
How to Write an Argumentative Essay

An argumentative essay uses reasoning and evidence—not emotion—to take a definitive stand on a controversial or debatable issue. The essay explores two sides of a topic and proves why one side or position is the best.

The First Steps

Choose a specific issue to discuss. Some debatable issues cover a wide range of topics. For example, “legalizing drugs” is too broad a subject because topics within that issue include legalizing marijuana, the effectiveness of the FDA, or whether a painkiller made in Europe should be allowed into the US. Any of these could be the sole focus of an argumentative paper.

Research both sides of the topic thoroughly. Even if you know which side you want to argue, research can give you ideas for counterarguments and help your paper show balance rather than bias.

Develop a working thesis. State your position on the issue and summarize your argument’s main reasons in one sentence. Your body paragraphs should explain your reasons fully.

Body Paragraphs

Option #1: Present both sides of the issue, then state your opinion and explain why you chose that side. This option is useful if you did not have an opinion on the issue prior to research, or your audience is not very familiar with your topic.

- One half to two-thirds of your paper explains the issue, shows the two opposing sides, and gives an assessment of each. This demonstrates that you have indeed conducted research and are an expert on the subject.
- Next, when you state your position, readers might be more inclined to agree with you.
- Last, explain your reasons for choosing that side without repeating ideas from previous paragraphs.

Option #2: State your opinion at the beginning. List and explain the reasons for your choice. Acknowledge the other side’s arguments; then, disprove/refute those arguments. This option is useful when your audience already has some knowledge of the issue. It allows you to be more assertive, thus making a stronger argument.

- Select the strongest evidence from your research and present your points—usually one point per body paragraph.
- Next, explain one or two of the opposing side’s points to show how readers might object to your argument. Then, show how these arguments are not reasonable, not logical, or not effective. Be sure to reassert your own viewpoint and why it is the best choice.

Final Steps: Revise and Edit

- Pretend that your readers are a skeptical panel or jurors. You can best convince them of your arguments by avoiding emotional or aggressive language and by using a mix of evidence types—facts, statistics, examples, expert opinions, or even personal experience.
- Cite your sources!
- To increase the chances that your audience will agree with you, start body paragraphs with ideas that both sides agree upon before arguing your point.
- Know the other side’s strongest arguments to defend against challenges from other students or your instructor.
- In your conclusion, emphasize why your topic is important, summarize your arguments, and re-state your position as the most sensible choice. Do not include new evidence or arguments.

Bibliography

“Argumentative Essay.” *Essay Start.com*. n.d. Web. 17 February 2012.

Fleming, Grace. “How to Write an Argument Essay.” *About.com*. The New York Times Company, n.d. Web. 17 February 2012.

The following is a sample argumentative essay that follows option 2. The guiding ideas of the paper are highlighted in gray and explained in footnotes. The essay has been edited for educational purposes. The original piece can be found at <http://spot.pcc.edu/~dramirez/GreatEssays/argumentessay.html>

"Fixing" What Isn't Broken

Every pet owner knows that there are enormous responsibilities that go along with having a cat or dog. It must be fed and exercised, and it must be given love, attention, and protection. There's another responsibility that not all pet owners think about, however: spaying or neutering, or "fixing." What does "fixing" a pet mean? Simply put, it means a quick, cheap surgery that will prevent a pet from ever becoming a mother or father. This surgery solves problems that pet owners know about, and some that they might not have considered before. In fact, all pet owners should be required to have their pets fixed because failure to do so overburdens shelters, causes pain and suffering to unwanted pets, and increases the health risks of pets and owners alike.¹

Everybody loves a cute new puppy or kitten.² But those cute babies soon get bigger, and right now, there simply aren't enough homes for them all. Some unwanted animals go to shelters, but these shelters have limited funds and limited space, and they cannot keep all the animals they collect³ (Esmonde).⁴ If a cat or dog is not adopted within a certain time period, that animal is euthanized. Besides, not all unwanted animals go to a shelter. What happens to a homeless animal left out on the street? Pets aren't wild animals. They cannot find fresh water or hunt their own food, especially in a city. They cannot understand traffic laws, so they often get struck by cars. They are susceptible to common illnesses—which can then spread to other animals, including pets. They are not tame, so they may attack other animals or people. In either case, the life of most unwanted animals is not long, but it is full of misery and pain, and it's also dangerous to other animals or people who they meet. By not "fixing" one's own animal, a pet owner will almost certainly be adding to this problem.

