

CHAPTER 6 – APPLICATION TO REAL LIFE

What You’ll Learn in this Chapter

Congratulations! We’ve arrived! We now have a complete set of reasoning tools, one that will enable us to analyze, evaluate, and construct any argument, however complex! As a result, this chapter only needs to give us some practice (and tips for) applying these skills to real-life situations.

In this chapter you’ll learn
- how to analyze and evaluate real life spoken arguments,
- how to analyze and evaluate real life written arguments, and
- how to write position papers.

Real Life Arguments

Up to this point, we’ve been looking at relatively short written arguments that were composed specifically for the purpose of teaching us how to recognize, analyze, and evaluate arguments. In real-life, however, we’ll find arguments that are spoken rather than written and we’ll find written arguments that are rather long, complex, and messy.

Real Life Spoken Arguments

The process of analyzing spoken arguments poses special challenges and enjoys special advantages. On the one hand, spoken arguments can be hard to follow and quite often aren’t as carefully constructed as written arguments. On the other hand, spoken arguments are frequently simpler in structure than written arguments and you may be in the position to actually ask the author of the argument for clarification.

When dealing with a spoken argument, start by making an unnumbered list of the speaker’s important ideas. (This is the only thing that you should be doing during the initial presentation of the spoken argument. It’s much like “taking notes.”) After you’ve heard the argument, review the list, identify the ultimate conclusion, and start your numbered list with that. Complete the numbered list of important ideas by following the ultimate conclusion with any other ideas from your original notes that still strike you as important. You can then analyze and evaluate the argument as usual.

Real Life Written Arguments

Most of the passages we’ve seen so far have had a number of characteristics in common.

- First, each passage contained only one argument.
- Second, the passages have been relatively short, allowing us to take them apart on one sentence at a time.
Third, the passages have been reasonably neat, so we haven’t had to worry too much about what ideas to include, which roles the ideas served, or how the inferences went.

And finally, the passages haven’t been too difficult to understand; some of them might have been harder to understand than others, of course, but hopefully none of them were monstrously tough.

Passages in the wild needn’t conform to any of these criteria.

They can contain multiple, interrelated arguments.
They can be very long, perhaps extending over an entire book.
They can be incredibly messy, leading us to wonder what ideas are important, what roles these ideas serve, and how the inferences should be drawn in.
And they can be fairly hard to comprehend, both because the writing can employ an unfamiliar vocabulary and complex sentence structure, and because the content of passages can be quite difficult.

The bad news is that this can complicate the process of analyzing and evaluating what we read. The good news is that this added complexity can be alleviated with some common-sense tips.

Of course, how you read something depends, to some extent, upon why you’re reading it. Sometimes, for example, you might read a work strictly in order to determine what the author thinks about a particular topic. In that case, you can read with that topic in mind, hunting for and noting all relevant passages. The harder type of reading, I think, is reading simply to understand that work, and it’s for this type of reading that I’ve formulated this advice.

And you should know that I’ve formulated this advice specifically for reading philosophy, because that’s the field I know. Hopefully, however, many of these skills are broad enough to apply to a wide spectrum of writing. So let’s get at it!

**Reading Advice**

**The Dirty Window Model**

I find that it helps to think about reading academic material like cleaning a very dirty window. At first, before you read the material, the window is so filthy that you can’t see through it at all. Reading the material once is like going over the window with one washing. It gives you a fuzzy overview of the general landscape outside. Each subsequent reading is a like another washing of the window, presenting the landscape with increasing clarity, until eventually you can see everything pretty well.

The important point to remember is that we should always be prepared to read difficult writings (or parts of them) multiple times. On each reading, however, there are some general things for us to bear in mind.
Things to Remember on Every Reading

- We should be patient, both with the author and with ourselves.

  Not understanding a reading, or part of it, is absolutely fine. Everybody finds some pieces of philosophy hard to follow, so if you’re confused by a certain writing, that doesn’t mean that anything’s wrong with you. It doesn’t mean that there’s anything wrong with the author, either. The author is probably presenting some very precise and complex ideas and is doing his or her best to share these ideas with you.

