



A GUIDE TO ACADEMIC WRITING

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Stuck writing a college paper? The art of writing an argumentative essay is a crucial one to master in order to excel in higher education. We hope our guide will help you on your writing journey!

General Tips

Techniques for Brainstorming:

- **Free writing:** Simply start writing about anything related to your topic. Let your ideas pour in a stream of consciousness. Don't worry about finding perfect ideas or connections between thoughts. Just go with the flow and see where it leads you. Who knows, you may just stumble across a brilliant idea.
- **Listing:** Simply make a coherent list of individualized thoughts or questions pertaining to your topic. For many people, this brainstorming method is the most effective way of viewing ideas in the grander scheme of how they are connected to each other.
- **The Big Questions:** Ask *who, what, when, where, why, and how*. By attempting to answer these questions, in respect to your topic, you may come across a thesis or at least some content for your essay.
- **Research:** Research, research, research! Read lighter, easier materials before delving into more complicated matter. As you read, make sure to jot down interesting quotes (and their source/page number), which you may later incorporate into your paper. Use actual books and academic journals; your college or university's library will most likely offer information sessions on how to use their databases to conduct research at the start of each academic year. *Take advantage of these resources;* they are invaluable and will make your college career a whole lot easier.
- **Ruminate on the research:** When you research a topic, you will be flooded with all sorts of various ideas and opinions. Play around with them and try to find a position you hold to be true. You should be using others' research *to come up with your own original idea on a topic*. Don't simply repeat the words of already-established academics.
- **Read everything:** Sometimes, keys to answering your thesis can be found in places you wouldn't consider looking, such as a preface, introduction,

- epilogue, or in footnotes. Read the back cover, the inside flaps, and the “About the Author” of any text you have at hand.
- **Ask why?:** Why did the author write this work? For whom is it intended? Why did he choose this title? Why are you reading this for class? How does this work fit in with your other assigned readings, class discussions, or item on the syllabus? How does it fit in with the overall theme of your class?
 - **Take notes as you read:** Highlight any quotes or passages which you deem important, make you react in a certain way, or confuse you. You can use these as food for thought when working on your essays or bring them up during class discussions.
 - **No rushing:** If you know your essay prompt in advance, keep it in mind as you read each text. Even if you think you understand the essay prompt, make sure your professor approves of your thesis before you actually begin writing.

The Thesis

After researching, analyzing others’ arguments, and brainstorming, you are now ready to come up with a thesis. Your **thesis** is the central idea that your essay will be spent trying to prove—the most important element of your essay. Your thesis statement should always be clearly identifiable at the end of the first paragraph.

Keep in mind that your thesis is an arguable statement, not a series of facts. If your thesis is a bit complex, you can separate ideas with semicolons or into several sentences. Since the thesis is so important in shaping your paper, *make sure that your professor approves of it before you start writing*. It’s normal to revise your thesis a few times before choosing an adequate one, so don’t stress if your professor gives you suggestions as to how it could be modified (he probably will).

Be original- Remember that your thesis should be *your original idea*. Throughout your paper, you will undoubtedly be using ideas from other thinkers and authors whose works you have discussed in your class or readings. Your thesis can contain elements from these ideas; *however*, you must put your own spin on things. You must show your professor that you can understand, interpret, and challenge complex ideas, *and then use this to create your own argument*.

Repeating other's ideas is not impressive. Show that you are a creative human being with analytical thinking skills, not a parrot!

Be specific- Your thesis will give your paper direction, so make it as specific as possible.

The Outline

A detailed, one-page outline will make your paper much easier to write. The outline will provide the basic structure for your paper and serve as a guide for your writing. Do not include too much detail in your outline- simply write down headings, topic sentences, key arguments, and specific quotes which you may use.¹ Having an outline allows you to take a step-back from minute details and see the larger picture. It will allow you to determine whether your paragraphs are in the right order and if they flow into each other.

Structuring Your Outline

- You may choose to present all of your arguments first and then all of your counterarguments. Or you may choose to present an argument imminently followed by its corresponding counterargument. Decide on what works best for the essay at hand.
- You may choose to place your weaker arguments and counterarguments in the middle of the essay- this is the part that readers tend to remember least.
- Some writers like to use a climactic arrangement, working up paragraphs to the strongest point.

Writing the Actual Paper

Introduction

- The first couple of sentences of an essay often tend to be the most difficult to write. Don't worry; as long as you have a strong thesis, you can write the whole paper first and then go back to the introduction. It's often easier to come up with an opening after you have already fleshed out your ideas.

