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Academic Arguments



Much of the writing you will do in college (and some of what you may do later in your professional work) is called **academic discourse** or **academic argument**. Although this kind of writing has many distinctive features, in general it shares these characteristics:

- It is based on research and uses evidence that can be documented.
- It is written for a professional, academic, or school audience likely to know something about its topic.
- It makes a clear and compelling point in a formal, objective, and often technical style.
- It follows agreed-upon conventions of format, usage, and punctuation.
- It is documented, using some professional citation style.

Academic writing is serious work, the kind you are expected to do whenever you are assigned a term paper, research paper, or capstone project. Manasi Deshpande's proposal "A Call to Improve Campus Accessibility

for the Mobility Impaired” in Chapter 12 is an example of an academic argument of the kind you may write in college. You will find other examples of such work throughout this book.

Understanding What Academic Argument Is

Academic argument covers a wide range of writing. But its hallmarks are an appeal to reason and a faith in research. As a consequence, such arguments cannot be composed quickly, casually, or off the top of one’s head. They require careful reading, accurate reporting, and a conscientious commitment to truth. Academic pieces do not entirely tune out appeals to ethos or emotions: such arguments often convey power and authority through their impressive lists of sources and their formal style. But an academic argument simply crumbles if its facts are skewed or its content proves to be unreliable.

Look, for example, how systematically a communications scholar presents facts and evidence in an academic argument about privacy and social networking in the United States:

According to three 2005 Pew Reports (Lenhart, 2005; Lenhart, et al., 2005; Lenhart and Madden, 2005), 87 percent of American teens aged 12–17 are using the Internet. Fifty-one percent of these teenagers state that they go online on a daily basis. Approximately four million teenagers or 19 percent say that they create their own weblogs (personal online journals) and 22 percent report that they maintain a personal Web page (Lenhart and Madden, 2005). In blogs and on personal Web sites, teenagers are providing so much personal information about themselves that it has become a concern. Today, content creation is not only sharing music and videos; it involves personal diaries.

—Susan B. Barnes, “A Privacy Paradox:
Social Networking in the United States”

Note, too, that this writer draws her material from reports produced by the Pew Research Center, a well-known and respected organization. Chances are you immediately recognize that this paragraph is an example of a researched academic argument.

You can also identify academic argument by the way it addresses its audiences. Some academic writing is clearly aimed at specialists in a field who are familiar with both the subject and the terminology that surrounds it. As a result, the researchers make few concessions to general readers unlikely to encounter or appreciate their work. You see that

Hyon B. Shin and Robert A. Kominski’s report on language use in the United States meets all of the criteria for academic argument listed here and provides a potential model for your own writing.

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single-mindedness in this abstract of an article about migraine headaches in a scientific journal: it quickly becomes unreadable to nonspecialists.

Abstract

Migraine is a complex, disabling disorder of the brain that manifests itself as attacks of often severe, throbbing head pain with sensory sensitivity to light, sound and head movement. There is a clear familial tendency to migraine, which has been well defined in a rare autosomal dominant form of familial hemiplegic migraine (FHM). FHM mutations so far identified include those in CACNA1A (P/Q voltage-gated Ca(2+) channel), ATP1A2 (N(+)-K(+)-ATPase) and SCN1A (Na(+) channel) genes. Physiological studies in humans and studies of the experimental correlate—cortical spreading depression (CSD)—provide understanding of aura, and have explored in recent years the effect of migraine preventives in CSD. . . .

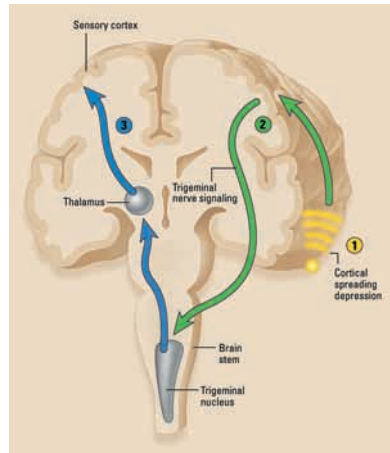
—Peter J. Goadsby, “Recent Advances in Understanding Migraine Mechanisms, Molecules, and Therapeutics,” *Trends in Molecular Medicine*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 39–44 (January 2007)

Yet this very article might later provide data for a more accessible argument in a magazine such as *Scientific American*, which addresses a broader (though no less serious) readership. Here’s a selection from an article on migraine headaches from that more widely read journal (see also the infographic on p. 370):

At the moment, only a few drugs can prevent migraine. All of them were developed for other diseases, including hypertension, depression and epilepsy. Because they are not specific to migraine, it will come as no surprise that they work in only 50 percent of patients—and, in them, only 50 percent of the time—and induce a range of side effects, some potentially serious.