  Often, what was unclear on our first reading of the article will be much clearer the second time through, even when that’s days, weeks, or months later and even when we haven’t consciously thought about the material in the meantime.

  And we should be prepared to take our time! Some writing is denser than others and it’s not uncommon for a professional philosopher to read very slowly.

- We should apply the principle of charity.

  Given the basic intelligence and honesty of most people, and the substantial screening process involved in getting one’s work published, the probability that the author is saying something obviously stupid or incorrect is very low. This isn’t to say that what’s published is always correct, of course. It’s just to say that we should try, wherever possible, to avoid attributing serious mistakes to the author.

- We should be honest with ourselves.

  We should not try to fool ourselves into thinking that we understand something that we know, on some level, we don’t understand. Not understanding a reading, or part of it, is absolutely fine. For one thing, intelligence isn’t understanding everything; intelligence is being able to distinguish between what we do understand and what we don’t understand. For another thing, our questions and confusions might contain the germ of a genuine insight, so we should treat them as very valuable resources!

- We should do our best to understand the words.

  We should look up words that we don’t understand, and if we are familiar with a word, we should remember that the author may be defining her terms in particular ways, instead of relying on their everyday meanings; consequently, we should be on the lookout for indications that special meanings are being applied. We should also remember that the writer may employ or introduce specialized terminology.

- We should do our best to understand the sentences.
We can break down complex sentences into their parts. Sentences are always composed out of “chunks” of ideas. Short sentences have little chunks; long sentences have bigger chunks. Sometimes long sentences are hard to understand because it’s difficult to see where one chunk ends and the other begins. Reading the sentence out loud can help us to hear these chunks as separate units and understand how they fit together. And we should take advantage of grammatical clues. We can read around “comma clauses” and parenthetical comments and breaking a sentence into smaller parts around sentence connectors other than “if…then…” and “or.”

We should remind ourselves of the referents of any pronouns in the sentence. For example, in the sentence “The original conclusion isn’t weakened by these new observations,” we should be sure we know what “the original conclusion,” is and what “these new observations” are.

If a sentence is a general claim or principle, we should find specific examples for it. If our examples don’t fit what’s written later on, we can go back and change our example until we find one that works.

We should try to rephrase confusing sentences. Sometimes a sentence is puzzling because it was written in a style different from what we’re accustomed to. It helps to rephrase these sentences to express the ideas in a way that’s more natural to us.

- We should focus on units of the right size.

As a rule of thumb, where we look for the important ideas depends upon the size of the passage presenting the argument. Normally, we look for the important ideas in passages that are one step smaller than the passage that contains the argument we’re analyzing. For example, if the argument is in a paragraph, we look at sentences. If the argument is in a section, we look at paragraphs. If the argument is in a chapter, we look at the sections. If an argument is in a book, we look at the chapters.

Once we know the size of the unit that we can expect to give us the important ideas, we see whether or not each unit at that level presents us with an important idea and, if it does, we identify that idea. This may require us to identify the main point of a paragraph, section, or chapter, or to summarize the most important ideas of each.

We should remember that if an argument is contained in a “large chunk,” for example a book, we can often choose to focus on different levels – zooming in and zooming out. If we want to get a sense of how an entire book works, we can skim the chapters and think about what the main idea of each is, putting the conclusions of each chapter together to understand the argument for the ultimate conclusion of
the entire book. We can then go back to examine the argument in each chapter, each section, each paragraph, if we want.

- We should remember that the author may present multiple, interrelated, positions and arguments, and adopt a different attitude toward each.

  If there are multiple arguments in a reading, it helps to understand how the arguments are related to each other. Arguments are frequently in what we might call an “oppositional relationship.” There may be a position or argument, for example, another argument that serves as an objection to that position or argument (criticizing a premise or an inference), yet another argument that serves as an objection to that objection, and so on.

  It helps to understand what attitude the author adopts toward the various arguments. She might be advancing a position or argument as her own. She might be examining a position or argument. She might be criticizing a position or argument as one counter to her own position or argument, either as a pre-existing position or argument or else as a possible objection to her position or argument.

- We should tolerate mess and disagreement.

