

Understanding Argument

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ISSUES AND MAIN CONTENTIONS

As we have learned, an issue is the general topic of a persuasive piece. It can usually be expressed in a word or a few words. For example:

Penalties for leaving children in cars

Some texts are primarily intended to give information about an issue. For example, a newspaper article might report on a change to the law that introduces harsher penalties for adults who leave children in cars on hot days. Other texts are aimed at persuading their audience to think or feel a certain way about an issue. In such **persuasive texts**, the writer will present their opinion in the form of an argument, using persuasive language to position the audience to agree.

In a persuasive text, a writer's **main contention** expresses their point of view on an issue. The main contention is often expressed in a single sentence early in their written piece. For example:

There should be tougher penalties for leaving children in cars on hot days.

Consider the examples in the table below, which show the difference between the topic of a persuasive piece and the writer's main contention. To demonstrate that you understand the main contention of a piece when analysing a persuasive text, aim to express it in a single sentence, as shown in the second column.

Topic	Main contention
public transport	Public transport should be free.
live exports	Australia should stop all live export of animals for meat production.
smacking	Smacking children should be made illegal.

Did you know that only around one per cent of people die in circumstances allowing organ donation? But many more can, and should, become eye and tissue donors. One donor can transform the lives of many people. Eye and tissue donation can make the difference between seeing and being blind, mobility and never walking again, or a speedy rather than protracted recovery from trauma, cancer or disease.

Can you find a main contention in the example above? Is it clearly expressed? Do you understand what the writer is trying to say?

First, aim to express the contention in your own words.

More people should consider tissue donation.

Next, state how the writer is presenting it.

Appealing to the reader's sympathy for people in need of transplants, the writer argues that more people should consider tissue donation.

Understand main contentions

Read the following blog entry then answer the questions below.

My Blog	People who use charity bins as dumping grounds for their household refuse should be made to volunteer at a charity for a week, so they can see firsthand the extra time, effort and money this sort of selfish behaviour costs these wonderful organisations.
HOME	
ABOUT	
SEARCH	



ACTIVITY 1

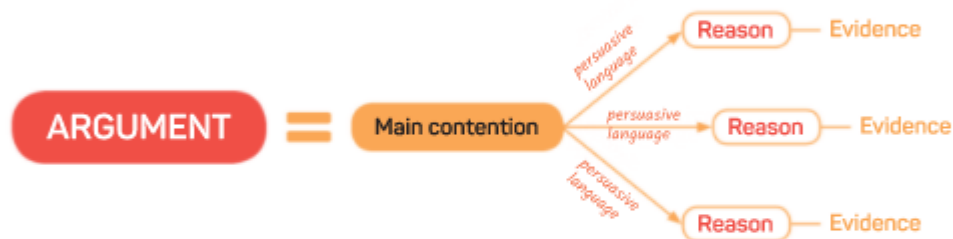
- 1 What is the main issue addressed in the above text?
.....
- 2 What is the main contention of the piece? Express this in your own words.
.....
.....
- 3 What emotion does the blog entry encourage the reader to feel?
.....



ARGUMENT

A writer's main contention needs to be supported by **argument**. When you hear the word 'argument' you might immediately imagine two people shouting at each other or users trading insults on a social media site. But presenting a strong argument is very different from 'arguing' in the common sense of the word. It involves a process of reasoning and presenting facts (the word 'argument' comes from the Latin word for proof). An argument is a set of connected reasons that support and justify a particular view. Good arguments are persuasive because they use strong reasoning and logic to show why a particular viewpoint or contention is valid.

An effective argument consists of **reasons** logically connected to the writer's main contention, and **evidence** that supports those reasons. Writers will also use **persuasive language** to present their argument in order to position readers to agree with them. (For more on persuasive language, see Chapter 3: Understanding Persuasive Language.) The diagram below shows the main components of an argument.