Recent research on the mechanism of these antihypertensive, anti-epileptic and antidepressant drugs has demonstrated that one of their effects is to inhibit cortical spreading depression. The drugs’ ability to prevent migraine with and without aura therefore supports the school of thought that cortical spreading depression contributes to both kinds of attacks. Using this observation as a starting point, investigators have come up with novel drugs that specifically inhibit cortical spreading depression. Those drugs are now being tested in migraine sufferers with and without aura. They work by preventing gap junctions, a form of ion channel, from opening, thereby halting the flow of calcium between brain cells.

—David W. Dodick and J. Jay Gargus,
“Why Migraines Strike,” *Scientific American* (August 2008)



Infographic: the root of migraine pain

Such writing still requires attention, but it delivers important and comprehensible information to any reader seriously interested in the subject and the latest research on it.

Even when academic writing is less technical and demanding, its style will retain a noticeable formality—maybe even stiffness. To some extent in academic arguments, the authors seem to disappear, the tone is objective and dispassionate, the language avoids highly connotative expressions, and all the i's are dotted and t's crossed. Here's an abstract for an academic paper on the Burning Man phenomenon, demonstrating those qualities:

Every August for more than a decade, thousands of information technologists and other knowledge workers have trekked out into a barren stretch of alkali desert and built a temporary city devoted to art, technology, and communal living: Burning Man. Drawing on extensive archival research, participant observation, and interviews, this paper explores the ways that Burning Man's bohemian ethos supports new forms of production emerging in Silicon Valley and especially at Google. It shows how elements of the Burning Man world—including the building of a socio-technical commons, participation in project-based artistic labor, and the fusion of social and professional interaction—help shape and legitimate the collaborative manufacturing processes driving the growth of Google and other firms. The paper thus develops the notion that Burning Man serves as a key cultural infrastructure for the Bay Area's new media industries.

—Fred Turner, "Burning Man at Google: A Cultural Infrastructure for New Media Production"



A scene from Burning Man.

You might imagine a different and far livelier way to tell a story about the annual Burning Man gathering in Nevada, but this piece respects the conventions of its academic field.

Another way you likely identify academic writing—especially term papers—is by the way it draws upon sources and builds arguments from research done by experts and reported in journal articles and books. Using an evenhanded tone and dealing with all points of view fairly, such writing brings together multiple voices and intriguing ideas. You can see these moves in just one paragraph from a heavily documented student essay examining the comedy of Chris Rock:

The breadth of passionate debate that [Chris] Rock’s comedy elicits from intellectuals is evidence enough that he is advancing discussion of the foibles of black America, but Rock continually insists that he has no political aims: “Really, really at the end of the day, the only important thing is being funny. I don’t go out of my way to be political” (qtd. in Bogosian 58). His unwillingness to view himself as a black leader triggers Justin Driver to say, “[Rock] wants to be caustic and he wants to be loved” (32). Even supporters wistfully sigh, “One wishes Rock would own up to the fact that he’s a damned astute social critic” (Kamp 7).

—Jack Chung, “The Burden of Laughter:
Chris Rock Fights Ignorance His Way”

Readers can quickly tell that author Jack Chung has read widely and thought carefully about how to present his argument.

As you can see even from these brief examples, academic arguments cover a broad range of topics and appear through a variety of media—as a brief note in a journal like *Nature*, for example, a poster session at a conference on linguistics, a short paper in *Physical Review Letters*, a full research report in microbiology, or an undergraduate honors thesis in history. Moreover, scholars today are pushing the envelope of traditional academic writing in some fields. Physicians, for example, are using narrative more often in medicine to communicate effectively with other medical personnel.

What do all these projects have in common? One professor we know defines academic argument as “carefully structured research,” and that seems to us to be a pretty good definition.

Developing an Academic Argument

In your first years of college, the academic arguments you make will probably include the features and qualities we’ve discussed above—and which you see demonstrated in the sample academic arguments at the end of this chapter. In addition, you can make a strong academic argument by following some time-tested techniques.

Choose a topic you want to explore in depth. Unless you are assigned a topic (and remember that even assigned topics can be tweaked to match your interests), look for a subject that intrigues you—one you *want* to learn more about. One of the hardest parts of producing an academic argument is finding a topic narrow enough to be manageable in the time you have to work on it but also rich enough to sustain your interest over the same period. Talk with friends about possible topics and explain to them why you’d like to pursue research on this issue. Browse through books and articles that interest you, make a list of potential subjects, and then zero in on one or two top choices.