  It’s important to accept the fact that arguments in real life are sometimes messy, in which case we’ll need to exercise our best judgment when deciding what ideas to include, what role the ideas play, and how the inferences run. As a result, different people might come up with different diagrams of an argument. That’s okay. The chief thing is to find an analysis of the argument that charitably elucidates, clarifies, and exposes what the author probably had in mind.

Bearing this general advice in mind, let’s take a closer look at what we should do during each of our multiple readings of a text.

**First Reading**

Read through the writing, if it’s an article. If it’s a book, read through the chapter or chapter section.

If it’s your own copy, you might want to mark particularly interesting or important bits with pencil. I tend to draw lines in the margins.

Just try to get a sense of what the author is saying and decide whether or not the piece is interesting or important enough to read again.
Second Reading

Go through the reading again, either marking the text, preferably in pencil, or taking notes, preferably using a word processor. If you decide to take notes, this would be a good time to begin a computer file for the reading. Include all information necessary for a citation of the work, and make sure that you put quotation marks around direct quotations, noting page numbers. These notes can be a very useful resource later on, especially if you want to refer to the paper in a work of your own.

Take special care to mark in the text or include in your notes:

1) The main position or positions advanced in the reading.

2) How the author goes about supporting the main position or positions.
   This can include:
   - Organizational cues, such as summaries of what will be or has been done, section headings, transitions, and subject-changes.
   - Background material, or anything that will help you to understand the arguments, like guiding questions, definitions of specialized terminology, description of positions, and important distinctions.
   - Argumentative material, or anything that constitutes part of an argument for a position, including answers to the guiding questions, important ideas, obvious inferences, obvious arguments, objections to ideas or arguments, and objections to the objections.

3) Your own responses
   Focus especially on the following reactions:
   - Confusion - Are there passages, positions, or arguments that you don’t understand or find confusing?
   - Recognition - Are you reminded of anything, another question, idea, argument, passage, or reading, for example?
   - Agreement – Do you find yourself in strong agreement with any positions?
   - Disagreement - Do you have objections to any positions or arguments? Do you think that you might have objections to some positions or arguments, because you feel “funny” about them?
   - Curiosity - Are there questions, ideas, arguments, or passages that you find particularly intriguing? Do any questions occur to you?
   (Obviously, if you’re taking notes, make sure to identify this material as your own, not the author’s.)

You should ignore:

1) Repetitions of ideas and arguments
2) Clarification of ideas and arguments, including examples
3) Explanations for why the author or others believe or do something
4) Tangents. This includes side issues and refuted or minor positions and arguments. It can be hard, and task-relative, to decide what is and what is not a tangent. In general, if your understanding would not be compromised if you forgot a passage, you can consider that passage a tangent.

**Third Reading**

Go over what you’ve marked in the text and polish your markings, or review the notes you’ve taken and polish your notes.

Pay special attention to:

1) The main position or positions advanced in the reading.
   - Do you still think that these are the main positions advanced in the reading? If not, what do you now think are the main positions?

2) How the author goes about supporting the main position or positions.
   - **Organizational cues**, such as summaries of what will be or has been done, section headings, transitions, and subject-changes.
     - If you’re reviewing your markings, do you want to erase your marks for any of this material that you now see is repeated or unimportant?
     - If you’re reviewing your notes, do you want to add any organizational aids? Do you want to use this material to divide your notes into sections? Do you want to cut some of this material that you now see is repeated or unimportant?
   - **Background material**, or anything that will help you to understand the arguments, like guiding questions, definitions of specialized terminology, description of positions, and important distinctions.
     - If you’re reviewing your markings, do you want to erase your marks for any of this material that you now see is repeated or unimportant?
     - If you’re reviewing your notes, do you want to reorganize some of this material to make the connections easier to see? (For example, do you want to give this material special sections, or do you want to distribute it throughout your notes, integrating it into the argumentative portions?) Do you want to combine some of this material? Do you want to divide some of this material into smaller parts? Do you want to clarify some of this material? Do you want to cut some of this material that you now see is repeated or unimportant?
   - **Argumentative material**, or anything that constitutes part of an argument for a position, including answers to the guiding questions, important ideas, obvious inferences, obvious arguments, objections to ideas or arguments, and objections to the objections.
     - If you’re reviewing your markings, are there multiple arguments? If so, how are the arguments related to each other? How does each argument go? Do you want to erase your marks for some of this material that you now see is repeated or unimportant?
o If you’re reviewing your notes, are there multiple arguments? If so, you might want to give each argument its own section. How are the arguments related to each other? You might want to add some comments explaining these interconnections. How does each argument go? You might want to reorganize some ideas to make their connections easier to see. You might want to combine some ideas. You might want to divide some ideas into smaller ideas. You might want to clarify some ideas. You’ll probably want to solidify the argumentative role of the ideas and the inferences between them, perhaps diagramming the arguments or representing the arguments in some other form. You might want to add some missing conclusions. You might want to cut some of this material that you now see is repeated or unimportant.

