

The UNB Writing Centre

16/17 C. C. Jones Student Services Centre
26 Bailey Drive, Box 4400
Fredericton, NB Canada, E3B 5A3

Contact us**Phone:** (506) 452-6346**Email:** wss@unb.ca

The Body of the Essay

The introduction and the conclusion are obvious structural features: One starts the discussion and the other completes it. The body of the paper supplies the argument that lies between the introduction and the conclusion. Good argument consists of a chain of logical propositions together with the evidence to support these propositions.

Argument is hard work; it requires honesty, tact, discipline, and confidence. Above all, it requires a plan; a haphazard argument is no argument at all. An argument also requires evidence. Even if your argument is entirely metaphysical, it will require at least the evidence of your own reflections.

1. Argument and Primary and Secondary Evidence

Most arguments rest on facts that can be verified independently. Obviously, relying upon faulty or insufficient evidence will lead you to flawed conclusions: An argument is only as good as its evidence.

Writers can use several kinds of evidence. Exploring primary sources will give you direct experience; studying secondary sources will provide you with a critical context. You will probably use at least a single primary source for any essay; when writing a research paper, you should (unless instructed otherwise) consult several secondary sources. It is important that you pursue more than a lone secondary source, if only because a secondary source is, at best, an interpretation of a primary source; as such, it is unlikely to be definitive. Only by consulting several secondary sources will you be able to gauge both the nature of dominant interpretations and the validity of the points being debated.

This raises the question of the purpose of secondary sources, to which there are several answers. Secondary sources offer a range of opinion against which to test your own ideas. Reading the criticism of others allows you to debate points with careful thinkers who have carefully documented their arguments, sometimes long ago. Secondary sources also provide you with expert interpretations of questions you cannot possibly master alone in any reasonable time. If you wish to do no more than allude to the tradition of the revenge tragedy in a short paper on *Hamlet*, you will not want to devote months to examining that tradition. If you want to make a few remarks about Roman comedies while reviewing a contemporary play, you should not feel obliged to tackle the whole corpus of Latin drama before writing.

Libraries hold generations of expertise as well as the most current opinion. While your argument must be your own, and you will work directly with many materials, do take advantage of informed opinion to settle supporting questions. The UNB library staff is not only thoroughly familiar with the research tools appropriate to your subject, but they are also familiar with major publications in all but the most obscure areas of study. While nothing can replace a session with the library staff on-site, UNB does offer a number of guides to help you

with your research even from a distance.

Whether you write a research paper or not, you should document your observations. Even when writing a paper in which you consult only a single source--such as a single poem, story, novel, book, or article--you should keep careful notes to ensure that you are always able to pinpoint precisely what it is in a text that gives rise to your ideas and your argument(s).

2. Logical Argument

Logic is not exactly a faculty; it is a skill. It is the art of proceeding correctly from established truths to new truths. A logical critique is based on evidence, and, like a scientific experiment, it can be reproduced by any investigator using the same materials and apparatus as the original author. Logical criticism requires the exhibition and defense of principles and standards. A logical approach to any subject must include detailed, explicit criteria for judgement; acknowledged facts; and a coherent method.

Arguments presented in formal papers are expected to be logical. Some exercises, such as reaction papers, may demand a chiefly subjective, emotional response, but in all other cases assume that the goal is a controlled, logical argument.

a.) Weaknesses in reasoning and logical fallacies

Insufficient or inadequate information poses the greatest threat to the integrity of an argument, but, even with adequate material to support it, an argument can fail because of structural weaknesses. Hasty generalizations and suppressed, ignored, or unconsidered evidence can invalidate conclusions. Try to identify the assumptions on which your argument rests, and never leap to conclusions. If your conclusions are not adequately borne out by your evidence, either modify it or collect additional material to support them. Anticipate possible counter-arguments or objections to your methods.

When using deductive reasoning, scrutinize your premises: Ensure that they do not rely upon popular prejudice or arbitrary opinion. In short, treat your own argument as you would an opponent's, checking for every possible weakness. Look for failures in logic; challenge your own assumptions.

b.) Use and abuse

Even clear facts can be used unscrupulously. The following passage offers a few facts about moose hunting that are used for quite different ends in the next two passages.

STATEMENT:

The moose population of New Brunswick includes approximately 21,000 adult animals. Hunting licenses from the annual draw produce about 1200 kills; poaching accounts for an estimated 800 more. This represents almost nine per cent of the total population. The gross population increase is slightly less than thirteen per cent per year; thus hunting, as it is now practised, restricts the population to a yearly growth of just over four per cent.

ARGUMENT 1:

In the fall the leaves of New Brunswick turn red; those that would naturally turn yellow or orange are dyed red with the blood of slaughtered animals. Thousands of moose are killed and dragged through towns and cities to appease the bloodlust of hordes of hunters who are environmentally irresponsible, palpably inhumane, and, all too often, doubly intoxicated with both murder and alcohol. No less than two thousand moose will die this year -- many, many more if statistics on poaching are as inadequate as most responsible estimates make them. This massive kill far outstrips the net growth rate.

ARGUMENT 2:

The annual moose harvest begins in early fall. A controlled number of registered hunters bring in about five per cent of adult animals (poaching is minimal, running at no more than 3.8 per cent of the population). Despite the hunting, the moose population continues to climb at a substantial rate. In fact, the harvest protects the herds, culling the population to keep it in line with available food stocks.

You may notice the effect of **diction** on tone. Words such as "kill" and "murder" create a very different mood than do "harvest" and "culling." The writers use other strategies to persuade the reader. The second passage concentrates upon the culpability of the hunter, and (with enormous license) launches an ad hominem attack that amounts to a red herring sub-argument: "hunting is harmful to the moose population because hunters are drunk." The third releases figures carefully and not altogether fairly: The rate of growth is small, and poachers take in nearly half of the annual "harvest."

Both of these arguments are full of weaknesses, of course. The first very loosely speaks of "thousands" of slaughtered moose before revealing that there are in fact only two of these thousands; it then attacks poaching estimates without real justification. Finally, it skillfully contrasts the gross kill with the net growth. The second fails to address matters of substance, such as the other hazards the moose population faces, which may produce an actual decline in the population.

c.) Winning arguments

Arguments of the quality of the final two examples are common in real writing. Rarely, even in scientific research, is writing undertaken with perfect objectivity. There are always important matters at stake, and writers are usually interested parties. The real defect of the sample arguments for and against moose hunting is that neither of them will ever convince anyone who is not already a partisan. They will appeal to adherents of one side of the question or the other, but neither will win a single convert.

To win an argument, especially one that engages the emotions, you must either appeal to the reader's mind--and appeal to it very strongly indeed--or counter the personal emotions of your reader with other emotions. The latter course is not recommended; it leads to an escalation of passion at the expense of reason. The former requires that your argument be powerfully logical. You must present the assumptions that underlie your claims, show your evidence, and

draw your conclusions without distorting or suppressing evidence.

Assumptions are matters that you present as settled--beliefs or principles that your argument will not question but will take as the basis for further conclusions. They are often unstated, but they should never be concealed. The argument from the first sample passage is full of unstated assumptions: that killing animals is synonymous with murder; that hunters are corrupt, debauched beings; and so forth. The second passage assumes that hunters are the only checks on the moose population and that reducing the herd size protects stocks of food. All of these matters could be questioned--and it is the job of the writer to put them beyond question, either by dealing with them or at least by presenting the argument as conditional upon the acceptance of them.