Get to know the conversation surrounding your topic. Once you’ve chosen a topic, expect to do even more reading and browsing—a lot more. Familiarize yourself with what’s been said about your subject and especially with the controversies that currently surround it. Where do scholars agree, and where do they disagree? What key issues seem to be at

stake? You can start by exploring the Internet, using key terms that are associated with your topic. But you may be better off searching the more specialized databases at your library with the assistance of a librarian who can help you narrow your search and make it more efficient. Library databases will also give you access to materials not available via Google or other online search engines—including, for example, full-text versions of journal articles. For much more on identifying appropriate sources, see Chapter 17, “Finding Evidence.”

Assess what you know and what you need to know. As you read about your topic and discuss it with others, keep notes on what you have learned, including what you already know about it. Such notes should soon reveal where the gaps are in your knowledge. For instance, you may discover a need to learn about legal issues and thus end up doing research in a law school library. Or perhaps talking with experts about your topic might be helpful. Instructors on your campus may have the knowledge you need, so explore your school’s Web site to find faculty or staff to talk with. Make an appointment to visit them during office hours and bring the sorts of questions to your meeting that show you’ve done basic work on the subject.

Come up with a claim about your topic. The chapters in Part 2, “Writing Arguments,” offer instruction in formulating thesis statements, which most academic arguments must have. Chapters 8–12, in particular, explain how to craft claims tailored to individual projects ranging from arguments of fact to proposals. Remember here, though, that good claims are controversial. After all, you don’t want to debate something that everyone already agrees upon or accepts.

In addition, your claim needs to say something consequential about an important or controversial topic and be supported with strong evidence and good reasons (see Chapter 17). Here, for example, is the claim that Brian Riady defends in his research argument on problems writing centers face when helping international students (reprinted at the end of this chapter): “Non-directive tutoring fails non-native English speakers for the exact reason that it so effectively assists native English speakers: *culture*.” Each piece of evidence that Brian presents after stating his thesis develops that claim and leads to the specific recommendations with which he ends his paper.

Mack D. Mariani and Gordon J. Hewitt include a discussion section in their academic journal article that reviews previous research on their topic. Providing this background information helps academic writers clarify areas for further exploration that their own arguments will address.

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Consider your rhetorical stance and purpose. Once you have a claim, ask yourself where you stand with respect to your topic and how you want to represent yourself to those reading your argument.

- You may take the stance of a reporter: you review what has been said about the topic; analyze and evaluate contributions to the conversation surrounding it; synthesize the most important strands of that conversation; and finally draw conclusions based on them.
- You may see yourself primarily as a critic: you intend to point out the problems and mistakes associated with some view of your topic.
- You may prefer the role of an advocate: you present research that strongly supports a particular view on your topic.

Whatever your perspective, remember that in academic arguments you want to come across as fair and evenhanded, especially when you play the advocate. Your stance will always be closely tied to your purpose, which in most of your college writing will be at least twofold: to do the best job in fulfilling an assignment for a course and to support the claim you are making to the fullest extent possible. Luckily, these two purposes work well together.

Think about your audience(s). Here again, you will often find that you have at least two audiences—and maybe more. First, you will be writing to the instructor who gave you the project, so take careful notes when the assignment is given and, if possible, set up a conference to nail down your teacher's expectations: what will it take to convince this audience that you have done a terrific job of writing an academic argument? Beyond your instructor, you should also think of your classmates as an audience—informed, intelligent peers who will be interested in what you have to say. Again, what do you know about these readers, and what will they expect from your project?

Finally, consider yet another audience—people who are already discussing your topic. These will include the authors whose work you have read and the larger academic community of which they are now a part. If your work appears online or in some other medium, you could reach more people than you initially expect.

Concentrate on the material you are gathering. Any academic argument is only as good as the evidence it presents to support its claims. Give each

major piece of evidence (a lengthy article, say, that addresses your subject directly) careful scrutiny:

- Summarize its main points.
- Analyze how those points are pertinent.
- Evaluate the quality of the supporting evidence.
- Synthesize the results of your analysis and evaluation.
- Summarize what you think about the article.

In other words, test each piece of evidence and then decide which to keep—and which to throw out. But do not gather only materials that favor your take on the topic. You want, instead, to look at all legitimate perspectives on your claim, and in doing so, you may even change your mind. That’s what good research for an academic argument can do: remember the “conscientious commitment to truth” we mentioned earlier? Keep yourself open to discovery and change. (See Chapter 18, “Evaluating Sources,” and Chapter 19, “Using Sources.”)

