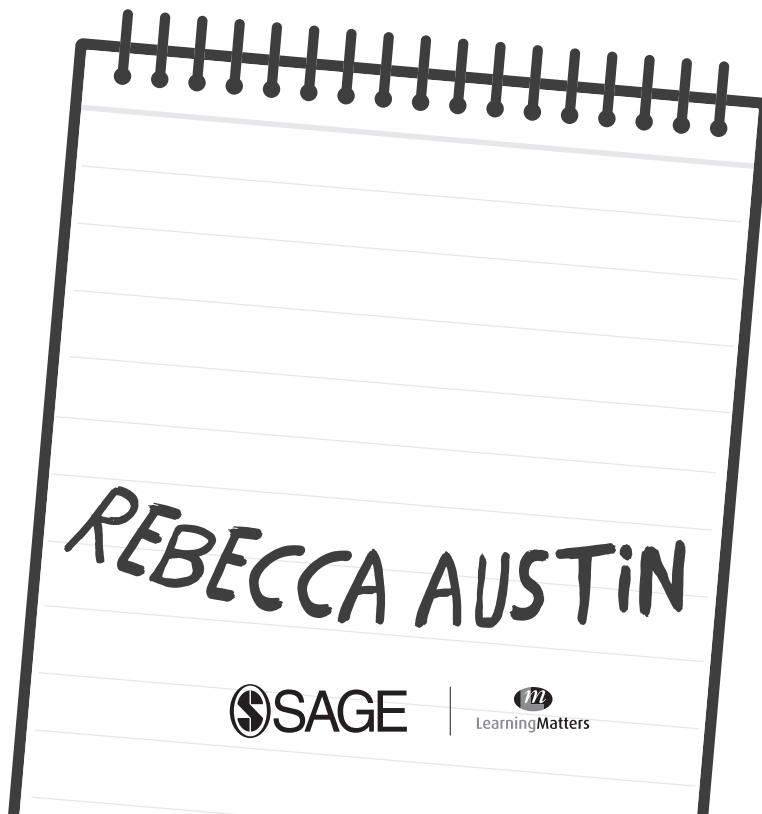


THE TRAINEE TEACHER'S GUIDE TO ACADEMIC ASSIGNMENTS





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SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 11 0 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Editor: Amy Thornton
Senior project editor: Chris Marke
Project management: Deer Park Productions
Marketing manager: Lorna Patkai
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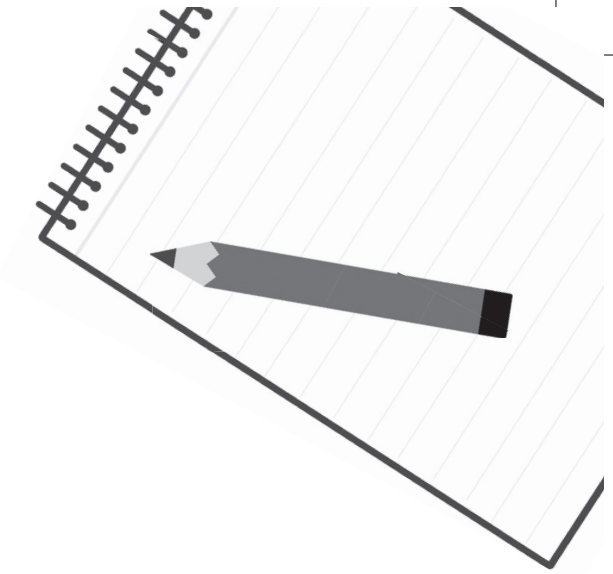
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5

CONSTRUCTING AN ARGUMENT

STRUCTURING



This chapter explores the ways in which arguments in assignments can be constructed so that your reader is taken logically through a series of points. The importance of taking a position/stance and supporting this with reference to reading is emphasised.

WHAT ARE YOU ARGUING FOR?

This chapter will dovetail with the next as *how* you write is as important as *what* you write when you are putting together your argument. 'Academic writing' provides the tools you need to be able to present your argument convincingly – but you need to have an argument in the first place!

