

Argumentative Writing

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1. What is argumentative writing?
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Objectives:

After studying this Unit, a student

- knows the meaning of argumentative writing.
- distinguishes three kinds of argumentative paragraphs.
- can do the exercises effectively.

1. What is argumentative writing?

The adjective argumentative is derived from the verb argue, which has several meanings. One meaning is "to dispute (with someone)." With this meaning, an argumentative person is someone who always disagrees with others. A second meaning is "to present reasons for or against something." This second meaning is the one that applies to argumentative writing. In argumentative writing, the writer presents his thoughts or opinions (i.e., the main ideas of paragraphs or the theses of essays) and, through support sentences (in paragraphs) or support paragraphs (in essays), tries to convince or persuade the reader that his thoughts or opinions are true.

2. Kinds of argumentative paragraphs

The argumentative writing presented in these materials includes three general categories: comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and analysis.

2.1. In comparison and contrast paragraphs and essays, two or more things are shown to be similar, to be different, or to be both similar and different. Obviously, the things to be compared or contrasted must have something in common to begin with. For example, pencils and pens are writing instruments that can be compared, but tables and chairs, even though they are furniture, cannot be compared because they are used differently. In the

following paragraph, the Bangkok of today and that of thirty-five years ago are compared.

¹ Bangkok has changed a lot, for the worse, in the last thirty-five years. ² Most notably, the city does not look the same. ³ Thirty-five years ago, few buildings were more than four or five storeys tall, so Bangkok was easily recognized as a beautiful small Asian, especially Thai, city. ⁴ Now, with all its skyscrapers, it looks like any other big city in the world. ⁵ And the city does not feel the same, either. ⁶ Then there were few wide streets--all of them lined with living green trees, and taking a stroll was a pleasant way to relax. ⁷ Now, there are gigantic expressways, and the trees that are planted year after year seldom live long enough to become green. ⁸ Perhaps most important, the city does not smell or sound the same. ⁹ In 1960, the motorless samlor was most convenient for short trips, and the few motorscooters that were used did not make much noise. ¹⁰ Now, the exhaust fumes from the motorized tuk-tuks, old buses, and millions of cars make the air unbreathable, and the noise made not only by the great number of motorcycles but also the blaring of "music" from store fronts causes hearing problems for many Thais. ¹¹ Many students say that Bangkok is very "civilized" now, but there are several arguments to support the idea that it is quite less "civilized."

In the above paragraph, the main idea is clearly stated in the first sentence: the writer will compare the Bangkok of 35 years ago with that of today and show that Bangkok is worse now than it was then. The words most notably in sentence 2, and in sentence 5, and perhaps most important in sentence 8 indicate that these are the major support sentences. Sentences 3 and 4 are minor support sentences comparing the "look" of Bangkok. Sentences 6 and 7 are minor support sentences comparing the "feel" of Bangkok. Sentences 9 and 10 are minor support sentences comparing the "smell" and "sound" of Bangkok. The words thirty-five years ago in sentence 3, then in sentence 6, and in 1960 in sentence 9 indicate that the previous Bangkok is always discussed first. The word music is in quotation marks in sentence 10 because the writer feels that the sound is "noise" rather than "music." The word civilized in sentence 11, which is a restatement of the main idea, indicates that the writer thinks the students use the word "civilized" incorrectly, thinking that it means "modern."

2.2. Cause and effect paragraphs and essays explain the reason(s) for something, the result(s) of something, or sometimes both the reason(s) and result(s). In the case of cause and effect paragraphs, it is important to identify, clearly, the causes and the effects. For example, a student once wrote

I am studying in the Faculty of Education,
so I want to be a teacher.

That statement may have been true at a closed university, but not at Ramkhamhaeng: either the sentences should be interchanged, or the subordinator because should be used instead of so.

In the following paragraph, the writer explains why the school is "searching for a new philosophy."

¹ Dairy School was in search of a philosophy.
² It was now firmly second-rate among conventional prep schools. ³ Although it based its curriculum on the acquiring of skills, the school's faculty became ⁴ grew less and less able to teach such skills and, conveniently, less convinced of the need for such skills--after all, the student body was decreasingly receptive. ⁵ Admissions were down, hence admission standards fell even lower. ⁶ The school became one of those places you could get into almost immediately upon being thrown out of another school. (1)

In the above paragraph, the main idea is stated in the first sentence. Major support sentences 2 and 5 indicate why the school was "in search of a philosophy." Minor support sentences 3 and 4 indicate why the school was "second-rate." Minor support sentence 6 is an example of the low admission standards.

2.3. Analysis paragraphs may be of several kinds: giving examples, indicating how to do something, and so on. In the following paragraph, the writer gives examples of the versatility of potatoes.