¹ Sample outlines can be found here: <http://www.austincc.edu/tmthomas/sample%20outline%201.htm>

- Grab your reader's attention with a **hook**. You can start your paper with any hook- an anecdote, a scene, a famous quote, a statistic, a fact, etc. Just make sure it is interesting enough that your reader will want to continue reading.
- After your hook, your intro will usually be written in a funneling fashion— from general to increasingly specific. Your opening should establish the context of your essay and lead up to your thesis, which will be your most specific sentence.
- You will likely modify your opening as you write your paper, so do not waste time trying to perfect it before the paper is finished.

The Body Paragraphs: Arguments, Counterarguments, and Rebuttals

- After the intro, comes the meat of your essay: the body paragraphs. Here, you will elaborate on the different arguments you mentioned in your thesis and connect them into your overall analysis.
- Each body paragraph should start with a topic sentence (kind of like a mini-thesis). The topic sentence tells us what the rest of the paragraph will be about. Each topic sentence is one main idea that you will thoroughly explore and develop. After your topic sentence, you should have 4-10 **supporting sentences** in which you support the argument you made in your topic sentence. After your supporting sentences, wrap up the paragraph with a **concluding sentence** summarizing the point of that paragraph.
- In between and within paragraphs, you will use **transition words** to connect your ideas. Examples of transition words: *however; also; thus; moreover; consequently; therefore; furthermore; subsequently*.
- Body paragraphs should be anywhere from ½-1 page in length. If you're having trouble adding some meat to the body, be sure to: include examples; use an authoritative quotation; include and respond to counterarguments; use more evidence to support your ideas; elaborate on definitions; offer a different perspective on the same idea.

Developing an Argument

The whole point of your paper is to convince its reader of the validity of your thesis. The structure of your arguments and the evidence you present will play a key role in winning the reader over.

What to consider when working on your argument:

- Before you begin writing, make sure there is enough evidence to support your thesis.
- Think about which arguments will be used to defend your thesis as well as potential counterarguments. As you read your materials, it is likely that you will modify or even completely change your thesis – this is completely okay! If you are writing a research paper, you may realize that your thesis was completely off and incorrect; at that point, you can either revise it or chuck it.
- For each argument toward your defense, you will need to present supporting evidence *and then analyze that evidence*. You can't simply present the reader with a series of facts and expect him to connect the dots. You must show that you understand how each piece of evidence is connected to each other and to your thesis.
- A strong paper will always include **counterarguments** (see below) to the thesis, which you will then demolish in your **rebuttals**. Including counterarguments shows that you have considered opposing viewpoints, that you understand them, and that you can counter-attack them. You should always provide at least one reason why each potential counterargument is flawed. If you are unable to reject a counterargument, you may want to mention to the reader that *although the specific argument exists, they should nevertheless accept your argument because...* If there are many possible counterarguments for your paper, simply choose between two and three and delve into them deeply. You should delineate each counterargument objectively and thoroughly, showing that you have carefully considered the opposing point of view yet still are at odds with it. Do not try to belittle or ridicule an opposing point of view.

Analyzing Arguments

Identifying the argument- As you research your topic, you will need to analyze arguments from others as well as your own. First, you must be able to identify an author's arguments. An argument always consists of two parts: a) a claim, and b) reasons supporting that claim. The claim is the controversial assertion of the essay and the reasons offer evidence as to why the claim is true.

For example:

Claim: *Chocolate is good for your health.*

Reasons: *Raw cacao is extremely high in magnesium. Eating chocolate stimulates the release of serotonin. Cacao is full of rejuvenating antioxidants.*

What weaknesses are there in the author's arguments?

- Are there any alternative explanations for a claim? (e.g., Mary ate two servings of dinner because she is a glutton. Another possible explanation could be that Mary ate two servings of dinner because she skipped lunch.)
- Is there ample evidence presented? Does the author cite credible statistics, data, facts, research, or other forms of evidence?
- Could the author's arguments be stronger? If so, how?
- Where are these *facts* coming from? Studies can often be designed to prove anything as true. Look at who is funding a study before blindly believing the data. Data is often distorted, manipulated, and misinterpreted when convenient for certain companies or organizational groups.
- Does the writer commit any logical fallacies?

Counterarguments

What is a counterargument?

A strong essay does not only require well-supported arguments, but also, well-attacked counterarguments. A counterargument is an argument that opposes your thesis, or at least a part of it. It may seem contradictory to include arguments *against* yours in your paper, but *au contraire!* Including counterarguments shows that you have considered various perspectives on the issue at hand, that you understand them, and that you *still* believe your arguments are stronger. It also gives you a chance to respond to your readers' possible objections before they reach the paper's conclusion. An argument lacking in counterarguments makes the writer appear unreasonable and narrow-minded. An argument with fairly presented counterarguments increases your ethos, or credibility.