When you are writing an assignment, you are setting out what you know and understand about the topic and letting the reader know what you think about it – what your response is. As we have said from the beginning of this book, all teachers should know why they are doing what they are doing in the teaching role – and this means you need to have considered the whats and the whys of everyday classroom practice – so you need to have a position because what you are writing about will affect what you do in the classroom.

FINDING YOUR ARGUMENT

Your argument is the heart of your assignment. You will have started off with a particular point of view (which will be more or less well-formed depending on the

topic in hand), you will have then engaged with some reading and you will have developed your position with a greater awareness of the range of points of view on offer, including where there are areas of contention and uncertainty. I would suggest that this is what happens with all reading to some extent. Freire (1985), in his writing about critical literacy, talks about the back and forth that happens as we ‘read the word and read the world’. That is, we know something about something and in reading about it (‘reading the word’), what we know about that something is changed and we ‘read the world’ differently. The next time we then go to read about that ‘something’ we are reading the words from a changed perspective. This is an iterative learning process which is potentially never-ending – it will only end if we believe we can ever be in a position to know all there is to know about something. To believe that you will never know everything there is to know about teaching is a very good place to be – because it means that you will keep on learning.

You can have a point of view, a position, an argument without feeling that you would sell your soul to defend it. In fact, in an assignment you might play around with a position, and argument, while still leaving room to allow for other points of view. The point is you will be setting out a way of looking at something and convincing your reader that there is something to think about in the position that you take. Really good assignments find an unusual or original position from which to argue something – drawing on evidence to present a different way of looking at something.

GETTING GOING

So how do you begin? In Chapter 4 we considered what you are looking for when you are reading, and I suggested some different ways to take notes – and what to take note of. One of the assignments we have set in my institution is called: ‘What do children need to be successful writers?’

The brief asks students to focus on one particular aspect in order to develop an argument. It is a 1,000-word assignment, which means that the argument has to be very focused and clear.

The brief contains the following:

In the current climate in school there is an emphasis on children getting writing ‘right’ – leading in some instances to formulaic teaching which directs children towards a particular ‘output’. Sometimes this can lead to the absence of the child in the writing – they are focused on a product not a process. We are asking you to counter this by thinking about how children can be inspired and enthused in their writing so that they WANT to write and CHOOSE to write and are able to communicate

successfully through the written word for a range of purposes and audiences. We want you to consider the processes that children need to go through to be able to be successful writers.

The emphasis is on children as successful writers – not on their ability to produce pieces of writing which meet certain grammatical criteria.

It then goes on to list some possible focuses for the assignment such as the role of drama, the link between reading and writing, the importance of the teacher as a writer.

The learning outcomes are to demonstrate:

1. knowledge and critical understanding of a range of aspects of pedagogy and the ability to relate this to your professional practice in English;
2. knowledge and critical understanding of the range of flexible and inclusive strategies available to promote learning;
3. knowledge and critical understanding of key local and national curriculum statements, guidance, requirements and policies relevant to English.

The assignment title clearly sets up the purpose and the trajectory of the argument for you; the brief gives you further contextual information and ideas; the learning outcomes show you what you need to demonstrate evidence of in the assignment and the assessment grid shows you what your marking tutors will be looking for. You have everything you need to get going!

This assignment was set up because we, as tutors, want our student teachers to think of children as 'authors with something to say' (Graves, 1994, p. 44) rather than seeing the role of the teacher being one that requires children to churn out 'perfect' pieces of writing in response to set criteria. So although this means that students will need to know the current requirements of the National Curriculum and policies (as per learning outcome 3) they will also need to understand a range of pedagogies in relation to learning in English (learning outcomes 1 and 2).

HOW DO YOU PUT AN ARGUMENT TOGETHER?

Everyone is different, and you will approach this differently depending on how you think, how you work, what you already know or believe or feel about the subject you are writing about. For some, the argument needs to be fully formed before they start writing; for others, the writing process is where/how the argument becomes fully formed.

