Argument Structures and Conventions

The Classical Argument: For Neutral or Receptive Audiences

I. Introduction: The introduction orient your readers to your subject. Here you can argue the significance of your issue and why it should be of concern to the reader, establish common ground with the audience, and/or address misconceptions.

II. Thesis Statement: If your audience is receptive or neutral on the topic, you must be direct with your argument. Readers should be able to locate your thesis statement within the first few paragraphs in a classical argument—usually at the end of the introduction. (Note: if your readers are not receptive, and you think they may be resistant or hostile, you will want to consider the Rogerian structure, outlined on the next page.) The thesis statement should meet the following criteria:

1. It is a complete statement. Questions and fragments are not acceptable.
2. It is specific. It does not rely on concepts like “bad,” “good,” “immoral,” or “influential.” These ideas are too abstract and do not allow for support or research.
3. It is debatable. No “I” statements should be present because they transform an argument into an opinion.
4. It is supportable. There should be sufficient research and evidence to support the claim.
5. It answers the “how,” “why,” or “so what” questions. If the first thing a reader asks after reading the thesis is why, how, or why should I care, you know you have not been specific and focused enough in the thesis.

III. Background: The background section is essential in making sure your audience is on the same page, so to speak. You might need to define terms, provide historical context, an overview of past events, a review of basic facts, or a review of literature/scholarship on the topic. Ask yourself: who is my audience and what are they likely to know and not know about this topic?

IV. Supporting Points and Evidence: Now that you’ve presented your argument, you must prove it. Depending on your audience, you might begin with the most well-known or familiar supporting point and work your way to new information. Or, you might begin with your weakest argument and work up to your strongest. Either way, remember that every body paragraph must offer evidence that works to prove the thesis in a significant way.

V. Refutation of Opposing Arguments: An argument must consider opposing views. Present one or two popular counterarguments fairly and accurately, then either concede to or refute them. If the opposing side makes compelling or logical points, concede to their strengths before proving that your stance is still the strongest. If the opposing side is fairly weak in its opposition, refute the argument outright with evidence and research.

VI. Conclusion: Most often, the conclusion restates the major arguments in support of your thesis or theme. Your conclusion can also summarize key points, reinforce the weakness of opposing arguments, or underscore the logic of your position. Many writers like to end their arguments with a strong last line, such as a quotation or a statement that sums up the argument. Remember though that no new information should appear here; these are closing statements only, and all of the evidence must have been presented beforehand.
The Rogerian Argument: For Hostile or Resistant Audiences

I. Introduction: The introduction orients your readers to your subject or the problem at hand. Here you can argue the significance of your issue and why it should be of concern to the reader; demonstrate the issue as one in need of a solution.

II. Common Ground: If the audience is hostile or in opposition to your case, you must first build bridges to them and establish common ground before you can expect them to consider your argument. Here, you must present—accurately and fairly—the opposing view and its concerns. Stay objective and show the audience that you have clearly researched the issue and understand both sides.

III. Thesis Statement: Once you establish common ground and prove to your audience that you not only understand their side, but also find at least some merit in it, then you can present your argument for consideration.

IV. Supporting Points and Evidence: Now that you’ve presented your argument, you must prove it. Depending on your audience, you might begin with the most well-known or familiar supporting point and work your way to new information. Or, you might begin with your weakest argument and work up to your strongest.

V. Reiteration of Argument: After you have supported your position, it is time to return to the debate. Here, you must show that your position is the most logical choice. Prove to your reader that in light of all options, yours is the best.

VI. Conclusion: Again, attempt to build bridges to your audience, discussing your shared concerns. Emphasize how they (and/or society in general) might benefit from adopting your argument—or at least considering it.

You might restate your theme or thesis, summarize key points, and/or underscore the logic of your position. Many writers like to end their arguments with a strong last line, such as a quotation or a statement that sums up the argument. Remember though that no new information should appear here; these are closing statements only, and all of the evidence must have been presented beforehand.