3) Your own responses
   - **Confusion** - Are there passages, positions, or arguments that you don’t understand or find confusing?
   - **Recognition** - Are you reminded of anything, another question, idea, argument, passage, or reading, for example?
   - **Agreement** – Do you find yourself in strong agreement with any positions?
   - **Disagreement** - Do you have objections to any positions or arguments? Do you think that you might have objections to some positions or arguments, because you feel “funny” about them?
   - **Curiosity** - Are there questions, ideas, arguments, or passages that you find particularly intriguing? Do any questions occur to you?
     o Do you want to add or eliminate any of this material?

**Fourth Reading**

This is the time to take a serious look at your responses. Try to resolve or develop them.

   - **Confusion** - Are there passages, positions, or arguments that you don’t understand or find confusing? Can you articulate what you fail to understand or find confusing? Is there a germ of an insight hiding in your confusion? Specifically, is there something amiss with the confusing position or argument? If so, what’s amiss? How might the position or argument be improved? What might be a better position or argument?

   - **Recognition** - Are you reminded of anything, another question, idea, argument, passage, or reading, for example? How does the reading compare to what you’re reminded of? What are the similarities and differences? Which do you prefer, and why?
Agreement – Do you find yourself in strong agreement with any positions? Do they withstand scrutiny? If you accept one of these positions or arguments, what implications might it have? What problems might it help solve?

Disagreement - Do you have objections to any positions or arguments? Do you think that you might have objections to some positions or arguments, because you feel “funny” about them? Try to articulate these objections. Do they withstand scrutiny? If so, what’s wrong with the position or argument? How might the position or argument be improved? What might be a better position or argument?

Curiosity - Are there questions, ideas, arguments, or passages that you find particularly intriguing? Do they withstand scrutiny? Do any questions occur to you? Can you clearly articulate these questions? What do you think is the best answer to one of these questions? Why is that the best answer?

That’s a lot of advice to see all at once, I know, and you certainly don’t need to adhere to it slavishly, but it can serve as a guide to help you tackle the longer, more difficult readings that you might encounter.

With this grounding in how to read difficult material, we’re ready to take a fairly in-depth look at how to write papers ourselves.

Writing Position Papers

You’ve probably had that frozen feeling of sitting in front of a blinking cursor, or before a blank sheet of paper, and needing, or wanting, to write a paper. Everyone gets stuck now and then. And because writing is such complex and individual process, it’s difficult to give one-size-fits all writing advice. Nonetheless, a few pointers can be given about how to write position papers, and this advice can go a long way toward eliminating much of the frustration and anxiety.

Let’s start by looking at some characteristics of a good position paper. This will give us help to understand how we can produce one.

Ten Characteristics of a Good Position Paper

1) The paper should be in the author’s own words.

This is probably the most basic requirement. Plagiarism is intentionally or unintentionally representing somebody else’s ideas as one’s own, and should be avoided at all costs. You may, of course, appeal to the ideas of others, if you acknowledge doing so and site your sources appropriately.
2) The paper should have a clear purpose.

Your readers should always have a clear understanding of what you’re going to do in your paper.

I find it helpful to think about position papers as attempts to answer specific questions, and to think about position papers as falling to four general kinds, according to the types of questions they attempt to address.

1. **Expositive writing** tries to answer questions of the form “What did A say or think about P?” “What did A mean in the following passage?” and so on.