We looked at academic reading in an earlier chapter and looked for ways of identifying the author's argument in writing. This includes noting where there was 'bias' or, as was suggested, a 'position'. As educators you will probably have met a lot of people who are not teachers, yet who have a view about some aspect of teaching and learning or schools. I have no doubt that sometimes those views will have rankled as you hear uninformed arguments being put forth – and you may or may not feel obliged to put your informed perspective forward as a counter-argument. By now you will know that a key message I have pushed in this book is that you need to be informed in order to put forward *your* argument. Don't forget that the tutors you are writing for are very well-informed. They will spot holes in your arguments a mile off and be able to reflect them back to you. How do you get informed? You read! (There's a whole chapter about it earlier in this book if you need a reminder...)

MAKE A START - REMEMBER CHAPTER 2!

So, before you start reading, what do you think at the moment?

Why do you think it?

Revisit notes from university-based sessions or tasks

Does any reading come to mind?

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO CONSTRUCT AN ARGUMENT?

You need an overtly stated claim, belief, position or idea:

- I argue that children need to read widely in order to become successful writers
- I argue that teachers who are writers themselves are more able to support their pupils to become successful writers
- I argue that children need to be able to write for their own pleasure and purposes if they are to become successful writers
- I argue that a playful approach to teaching writing leads to the development of successful writers.

Your claim needs to be supported by a series of points, with evidence, which are linked together coherently.

You will need to show that you are aware of any significant counter-claims or positions – but you do not need to go into these in detail unless you feel they are necessary. You do not need to provide ‘balance’ – but you do need evidence to support your view and to be able to demonstrate where you are aware of other views that are important. How will you know whether other views are important or significant? You know the answer, I think – you will be informed through reading, you will know the field and you will understand what you are writing about.

Sometimes there are not any credible counter-claims – and you might only rarely find directly opposing views to your position. Consider the bullet points above: the opposite arguments for the first two would be faintly ridiculous and you are unlikely to find support for them anywhere:

- children should only read a narrow range of texts to be successful writers
- teachers who don't do any writing themselves can help children become successful writers.

No-one is going to argue for either of these two points with any credibility.

With the second two, however, you might find arguments which lean towards ideas such as:

- children need to have structured set assignments in order to be successful writers (many writing ‘schemes’ will follow this approach)
- children should be taught to write in a formal way in order to be successful writers (the current emphasis in the curriculum seems to be more towards formal right/wrong approaches to writing rather than playful ones which encourage experimentation).

You might feel that you want to acknowledge these positions, particularly as they might well be significant in influencing practice in the teaching of writing in school.

Once you have taken your position and formulated the sentence for your assignment which begins: ‘I argue’ you will need to give your argument a structure.

CLASSROOM LINK - THE VALUE OF ARGUMENT

Riley and Reedy (2005) put forward the case for supporting young children through a structured approach to creating their own written arguments.

They argue for this as a significant way in which children can engage with 'contentious real-life issues' and develop their thinking.

How can what you know about developing and structuring arguments be used with children at their level to develop their argumentative powers? Will you encourage children to argue against your position and challenge what you think?

HOW WILL I STRUCTURE MY ARGUMENT?

You will begin with the statement which states your argument and your marking tutor will settle back and wait to be convinced. You might find there is just one thing you want to argue, but in longer assignments you might want to take two or three arguments or positions to develop. If they can be linked to each other that will make your assignment, as a whole, feel more coherent.

So, if the assignment above had a longer word count you might say:

I argue that children need to experience a wide range of texts and have frequent opportunities to write for their own pleasure to be successful writers. I further argue that this is more likely to be children's experience in the classroom if their teacher is someone who reads and writes for pleasure themselves.

Each argument will be supported by a series of points which are themselves drawn from the reading you have done, so will be evidenced with reference to where that point comes from in the literature. For some arguments there will be a logical sequence for the points you make to build your argument and other times you will have greater flexibility and can decide for yourself which order works best.

As a general rule, each point will have its own paragraph which is explained, discussed and explored along with the evidence you offer. Remember how we looked at reading by focusing on the first sentence of each paragraph. If you have more points than you have room to write about within the allocated word count, you might need a paragraph to explain that you are aware of them too, but that you have focused on what you believe to be the key points.

If you have been clever in the way you have taken notes you will have organised these around key points, or you can be just as clever and use your notes to ascertain the key points afterwards. Sometimes it helps to write out points from your notes that you suspect are relevant onto small pieces of paper or card and physically play around with them – grouping them, structuring them into sequences or patterns.

