

2. Arguments and evidence.

If you've chosen your thesis statement properly, chances are a good argument can be made in its defense. Actually making such an argument, however, demands both care and skill. For those seeking to master the art of persuasive argument, there is no substitute for practice. The following remarks may, however, serve to direct your attention to issues of particular importance.

Appropriate evidence. Arguments are based on evidence, whether that evidence is gathered by observation (as is generally the case in the sciences) or by intuition (as in many philosophical discussions). Recall Samuel Clarke's version of the cosmological argument for the existence of God. Clarke employs two crucial bits of evidence. First, he directs our attention to the existence of dependent beings, a fact about the world we have presumably all observed. Second, he appeals to the principle of sufficient reason, the truth of which is meant to be obvious by intuition alone. This evidence is deployed in his argument as two premises or assumptions ("There are dependent beings" and "There's a reason for everything").

Many, if not most of the papers written in the Humanities are largely interpretive in focus. In other words, they interpret key texts. Interpretive arguments are grounded in a special kind of observable evidence, called "textual" evidence. Consider the sample thesis statement from 1.c. Clearly, part of what needs to be shown in a defense of this thesis is that Clarke's formulation of the principle of sufficient reason is more precise than Aquinas'. Equally clearly, quotations or paraphrases from the two relevant texts will be the evidentiary cornerstones of any successful defense. Make sure to observe correct citation form!

Personal opinions are not evidence. They may be worth defending, and may be the source of terrific thesis statements, but they can't serve as the basis for persuasive arguments. Consider the following argument:

Anselm's argument proves that God exists. But I feel strongly that God can't exist; for if he existed, God wouldn't permit all the suffering there is in the world. Therefore Anselm's argument must be unsound.

There may be the germ of a good argument here, but as stands, the argument relies on the author's feeling that God can't exist. Until that feeling has itself been made explicit and justified, it carries no persuasive weight.

Arguments. Once you have chosen your thesis statement and selected the evidence you think supports it, you're ready to construct an argument. An argument is the logical glue between evidence and thesis; it's the line of reasoning that shows why your evidence proves your thesis. For now, it will suffice to consider two hints toward argument construction.

a. Rhetorical balance. Recall the "reasonable disagreement" test good thesis statements were supposed to pass. A thesis statement is more interesting if it's possible to imagine a reasonable person's disagreeing with it. Now, essays are often more persuasive if instead of simply presenting favorable evidence and showing how it supports a thesis, they also present evidence that seems to refute the thesis, and then return to argue that it doesn't.

b. Avoid obvious fallacies. Fallacies are logically defective arguments. The following are examples of some of the most common fallacies, along with their traditional names. **These are bad arguments! Don't imitate them!**

i. Affirming the consequent:

- (1) If Anselm's argument is sound, God exists.
- (2) God does exist.
- (3) Therefore, Anselm's argument is sound.

ii. Denying the antecedent:

- (1) If Anselm's argument is sound, God exists.
- (2) Anselm's argument is unsound.
- (3) Therefore, God doesn't exist.

iii. Ad hominem:

- (1) Anselm argues that the idea of a perfect being is conceivable.
- (2) But Anselm was a lazy, aristocratic medieval priest.
- (3) So the idea of a perfect being is impossible.

iv. Ad populum:

- (1) Hume argues that God doesn't exist.
- (2) But most people believe that God does exist.

v. False dilemma:

- (1) Either God exists, or there is no difference between right and wrong.
- (2) But there is a difference between right and wrong!

vi. Straw man:

- (1) Anselm believes that anything we can have an idea of must exist.
- (2) So, I must have a million dollars in the bank.

(3) So Hume's argument is nonsense.

(3) Therefore God exists.

(3) But this is nonsense.