Give visual and nonprint materials the same scrutiny you would to print sources since these days you will likely be gathering or creating such materials in many fields. Remember that the graphic representation of data always involves an interpretation of that material: numbers can lie and pictures distort. (For more information on evaluating visuals, see Chapter 14.)

Take special care with documentation. As you gather materials for your academic argument, record where you found each source so that you can cite it accurately. For print sources, develop a working bibliography either on your computer or in a notebook you can carry with you. For each book, write the name of the author, the title of the book, the city of publication, the publisher, the date of publication, and the place that you found it (the section of the library, for example, and the call number for the book). For each article, write the name of the author, the title of the article, the title of the periodical, and the volume, issue, and exact page numbers. Include any other information you may later need in preparing a works cited list or references list.

For electronic sources, keep a careful record of the information you’ll need in a works cited list or references list. Write the author and title information, the name of the database or other online site where you found the source, the full electronic address (URL), the date the document was first produced, the date it was published on the Web or most

recently updated, and the date you accessed and examined it. The simplest way to ensure that you have this information is to print a copy of the source, highlight source information, and write down any other pertinent information.

Remember, too, that different academic fields use different systems of documentation, so if your instructor has not recommended a style of documentation to you, ask in class about it. Scholars have developed these systems over long periods of time to make research in an area reliable and routine. Using documentation responsibly shows that you understand the conventions of your field or major and that you have paid your dues, thereby establishing your position as a member of the academic community. (For more detailed information, see Chapter 21, “Documenting Sources.”)

Think about organization. As you review the research materials you have gathered, you are actually beginning the work of drafting and designing your project. Study the way those materials are organized, especially any from professional journals. You may need to include in your own argument some of the sections or features you find in professional research:

- Does the article open with an abstract, summarizing its content?
- Is there a formal introduction to the subject or a clear statement of a thesis or hypothesis?
- Does the article begin with a “review of literature,” summarizing recent research on its topic?
- Does the piece describe its methods of research?
- How does the article report its results and findings?
- Does the article use charts and graphs to report data?
- Does the piece use headings and subheadings?
- How does the work summarize its findings or make recommendations?
- Does the essay offer a list of works cited or references?

Anticipate some variance in the way materials are presented from one academic field to another.

As you organize your own project, check with your instructor to see if there is a recommended pattern for you to follow. If not, create a scratch outline or storyboard to describe how your essay will proceed. In reviewing your evidence, decide which pieces support specific points

in the argument. Then try to position your strongest pieces of evidence in key places—near the beginning of paragraphs, at the end of the introduction, or toward a powerful conclusion. In addition, strive to achieve a balance between, on the one hand, your own words and arguments, and on the other hand, the sources that you use or quote in support of the argument. The sources of evidence are important props in the design, but they shouldn't overpower the structure of your argument itself.

And remember that your organization needs to take into account the placement of visuals—charts, tables, photographs, and so on. (For specific advice on structuring arguments, review the “Thinking about Organization” sections in the “Guides to Writing” for Chapters 8–12.)

Consider style and tone. Most academic argument adopts the voice of a reasonable, fair-minded, and careful thinker who is interested in coming as close to the truth about a topic as possible. A style that achieves that tone may have some of the following features:

- It strives for clarity and directness, though it may tolerate jargon.
- It favors denotative rather than connotative language.
- It is usually impersonal, avoiding “I” and using the third person.
- In some fields, it may use the passive voice routinely.
- It uses technical language, symbols, and abbreviations for efficiency.
- It avoids colloquialisms, slang, and even contractions.

The examples at the end of this chapter demonstrate traditional academic style, though there is, as always, a range of possibilities in its manner of expression.

Consider design and visuals. Most college academic arguments look more like articles in professional journals than those one might find in a glossier periodical like *Scientific American*—that is, they are usually black on white, use a traditional font size and type (like 11-point Times New Roman), and lack any conscious design other than inserted tables or figures. But such conventions are changing as more students gain access to software that allows for more sophisticated design elements.

Indeed, student writers today may now go well beyond print, creating digital documents that can integrate a variety of media and array data in strikingly original ways. But always consider what kinds of design best suit your topic, purpose, and audience and then act accordingly. As you

Anne E. Becker's study of body image and identity in Fiji exemplifies a clear, direct academic style. Even though she makes a complex argument, her writing remains straightforward and readable.

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think about the design possibilities for your academic argument, you may want to consult your instructor—and to test your ideas and innovations on friends or classmates.