Using an example from the list above we might choose the argument:

- teachers who are writers themselves are more able to support their pupils to become successful writers.

What are the points that will feed into this argument? They include:

- a greater ability to empathise with the children as writers
- a better ability to model the process of writing and the pleasure and pain that this involves
- more confidence to produce models for children to follow
- a greater understanding of what makes a piece of writing successful and how it might be improved
- greater insight into the way that texts are constructed and an ability to help children understand the choices authors make in writing
- being more likely to facilitate a range of independent writing opportunities and an environment that promotes writing
- being more likely to think of themselves and children as writers who are expressing themselves and communicating through writing, than seeing writing as something that is done.

These might be points that you have taken verbatim (word for word) from your reading or they might be statements that you have constructed which draw on your own understanding – at this point either is fine, but in your writing you will be looking to use your own words rather than the words of others. At this stage you might also have a couple of points which you feel strongly about but which you don't yet have much supporting evidence from reading for or you might feel that you don't have enough points. Both things would be reasons to go back and do some more reading – but you might also make a start with writing those things you feel you have got enough to say about.

This is part of the process where we will all be different; however, I am simply highlighting the fact that you do not need to feel that you know *everything* before

you start if you want to get going. It is often the case, too, that, as you write, your thinking is clarified and more points come to you. I have put the point above into what I feel is a roughly logical sequence, but this might also change during the writing where it feels more natural to take your argument to a different point than the one in your plan. Plans should never be seen as anything other than a guide – whatever you do, don't be restricted by your plan. Always be ready to change your plan to fit new thinking, new ideas and new directions!

SUPPORTING YOUR ARGUMENT WITH EVIDENCE

When you are looking through your notes for evidence to support the points you want to make, you need to bear in mind that although *you* think they are good and valid points, if the literature doesn't support them they might not be as good as you think! Alternatively, you might have come up with something that is new or original. In which case you might need to draw on tangential evidence and offer your point more tentatively than you might otherwise have done. So you might say:

While there is a range of research and discussion around the concept of reading for pleasure, there appears to be very little in relation to writing for pleasure. It seems logical that the arguments which provide support for developing the practice of reading for pleasure in primary schools would also ring true in relation to writing for pleasure.

You would then go on to show how you see the arguments fitting together.

As soon as you have your list of key points you might begin to sense that the assignment is within your grasp! Your argument is likely to begin with a bit of scene setting – you might talk about current curriculum and policy positions – what is influencing the teaching of writing at the moment. It is important to show that you understand what the parameters are that you are working within in a school context. You might offer a wider perspective about the research that is out there. Is it mostly current? Is there a lot or a little? Are certain countries taking the lead? This contextualising stuff might come before or after your 'I argue ...' statement. Together, they will form your opening paragraph/introduction. The next chapter provides a fleshed-out example of an introduction.

DEVELOPING THE ARGUMENT

Getting back to the argument above – I have indicated some key points, but each of those needs some fleshing out. You are going to have to show that you understand the provenance of each point (where it has come from in the literature) and that you can go beneath the surface and look at the detail of each point (this is analysis), as well as understanding that you need to present a critical perspective – the questions ‘So what?’ and ‘Why does this matter?’ should be at the forefront of your mind with every point you make.

Let's take this point:

- a greater understanding of what makes a piece of writing successful and how it might be improved.

I think it fits well with this point:

- greater insight into the way that texts are constructed and an ability to help children understand the choices authors make in writing .

One is about engaging with written texts written by established authors and one is about engaging in texts written by themselves and their children – but both are about what makes writing ‘effective’ or ‘successful’, so they need to come near each other in the argument.

Let's flesh both these out a bit more – they each need their own ‘mini argument’.

