribution, as in "Harvard physicist Joseph Smith, author of *The Atoms Family*, says ..." By explaining that Smith is a physicist at Harvard and has written a book on atoms, you subtly suggest he is an expert who can be trusted.

Statistics, too, can and often are used in writing, but you should exercise the same reservations with them as with expert opinion. You should make sure they come from a reputable source, and you should let readers know the source.

Keep in mind that statistics can be skewed. If a glass is described as 25 percent empty, it is also 75 percent full. Statistics about gun-related deaths from the National Rifle Association may be skewed to favor the NRA's views on gun control.

Also, make sure pertinent terms are clearly defined. For instance, a few years ago, the number of farms in one state was reduced by several thousand—by changing the definition of "farm" in the government agency that keeps track of such things.