In choosing visuals to include for your argument, be sure each one makes a strong contribution to your message and is appropriate and fair to your topic and your audience. Treat visuals as you would any other sources and integrate them into your text. Like quotations, paraphrases, and summaries, visuals need to be introduced and commented on in some way. In addition, label and number (“Figure 1,” “Table 2,” and so on) all visuals, provide a caption that includes source information and describes the visual, and cite the source in your references page or works cited list. Even if you create a visual (such as a bar graph) by using information from a source (the results, say, of a Gallup poll), you must cite the source. If you use a photograph you took yourself, cite it as a personal photograph.

The screenshot shows the JSTOR homepage with a search bar and a list of disciplines under "BROWSE BY DISCIPLINE". The disciplines listed include African American Studies (118 items), African Studies (52 items), American Indian Studies (8 items), American Studies (119 items), Anthropology (83 items), Applied Sciences (13 items), Architecture & Architectural History (11 items), Art & Art History (191 items), Asian Studies (73 items), Astronomy (1 item), Buddhism (13 items), Chemical Sciences (245 items), Communication Studies (17 items), Developmental & Cell Biology (11 items), Ecology & Environmental Biology (78 items), Economics (130 items), Education (132 items), Engineering & Technology (12 items), Environment & Society (23 items), Film Studies (14 items), Finance (28 items), Gender Studies (21 items), Geography (23 items), Health Policy (23 items), Health Sciences (28 items), History (215 items), Humanities (215 items), Information Science & Technology (77 items), Law (73 items), Life Sciences (118 items), Linguistics (21 items), Management & Organizational Behavior (11 items), Mathematics (73 items), Media East Studies (53 items), Music (83 items), Nutrition (12 items), Paleontology (12 items), Performance Arts (21 items), Philosophy (26 items), Political Science (146 items), Psychology (26 items), Public Policy & Administration (18 items), Religion (72 items), Social Studies (113 items), Sociology (123 items), Statistics (21 items), and Teaching of History (11 items).

JSTOR is a database for journal articles in many disciplines. Such articles are important to academic arguments.

Reflect on your draft and get responses. As with any important piece of writing, an academic argument calls for careful reflection on your draft. You may want to do a “reverse outline” to test whether a reader can pull a logical and consistent pattern out of the paragraphs or sections you have written. In addition, you can also judge the effectiveness of your overall argument, assessing what each paragraph contributes and what may be missing. Turning a critical eye to your own work at the draft stage can save much grief in the long run. Be sure to get some response from classmates and friends too: come up with a set of questions to ask them about your draft and push them for honest responses. Find out what is confusing or unclear to others in your draft, what needs further evidence, and so on.

Edit and proofread your text. Proofread an academic argument at least three times. First review it for ideas, making sure that all your main points and supporting evidence make sense and fit nicely together. Give special attention to transitions and paragraph structure and the way you have arrayed information, positioned headings, and captioned graphic items. Make sure the big picture is in focus.

Then read the text word by word to check spelling, punctuation, quotation marks, apostrophes, abbreviations—in short, all the details that can go wrong simply because of a slip in attention. To keep their focus at this level, some readers will even read an entire text backwards. Notice too where your computer’s spelling and grammar checkers may be underlining particular words and phrases. Don’t ignore these clear signals.

Finally, check that every source mentioned in the academic argument appears in the references list and that every citation is correct. This is also the time to make any final touchups to your overall design. Remember that how the document looks is part of what establishes its credibility.

RESPOND ●

1. Look closely at the following five passages, each of which is from an opening of a published work, and decide which ones provide examples of academic argument. How would you describe each one, and what are its key features? Which is the most formal and academic? Which is the least? How might you revise them to make them more—or less—academic?

During the Old Stone Age, between thirty-seven thousand and eleven thousand years ago, some of the most remarkable art ever conceived was etched or painted on the walls of caves in southern France and northern Spain. After a visit to Lascaux, in the Dordogne, which was discovered in 1940, Picasso reportedly said to his guide, “They’ve invented everything.” What those first artists invented was a language of signs for which there will never be a Rosetta stone; perspective, a technique that was not rediscovered until the Athenian Golden Age; and a bestiary of such vitality and finesse that, by the flicker of torchlight, the animals seem to surge from the walls, and move across them like figures in a magic-lantern show (in that sense, the artists invented animation). They also thought up the grease lamp—a lump of fat, with a plant wick, placed in a hollow stone—to light their workplace; scaffolds to reach high places; the principles of stenciling and Pointillism; powdered colors, brushes, and stumping cloths; and, more to the point of Picasso’s insight, the very concept of an image. A true artist reimagines that concept with every blank canvas—but not from a void.

