

PRESENTING AN ARGUMENT

Behind any essay you write should stand an opinion of your own that you are able to support from your reading and from your own critical thinking. That may sound simple enough, but a reader can be extraordinarily difficult to convince. You cannot win an argument on paper by cajolery or shouting, by tone of voice or gesture. You get no second chance to explain that what you said was not really what you meant. Therefore, the organization of your essay is extremely important. The argument must be carefully thought out and presented in such a way that the reader is able to follow your thought processes from their beginning to their logical conclusion.

A well-organized essay requires much reading, thinking, and planning before you begin to write. Do not just start putting words down on paper, hoping that they will magically organize themselves. They will not do so. An effective essay provides a road map to guide the readers. If you begin without knowing where you are headed, you cannot hope that your readers will be able to follow you. These rules are intended to serve as a guide for you as you prepare the map of your thinking. They are specifically directed toward the type of research paper you will be writing for this course, but they can be applied to almost any topic, even the answer to an exam question.

An experienced writer or speaker will make each point three times. The rule is this:

1. Tell the readers what you are going to tell them.
2. Tell them.
3. Tell them what you have told them.

Specifically, you should approach your planning in this sequence:

1. After you have finished your reading, determine your own position.

Does Paul really say that women are not supposed to teach everywhere? Does the particular Bible verse apply to our churches in 21st century? What about wearing adornment in the church? Is it relevant to us now? Your answer to this type of question, stated in a positive form, becomes your thesis statement. It is "what you are going to tell them."

2. Round up your evidence.

From your reading, find at least three arguments that support your position. To show that women are not supposed to teach in church, you might discuss Paul's instruction to the Corinthian church, other Biblical examples, and even your cultural situation [I don't mean here that I agree with a certain position on this particular issue]. You may use more, of course, but without at least three points in support, your argument will not stand up. This is where "you tell them."

3. Summarize and restate your position as positively as possible.

In other words, "tell them what you have told them." Be careful, however, not to simply repeat your opening paragraph. You want to leave the readers with a strong reaction, not terminal boredom.

This will give you a basic outline for your essay: an introduction, the body of your argument, and a conclusion. Next, you should begin to flesh out the outline. Your introduction should contain a short general discussion of the topic, historical background, or character you are discussing. The focus of your paper should have a paragraph to itself and should contain your thesis statement. Each of your three arguments will require separate development. Depending on the amount of detail you are using, you might want to expand each major point into several paragraphs. Your conclusion should stand as a single paragraph.

Now work on an outline for each paragraph, following the same format you used to plan the paper as a whole. Begin with a topic sentence that will make clear "what you are going to tell them." Support the topic sentence with at least three specific details or examples or points. Then restate your major idea in different words to make sure the readers understands what you have been telling them. Note that this provides for a minimum of five sentences for each paragraph.

Before you begin to write, go back over your outline and rearrange the details so that you are always moving from your weakest argument to the strongest. This rule applies equally to the organization of the essay as a whole and to the development of each paragraph. In order to hold the interest of your readers, save the best example, the most colorful detail, or the most telling argument for last. You may want to signpost your ideas with terms such as first, second, third, more important, or most significant. But whether you use words like these in the final essay or not, they should play an important role in your thinking and planning.

Finally, make sure that you are fulfilling the purpose of the assignment. Do not beat your own private drum. Even if you sincerely believe that Socrates was a male chauvinist wife-beater or that St. Augustine would have been happier as an atheist, a scholarly essay is not the place for such arguments. Keep your personal views in the background and concentrate on the evidence provided by your source material.