

## How to Write an Argument: What Students and Teachers Really Need to Know

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Gerald Graff has taught at the University of New Mexico, Northwestern University, the University of California at Irvine and Berkeley, Ohio State University, Washington University, and the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he is currently a professor of English. He has a strong interest in the teaching of writing on both the graduate and undergraduate levels but is best known for developing the “teach the controversy” approach, a pedagogy that brings the arguments surrounding any issue into the classroom so that students can become involved in the history of the debate, its development, and the various shapes it takes. Graff’s books include *Professing Literature* (1987), *Beyond the Culture Wars* (1993), and, most recently, *Clashes in Academia: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (2003), a provocative critique of college curricula.

Graff has also been an advocate for clear and purposeful prose, especially in academic settings. In “How to Write an Argument,” which is taken from *Clashes in Academia*, Graff practices what he preaches by putting into clear and direct language his directions for writing an argument. Far from simple in content, however, his ideas about research being an ongoing conversation, the need to make a claim, the advice to include a meta-text that comments on the writer’s main argument, and the desirability of mixing “Academicpeak” with everyday language are all excellent suggestions worth putting into practice.

**WRITING TO DISCOVER:** Write a paragraph in which you reflect on your experiences in writing argumentative essays. What successes have you had? Were you unknowingly following Graff’s advice? What problems have you had? Would your efforts have been helped had Graff’s suggestions been available to you? Explain.

1. Enter a conversation just as you do in real life. Begin your text by directly identifying the prior conversation or debate that you are entering. What you have to say won’t make sense unless your readers know the conversation in which you are saying it.
2. Make a claim, the sooner the better, preferably flagged for the reader by a phrase like “My claim here is that . . . .” You don’t actually have to use this exact phrase, but if you couldn’t do so you’re in trouble.
3. Remind readers of your claim periodically, especially the more you complicate it. If you’re writing about a disputed topic—and if you aren’t, why write?—you’ll also have to stop and tell the reader what you are *not*

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saying, what you don’t want readers to take you as saying. Some of them will take you to be saying it anyway, but you don’t have to make it easy for them.

4. Summarize the objections that you anticipate will be made (or that have in fact been made) against your claim. This is done by using such formulas as “Here you will probably object that . . . .” “To put the point another way . . . .” or “But why, you may ask, am I so emphatic on this point?” Remember that your critics, even when they get mean and nasty, are your friends: you need them to help you to clarify your claim and to indicate why what you’re saying is of interest to others besides yourself. Remember, too, that if naysayers didn’t exist, you’d have no excuse for saying what you are saying.

5. Say explicitly why you think what you’re saying is important and what difference it would make to the world if you are right or wrong. Imagine a reader over your shoulder who asks, “So what?” Or “Who cares about any of this?” Again, you don’t actually have to write such questions in, but if you were to do so and couldn’t answer them you’re in trouble.

6. Write a meta-text into your essay that stands apart from your main text and puts it in perspective. An effective argumentative essay really consists of two texts, one in which you make your argument and a second one in which you tell readers how and how not to read it. This second text is usually signaled by reflexive phrases like “Of course I don’t mean to suggest that . . . .” “What I’ve been trying to say here, then, is that . . . .” etc. When student writing is unclear or lame, the reason often has less to do with jargon, verbal obscurity, or bad grammar than with the absence of this layer of meta-commentary, which explains why the writer thought it was necessary to write the essay in the first place.

7. Remember that readers can process only *one* claim at a time, so resist the temptation to try to squeeze in secondary claims that are better left for another essay or paragraph, or for another section of your essay that’s clearly marked off from your main claim. If you’re a professional academic, you are probably so anxious to prove that you’ve left no thought unconsidered that you find it hard to resist the temptation to try to say everything all at once. Remember that giving in to this temptation to say it all at once will result in saying nothing that will be understood while producing horribly overloaded paragraphs and sentences like this one, monster-sized discursive footnotes, and readers who fling your text down and reach for the *TV Guide*.

8. Be bilingual. It is not necessary to avoid Academicpeak—you sometimes need the stuff to say what you want to say. But whenever you do have to say something in Academicpeak, try also to say it in conversational English as well. You’ll be surprised to discover that when you restate an academic point in your nonacademic voice, the point will either sound fresher or you’ll see how shallow it is and remove it.

9. Don’t kid yourself. If you couldn’t explain it to your parents the chances are you don’t understand it yourself.