—Judith Thurman, “First Impressions,” *The New Yorker*

I stepped over the curb and into the street to hitchhike. At the age of ten I’d put some pretty serious mileage on my thumb. And I knew how it was done. Hold your thumb up, not down by your hip as though you didn’t much give a damn whether you got a ride or not. Always hitch at a place where a driver could pull out of traffic and give you time to get in without risking somebody tailgating him.

—Harry Crews, “On Hitchhiking,” *Harper’s*

Coral reef ecosystems are essential marine environments around the world. Host to thousands (and perhaps millions) of diverse organisms, they are also vital to the economic well-being of an estimated 0.5 billion people, or 8% of the world’s population who live on tropical coasts (Hoegh-Guldberg 1999). Income from tourism and fishing industries, for instance, is essential to the economic prosperity of many countries, and the various plant and animal species present in reef ecosystems are sources for different natural products and medicines. The degradation of coral reefs can therefore have a devastating impact on coastal populations, and it is estimated that between 50% and 70% of all reefs around the world are currently threatened (Hoegh-Guldberg). Anthropogenic influences are cited as the major cause of this degradation, including sewage, sedimentation, direct trampling of reefs, over-fishing of herbivorous fish, and even global warming (Umezawa et al. 2002; Jones et al. 2001; Smith et al. 2001).

—Elizabeth Derse, “Identifying the Sources of Nitrogen to Hanalei Bay, Kauai, Utilizing the Nitrogen Isotope Signature of Macroalgae,” *Stanford Undergraduate Research Journal*

While there’s a good deal known about invertebrate neurobiology, these facts alone haven’t settled questions of their sentience. On the one hand, invertebrates lack a cortex, amygdala, as well as many of the other major brain structures routinely implicated in human emotion. And

unsurprisingly, their nervous systems are quite minimalist compared to ours: we have roughly a hundred thousand bee brains worth of neurons in our heads. On the other hand, some invertebrates, including insects, do possess the rudiments of our stress response system. So the question is still on the table: do they experience emotion in a way that we would recognize, or just react to the world with a set of glorified reflexes?

—Jason Castro, “Do Bees Have Feelings?” *Scientific American*

From the richest high school to the poorest high school in America, students are being told that employment in the computer industry is nothing less than salvation from the indignities of the jobs those others have to do to survive. If you don't learn your computer skills well, if by some chance you're bored sitting in front of that screen, day after day under buzzing fluorescents, pecking at a vanilla keyboard, clicking a mouse, it's your problem, and there will be no excuse for your fate in this new economy: you will be doomed to menial, manual labor. That dirty, anybody-can-do-that work. Poor income, low prestige. *Pues, así va la vida, compa*, that's life if you don't get your stuff right.

—Dagoberto Gilb, “Work Union,” *Gritos*

2. Working with another student in your class, find examples from two or three different fields of academic arguments that strike you as being well written and effective. Spend some time looking closely at them. Do they exemplify the key features of academic arguments discussed in this chapter? What other features do they use? How are they organized? What kind of tone do the writers use? What use do they make of visuals? Draw up a brief report on your findings (a list will do), and bring it to class for discussion.
3. Read the following three paragraphs, and then list changes that the writer might make to convert them into an academic argument:

The book—the physical paper book—is being circled by a shoal of sharks, with sales down 9 percent this year alone. It's being chewed by the e-book. It's being gored by the death of the bookshop and the library. And most importantly, the mental space it occupied is being eroded by the thousand Weapons of Mass Distraction that surround us all. It's hard to admit, but we all sense it: it is becoming almost physically harder to read books.

In his gorgeous little book *The Lost Art of Reading—Why Books Matter in a Distracted Time*, the critic David Ulin admits to a strange feeling. All his life, he had taken reading as for granted as eating—but then, a few years ago, he “became aware, in an apartment full of books, that I could no longer find within myself the quiet necessary to read.” He would sit down to do it at night, as he always had, and read a few paragraphs, then find his mind was wandering, imploring him to check his email, or Twitter, or Facebook. “What I'm struggling with,” he writes, “is the encroachment of the buzz, the sense that there's something out there that merits my attention.”

I think most of us have this sense today, if we are honest. If you read a book with your laptop thrumming on the other side of the room, it can be like trying to read in the middle of a party, where everyone is shouting to each other. To read, you need to slow down. You need mental silence except for the words. That's getting harder to find.