Writers carefully select the main reasons they will present to support their opinion and the way in which they will present them. They might begin with the most important reason first or they might begin with more minor reasons and build to a strong conclusion.

Understand argument

ACTIVITY 2

- 1 Amal is giving a presentation at her school assembly, arguing that the school canteen should stop stocking products made with palm oil. Match the segment of the audience to the reason that is most likely to appeal to them.

students	Palm oil is high in saturated fat and not recommended for frequent consumption.
teachers	Our reputation as a 'sustainable school' is jeopardised by our support of the corrupt palm oil industry.
the canteen manager	Many animals, such as orangutans, tigers and monkeys, are losing their homes and their lives due to forest clearing.
parent volunteers	There are many affordable and healthy alternatives to palm oil.

- 2 There have been several accidents involving cars and bicycles on the main road that runs through the town of Strathcombe. Jack, who rides along this road to school every day, plans to contact the local council to argue that the road should have a bike lane. Suggest three reasons he might present to support his main contention and the most effective order in which to present these.

SUPPORTING REASONS IN ORDER:

.....

- 3 What kinds of evidence do you think Jack could present to support his argument?

.....

.....

- 4 Select three words from the following list that describe the sort of language you think Jack should use in his letter to the council.

friendly	sophisticated	angry	aggressive	serious
humorous	reasonable	sarcastic	formal	casual
lighthearted	pleading	emotional	outraged	logical

Argument versus opinion

Having an opinion is part of presenting an argument, but it's not the same thing.

Argument: a text or statement intended to persuade others by presenting facts or reasons in support of the view.

Opinion: a personal point of view, attitude or belief.

Of course, people present arguments with varying degrees of skill, sophistication and success. Consider the following two examples. Which one might be presenting an argument and which is simply presenting an opinion?

‘Salt and vinegar chips are disgusting.’

‘Don't eat salt and vinegar chips because eating a lot of salt is unhealthy.’

The first example above is only giving an opinion – that the taste of salt and vinegar chips is unpleasant. There is no argument or logic, and no supporting reasons are given. If someone said this to you, the sentence would imply that you should think the chips disgusting too. But to insist that, just because one person doesn't like something, no-one else should like it either is not a good argument.

However, the second example provides us with a supporting reason: ‘because eating a lot of salt is unhealthy’. This is an argument because it offers a justification or reason why we shouldn't eat the chips: because they have a lot of salt, and eating a lot of salt is unhealthy.

Beware the disguised opinion

Some sentences are structured to look as if they are offering supporting evidence/information when they only contain opinion. For example, consider the sentence:

‘Salt and vinegar chips should be banned because they’re disgusting.’

The opinion ‘salt and vinegar chips ... are disgusting’ is being presented as a supporting point, but it’s really just an opinion. The conjunction ‘because’ suggests that supporting information is coming next but actually the second part of the sentence is simply an opinion phrased as a fact.

Other conjunctions that imply cause and effect, such as *therefore* and *consequently*, can also give the same impression.

Bias

To show **bias** or have bias is to form an opinion based on your own preconceived prejudices and preferences. The term is often used in a very negative or pejorative sense, but we all have different biases based on our background and experiences. It’s impossible to be completely objective or impartial about everything.

Understanding where a writer’s biases lie will help you analyse the strengths and weaknesses of their argument.

Explore your own biases

ACTIVITY 3

- 1 In pairs or small groups, consider the following questions and discuss what aspects of a person’s life and beliefs might influence their attitudes about the issue.
 - a Should private schools receive more government funding?
 - b Should all religious clothing be banned?
 - c Should pay rates for casual work be higher?
 - d Should internet providers be required to block illegal downloads?
- 2 Consider your own biases and make a list of five issues that you would find it hard to be objective (unbiased) about. For each, briefly describe why you would hold a biased view.

