

Revising An Argumentative Paper

Introduction

You've written a full draft of an argumentative paper. You've figured out what you're generally saying and have put together one way to say it. But you're not done. The best writing is revised writing, and you want to re-view, re-see, re-consider your argument to make sure that it's as strong as possible. You'll come back to smaller issues later (e.g. Is your language compelling? Are your paragraphs clearly and seamlessly connected? Are any of your sentences confusing?). But before you get into the details of phrases and punctuation, you need to focus on making sure your argument is as strong and persuasive as it can be.

This handout provides you with eight specific strategies for how to take on the important challenge of revising an argument.

Strategies

1. Give yourself time.

The best way to begin re-seeing your argument is first to stop seeing it. Set your paper aside for a weekend, a day, or even a couple of hours. Of course, this will require you to have started your writing process well before your paper is due. But giving yourself this time allows you to refresh your perspective and separate yourself from your initial ideas and organization. When you return to your paper, try to approach your argument as a tough, critical reader. Reread it carefully. Maybe even read it out loud to hear it in a fresh way. Let the distance you created inform how you now see the paper differently.

2. Chart out your argumentative claims and evidence.

This strategy combines the structure of a reverse outline with elements of argument that philosopher Stephen Toulmin detailed in his influential book *The Uses of Argument*. As you're rereading your work, have a blank piece of paper or a new document next to you and write out:

- Your main claim (your thesis statement).
- Your sub-claims (the smaller claims that contribute to the larger claim).
- All the evidence you use to back up each of your claims.

Detailing these core elements of your argument helps you see its basic structure and assess whether or not your argument is convincing. This will also help you consider whether the most crucial elements of the argument are supported by the evidence and if they are logically sequenced to build upon each other.

In what follows we've provided a full example of what this kind of outline can look like. In this example, we've broken down the key argumentative claims and kinds of supporting evidence that Derek Thompson develops in his July/August 2015 Atlantic feature "A World Without Work." This is a provocative and fascinating article, and we highly recommend it.

Charted Argumentative Claims and Evidence
“A World Without Work” by Derek Thompson (*The Atlantic*, July/August 2015)

Main claim: Machines are making workers obsolete, and while this has the potential to disrupt and seriously damage American society, if handled strategically through governmental guidance, it also has the potential of helping us to live more communal, creative, and empathetic lives.

Sub-claim: The disappearance of work would radically change the United States.

Evidence: personal experience and observation

Sub-claim: This is because work functions as something of an unofficial religion to Americans.

Sub-claim: Technology has always guided the U.S. labor force.

Evidence: historical examples

Sub-claim: But now technology may be taking over our jobs.

Sub-claim: However, the possibility that technology will take over our jobs isn't anything new, nor is the fear that this possibility generates.

Evidence: historical examples

Sub-claim: So far, that fear hasn't been justified, but it may now be because:

1. Businesses don't require people to work like they used to.

Evidence: statistics

2. More and more men and youths are unemployed.

Evidence: statistics

3. Computer technology is advancing in majorly sophisticated ways.

Evidence: historical examples and expert opinions

Counter-argument: But technology has been radically advancing for 300 years and people aren't out of work yet.

Refutation: The same was once said about the horse. It was a key economic player; technology was built around it until technology began to surpass it. This parallels what will happen with retail workers, cashiers, food service employees, and office clerks.

Evidence: an academic study

Counter-argument: But technology creates jobs too.

Refutation: Yes, but not as quickly as it takes them away.

Evidence: statistics

Sub-claim: There are three overlapping visions of what the world might look like without work:

1. Consumption—People will not work and instead devote their freedom to leisure.

Sub-claim: People don't like their jobs.

Evidence: polling data

Sub-claim: But they need them.

Evidence: expert insight

Sub-claim: People might be happier if they didn't have to work.

Evidence: expert insight

Counter-argument: But unemployed people don't tend to be socially productive.

Evidence: survey data

Sub-claim: Americans feel guilty if they aren't working.

Evidence: statistics and academic studies

Sub-claim: Future leisure activities may be nourishing enough to stave off this guilt.

2. Communal creativity—People will not work and will build productive, artistic, engaging communities outside the workplace.

Sub-claim: This could be a good alternative to work.

Evidence: personal experience and observation

3. **Contingency**—People will not work one big job like they used to and so will fight to regain their sense of productivity by piecing together small jobs.

Evidence: personal experience and observation.

Sub-claim: The internet facilitates gig work culture.

Evidence: examples of internet-facilitated gig employment

Sub-claim: No matter the form the labor force decline takes, it would require government support/intervention in regards to the issues of taxes and income distribution.

Sub-claim: Productive things governments could do:

- Local governments should create more and more ambitious community centers to respond to unemployment's loneliness and its diminishment of community pride.
- Government should create more small business incubators.