—Johann Hari, “How to Survive the Age of Distraction”

4. Choose two pieces of your college writing, and examine them closely. Are they examples of strong academic writing? How do they use the key features that this chapter identifies as characteristic of academic arguments? How do they use and document sources? What kind of tone do you establish in each? After studying the examples in this chapter, what might you change about these pieces of writing, and why?
5. Go to a blog that you follow, or check out one like the *Huffington Post* or *Ricochet*. Spend some time reading the articles or postings on the blog, and look for ones that you think are the best written and the most interesting. What features or characteristics of academic argument do they use, and which ones do they avoid?



Opening paragraph explains the context for this academic argument.

A Directive Approach toward ESL/EFL Writers

BRIAN RIADY

Since its origin in Stephen North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center” and Jeff Brooks’s “Minimalist Tutoring,” a non-directive approach has become firmly embedded in writing center methodology (Clark 33). The premise of the non-directive approach is that minimizing direct instruction at a writing center will simultaneously improve student learning, keep student writers accountable, and make students feel more comfortable about seeking writing help. At the same time, non-directive tutoring lets students retain ownership of their work, while circumventing potential problems with plagiarism. This approach, which was initially accepted precisely because its collaborative methods rejected the dominant top-down, current traditional pedagogy of its time, persists as a fundamental element of American writing center culture today.

But in recent years, a dramatic increase in ESL [English as a Second Language] consultations at writing centers, caused mainly by escalating admission rates for international students, has led writing center faculty to reevaluate the effectiveness of this non-directive pedagogy. In an attempt to adapt traditional conferencing strategies to the ESL writer, writing center faculty have found that the non-directive approach—which has been hailed as a writing center “bible” (Shamoon and Burns 135), writing

Brian Riady wrote this research argument for a course at the University of Texas at Austin that prepares undergraduates to work as tutors at the Undergraduate Writing Center. Brian’s topic reflects his own status as an international student from Singapore majoring in Communication Studies, Rhetoric and Writing, and Economics. The paper uses MLA documentation.

Second paragraph ends with a thesis sentence.

Explains how culture defines writing, quoting from experts.

Provides evidence that Arabic and Japanese cultures define “good writing” differently.

center “dogma” (Clark 34), and a writing center “mantra” (Blau 1)—does not effectively assist ESL writers. Non-directive tutoring fails non-native English speakers for the exact reason that it so effectively assists native English speakers: culture.

Culture is at the heart of the ESL student’s struggle with writing because culture informs writing. Every culture defines effective writing—and the means to achieving it—differently. Most ESL students understand what good writing looks and sounds like in their own culture, but because good writing is culturally constructed, these students have difficulty understanding what good writing is in standardized, academic American English. Hence, writing that appears to be effective to the non-native English speaker may seem illogical or nonsensical to the native speaker.

Take Arabic, for instance. In Arabic, good language is decorative, ornate, and intentionally pleasing (Zinsser). “It’s all proverbs,” writes William Zinsser. “Arabic is full of courtesy and deference, some of which is rooted in fear of the government.” And because Arabic is a historically oral culture, Arabs emphasize a balanced sound and “prefer symmetry to variety” (Thonus 19). What constitutes effective Arabic, then, is a result of a combination of cultural, historical, and in some countries, political factors. But what Arabs consider good writing—ornate, proverbial, symmetrical prose—would be the ruin of someone trying to write good English.

The same is true of Japanese. Persuasive rhetoric in Japanese follows the *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu* form (Thonus 18). *Ki-shoo-ten-ketsu* form begins with *ki-shoo*, or the full development of an argument; then proceeds with *ten*, an indirectly related subtheme; before ending with *ketsu*, or the conclusion or thesis (Thonus 18). Transitions are rarely if ever present, because the Japanese believe that it is the reader’s responsibility to connect the various parts of the essay. Thonus notes that this “deviates from western argumentation in that the *ten* subtheme departs

from the topic, while the thesis . . . is withheld until the final paragraph” (18). When the *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu* rhetorical form is used in English, writing often sounds foreign and is more descriptive than persuasive.

When ESL writers of Japanese or Arabic or any other foreign descent attempt to learn English, they are hampered not only by their “limited backgrounds in the rhetoric of written English but also by their learned patterns as educated writers of their own languages” (Powers 41). Such writers deal simultaneously with an unfamiliar culture and an unfamiliar language. For them, learning to write effectively in English is not merely transferring the rules of “good writing” from their native language and applying them to English; rather it is learning a new set of cultural assumptions of what “good writing” is altogether. Such writers often struggle to deviate from their instinctive cultural assumptions and fail to think about writing in a new way.