- A greater understanding of what makes a piece of writing successful and how it might be improved:
 - if you write yourself, you are more consciously engaged in the process of the construction of written texts
 - you are aware of the way that you use the revision and redrafting process to refine and improve your own writing
 - you are able to have effective discussions with children about their writing and make suggestions for how they might improve.
- Greater insight into the way that texts are constructed and an ability to help children understand the choices authors make in writing:
 - if you write yourself, you are more consciously engaged in the process of construction of written texts
 - you can then apply your own knowledge of this conscious process to the texts that you read with children

- when you read with children you can support them in understanding how the text has been constructed
- children's understanding will be enhanced, and they will be able to apply this knowledge to their own writing.

You will see that the first bullet point overlaps and this is where you can develop coherence in your writing – that is, you can make it hold together well and have a flow that your audience can follow. You need to consider how each paragraph leads into the next.

Paragraph one can begin:

- if you write yourself, you are more consciously engaged in the process of the construction of written texts.

Paragraph two can begin:

- this conscious engagement with the process of the construction of written texts can also be applied to your reading with children.

As you put your argument together you are showing that you can take evidence from a range of sources and put it together in *your* way. You are not necessarily inventing new arguments (although at post-graduate level that might well be the case), but you are offering new ways in which the argument can be presented.

You must avoid:

- *relying solely on what you know or think or believe without providing evidence for it:* in an academic assignment this is not good enough. You are aiming to persuade your reader to your way of looking at things so you need evidence to be convincing
- *relying on other people's arguments:* this happens when you simply tell the reader about the reading you have done and what other people think and believe. Your reader wants to know what you think, so you will need to comment on the views' of others and show how they fit with your own perspective
- *using other people's words:* this happens when you over use quotations or near-quotations and have not expressed your own understanding or views
- *using other people's arguments but making it sound like they are yours:* this is related to poor referencing, but often happens when you have read what others have to say and like it! You then repeat the argument but fail to acknowledge where it came from. Remember that part of what you are doing in your assignment is

showing that you understand what is already known and understood in the field – so referencing other people is a good thing because it shows your understanding.

PUTTING THE ARGUMENT TOGETHER

Now we come how we make our argument fit together and flow. Connectives are the key! I mentioned them in the previous chapter because they are essential to understanding an argument and how it has been constructed, but I want to spend longer here because it is in the writing of the assignment that you must construct your argument impeccably. If you get the connective wrong, it changes the point you are making and the direction of your argument. Connectives are not interchangeable – ‘nevertheless’ and ‘furthermore’ do *not* mean the same thing!

If you have several points that build on each other (such as in the example above) you are going to want to use connectives that demonstrate that you are presenting a cumulative argument:

- if you write yourself, you are more consciously engaged in the process of construction of written texts. *Furthermore*, you can apply your own knowledge of this conscious process to the texts that you read with children.

Other connectives that would work here are:

- *and*
- *in addition*
- *moreover*.

For the last two points you could use a connective which shows that the first thing leads to another – there is a causal connection:

- When you read with children you can support them in understanding how the text has been constructed, *therefore*, children’s understanding will be enhanced, and they will be able to apply this knowledge to their own writing.

You could also use:

- *in this way*
- *so*
- *consequently*.

TAKE A SECTION OF YOUR WRITING AND HIGHLIGHT EVERY CONNECTIVE

Does each connective make sense in terms of how the two halves of the sentence are being connected?

Have you used a variety of connectives to build your argument?

Is there a logic to what you are arguing? Does it make sense?

Your argument will need to build point by point – each paragraph having its own focus and linking to the next, using evidence from your reading to support.

THE CONCLUSION

You should think of your conclusion as a summary. You will go back over your key points and reiterate your argument – summing up what your position is and why. You must not introduce new points in your conclusion – if they were important, they should have been a part of the main body. You might offer a ‘what next?’ kind of stance if you think there are implications beyond what you have discussed, but this will not always be possible or necessary.

BUILDING AN ARGUMENT

- What do I think about what I have read?
- What is my position or point of view?
- What are the key points I want to make?
- How are the points connected to each other?
- What is my main argument?
- How will I introduce my argument and the context?
- How am I going to order my points to build my argument(s)?
- How will I link my points together coherently?
- What is the summary of my argument?

This chapter has encouraged you to engage with the ideas in the reading, take a position and present a logically structured convincing argument which demonstrates your understanding about the issues in hand. This is the heart of your assignment.