¹ Potatoes are probably the most versatile vegetables. ² When they are ripe, they may be eaten raw, with a little salt. ³ They may also be fried, either raw or after being boiled. ⁴ French fries are raw potatoes cut into sticks and then fried. ⁵ Raw fries are raw potatoes that have been sliced and fried. ⁶ Boiled potatoes, in addition to being fried, may also be mashed. ⁷ In this case, milk, butter, and salt are added while the potatoes are being mashed. ⁸ Cold boiled potatoes may be diced and--with the addition of mayonnaise, spices, and onions---made into potato salad. ⁹ Finally, potatoes may be baked in their skins. ¹⁰ When they are cooked, they are split open and a variety of things may be added. ¹¹ The versatility of potatoes is emphasized by the fact that these various ways of cooking potatoes all produce different tastes. (1)

In the above paragraph, the main idea is stated in sentence 1. Major support sentences 2, 3, 6, 8, 9 indicate how potatoes may be eaten--without cooking (sentence 2) or after frying (sentence 3), boiling (sentences 6 and 8), or baking (sentence 9). Minor support sentences 4 and 5 give the names of two kinds of fried raw potatoes. Minor support sentence 7 gives the in-

(1) Adapted from Irving, John. The Hotel New Hampshire. Corgi Books, London, 1981, p.55.

gredients for mashed potatoes. Minor support sentence 10 indicates how baked potatoes are eaten. Sentence 11 is a transitional sentence: in addition to restating the main idea, it includes the idea of varying tastes, which could be the topic for a following paragraph.

These three methods of paragraph development will be explained more fully in the following Units. In this Unit, the student is simply introduced to the three kinds of writing that will be emphasized in this course.

3. Exercises

Directions: Read the following paragraphs. Indicate the method of development for each one: comparison and contrast, cause and effect, or analysis. Check (/) the correct answer for each paragraph.

¹ The use of transition words and phrases is like crossing a stream or river. ² If a stream is narrow and shallow, a person can easily wade across it. ³ Likewise, if the ideas presented in the support sentences are easy to understand and the coherence is clear, there may be no need for transition words and phrases. ⁴ However, if a stream is fairly wide and deep, a person may need stepping-stones or a plank in order to get across easily. ⁵ In the same way, when the support sentences are more difficult

to understand or the order of arrangement of the sentences is not clear, transition words and phrases will help the reader understand more clearly the relationships between the sentences. ⁶In the case of a wide river, a person must swim across or use a bridge, if there is one, in order to get across. ⁷Just so, when the support sentences are complicated or when they are arranged in a vague manner, the lack of transition words or phrases may force the reader to "swim" from one idea to another, when their use provides "bridges" and the reader can understand the relationships between ideas without a great deal of difficulty.

[] Comparison and Contrast

[] Cause and Effect

[] Analysis

¹ A good main idea has certain characteristics.

² First, and most important, it should be an opinion statement. ³ Readers can find facts in dictionaries, encyclopedias, etc. ⁴ They want to know what the writer's ideas, thoughts, beliefs are. ⁵ Second, main ideas should be the thoughts of mature writers. ⁶ No one is interested in the fact that "My teacher is beautiful" or "My love is like a novel." ⁷ A main idea should reflect the thoughts of a mature adult,

not those of a childish teenager. ⁸ Third, a main idea should be interesting, informative, and provocative. ⁹ If the main idea is interesting, the reader will want to read what the writer has written. ¹⁰ If the main idea is informative, the reader will learn something from the writer. ¹¹ If the main idea is provocative, the reader will be encouraged to think for himself. ¹² Finally, the main idea of a paragraph must be such that it can be explained and proved in one paragraph. ¹³ To explain that "The history of Thailand is very interesting" would require a book, at least, while to explain that "My summer vacation was very interesting" might be done in one paragraph, although it might not be a very interesting topic.

- Comparison and Contrast
- Cause and Effect
- Analysis

¹ Following three simple rules will help anyone learn a foreign language well, without much difficulty. ² Beginning by learning only a little at a time allows the learner to master each little bit easily. ³ Practicing each little bit a lot ensures that the learner will not forget what he has learned. ⁴ Finally, using each little bit as much and as

often as possible in real language situations will gradually make it possible for the learner to use the foreign language without thinking about it.

Comparison and Contrast

Cause and Effect

Analysis

¹ *A composition is a series of related paragraphs that explain or prove a main idea called a thesis.* ² *The thesis is explained or proved in a central core of paragraphs called the body.* ³ *The body may be preceded by an introduction.* ⁴ *The introduction must be an integral part of the composition and not just something tacked on the beginning.* ⁵ *The body may also be followed by a conclusion.* ⁶ *The conclusion, like the introduction, must perform a specific function in the composition and must not be simply a rapid review of the composition.*

Comparison and Contrast

Cause and Effect

Analysis