
Argumentative Essays vs. Expository Essays

An “argument” isn’t just two people yelling at each other -- it’s having different opinions on things. In a very basic way, *argumentative essays* are different from *expository essays* in the same way that *opinions* are different from *facts*.

In an expository essay, you, the author, don’t have too much room to include your opinions or beliefs on the page. You’re focusing more on factual statements than on debatable claims. You usually focus your discussion on what things are or how they work.

In an argumentative essay, though, it is your opinion on things that matters. It is how well you can support a claim on a topic that has two reasonable sides.

Argument: A debatable claim (not a factual statement) that is supported by concrete evidence, expert opinion, analysis, and personal insight.

In argumentative writing, you’re free to voice your opinions. You’re free to say whatever you’d like, as long as you can back it up and support it with research -- writing college-level essays is your practice time, like running drills.

- Learning to play offense is like knowing your logic and support.
- Building a good defense is how well you anticipate and refute your readers’ objections.
- Passing the ball well is sort of like learning how to make better connections between your paragraphs and sentences.

Your first expository essay in this class was intended to expose your understanding of a certain topic. It used evidence, examples, and/or anecdotes to explain a memorable time, place, or event.

It was not a pure *narrative (a story)*, nor a pure *argument*, but it was based on a fixed focal point, a thesis, in this case a specific reason for why a time/place/event is important to you. Your reasons for why it is important to you are not debatable. No one can argue with you about why you feel the way do about events in your life. As such, it was not an *argumentative* essay.

That is really the main difference between writing expository essays and argumentative essays: *In an argument you focus your development on how and why you feel the way you do about a debatable topic.* Think about the following questions to help frame many arguments:

- Is it good or is it bad? Is it right or is it wrong? Is it harmful or is it harmless? Should something be done or not?
- Why do you feel the way you do?
- How many experts agree with you?
- What real-world examples can you provide?
- Why should your readers be concerned?
- How does it affect you, the author?
- How can you address and refute the opposition’s concerns?
- What solutions can you offer?

For example, consider the following working thesis. Would it be an appropriate thesis for an argumentative essay?

Hip hop lyrics contain a lot of violence.

You, as a listener, can go through different types of hip hop songs and find many that contain violent references and lyrics, so the claim that there are songs with violent content make this a *factual statement*, not a *debatable claim*. The author isn't making an argumentative point here, so there is little to discuss. Your readers might think, "Yep, there are violent lyrics in some hip hop songs. So what? What's your point? Why am I reading this?"

Consider the following revisions that offer two different legitimate viewpoints on the same topic:

1. *Since many hip hop lyrics contain a lot of violence, listening to this sort of music can be damaging to young listeners. (it is harmful -- bad for young listeners)*
2. *Even though many hip hop lyrics contain a lot of violence, it isn't a glorification of violence, but it is an artist's expression of actual occurrences, and, as such, it is the best way to end the violence in certain American cities by exposing it to a vast audience. (harmless -- beneficial to society)*

It is the main point in these last two examples that takes the *factual statement* that there is violence in some hip hop lyrics, and it makes it *debatable*. One claims that the violence is harmful to its listeners, and the other claims it isn't.

Let's try another:

Contemporary advertising campaigns are using more sex than ever to sell their products.

Again, in this case, how much sex is used in advertising can be measured. There is indeed more sexual imagery used in modern advertising, so there is no *debatable* main point being offered, no *argument* is being posed.

Consider the following revisions that again offer two different legitimate viewpoints on the same topic:

1. *Contemporary advertising campaigns are using more sex than ever to sell their products, and this overt focus on sexuality is making our society desensitized to sexual activity which demeans it and causes reckless sexual behaviors. (harmful -- demeans sex)*
2. *The fact that contemporary advertising campaigns are using more sex than ever to sell their products shows a natural evolution of commerce to include the less Puritanical and healthy view of sexual activity as a natural part of human nature. (harmless -- natural)*

Always make sure that the thesis statement you're creating matches the writing assignment at hand. If the essay is supposed to be an argument, your thesis statement's main point should be debatable. It should not be a factual statement, but it should provide a main point that has at least two reasonable points of view, at least two claims that can be reasonably supported.