REASONS

A good argument includes supporting **reasons**, which are the ideas that back up the main contention with some kind of logic or justification. Consider the following examples:

[Contention] *University education should be free because [supporting reason] society benefits from having a highly educated population.*

[Contention] *University students should pay fees because [supporting reason] they will reap financial rewards as educated graduates.*

Identifying the contention and supporting reasons is not always this clear-cut. Often you will find that the contention and reasons are implied (not stated directly but suggested in other ways) or the reasons are presented in more abstract ways, for example, through rhetorical questions or an assertion that seems like a statement of fact. Read the very short letter to the editor below.

So school-leavers face a six-month wait before they can apply for the dole. I must be missing something. Why should taxpayers take over from parents when children leave school?

Michael Doyle, Ashburton, *The Australian*

This letter begins by giving context that hints at what the argument is really about, but the contention and supporting reasons are implied through the rhetorical question. The implied contention is that parents should support their children after they leave school. The supporting reason implied is that it's not taxpayers' job to support young people.

Find the contention and supporting reasons

- 1 Read the texts below and on the next page.
 - a Write the main contention of each (in your own words) in the spaces provided.
 - b Highlight the supporting reasons.
- 2 Write a response to one of the texts, arguing the opposite point of view. Clearly state your contention and support your opinion with at least two good reasons.

ACTIVITY 4

Change the play

Criticism of the low scores in the AFLW is unfair ("AFL goes on attack over AFLW", 7/2). For a start, the women play roughly 10 minutes less than the men each quarter. Also, many of the women are relatively new to the game and have not had the chance to develop their ball-handling and kicking skills. As for tactics, why bag the women for copying the men? If the AFL wants less congestion and more goals, they should make some changes. Obvious things would be to abolish or restrict the use of the interchange bench, force teams to keep a certain number of players in their back half, and, above all, direct the umpires to pay more free kicks. At present, as in the men's game, taggers and others playing defensively are harassing the hell out of the playmakers and forwards and often getting away with it.

Lindsay Zoch, East Melbourne, letter to the editor, *The Age*



Cherry Bar is proposing to ban mobile phones from its live gigs. Not entirely of course. We will tolerate a quick snap of a band. However, holding up your phone and filming an entire song is just not on. It blocks the view of those behind you, it distracts the band and it's just uncool. Holding up your phone and filming songs at a live music gig is just not rock 'n' roll. And at all times Cherry Bar must stand up for rock 'n' roll.

Statement by Melbourne venue Cherry Bar about their intention to ban the use of mobile phones at live gigs

EVIDENCE

An effective argument will include not just reasons for the writer's point of view but also **evidence** to support those reasons.

Types of evidence include:

- facts
- statistics
- expert opinion
- personal experience.

Facts

It is important to understand the distinction between a fact and an opinion. A **fact** is a piece of information that can be proved to be true. It is different from an opinion, which is one person's belief about something and cannot be proven to be true or untrue. For example, the statement 'Mushrooms contain Vitamin B' is a fact. It has been scientifically proven. But the statement 'Mushrooms should be part of every Australian's daily diet' is an opinion. While such a viewpoint could be supported with reasons and evidence, it will always be open to disagreement and challenge from those who feel differently and have reasons and evidence to support their own opinion.

Sometimes a writer or speaker might state a piece of information as if it is a fact, when really it is closer to an opinion. For example, a writer might state that 'trampolines are the leading cause of injury for children under the age of five'. This might sound like a statement of fact but the writer doesn't indicate where this information comes from or give any proof that it is accurate. It might be true, but statements such as this are more convincing when accompanied by details of the source of the information and how the writer knows that it is true.

Statistics

Statistics are numerical facts that tell us something meaningful about a group of people or a set of data. They summarise information and help to present an overall picture. Such information can be very persuasive when presenting a point of view. But it is also important to consider the source of statistics you see in an argument, as well as how the information was obtained.