How exactly do I create a counterargument?

Develop your counterarguments just as you would develop any of your other argumentative paragraphs. The only difference is that the ideas presented therein oppose your thesis. This is really the only difference, so don't worry! Like any body paragraph, the counterargument should start with a topic sentence. You may want to include words such as "others," "opponents," "critics," "argue," and "claim," in this sentence. For example, "*Some critics argue [xxx information against your thesis].*" Then, follow the same pattern you would employ in an argument: provide evidence (use credentials, dates, and statistics in order to present a strong, and therefore fair, counterargument) from experts and then explain/analyze it.

How should I present my counterargument?

Your counterargument should always be expressed objectively, from a completely unbiased third-party perspective. Make sure that you thoroughly delve into your opponent's arguments, writing a minimum of three sentences (sometimes even a whole paragraph will be in order) per counterargument. The more you explain an opposing point of view, the easier it will be for your reader to follow your train of thought as you later rebut it. Don't belittle or minimize your counterarguments. Explain opposing ideas fairly and with respect. Imagine if you were in fact your opponent. Would you be satisfied with the way the ideas are presented?

How do you rebut a counterargument?

There are several ways to rebut a counterargument, so choose whichever works best for the arguments at hand.

- First, you may want to show that the counterargument is based on faulty factual or analytical assumptions. Maybe the facts are wrong or the given analysis is incorrect. Go over the handout of logical fallacies to check if your counterarguments include any of them.
- Second, the counterargument may be true but irrelevant to your argument.
- Third, your counterargument may be true but very weak. You can state, "*Although xxx is true, I still hold that...*"

Your rebuttal paragraph must show that the counterargument is wrong. Start with an opening sentence that summarizes your opponent's argument. This sentence will likely include the modal "may." For example, "*It may be true that*

paraphrase the opposing argument.” Then, provide a topic sentence that states why the counterargument is wrong. This sentence will likely use the words “however”, “although”, “nevertheless”, or “nonetheless.” As usual, provide legitimate evidence and subsequent explanations for your topic sentence.

Where do I place my counterargument?

You may choose to present all of your arguments first and then all of your counter-arguments. Or you may choose to present an argument imminently followed by its corresponding counter-argument. Decide on what works best for the content in your essay.

Conceding a counterargument

Sometimes you will come across a counterargument that you actually cannot find any problem with. It seems to be completely valid, responding to your actual argument with legitimate facts and information. You may choose to change your entire thesis and adopt the point of view of the convincing counter-argument if you believe in it strongly enough. However, it is a lot less painful to just modify your thesis in order for it to acknowledge said counterargument. This way, you are actually strengthening your thesis by incorporating part of the opposition’s views into your original point.

Choosing a counterargument

Choose popular or strong oppositions to your point of view. Don’t simply choose the weakest possible counterarguments you can find. Your reader will be skeptical as to why you are not addressing the more popular opposing viewpoints and will believe you don’t have the power to attack them. Show your readers that you are not afraid to present a strong counterargument.

Conclusion

- Your conclusion should briefly (1-2 sentences) summarize your key arguments so that the reader has them fresh in mind.
- You should remind the reader of why the ideas you presented are important.

- Your conclusion can extend beyond the scope of your paper, pushing readers to consider broader issues related to your findings.
- Do not always try to make a dramatic ending. There is no need for such frivolities.
- Do not present new information in your conclusion! Sometimes, students try to cram all the information they had no idea where to put into their conclusions. *Never* do this.
- Say something to leave the reader with a favorable impression.
- Always end on a positive note. 😊

Last But Not Least....

Remember Your Audience

When writing your essay, *always* keep in mind that you are not writing for yourself, but rather for an imaginary third-party who knows nothing about the topic at hand. Do not assume that the reader knows anything about your topic, though of course your professor will likely be an expert in the field. Always use a formal tone (e.g., no contractions, such as *can't* instead of *cannot*) unless you are working on a piece of creative writing. Explain things clearly and simply. Strive for clarity, not impressive vocabulary.

Self-Editing Your Essay

Things to Consider

- What is the main point of your paper?
- Does your opening smoothly connect to your thesis?
- Is your thesis clear and identifiable?
- Does each paragraph begin with a topic sentence which the body then supports? Each paragraph should flow uninterruptedly from one to another via carefully worded topic sentences.
- Does the conclusion make the reader satisfied that he has read your paper?

