

Essay writing: Argumentation 1

SID Inglese 1 2019-20

Contents

- The meaning of «argument»
- The Anglo Saxon essay writing tradition: directives in essay questions with examples from A level politics exam papers
- The precise meaning of commonly used directives in essay titles
- What an argument is, and what it is not, with examples.
- Listening to an argument and noting down the supporting reasons.
- Writing a paragraph based on the listening above.

An *argument* can be:

- A heated discussion, a row, a quarrel, a disagreement:

A: «Why are they shouting?»

B: «They're having an argument over who should pay the bill»

- A proposition about how things are, or a proposal for action to bring about a change, and a reason or set of reasons for supporting it.

The argument for the UK staying in the EU is a powerful one.

We're interested in the latter. Most essays are ARGUMENTATIVE. They involve some kind of argument, even if they don't have the word 'discuss' or 'argue' in the title. Consider the essay titles on the next slide.

Some example politics A-level essay questions

- *Evaluate the extent to which* representative democracy is superior to indirect democracy
- 'A Prime Minister is only as powerful as his Cabinet allows him to be.' *Discuss.*
- Assess the reasons for Thatcher's electoral successes in the period 1979 to 1990.
- *Explain* the functions of the UK Parliament & US Congress, particularly scrutiny and legislation.
- *Analyse* the ideological differences between the three main political parties in Britain and *explain* their structural set ups.
- *Compare and contrast* Modern and Classical Liberalism.

In the British education system, essay questions are *DIRECTIVE*. Often they are not phrased as *questions* but as *imperatives*. These are the words or expressions most often used to direct the writer's answer:

Compare, contrast

Define

Describe

Discuss

Explain

Evaluate

List

Outline

Show

To what extent ...

Which of the above expressions matches the meanings on the next slides?

- 1. Consider something from different points of view, then give your own opinion*
- 2. Say what something is like*
- 3. Assess and explain*
- 4. Put in sequence; catalogue; mention*
- 5. Make clear; give reasons for*

1. *Consider something from different points of view, then give your own opinion* **DISCUSS**

2. *Say what something is like* **DESCRIBE**

3. *Assess and explain* **EVALUATE**

4. *Put in sequence; catalogue; mention* **LIST**

5. *Make clear; give reasons for* **EXPLAIN**

6. Discuss how true facts or arguments are

7. Give a short description of the main points

8. State precisely the meaning of; explain

9. Describe similarities and differences

10. Indicate, give evidence of, make clear, demonstrate, illustrate

6. *Discuss how true facts or arguments are*

TO WHAT EXTENT

7. *Give a short description of the main points*

OUTLINE

8. *State precisely the meaning of; explain*

DEFINE

9. *Describe similarities and differences*

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

10. *Indicate, give evidence of, make clear, demonstrate, illustrate*

SHOW

All of the titles on the next slide are non-directive.

Two of them are too vast to be undergraduate essay titles. Which?

Re-phrase the others, so that they are directive.

Brexit: impact on UK economy

*Australia – US Free Trade Agreement (AUSFTA):
an evaluation*

*Why a peaceful resolution could not be met between the
USA and Iraq, 1991-2003*

Chinese relations with Africa

Canada's contributions to world peace

These titles are too general:

Chinese relations with Africa

[In which period? What kind of relations? Is a description / evaluation / discussion required?]

Canada's contributions to world peace

[When? Where? How should the topic be approached?]

EXAMPLES of re-phrasing to give
direction

*DESCRIBE / ASSESS the current impact of Brexit on the
UK economy*

*Australia – US Free Trade Agreement (AUSFTA):
an evaluation*

OUTLINE the main points of the AUSFTA

*Why a peaceful resolution could not be met between the
USA and Iraq, 1991-2003*

EXPLAIN why

An argument must have

- **A conclusion, or thesis.** This may be a proposal for action:

«Nuclear weapons should be banned»

or a statement about how things are:

«Fairies exist»

- **Premises:** reasons, examples, authoritative citations to support the above.

A nuclear war would cause immense loss of life and massive damage to our planet. It would lower the earth's temperature and create food shortages everywhere.

Are the four texts on the
following slides arguments?
Identify the thesis and the
premises

1) To install the program, you must first put the CD in the player. 2) Open up the File Manager, click on "Run" and type in "D: Install." 3) After the program is loaded, you will need to restart the computer to use the program.

This text is NOT an argument: it gives instructions how to do something

1) To install the program, you must first put the CD in the player. 2) Open up the File Manager, click on "Run" and type in "D: Install." 3) After the program is loaded, you will need to restart the computer to use the program.

1) We must resist all effort to allow the government to censor entertainment. 2) Freedom of speech and expressions are essential to a democratic form of government. 3) As soon as we allow some censorship, it won't be long before censorship will be used to silence the opinions critical of the government. 4) The next thing we know, we will have no more freedom than the Germans did under Hitler.

This text IS an argument. The thesis is underlined.
It is a proposal for action, about how the world
SHOULD BE. Sentences 3-4 are the premises.

- 1) We must resist all effort to allow the government to censor entertainment.
- 2) Freedom of speech and expressions are essential to a democratic form of government.
- 3) As soon as we allow some censorship, it won't be long before censorship will be used to silence the opinions critical of the government.
- 4) The next thing we know, we will have no more freedom than the Germans did under Hitler.

1) All of this talk about banning guns makes me angry. 2) Isn't it obvious that if we ban guns, law-abiding citizens will not own them, while only the criminals will have them?

This text is NOT properly an argument. It is an emotional reaction, supported with a rhetorical question. The thesis – «Guns should not be banned» - has to be inferred

1) All of this talk about banning guns makes me angry. 2) Isn't it obvious that if we ban guns, law-abiding citizens will not own them, while only the criminals will have them?

1) Research has shown that people who do at least 30 minutes a day of vigorous exercise reduce their risk of heart disease and some forms of cancer. 2) It would be wise for you to begin a daily program of exercise.

This text IS an argument. The thesis / conclusion is underlined.

1) Research has shown that people who do at least 30 minutes a day of vigorous exercise reduce their risk of heart disease and some forms of cancer. 2) It would be wise for you to begin a daily program of exercise.

Listening «The sixty second idea»



You're going to listen to an evolutionary biologist, Chris Ponting, make an argument for this proposal, or thesis:

«The power supply to Western households should be randomly switched off for one day, once a week.»

Listen, and list the six **reasons** he gives to support his proposal. Check your response against the list on the next slide

- It will remind us what it is like to live in countries with intermittent electricity
- Personally empowering, liberating us from personal enslavement to devices such as TV, smartphones and the internet
- Respite from devices would lengthen our attention spans and linger on the past and future, rather than on the present
- Carbon emissions would go down for the day, and the CO2 saved would be a timely reminder of the electricity we waste
- Power cuts bring families and communities together in adversity, making us share our material goods and ensuring we spend time together
- With the lights off, we would be able to do something usually denied us: lift our heads, and gaze at the stars

This would change the world: change our thoughts, and change our futures.

Writing an argument

Now write ONE paragraph developing the argument that

The power supply to Western households should be randomly switched off for one day, once a week.

Begin with the above thesis statement and use some or all of the reasons you heard from Chris Ponting, to support it.

Consider how you will link the reasons to make a seamless, coherent text.