For example, if a survey reveals that 90 per cent of respondents support the introduction of a tax on foods that are high in sugar and salt, this will be much more persuasive if 100 people were asked, rather than just ten people. Similarly, if the survey was conducted by an independent researcher, the results are likely to be considered more trustworthy than if it was conducted by a health food company, which might have a financial interest in encouraging a tax on unhealthy foods.

The sorts of people captured by a particular statistic should also be considered. For example, if the respondents to the survey about a tax on high-sugar and high-salt foods were all physical trainers, the results couldn't be considered representative of the attitudes of the general population.

Expert opinion

Expert opinion includes statements or information from people or organisations considered to have specialised knowledge of a particular subject. Expert opinion can be highly persuasive because it suggests that the writer has researched the issue thoroughly, and also that well-informed people agree with the writer's opinion. Expert opinion is most persuasive when the expert has a strong knowledge of and connection to the issue. For example, a doctor might be considered an expert on immunisation, but would probably not be the best expert to refer to on the issue of whether learning a second language should be compulsory in secondary school.

Personal experience

Referring to **personal experience** of an issue can be persuasive because it suggests the writer has firsthand knowledge of the issue they are addressing. However, a close personal connection to an issue can also mean that the writer might have a bias towards a particular point of view and might be less open to considering other ideas and opinions. Furthermore, one person's experience is not necessarily typical of the experiences of most people. For example, one individual's bad reaction to a vaccine does not mean that all vaccinations are harmful and should be banned.





STRUCTURING STRATEGIES

Writers select and arrange their arguments to affect their audience in particular ways. Often similar types of writing will employ the same structuring techniques. For example, letters to the editor have to be short, so writers often outline their contention early and structure their argument around their strongest supporting point. Editorials are written by a newspaper's senior staff, who generally want to appear balanced and thoughtful, so they often acknowledge other viewpoints but make sure that their argument seems the strongest.

Other structuring techniques used by writers include:

- starting with the strongest supporting points and ending with the weakest
- starting with specific information, or one particular case, and ending with general information
- starting with personal experience and ending with universal examples
- strategic placement of the contention (at the start, the middle or the end)
- using subheadings to break up the text and identify the main points
- omitting information that undermines their case, in order to be more persuasive.

Consider the structure of the argument in the following letter to the editor.

- ① Main point: Locals do not have problems with sharing the park on a temporary basis.
- ② Main point: The people who park there are not locals and only visit occasionally.
- ③ Contention: Turning part of the park into a permanent carpark is unfair.

Hit for six

As a resident of East Melbourne, I am used to giving up half of the beautiful parkland surrounding the MCG to the grass-chewing wheels of sports lovers' cars. It's something I just work around.^①

My trusty pooch, Eudora, even seems to be OK with sharing half of her limited running space with visitors' SUVs and outer suburban people-

movers from time to time.^② She knows the joys of chasing a bouncing ball and would happily travel to far-away suburbs to do so too.

The proposal to commandeer a large portion of a very rare stretch of inner-city parkland for a permanent, sealed carpark is just not cricket.^③

Eva Tomic, East Melbourne, Melbourne Daily

Mapping out the main points in any argument is a good way to help you see how the structure works. For example, in the letter above, it makes sense to place the contention last because the main points set up the writer as a reasonable person who is willing to compromise. The writer's contention, however, is that establishing a permanent carpark in the public parkland is unfair.

If we rearrange the argument and put the contention first (see next page), the writer seems less reasonable and fair-minded. The contention comes across more abruptly, and the whole argument seems more urgent and confrontational. The main points also take on a more complaining tone.

Hit for six

The proposal to commandeer a large portion of a very rare stretch of inner-city parkland for a permanent, sealed carpark is just not cricket.

As a resident of East Melbourne, I am used to giving up half of the beautiful parkland surrounding the MCG to the grass-chewing wheels of sports lovers' cars. It's something I just work around.

My trusty pooch, Eudora, even seems to be OK with sharing half of her limited running space with visitors' SUVs and outer suburban people-movers from time to time. She knows the joys of chasing a bouncing ball and would happily travel to far-away suburbs to do so too.