Technicalities

- Print out your paper. It's much easier to notice mistakes and focus on content when you are not distracted by multiple tabs.
- Read your paper aloud to catch any awkward-sounding phrases or sentences.
- Make sure your writing is clear, direct, and concrete. Do not use extra, unnecessary words.
- Double-check to make sure that each topic sentence is supported throughout its corresponding paragraph.
- Spell-check!
- Make sure you use the active voice whenever possible (for example: The data is used to show that... → The data shows that...).
- Is your essay in the proper format (MLA or APA, depending on the subject)?

What kinds of information should be cited?

- Cite all facts, statistics, and other information which is not your own.
- For details on citations, please use the APA and MLA formatting guides in the links below.
- Remind all students that plagiarism will result in an automatic failure (or worse; in some schools, suspension or expulsion). If you are not sure whether or not to cite a source, do so.

Additional Resources

Citations

APA Formatting Guide: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>

MLA Formatting Guide: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>

www.easybib.com

Grammar

The Elements of Style by Strunk & White:

<http://faculty.washington.edu/heagerty/Courses/b572/public/StrunkWhite.pdf>

About The Author

Andrea received her Bachelor's in Literature from Cornell University and her Master in Education, focusing on Learning & Teaching, from Harvard University. She has taught English Literature and SAT prep at private and charter schools in both the US and in China.

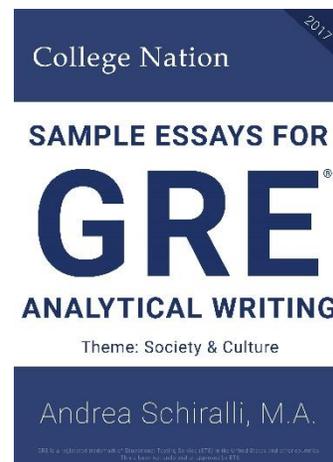
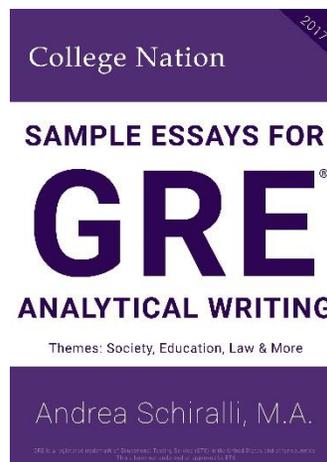
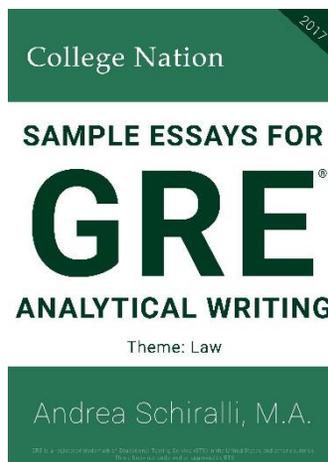
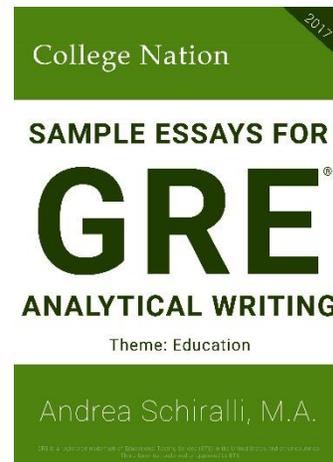
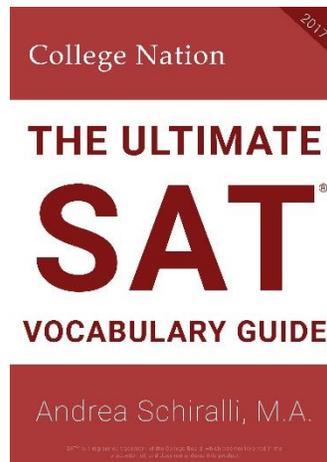
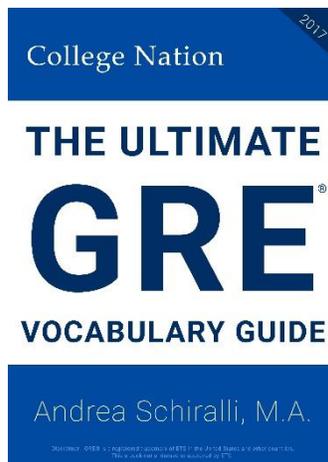
For the past two years, she has worked as an education consultant, coaching over 250 students on their personal statement and supplementary essays, experiencing the rush of giving essays makeovers and helping students learn to love the English language.

Andrea is also the co-founder of writeofpassage.us, an online writing tutoring platform, collegenation.org, helping kids with their college application essays, and of essay-girls.com, a site devoted to test prep writing.

Additional Resources

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