

THE ESSENTIALS OF ARGUMENT

Argument: Argument concerns itself with neither fact nor taste, but with that vast middle territory of statements that are more or less probable. ... An arguable statement can evoke degrees of adherence, and its grounds of support do not depend on the individual who holds them. ... [E]ven the side that wins [an] argument has not established a truth, only a probable wisdom of a particular choice.

Every argument has four essential elements:

1. A thesis statement, a claim, a proposition to be supported, which deals with a matter of probability, not a fact or a matter of opinion.
2. An audience to be convinced of the thesis statement.
3. Exigence: the need to make an argument at a certain time, in a circumstance, or for a purpose.
4. Grounds, reasons, or, as they are sometimes formally called, premises that support the thesis.

Thesis Statement: Every argument, no matter how complicated, has a single, overriding thesis. That thesis may be qualified, elaborated, complicated, or hedged all around, yet the arguer must always be able to answer the "What is your point?"... [A]ll arguments can be summed upon a single statement that the whole discourse is designed to support... Whether the unit of argument is a paragraph or a book, that basic element, the thesis statement, must be discoverable.

Audience: An argument needs a human audience to convince. ... The particular audience of an argument influences how you argue--coolly or with passion, tentatively or with strong conviction, elliptically or in great detail. ... Thus, different audiences require significant differences in the support, organization, and working of your argument.

Exigence: In order for a real argument to occur there must be some forum and occasion, like a town meeting, some push in the time and circumstances and some purpose for making claims and supporting them. The combination of all these factors has been called the *exigence*. ... To compensate for [the often] inherent disconnection from its audience, a written argument must frequently create its own exigence.

Support: also called premise(s). Support is the reason(s) for an audience to be convinced of the thesis statement. You should follow the thesis with at least one reason or "because" statement. You may make much longer arguments by introducing more supporting statements for the thesis or by supporting the supporting statements themselves, but at least one premise, one statement that gives the audience a reason to adhere to the thesis, is necessary.

An unspoken premise is called an "assumption." Assumptions are common ground, shared preconceptions and beliefs of arguer and audiences.