Academic Arguments: How to Pick and Win a Good “Fight”

Remember: an argumentative essay is different from an expository essay.

- An expository essay explains or “exposes” a topic. You are teaching your reader about something that he or she probably doesn’t know about. For an expository essay, you are looking for good examples to illustrate your points.
- An argumentative essay is persuasive. You are trying to convince your reader. For an argumentative essay, you are looking for evidence to support your argument. In the social sciences, the best evidence comes from strong, well-executed research.

Key: pick a good “fighter” – a strong, integrative thesis that addresses many facets of the topic at hand or is specific to particular conditions

- Like a good “fighter” knows many punches, a good argument is not too simple. A fighter that only knows one kind of punch can easily be defeated: an opponent learns how to defend against that punch. A simple thesis can be easily disregarded because the reader can see the flaws
- Like a good fighter has to learn defensive moves and not just punches, a strong thesis anticipates criticism and sets up a response to that criticism. To find a strong integrated thesis, you have to research both sides of an issue and the evidence that supports each side. It’s often helpful to look at criticisms of each side.

Pick good “punches” – a strong argument is backed up by strong evidence.

- In the social sciences, an argument will be evaluated based on a hierarchy of types of evidence.
  - The strongest evidence in most social sciences is well-executed research. In general, primary source evidence is the strongest, followed by secondary, then tertiary.
    - Primary sources are actual data that you collect or analyze: you run a study designed to address your question, or you read actual historical documents like diaries or shipping records. This is often what professors expect in advanced coursework like capstones, graduate courses, and/or a thesis/dissertation.
    - Secondary sources are reports written by other people who collected or analyzed primary source data. These are empirical reports that have some sort of method section where they describe how they drew conclusions from primary source data (although they might not call it “primary source data”). Some undergraduate and graduate courses expect this type of evidence.
    - Tertiary sources are reviews of secondary source data. Textbooks usually fall into this category. A review paper (sometimes called a literature review) is also a tertiary source of data: it is someone’s analysis of secondary sources. You can often tell a review paper because it doesn’t have a method section.
    - Remember: a theory is not the same as research. A theory may use data to support its claims, but it is about explaining why something happens.
  - How can you evaluate the strength of research?
    - Type of data (primary/secondary/tertiary)
    - How well-executed was it? If you’ve taken a method course in your discipline, then that will be your guide about what counts as well-executed research in your major. If you haven’t taken a method course yet, the introductory textbook most likely has a section on methods that you could refer to. For example: sampling, strength of measures/sources, analysis, and whether the conclusions drawn are appropriate for the methods used are all signs of how well-executed the research was in psychology.
  - Beyond research, you may be able to draw from personal experience or anecdotes, but check with your professor to see if this will be considered acceptable. In general, remember that research is a stronger source of evidence than anecdotes or personal
experience. If you can use personal experience, some uses are generally better than others. The following are types of personal experience that may be acceptable.

- Personal experience that illustrates what the research shows. People are often convinced by numbers that an issue is important, but people often change their minds or action based on powerful stories.

- Personal experience that illustrates a weakness in the research. For example, if your experiences are not represented in the published research, your personal experience may contradict research. This has happened when women or ethnic minorities were regularly excluded from research.

- Note that just because your experience is different from published research, doesn’t mean that it is illustrating a weakness. Statistics show a difference overall that may not apply to all individuals. This is common with gender differences, for example. Although, men are taller than women on average, an individual woman may be taller than an individual man.

Have good “counter-punches.” Just like a fighter needs to have a “defense” as strong as his/her “offence,” a strong argument paper directly addresses the counter-argument and critiques of supporting evidence.

- Make sure your thesis statement is strong enough to withstand the counter-argument. You can do this in at least the two following ways (but there are probably more ways to do this):
  - Have a conditional thesis statement. For example, biology has a greater effect on development than experience during certain periods, called critical and sensitive periods.
  - Identify the limits of your thesis. For example, certain genetic conditions like phenylketonuria (PKU) limit the role of experience in development, but experience always influence development.
  - Sometimes your best argument is to make a clear, specific counter-argument against a commonly held belief. For example, although some psychologists argue that all children need one primary attachment figure, there is growing evidence that children may only need at least one person who serves as a secure base.

- Any single “punch” or evidence can only do so much. When you present evidence, address the limitations of that evidence clearly and directly.
  - You will be more likely to convince your reader when you put together a package of evidence that addresses the limitations of any one piece.
  - For example, a combination of a study with only one well-chosen participate with an experimental study of many participants may be stronger when presented together.
  - Similarly, the strongest evidence (e.g., an experiment) might come from non-human research (e.g., monkeys), so you can describe that with another study that demonstrates a similar pattern for humans.

Have a “plan of attack” or strategy and follow it – make sure you clearly communicate your thesis and organize your evidence effectively.

- Why use 10 punches if it only takes 3? Select your best evidence and use it strategically.
- Do you want to use a series of “small punches” to throw your opponent off balance followed by a knock-out punch? Or do you want to start with your strongest evidence?
- Would it work better to pick a fight while you are hidden behind a group of friends or when you are standing in front of a strong-looking group of friends? Similarly, don’t “hide” your thesis or supporting evidence behind a bunch of other information.
  - Have your thesis statement clearly stated in a place that is easy to find.
  - Clearly state your supporting evidence in a prominent position.
- If you can win with a “knock out punch,” why risk a judge’s decision by not throwing that punch? If you've got a really strong piece of evidence, use it.