   Generally speaking, expositive writing and consists of summarizing or setting out the ideas of a given thinker in your own words, in order to help your reader to understand material that is otherwise obscure or hard to follow. It often involves arguing for or against a certain interpretation of that thinker’s ideas by showing that this interpretation is more or less consistent with other writings by the same thinker, entails consequences that the thinker would or would not be willing to accept, etc.

2. **Comparative writing** takes up questions like “How are positions X and Y similar, and how do they differ?” “What is the relationship between the arguments for X and Y?” and “How do thinkers A and B compare with respect to their thinking on P?”

   As with expositive writing, comparative writing will usually require you to summarize or set out the arguments and positions your own words. It will also require you to defend your claims of commonality and difference.

3. **Evaluative writing** considers such questions as “Is position P plausible?” “Is P more or less plausible than Q?” “Is the argument for P strong?” “Is the argument for P stronger or weaker than the argument for Q?”

   If a position seems to contradict what we know, or if we can find a case that seems to contradict the position, that’s a mark against the position. If an argument assumes things we have reason to doubt, or that can’t be believed without accepting the conclusion, or if those ideas don’t seem to support the conclusion the argument wants us to draw, that’s a mark against the argument.

4. **Constructive writing** is unlike expositive, comparative, or evaluative writing in that the questions it considers are less directly concerned with pre-existing positions or arguments. Instead of asking “What did A think about P?” for example, constructive writing asks “What should we think about P?” or “What’s the truth about P?”
Defending a position of our own usually involves an analysis and evaluation of particularly relevant and influential work in order to elucidate or advance our own position, carefully supporting our position with argument, and responding to actual or potential objections.

You and your reader should always know what question your paper is attempting to answer, and how your paper is going about answering it.

3) The paper should be well organized.

Your paper as a whole, and each part of your paper, should work to fulfill the purpose of the paper (that is to say, it should help you to answer the question that your paper poses). It should take up each task in the order most helpful to meeting that objective and it should finish one thing before starting another.

4) The paper should be clear.

Make sure that you really understand what you’re saying and that an average member of your audience could be expected to understand it, too. When it doubt about your audience, the positions and arguments should be stated in such a way that they would be understood by a reasonably intelligent reader who is unfamiliar with the material.

It really helps to read your work out loud and ask yourself “If I were someone else, would I understand this?” It also helps to provide your reader with guiding questions, definitions of specialized terminology, descriptions of positions, and important distinctions.

If you are going to set out an argument (either your own or another person’s) make certain to include all of the important ideas and ensure that the connections between the ideas are as clear as possible.

And don’t strive for linguistic variety by using a thesaurus. For one thing, we often need to use the same terminology repeatedly because some terms have very precise meanings. If you want to invoke a particular meaning, you might have to use a specific expression, even if you’ve used that expression recently. Also there’s a danger, when using a thesaurus, that you’ll choose a word that doesn’t quite mean what you want simply because it’s a more sophisticated-sounding term. Always sacrifice sophistication to clarity.

5) The paper should be substantively correct.

Attribute positions to the right person and represent those positions correctly.

Always try to avoid speculating about an author’s motivations because motivations are difficult to establish and are usually irrelevant to the merits of an author’s case.

Ensure that your own reasoning avoids serious errors of fact or logic. If you aren’t sure that your interpretation is correct, or that your argument is sound, admit it.
Note actual or possible objections to your position, interpretation or argument. If you admit possible problems, and discuss them intelligently, they don’t really count as mistakes.

6) The paper should be complete.

Think slowly. Don’t jump to conclusions. Flesh out all ideas and arguments in sufficient detail and ensure that you adequately defend claims that need defending.

Use specific examples to elucidate and support general claims.

Respond to anticipated objections to your position or argument, even if your response is simply the acknowledgment of an objection and a recognition of the fact that the objection will need to be addressed at some future time.

7) The paper should be focused.

Don’t include irrelevant or inessential material. Anything that’s unrelated the attainment of the paper’s purpose is inessential. If you aren’t going to discuss an argument, for example, don’t spend time setting it out. If you’ve already set out an argument that you come to realize is inessential, remove it.