Evidence: This worked in Youngstown.

- Governments should encourage job sharing.

Evidence: This worked for Germany.

Counter-argument: Some jobs can't be shared, and job sharing doesn't fix the problem in the long term.

Given this counter argument:

- Governments should heavily tax the owners of capital and cut checks to all adults.

Counter-argument: The capital owners would push against this, and this wouldn't provide an alternative to the social function work plays.

Refutation: Government should pay people to do something instead of nothing via an online job-posting board open up to governments, NGOs, and the like.

- Governments should incentivize school by paying people to study.

Sub-claim: There is a difference between jobs, careers, and calling, and a fulfilled life is lived in pursuit of a calling.

Evidence: personal experience and observations

Some of the possible, revision-informing questions that this kind of outline can raise are:

- Are all the claims thoroughly supported by evidence?
- What kinds of evidence are used across the whole argument? Is the nature of the evidence appropriate given your context, purpose, and audience?
- How are the sub-claims related to each other? How do they build off of each other and work together to logically further the larger claim?
- Do any of your claims need to be qualified in order to be made more precise?
- Where and how are counter-arguments raised? Are they fully and fairly addressed?

For more information about the Toulmin Method, we recommend John Ramage, John Bean, and June Johnson's book *Written Arguments: A Rhetoric with Readings*.

3. Identify and evaluate your argument's assumptions.

In building arguments we make assumptions either explicitly or implicitly that connect our evidence to our claims. For example, in "A World Without Work," as Thompson makes claims about the way technology will change the future of work, he is assuming that computer technology will keep advancing in major and surprising ways. Through this assumption he connects the evidence he provides about technology's historical precedents to his claims about the future of work. Many of us

would agree that it is reasonable to assume that technological advancement will continue, but it's still important to recognize this as an assumption underlying his argument.

To identify your assumptions, return to the claims and evidence that you outlined in response to recommendation #2. Ask yourself, "What assumptions am I making in order to connect this evidence to this claim?" Write down those assumptions, and then ask yourself, "Are these assumptions reasonable? Are they acknowledged in my argument? If not, do they need to be?"

Often you will not overtly acknowledge your assumptions, and that can be fine. But especially if your readers don't share certain beliefs, values, or knowledge, you can't guarantee that they will just go along with the assumptions you make. In these situations, it can be valuable to clearly account for some of your assumptions within your paper and maybe even rationalize them by providing additional evidence. For example, if Thompson were writing his article for an audience skeptical that technology will continue advancing, he might choose to identify openly why he is convinced that humanity's progression towards more complex innovation won't stop.

4. Revise with your audience in mind.

We touched on this in the previous recommendation, but it's important enough to expand on it further. Just as you should think about what your readers know, believe, and value as you consider the kinds of assumptions you make in your argument, you should also think about your audience in relationship to the kind of evidence you use. Given who will read your paper, what kind of argumentative support will they find to be the most persuasive? Are these readers who are compelled by numbers and data? Would they be interested by a personal narrative? Would they expect you to draw from certain key scholars in their field or avoid popular press sources or only look to scholarship that has been published in the past ten years? Return to your argument and think about how your readers might respond to it and its supporting evidence.

5. Be your own most critical reader.

Sometimes writing handbooks call this being the devil's advocate. It is about intentionally pushing against your own ideas. Reread your draft while embracing a skeptical attitude. Ask questions like, "Is that really true?" and, "Where's the proof?" Be as hard on your argument as you can be, and then let your criticisms inform what you need to expand on, clarify, and eliminate.

This kind of reading can also help you think about how you might incorporate or strengthen a counter-argument. By focusing on possible criticisms to your argument, you might encounter some that are particularly compelling that you'll need to include in your paper. Sometimes the best way to revise with criticism in mind is to face that criticism head on, fairly explain what it is and why it's important to consider, and then rationalize why your argument still holds even in light of this other perspective.

6. Look for dissonance.

In her influential 1980 article about how expert and novice writers revise differently, writing studies scholar Nancy Sommers claims that "at the heart of revision is the process by which writers recognize and resolve the dissonance they sense in their writing" (385). In this case, dissonance can be understood as the tension that exists between what you want your text to be, do, or sound like and what is actually on the page. One strategy for re-seeing your argument is to seek out the places where you feel dissonance within your argument—that is, substantive differences between what, in your mind, you want to be arguing, and what is actually in your draft.

