What is an argument?

An argument is an evidence-based defence of a particular position on a specific topic. Each academic discipline has its own style of argument. For example, arguments in biology often draw conclusions from experimental results, whereas arguments in history are more likely to cite historical documents.

Arguments set out to prove “claims”. A “claim” is a conclusion you have about the topic. You prove the claim by first citing evidence and then showing how that evidence supports your claim. Citing evidence and showing how it supports your claim is known as “justifying” the claim.

An academic argument is what your reasoning has led you to believe about the topic. It is your contribution to the academic community’s current conversation about this topic. It provides your readers with your perspective and explains why you take that position. Your task is to lead the reader through a chain of reasoning which leads to your conclusion.

The quality of your argument will be assessed in terms of the sources and evidence you cite, the points you make, the order in which you make them, and the degree to which they support your conclusion.

The aim of the argument is to convince people who disagree with you that they are wrong and you are right. However, since they are just as intelligent as you, they will need good reasons to be convinced. Your argument therefore needs to lead them through your chain of reasoning so they reach the same conclusion. Your reasoning will need to be based on evidence and logic.

Since an academic argument is based on research, it is called an “evidence-based argument.” This means you must support your argument with evidence from sources you find through research.

Reflective Writing

Some disciplines, such as Education, have “reflective” essays. These are the exception to the logical rules. Reflective essays are supposed to be about your emotional and personal responses to experiences. Even so, the occasional citation does no harm, and it is a good idea to provide good reasons for your responses or other evidence you are thinking about what you are writing.

Reflective essays are not arguments.

What is a good argument?

A good argument has the following qualities:

- Concise
- Defensible
- Rational

Concise Arguments

A concise argument is one which says what it needs to say, and no more. Points which do not lead towards your conclusion are a waste of space. Because they are irrelevant, they can’t increase your marks. They take space which could have been used for enhancing your argument and potentially harm the marks you could have earned. Finally, they show you can’t tell the difference between relevant and irrelevant points, so you’ll be marked down for that as well.

Defensible arguments

A defensible argument is one which can be supported by “appropriate” and “valid” reasons. This is a key criteria by which your work is assessed. You must provide reasons for each point you make. To be “appropriate”, they must be the type of reasons used in the discipline for which you are writing. Surveys of public opinion will not support points about the mechanisms of cellular biology. To be “valid”, they must logically support the point you are making. For example, if your point is that the planet is warming up, evidence that temperatures are getting lower is not a valid support of your point.

Rational Arguments

There is no place for emotion in academic writing. University essays should not contain any information about your feelings. Your emotional response to something is irrelevant and tells us nothing about the matter in question. If you want to take a position in favour of something, you must justify your position with logical reasons. These reasons can be drawn from other sources (which you must cite), or from empirical evidence (which you
must describe), or from pure logic, such as the meaning of the words themselves (which you must explain). The same restrictions apply if you want to reject something – provide good reasons.

Knowledge is traditionally defined as “a true belief with an explanation why.” It’s not enough to be correct about something. You have to explain why it is the case. If you can’t explain why, you just have an opinion. Your opinion may be correct, but that doesn’t make it knowledge.

This means you need to be cautious about the statements you make. Unless it is a trivial fact everyone accepts, such as the capital of Ireland is Dublin, you will probably need to provide a justification. The easiest form of justification is to cite a work which defends the proposition in detail.