

# Formulating Arguments

## Why Argue?

Arguments are often seen as unnecessary, emotional or disruptive quarrels that never actually solve anything. Although this may be true in some circumstances, it is not true of academic arguments. The purpose of an academic argument is to make a particular claim and support it with objective reasons to persuade others of that claim.

## Two Types of Arguments

### Destructive Arguments



- \* Destructive arguments argue **against** a specific position or argument; they point out weaknesses or problems with another point of view.
- \* Most destructive arguments are known as *counter-arguments* — arguments against another specific argument. For example, a counter-argument may contend that Richard Dawkins' argument for naturalism fails.
- \* Destructive arguments may also be against a general position. For example, a destructive argument may attempt to establish that naturalism is false.

### Constructive Arguments



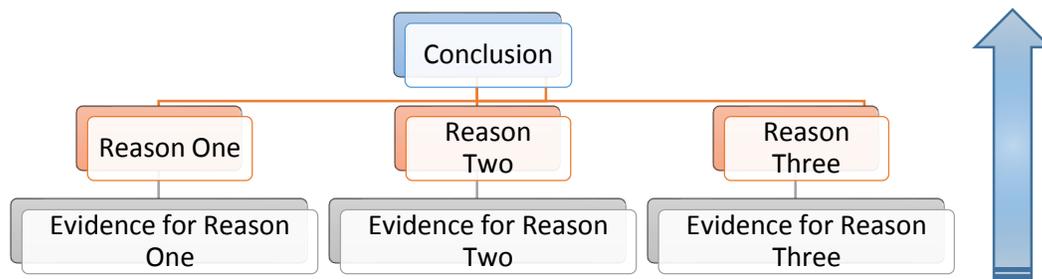
- \* Constructive arguments argue **for** a particular view; they attempt to establish a specific and positive position.
- \* Most constructive arguments develop reasons for holding a particular perspective or doctrine. For example, one may argue for the positive conclusion that Christianity is the only way to salvation.

## Step 1: Choose Your Argument

- Develop a clear and specific conclusion.** For a *destructive* argument, find a significant point of weakness in the other position that you can argue against. For a *constructive* argument, consider what your argument will seek to confirm or demonstrate. If you are having trouble coming up with a conclusion, try asking yourself, “**What** am I arguing for?”
- Does the argument relate to your thesis?** The conclusion of your argument should either be a part of the thesis itself or support the thesis in some significant way.
- Is the argument debatable?** Contend for a conclusion that is not already agreed upon by both sides of the argument; otherwise, what is the **purpose** of arguing for that conclusion? Second, ensure that you can create a **persuasive** case in support of your conclusion.
- Is the conclusion of the argument significant?** If the conclusion of your argument does not result in the construction of (constructive argument), the destruction of (destructive argument), or the modification of a *significant* position, then be more **bold** in your contribution to the topic.
- Is the argument fair?** If you are arguing against a position or argument that is not your own (a destructive argument), take care in presenting your opponent's position **fairly** and **charitably**.

## Step 2: Develop Your Argument

- **Have you developed reasons that will support your conclusion?** Developing reasons (or evidence) that support your conclusion is key in producing an effective argument. If you are having trouble developing reasons, ask yourself, “**Why** should someone else agree with my conclusion?”
- **Are your reasons convincing?** Ensure that a reasonable person will be **convinced** by the reasons you have given. Reasons can be supported through several means: logic, scientific evidence, psychological considerations, theological reasons, and so forth.
  - The most convincing reasons are **objective**—meaning that they do not depend upon your personal emotions or perspectives. While emotions do impact our decisions, it is risky to use emotional appeals in academic arguments as others may not share your personal opinions. That said, do familiarize yourself with the expectations of your discipline and your professor, as some may welcome the use of emotional appeals as part of an argument.



- **Do your reasons establish your conclusion?** The conclusion of your argument should clearly **follow** from the supporting reasons you have given. A reasonable person should not be able to agree with your reasons while denying your conclusion. If he can, then your conclusion is either too strong for the evidence you have given, or your evidence may be too weak for your conclusion.

<i>Examples of Good Arguments</i>	<i>Examples of Poor Arguments</i>
<p><u>Modus Ponens:</u></p> <p>1) If it is raining, then the grass is wet (<math>A \rightarrow B</math>).</p> <p>2) It is raining (<b>A</b>).</p> <p>3) Therefore, the grass is wet (<math>\therefore B</math>). ✓</p>	<p><u>Affirming the Consequent:</u></p> <p>1) If it is raining, then the grass is wet (<math>A \rightarrow B</math>).</p> <p>2) The grass is wet (<b>B</b>).</p> <p>3) Therefore, it is raining (<math>\therefore A</math>). ✗</p>
<p><u>Modus Tollens:</u></p> <p>1) If it is raining, then the grass is wet (<math>A \rightarrow B</math>).</p> <p>2) The grass is not wet (<b>not B</b>).</p> <p>3) Therefore, it is not raining (<math>\therefore \text{not A}</math>). ✓</p>	<p><u>Denying the Antecedent:</u></p> <p>1) If it is raining, then the grass is wet (<math>A \rightarrow B</math>).</p> <p>2) It is not raining (<b>not A</b>).</p> <p>3) Therefore, the grass is not wet (<math>\therefore \text{not B}</math>). ✗</p>

- **Have you explained the consequences of denying your reasons or conclusion?** Explaining the negative **consequences** that result from denying your reasons or conclusion will help to demonstrate the strength of your argument. In other words, your argument should attempt to make it *as difficult as possible* for a reasonable person to *deny* your reasons or conclusion.

## Step 3: Polish Your Argument

- **Have you addressed potential objections to your argument?** **Anticipate** how someone might reject your reasons or conclusion and **respond** with objective reasons that show you have thought through *both* sides of the argument.
- **Is your presentation of the argument clear and specific?** All of the necessary steps to guide the reader from your argument’s initial statement to its final conclusion should be laid out **clearly**. Use **relevant** and **persuasive examples** when needed to clarify complicated concepts or steps in the argument. While reviewing your draft, be sure also to eliminate any non-essential or irrelevant material.