Consequently, when writing center tutors and ESL student writers collaborate for a writing consultation, the traditional non-directive model of writing center consultations falls short. Non-directive consulting works well with native English speakers precisely because consultant and writer share certain cultural notions of “good writing.” By asking the right questions, an experienced consultant can unobtrusively lead a writer to discover ways to improve his own writing (Powers 41). In this sense, a writing consultant can actually direct “the conference through the use of questions, much as Socrates determined the direction of the Platonic dialogues” (Clark 35).

But when tutor and writer come into a consultation with different sets of cultural assumptions, the routine technique of Socratic, non-directive questioning often does not work. Leading questions can only lead a student writer to discover his own mistakes if he has a basic grasp of how his writing should be. Non-directively asking an ESL student to consider his audience is inherently problematic if the ESL student is unfamiliar with

what his audience knows and expects. Similarly, a writer will fail to discover his own mechanical errors by reading his work out loud if he does not understand how “correct” writing should sound (Powers 41–42). As Powers puts it: “[to] merely take the [non-directive] techniques we use with native-speaking writers and apply them to ESL writers may fail to assist the writers we intend to help” (41).

Hence, Powers argues, “successful assistance to ESL writers may involve more intervention in their writing processes than we consider appropriate with native-speaking writers” (44). ESL writers struggle with an unfamiliar culture, audience, and rhetoric, and what they need from writing consultants is knowledge of how an American academic audience will respond to their work. To best assist the ESL writer, a consultant must be directive insofar as she becomes a “cultural informant about American academic expectations” (Powers 41). A writing consultant must in other words be directive in teaching an ESL student what constitutes “good writing” and how to accomplish “good writing” in the culture of American academia.

This is not to say that consultants should completely disregard the non-directive approach; consultants should still refrain from acting as a one-stop proofreading service. In “Tutors as Teachers: Assisting ESL/EFL Students in the Writing Center,” Terese Thonus advises consultants to avoid the tendency to merely correct surface-level errors in ESL writing, even if such errors may seem overwhelming. Most ESL students demonstrate basic proficiency of English vocabulary and grammar by passing the TOEFL, and may be able to isolate mechanical problems and self-correct with a little guidance. But emphasizing correctness in a directive, current traditional manner, and demanding a correct product of ESL writers “will engender frustration and even the loss of confidence, just as does demanding perfect native-like English pronunciation” (Kobayashi 107). Rather,

Argues for using more directive tutoring of international students.

Qualifies his argument, citing several experts.

consultants must find a balance between directive teaching and non-directive tutoring that is most effective for ESL students.

Learning to be more directive with ESL students poses an especially tricky problem for writing tutors accustomed to non-directive consulting. Non-directive consulting is so firmly embedded in the culture of writing centers that it is “hard for practitioners to accept possible tutoring alternatives as useful or compelling” (Shamoon and Burns 135). Directive tutoring when measured against this predominant writing center culture is seen as a failure. Consequently, a consultant who does engage in directive tutoring may feel that she has betrayed the non-directive philosophy when in fact she has successfully met the needs of the ESL student writer.

What needs to occur is a significant paradigm shift in the culture of writing centers. The existing writing center culture assumes that there is one correct standard for writing, and a one-size-fits-all approach to assisting writers in consultations. Writing centers and their staff must first reassess their own cultural assumptions, and realize that their way is but a single option amongst myriad equally “correct” alternatives. They must in other words recognize that the non-directive methodology is not the right method in an absolute sense, but a helpful method that must be appropriately adapted to assist writers with different needs.

Such a paradigm shift will not be easy, but as writing centers move forward and prepare to meet the challenges of the future, it will be necessary. Improving the methods of writing instruction at writing centers is a continuous process: it began with the conception of the writing center, proceeded with a rejection of the current traditional pedagogy for the non-directive approach, and must continue on with an enhanced cultural sensitivity and awareness for ESL student writers.

Acknowledges difficulties in implementing his proposal.

Concludes by asserting the need for greater cultural awareness.

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China: The Prizes and Pitfalls of Progress

LAN XUE

ABSTRACT

Pushes to globalize science must not threaten local innovations in developing countries, argues Lan Xue.

Developing countries such as China and India have emerged both as significant players in the production of high-tech products and as important contributors to the production of ideas and global knowledge. China's rapid ascent as a broker rather than simply a consumer of ideas and innovation has made those in the "developed" world anxious. A 2007 report by UK think tank Demos says that "U.S. and European pre-eminence in science-based innovation cannot be taken for granted. The centre of gravity for innovation is starting to shift from west to east."¹

But the rapid increase in research and development spending in China—of the order of 20% per year since 1999—does not guarantee a place as an innovation leader. Participation in global science in developing

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