Eva Tomic, East Melbourne, Melbourne Daily

Finally, the letter omits a lot of information that would be important in helping readers to make their mind up about this issue. The omitted information includes:

- the amount of space the carpark will take from parkland
- how often the site is used by locals, and how many people use it
- numbers of cars and how often and for how long the park is currently used for parking.

When you are presented with an argument, always consider whether any information has been deliberately left out, and why.

Analyse structuring strategies

Read the following letter to the editor and answer the questions below.

Expand palliative care

There are major problems with the euphemistically titled Voluntary Assisted Dying bill.

First, for all the supposed checks and balances, the vulnerable old, infirm, and depressed would be very much at risk from those relatives and others who see their dying as a matter of convenience and apply pressure or other means to this end.

Second, if enacted, the next push would be legislative creep, broadening it to more classes of people, as has happened in Belgium and the Netherlands. And the checks and balances are weakened or cast aside.

Third, the AMA opposes it for good reasons. It would put doctors in an invidious position. They are in the business of saving life, not destroying it.

Fourth, it would have a broad and deleterious effect on our culture. It could render suicide for others more acceptable and drive up these numbers.

As the AMA says, a much better option is palliative care. Yet it has been seriously underfunded, with many dying and having no access to it. So this critical choice is not available. Palliative care should be expanded.

William Friday, Doreen, letter to the editor, The Age

AUDIENCE, PURPOSE, CONTEXT AND FORM

A writer's choices about how they present their argument and the language they use are always shaped by the following elements of their persuasive text: **audience**, **purpose**, **context** and **form**.

Consider the following opinion piece, which appeared in the 'Youth Column' of New South Wales newspaper *The Area News*.

Money handling is not something humans just 'know', like how to find food or that when someone cries, we should comfort them.

It is a human invention, and as our society develops, so does the complexity of money handling.

So why doesn't everyone know how our monetary systems work?

Simply put, it's because budgeting and monetary skills aren't taught in schools.

Even students who study Economics or Mathematics barely touch the subject, and in 2017, there was only one Economics class in Griffith anyway.

We were a typical cohort, so we didn't learn how to handle money.

Which means that we have to learn out of necessity, rather than through understanding, when we get a job.

Even then, it's guess and check.

Why isn't the education system teaching young adults how to have financial security?

Money, taxes and superannuation are everyday aspects of life that simply are not covered by syllabuses.

It is naive and unjust for the Department of Education to assume we can all be self-taught to the extent we need to be.

Students throughout Australia are raising awareness for the need to learn this skill.

In the ABC article 'NSW Students Want Life Skills Better Taught at School, Children's Advocate Finds', the New South Wales Advocate for Children and Young People Andrew Johnson noted the demand for the subject.

He states, 'Young people ... were concerned about things that we didn't think about – they were concerned about housing, they were concerned about how to pay their taxes, how you go about renting, how



to raise a family'. I believe the mentality is shared throughout the young people of Griffith too.

You would think government officials would want the general population to understand taxes and superannuation.

It would help to destigmatise the topic!

Throughout my childhood, I thought taxes were a terrible burden. It wasn't until I got a job that I was told what they actually were.

Then I was in complete support of the tax system. Why wouldn't I want to pay a small amount of money to better society?

Taxes help improve our community by contributing funds to services, such as our own Base Hospital or maintaining our roads.

They even fund our schools! Why aren't we learning about the money that is contributing to the running of Wade and Griffith High Schools? We need to give our population a better understanding of money. And that starts with educating them properly.

Even by running little programs out of Wade High School, Griffith High School and Marian Catholic College, we can better equip the local young people with these necessary skills.

*Matilda Conlan and Elizabeth Portolesi,
Griffith youths writing about Griffith youth issues
for The Area News*



The **audience** is anyone reading, viewing or listening to a persuasive text. The creator of a text will always have a particular audience in mind (e.g. senior secondary school students or the readers of a magazine on cycling) before they write or create their text.