It’s a good idea to start a folder that can serve as a sort of attic for storing inessential passages, examples, or arguments that you’ve cut from your papers but to which you are particularly attached. That way, when you remove an irrelevant bit from your paper, you can console yourself with the knowledge that you aren’t throwing it away forever. You can return to it later, and include it in a paper that really needs it.

8) The paper should flow.

Ensure that your paper flows nicely from one point to the next. Avoid sudden jerks. Use smooth transitions.

Organizational cues, including section headings, transitions, subject-changes, and summaries of what will be or has been done can help your reader to follow your paper.

If there is more than one argument, ensure that your readers understand how the arguments are related to each other (e.g. one argument might be your own position, another argument might be a possible objection, a third argument might be a response to that objection, etc.)

9) The paper should be mechanically correct, adhering to the rules of style and usage. In particular, make sure that the spelling and grammar is right.

10) Ideally, the paper should be creative, asking new questions, answering old questions in new ways, seeing new things, seeing old things in new ways, or making an original point.
Of course, it's one thing to know what makes a good paper; it's quite another thing to write one. So let's take a look at the writing process itself.

**How to Write a Good Position Paper**

1) **Find Something to Write About: Formulating your Thesis**

As we've seen, a good paper should have a clear purpose, so the first thing you should do is find a paper topic, something to write about. This can be one of the most challenging aspects of writing a paper. How can you decide what position you want to defend and the way in which you want to defend it? How, in other words, can you formulate a *thesis*?

There is, as you might expect, no guaranteed process here, but there are some things that you can do and some questions you can ask yourself. In particular, it's useful to remember that paper topics seldom fall upon people from the sky, but instead arise from reading, conversing, or otherwise exposing oneself to the thinking of others.

The first thing you might do, therefore, is **find a general question or topic that interests you**. This can be as broad or narrow as you desire because its purpose is just to get you started and to point you in a general direction. In particular, it doesn't need to be (and probably won't be) the paper topic you'll eventually decide on.

After you've found a general question or topic of interest, **locate material on this question or topic**. Subject-specific research tools, like *The Philosopher's Index*, can be very useful here. You might want to keep track of relevant authors and readings, perhaps in a computer file.

Once you're aware of some of the relevant literature, you **can decide which material looks most promising**. Read the abstracts, if available, because they can give you a very good idea of what the article or book is about and whether or not it's interesting or relevant to you.

Having decided upon the most interesting and relevant literature, **read the most promising material**, following the reading advice we've already discussed and, if possible, taking reading notes. Pay special attention to observing and recording your own responses to what you read.

If an article or book strikes you as especially interesting or important, you might want to follow the literature trail in both directions. Specifically, you can read some of the articles and books referred to in the reading (following the trail “backward”), and you can use a citation index to locate and read other works that cite the reading you like (following the trail “forward”). Again, when you read, follow the reading advice we've seen and pay special attention to your own responses.
If you persist in reading and thinking about things you find interesting, you’ll find that your responses to those readings will be fertile soil in which to dig for paper topics of your own.

By focusing on your feelings of CONFUSION, for example, and by trying to clarify the positions or arguments that confused you, you might come up with an enlightening interpretation of the text and be able to write an expositive paper. Alternatively, you might discover that the positions or arguments that confused you are genuinely flawed, in which case you could write an evaluative paper discussing the problems with those positions or arguments. If contemplating the problems with the position or argument gives you an idea about how the position or argument could be improved, or helps you to frame a better position or argument to put in its stead, you might be able to defend your position in a constructive paper.

Your feelings of RECOGNITION can point you to related ideas, arguments, or readings, and by following up on this material you can write a comparative paper elucidating the similarities and differences that you find. If you prefer one of the positions to the others, you can write an evaluative paper. You might end up framing a position of your own that synthesizes the pre-existing positions, and by defending this new position you can write a constructive paper.

Your feelings of AGREEMENT can be utilized, too. If your points of agreement don’t withstand a critical evaluation and you end up changing your mind, you can write an evaluative paper. If your points of agreement do stand up, you can explore the implications of the positions you like, thereby writing a constructive paper.

