

# The Elements of a Persuasive Essay

*“Rhetoric, then, may be defined as the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever.”*

*- Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), from “Art’ of Rhetoric”*

*“. . . we are in no respect superior to other living creatures; nay, we are inferior to many in swiftness and in strength and in other resources; but, because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and found cities and made laws and invented arts. . .”*

*- Isocrates (436-338 B.C.), from “Antidosis”*

No one structure fits all written argument, but every well-written student essay should contain each of the following elements:

**1. Title.** A good title will introduce the topic of the essay, suggest the author’s tone, and, perhaps most importantly, lure the audience into the introductory paragraph.

**2. Introduction.** The introductory paragraph sets the context for the position that is argued in the essay, establishes the author’s tone, and convinces the audience that the rest of the essay is worthy of a reader’s time. The introductory paragraph should begin with a compelling and informative lead sentence.

Some introductory paragraph strategies include:

- providing relevant background information
- telling an interesting anecdote
- presenting a pertinent statistic or statistics
- asking a provocative question or questions
- using an appropriate quotation
- drawing a useful analogy
- defining a key term used throughout the essay
- identifying the situation.

**3. Thesis Statement.** The thesis statement states succinctly the position being argued. It must present an arguable position. In a short essay, the thesis statement often appears as the last sentence of the introductory paragraph. The thesis statement makes a claim that the rest of the essay will attempt to prove, and it may also reveal the pattern of development that the essay will assume.

**4. Background Information.** The essay must provide the reader basic information needed for understanding the position being argued. This information can be provided as

- part of the introductory paragraph
- its own paragraph
- in body paragraphs where it is necessary to clarify support points.

Careful analysis of the audience’s requirements for background information must be made. Too little background will confuse the audience, whereas too much simple background can be insulting.

**5. Support: Reasons and Evidence.** The thesis must be supported in the body paragraphs. This material is the core of the essay. Each type of evidence or reason usually consists of a general statement backed up with specific details or examples and careful explanation of the links between the two.

Explanations, analyses, and reasoning must be clear, logically ordered, and thorough. In literary analysis, the best examples are usually direct textual quotations, carefully cited. Depending on the length of the essay and complexity of the support, one or two paragraphs are devoted to each reason or presentation of evidence.

The best sequence for presenting the complete set of reasons and evidence depends upon your desired effect. Moving from evidence most familiar to your audience to evidence least familiar helps the reader to move from the known to the unknown. Moving from evidence that is least important to the evidence that is most important will allow you to provide your best evidence in the most memorable position. Generally, moving from weakest to strongest evidence is best in establishing a logical appeal.

## 6. Anticipation of Likely Objections and Responses to Them (OPOV&R).

*“For the orator to produce conviction, three qualities are necessary; for independently of demonstrations, the things which induce belief are three in number. These qualities are good sense, virtue, and goodwill . . . These qualities are all that are necessary, so that the speaker who appears to possess all three will necessarily convince his hearers.”*

*- Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), from “Art’ of Rhetoric”*

To convince your audience of your “good sense, virtue, and goodwill,” you must mention positions opposed to the one being argued and rebut them briefly. You should anticipate that there are two types of opposing points of view (OPOV): disagreements with the overall claim presented in the thesis and objections to your support: your evidence, reasoning, or both. Your rebuttals (R) can appear in their own paragraphs or in other paragraphs. Several placement options are possible:

- in classical oral argument and some written rhetoric, OPOV&R appears immediately before the concluding paragraph. Be wary: if your rebuttal is not very strong, this placement of OPOV can undermine your argument
- objections to the argument presented in the thesis may be placed immediately after the introductory paragraph as a bridge to the body of the essay; in this arrangement, the essay’s thesis falls either at the end of the introductory paragraph or at the end of the refutation paragraph.
- objections to the argument presented in the thesis may be placed in the introduction, prior to the statement of the thesis, allowing the thesis to serve as a rebuttal statement
- objections to evidence or reasoning may be placed “organically” in body paragraphs, either prior to or following the reasoning and evidence presented in the paragraph.

An essay may employ a combination of these placement strategies. Keep in mind that rebuttals should *always* include supporting evidence and reasoning. Also remember that your anticipation of opposing points of view and your rebuttals will in large part determine your audience’s evaluation of your *ethos*.

**7. Conclusion.** The concluding paragraph brings the essay to a close that flows logically and gracefully from the rest of the essay. It does not cut the reader off abruptly, but neither does it dawdle.

Strategies for concluding include

- a call for awareness, action, or similar type of resolution
- looking ahead to the future
- drawing a parallel to a similar text or situation or personal experience
- summarizing the main points of the essay, but avoid doing this in essays short enough that the audience is likely to remember them
- using a device from the list of introductory strategies, but usually avoid using the same device in both the introductory and concluding paragraph.

*“To prove is the first necessity, to please is charm, to sway is victory.”*

*- Cicero (106-43 B.C.), from “Orator”*