Another thing to consider is the health of the pet itself.⁵ Animals, especially those who eat processed foods, are prone to the same illnesses as humans, like heart disease and cancer. A spayed or neutered animal is at less risk from certain kinds of cancer.

¹ A strong thesis states its position and main arguments.

² The writer establishes common ground with readers.

³ This paragraph explains the first two points of the writer's argument: shelters are overburdened, and unwanted pets suffer. It uses specific examples that explain these arguments.

⁴ Sources are cited.

⁵ Main argument #3 is explained.

Furthermore, animals who are not fixed can sometimes behave aggressively when trying to find mates. They can injure themselves trying to escape from their homes, or they may fight with other animals. Additionally, while running free, they are in danger from cars. And finally, for females who become mothers, giving birth is not a safe process. For the ordinary pet owner, all these reasons should be strong enough to convince them to “fix” their dear pet.

Of course, some people will not agree.⁶ “I don’t want to give my animal an unnecessary surgery,” they will say. “Surgery is risky, too, and it’s certainly expensive.” That idea shows ignorance. Spaying or neutering should be done as soon as you get your pet—when he or she is young and healthy—and it is almost 100% safe. Your animal is in much more danger if not fixed,⁷ for the urge to run away from home will put your pet in extremely dangerous situations. And almost all cities have a fund to help pay for the surgery. Just ask at a vet or the local Humane Society. The cost can be as low as fifteen dollars (“I have an animal”).

Others might feel that this surgery will change their pet’s personality.⁸ They might think that a “fixed” dog might not be a good watchdog, for example. Or they may simply say “I like my pet the way he/she is” (Rita_alabama). This shows a basic misunderstanding of what the effects of spaying or neutering are.⁹ A pet’s personality, like a human’s personality, is his or her own, and it won’t change after a “fixing.” It’s true that some behaviors will change. A pet won’t want to mark objects with urine as much, and females won’t go into heat every few months (“I have an animal”). A watchdog will still be vigilant, but it probably won’t want to fight with other dogs as much. This simple surgery solves many behavior problems that can frustrate pet owners.¹⁰ The best solution is simply to get your pet “fixed” as soon as you get it home, as young as possible. That way, fewer bad habits will form.

There’s really no valid reason not to spay or neuter your pet. Whether considering the potential suffering of unborn animals, the health and comfort of one’s own pet, or the convenience as a pet owner, the facts all show that spaying or neutering is the way to go. It’s not only the convenient choice, but also the morally right choice, and one that all pet owners should make.

⁶ One opposing viewpoint is acknowledged.

⁷ The rest of the paragraph thoroughly explains why the opposing viewpoint is flawed.

⁸ A second opposing viewpoint is acknowledged and then thoroughly refuted.

⁹ The writer demonstrates assertive passion about the subject, but not aggressive or emotional judgment.

¹⁰The writer establishes common ground with readers.

Works Cited

Esmonde, Donn. "Getting Pets 'fixed' Can End Slaughter." *Buffalo News.com*. Buffalo News, 6 Feb. 2012. Web. 13 Feb 2009.

"I have an animal: spaying and neutering." *Seattlehumane.org*. Seattle Humane Society of King County, n.d. Web. 13 Feb. 2012.

Rita_alabama. "Should I neuter my dog?" *Yahoo Answers*. Yahoo Groups, 15 Sep. 2007. Web. 13 Feb. 2012.