

Rules of Argument

Make your argument convincing!

1. Always state your argument quickly and concisely, as early as possible in the presentation of your project.

Get to the point in the very beginning, if possible. You will help yourself in making an argument if you state your premises early, shortly after telling us what your argument is going to be. Premises are assumption on which your argument is based. In writing history or developing your project, you may assume that some sources are reliable and some are not, and you will base your argument accordingly. You must then explain why you think one source is more reliable than another. Having done so, you can move towards your argument based on the premise of reliability.

2. When you make an assertion essential to your case, provide some examples as evidence.

A general statement is followed by a quotation or some other concrete reference to the evidence that provides support for the assertion. Readers need some reason to believe you. Combining a quotation and a summary of the evidence, for example, helps to make your argument credible because you've given specific evidence.

3. Always give the fairest possible treatment to those against whom you may be arguing.

Never distort the work of someone who disagrees with your position. Such distortions are cowardly and unfair, and if you are found out, your audience will reject you and your work, the good part along with the bad. Treat your adversaries as erring friends, not as foes to be slain, and you will always be more convincing to the audience who expect fair and benign arguments. The most effective scholarly arguments are carried on courteously and without bitterness or anger.

4. Always admit weakness in your argument and acknowledge those facts that opponents might raise against your position.

If you deny obvious truths about the subject of your argument, knowledgeable audiences will see what you are doing and will lose confidence in your sense of fairness. Most arguments have a weak point somewhere. Otherwise there would be no argument. If you admit the places where your argument is weak and consider counterarguments fairly, giving your reasons for rejecting them, you will build confidence in your judgments.

Concession is vital in argument. You may concede that some evidence stands against your proposition. But you may then argue either that evidence is not as important or as trustworthy as the evidence you adduce for your point of view. Of you may argue that the contrary evidence has been misinterpreted. In either case you acknowledge that you know about the contrary facts, and you rob your foes of seeming to catch you in ignorance.

5. Stay on the subject throughout the project so your argument is not submerged meaningless detail.

Sometimes we try to throw everything we know into a project as if it were soup and the more ingredients the better. We work hard to gather the information. We find our sources interesting and want our audience to see how much work we have done and how much we know. Projects, then, are padded with much information irrelevant to the topic at hand. Make your argument economical. Do as much as you can in as few words as possible.

Argument Checklist

- Is this subject worth arguing about?
- Have I gathered enough evidence to make an argument?
- Do I represent the views of my opponents in a way they would consider fair?
- Have I developed my argument logically?
- Is my use of evidence accurate?
- Have I tried to prove too much?