Your feelings of DISAGREEMENT hold out similar possibilities. If your objections withstand scrutiny, you can write an evaluative paper, and if your insights can improve the position or argument, you can write a constructive paper.

And, finally, your reactions of CURIOSITY can lead to explore the implications of what you’ve read, can help you to raise new questions, and can direct you toward other ideas to research, all of which can lead you to write a constructive paper.

After you’ve found something to write about, articulate your thesis, or the position you intend to defend, as simply and as clearly as possible.

2) Defend your Position to Yourself: Constructing an Argument for Your Thesis

Once you have a something to write about – a thesis - it’s very tempting to start writing the paper. But be patient!

Take some time to defend the position to yourself. Construct an argument to support your position. Consider how someone might object to your position or argument and think about how you might respond to those objections.
And - as horrible as this might be to contemplate - remember that you might be unable to set out a good argument for your position and that you might be unable to respond to an objection you envision. If this happens, you'll need to seriously consider the possibility that your position is mistaken and, if you decide that it is, you'll need to change your position and write a different paper. That's okay. It's more important to be right than stubborn.

3) Organize your Paper

Once you've decided upon the position you want to defend, and decided upon how you want to defend it, determine what background information your readers will need. This will give you a basic list of things you want to say, and you can start to think about the order in which you want to say them.

Four basic rules here are:

i) Plan to present your material in an order that will be easy for your readers to follow.
ii) Plan to present one point at a time.
iii) Plan to develop each point in sufficient detail, and
iv) Plan to finish one thing before starting another.

It sounds simple, but most organization is really is simple. You can think about your paper like a dinner party to which you're inviting your readers. You don't want to greet them at the door with some ice-cream and asparagus, then serve them raw hamburger with moldy bread in the living room, give them more ice-cream in the dining room, and finish it all off with mashed potatoes and a salad as they're going out the door. No. You want to ensure that the food is well-prepared; you want to present it to your guests one course at time, and you want to give your guests the opportunity to eat and enjoy each course before clearing away the dishes and bringing the next course in. And you certainly don't want to suddenly and inexplicably introduce a juggling aardvark. If something doesn’t help your paper to establish your thesis then no matter how neat you think it is and no matter how proud you are of it, leave it out.

4) Write your Paper

By the time you start to write your paper, you should know what position you want to defend, how you want to defend it, and the order in which you want to do things. All of this should put you in a pretty good position to fill in your outline with narrative. I typically start at the beginning of the paper and write to the end at this point. And don't worry! You aren't expected to come up with finished product yet.

5) Review your Paper

This is a very important step! When you have good first draft of your paper, compare it with the ten characteristics of a good position paper discussed above. In particular, ask yourself the following questions:
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1. When I use other people’s ideas, have I put them into my own words or included them in quotations and have I given proper credit?
2. Is the purpose of my paper obvious to my readers? Do they know the question that I’m attempting to answer and what my answer is?
3. Is the paper well organized? Do my readers always know where they are, so to speak, in the broader scheme of my paper?
4. Is the paper clear? Could an intelligent person unfamiliar with this material understand what I’m saying?
5. Have I correctly characterized the positions of others? Is my own reasoning sound? Have I noted actual or possible objections to my position?
6. Have I given enough attention to everything? Have I addressed actual or possible objections to my position?
7. Have I avoided including irrelevant material?
8. Is the paper smooth? Are all of my transitions easy?
9. Is my paper mechanically correct?
10. Is my paper (at least a little) creative?

6) Revise your Paper

After you’ve reviewed your paper in light of the characteristics of a good position paper, you can make the necessary changes.

If you wish, you can then repeat the process, reviewing your paper again, making more revisions, reviewing your paper again, making still more revisions, and so on, until eventually you call yourself done.

And “calling yourself done” is probably what you’ll do because you might never feel done. You might continue to think of ways to improve your paper and you might return to it weeks, or months, or even years later. But if you need to turn it in to a professor or submit it for publication, this would be the time.

Summary

In this chapter, we learned
- how to approach the complex and messy arguments that we encounter in real-life, and
- how to write position papers containing arguments of our own.

These are very high-level skills, of course, and mastery of them (if thinking about “mastery” even makes sense here) requires lots of practice.