For the text above, the audience is the readers of local newspaper *The Area News*.

Writers and speakers also have a clear **purpose** in mind. Their aim might be to persuade the audience to buy a certain product, sign a petition, vote for a particular political candidate, donate money to a cause or just agree with the point of view being expressed.

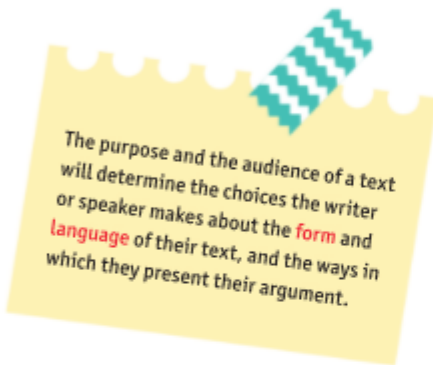
Conlan and Portolesi's purpose is to convince their audience that money management should be taught in Australian schools.

Context refers to the background and circumstances surrounding a persuasive text, as well as the place it is published, all of which affect how the text is understood.

Conlan and Portolesi's opinion piece was published in local newspaper *The Area News* in response to the writers' own experiences of feeling inadequately informed about money management during their time at school.

Form refers to the type of persuasive text in which a writer presents their argument. Possible forms include newspaper opinion piece, online comment, blog post and speech.

The text on p.25 is in the form of an opinion piece.



Understand audience, purpose, context and form

ACTIVITY 6

1 Complete the table by grouping audiences, purposes and forms appropriately.

- group of senior secondary school students
- a local town council
- to persuade them to donate to an environmental cause
- a PowerPoint presentation
- to request that a local park become a designated 'leash-free' area for dogs
- patients in a maternity ward at a private hospital
- a speech
- to improve vaccination rates
- a letter

Audience	Purpose	Form

- 2 Now, decide on the most appropriate language for each example of audience, purpose and context listed in the table below by drawing an arrow from the example on the left to the appropriate language in the right-hand column.

Example of Audience, Purpose and Context	Language
A residents of a local area that traditionally votes for Labor P persuade them to vote for a Greens political candidate C state election campaign	informal excited urgent
A parents of Year 12 students P offer advice on supporting their child during the VCE year C at the beginning of the school year, at a small country school	formal serious urgent
A followers of a celebrity's Instagram account P encourage them to vote for a certain contestant C during the semifinal round, when three contestants have roughly equal votes	semiformal emotional upset
A readers of a news story P convince them to support changes to laws regarding dangerous dogs C following a recent attack on a small child	formal considered calm

- 3 Circle the reason you think would be most persuasive for the following scenarios, and write a sentence explaining your choice.

- a A teenager is trying to convince her teacher to let her attend a school excursion although she behaved badly on a previous excursion.
- It's not fair – all my friends will be going.
 - Excursions are an important part of the educational experience.
 - I've learned my lesson after last time. I won't make the same mistakes again.

WHY THIS REASON WOULD BE MOST EFFECTIVE:

.....

- b A psychologist is trying to convince parents that young children should not watch any television before the age of two.
- Evidence shows that screen viewing before the age of two has lasting negative effects on children's language development, reading skills, and short-term memory.
 - Parents who use televisions as babysitters are lazy and irresponsible.
 - Television has a 'dumbing down' effect on all viewers, but especially children.

WHY THIS REASON WOULD BE MOST EFFECTIVE:

.....

- c An advocacy group wants to recruit volunteers to teach English to detained refugees.
- It will be incredibly rewarding to make such a difference to someone's life.
 - Refugees in detention are often traumatised and depressed, with complex needs, for which they require a lot of help in various ways.
 - Being a volunteer English teacher is a great addition to your résumé.

WHY THIS REASON WOULD BE MOST EFFECTIVE:

.....