A key to strengthening a paper through considering dissonance is to look critically—really critically—at your draft. Read through your paper with an eye towards content, assertions, or logical leaps that you feel uncertain about, that make you squirm a little bit, or that just don't line up as nicely as you'd like. Some possible sources of dissonance might include:

- logical steps that are missing
- questions a skeptical reader might raise that are left unanswered
- examples that don't actually connect to what you're arguing
- pieces of evidence that contradict each other
- sources you read but aren't mentioning because they disagree with you

Once you've identified dissonance within your paper, you have to decide what to do with it. Sometimes it's tempting to take the easy way out and just delete the idea, claim, or section that is generating this sense of dissonance—to remove what seems to be causing the trouble. But don't limit yourself to what is easy. Perhaps you need to add material or qualify something to make your argumentative claim more nuanced or more contextualized.

Even if the dissonance isn't easily resolved, it's still important to recognize. In fact, sometimes you can factor that recognition into how you revise; maybe your revision can involve considering how certain concepts or ideas don't easily fit but are still important in some way. Maybe your revision can involve openly acknowledging and justifying the dissonance.

Sommers claims that whether expert writers are substituting, adding, deleting, or reordering material in response to dissonance, what they are really doing is locating and creating new meaning. Let your recognition of dissonance within your argument lead you through a process of discovery.

7. Try “provocative revision.”

Composition and writing center scholar Toby Fulwiler wrote in 1992 about the benefits of what he calls “provocative revision.” He says this kind of revision can take four forms. As you think about revising your argument, consider adopting one of these four strategies.

a. Limiting

As Fulwiler writes, “Generalization is death to good writing. Limiting is the cure for generality” (191). Generalization often takes the form of sweeping introduction statements (i.e. “Since the beginning of time, development has struggled against destruction.”), but arguments can be too general as well. Look back at your paper and ask yourself, “Is my argument ever not grounded in specifics? Is my evidence connected to a particular time, place, community, and circumstance?” If your claims are too broad, you may need to limit your scope and zoom in to the particular.

b. Adding

Inserting new content is a particularly common revision strategy. But when your focus is on revising an argument, make sure your addition of another source, another example, a more detailed description, or a closer analysis is in direct service to strengthening the argument. Adding material may be one way to respond to dissonance. It also can be useful for offering clarifications or for making previously implicit assumptions explicit. But adding isn't just a matter of dropping new content into a paragraph. Adding something new in one place will probably influence other parts of the paper, so be prepared to make other additions to seamlessly weave together your new ideas.

c. Switching

For Fulwiler, switching is about radically altering the voice or tone of a text—changing from the first-person perspective to a third-person perspective or switching from an earnest appeal to a sarcastic critique. When it comes to revising your argument, it might not make sense to make any of these switches, but imagining what your argument might sound like coming from a very different voice might be generative. For example, how would Thompson’s “A World Without Work,” be altered if it was written from the voice and perspective of an unemployed steel mill worker or someone running for public office in Ohio or a mechanical robotics engineer? Re-visioning how your argument might come across if the primary voice, tone, and perspective was switched might help you think about how someone disinclined to agree with your ideas might approach your text and open additional avenues for revision.

d. Transforming

According to Fulwiler, transformation is about altering the genre and/or modality of a text—revising an expository essay into a letter to the editor, turning a persuasive research paper into a ballad. If you’re writing in response to a specific assignment, you may not have the chance to transform your argument in this way. But, as with switching, even reflecting about the possibilities of a genre or modality transformation can be useful in helping you think differently about your argument. If Thompson has writing a commencement address instead of an article, how would “A World Without Work” need to change? How would he need to alter his focus and approach if it was a policy paper or a short documentary? Imagining your argument in a completely different context can help you to rethink how you are presenting your argument and engaging with your audience.

8. Have someone else help you critically at your argument.

Sometimes the best thing you can do to figure out how your argument could improve is to get a second opinion. Of course, if you are a currently enrolled student at UW-Madison, you are welcome to make an appointment to talk with a tutor at our main center or stop by one of our satellite locations. But you have other ways to access quality feedback from other readers. You may want to ask someone else in your class, a roommate, or a friend to read through your paper with an eye towards how the argument could be improved. Be sure to provide your reader with specific questions to guide his or her attention towards specific parts of your argument (e.g. “How convincing do you find the connection I make between the claims on page 3 and the evidence on page 4?” “What would clarify further the causal relationship I’m suggesting between the first and second sub-argument?”). Be ready to listen graciously and critically to any recommendations these readers provide.

Works Cited

- Fulwiler, Toby. “Provocative Revision.” *Writing Center Journal*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1992 pp. 190-204.
- Sommers, Nancy. “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1980, pp. 378-388.
- Thompson, Derek. “A World Without Work.” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/07/world-without-work/395294/>. Accessed 11 July 2017.
- Toulmin, Stephen. *The Uses of Argument*. Updated ed., Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Ramage, John D., John C. Bean, and June Johnson. *Writing Arguments: A Rhetoric with Readings*, 8th ed., Longman, 2010.