[This handout provides important guidance about crafting persuasive arguments and lays out strategies for forming argumentative rather than descriptive thesis statements. It is provided to upper and lower level English students.]

Some Writing Tips for Argumentative Essays

I) Successful argumentative essays will do a number of things. They will:

1) Contain an argumentative, interpretive thesis claim.
2) They will use textual evidence to support the claim.
3) They will often make smaller sub-claims, supported with textual evidence, to support the overall thesis claim.
4) They will be organized clearly and logically so that a skeptical reader can easily follow your analytic points.

Thesis claim: Your thesis is a claim you make about the significance of a text. It should be specific – more specific theses are easier to "prove" or defend. If you argue something like "People always hate being cold" or "Museums are primarily educational institutions" or "Love is something everyone wants" you leave a lot of openings for people to contradict you or find holes in your claim.

Your claim must be **argumentative** – which means it must be debatable. If your claim is something no one would argue with (ex. The sun is bigger than the earth) it is not really an argumentative claim. A claim that is obviously true is probably actually summary or paraphrase. Instead, you should try to come up with a thesis that reasonable people could agree or disagree with; your job of course will be to try to present evidence in support of your claim as clearly and persuasively as possible. Keep in mind that "proving" something in literature does not mean asserting it as irrefutable but in making as persuasive a case as possible about it; when a claim is "proven" it will be hard to come up with counterclaims, logical errors, or obvious gaps in your argument.

Your thesis is **interpretive** in so far as many different kinds of claims can be made about texts, and you are advocating for a particular one. Your job in your essay is to persuade someone who may not agree with you that your claim makes sense and is a good way to think about the text.

You can make your claims more specific in various ways. One is by hedging, or adding qualifiers. For above, it's easier to defend the claim that "While many people view museums as places of entertainment and others view them as places of cultural theft, their primary function is actually educational. This can be seen in their spatial organization, programming, and funding structure." It's much more likely you could make a persuasive case about that claim than it is to defend the claim "Museums are primarily educational institutions."

Again, claims about texts can and should be specific. They should make a specific claim about the **significance** of a specific aspect of a text. Significance means that something is important for the meaning of the text; it goes beyond something you find interesting.

II) Some strategies for articulating a persuasive, argumentative claim

1) Not this, but that; contrast

Exercise: What is the thesis claim in each of these paragraphs? Underline it. What SPECIFIC LANGUAGE or INDIVIDUAL WORDS help make these claims persuasive? What are the words that indicate contrast? Underline.

a. The tracking shots that link Madeleine and the portrait draw a series of simple comparisons. The camera dollies from the floral bouquet Madeleine holds to the identical one held by Carlotta.

Likewise the camera moves from the spiraling arrangement of Madeleine's hairdo to Carlotta sporting the same curl in the portrait. The dolly-in camera makes us gradually approach the painting, drawing so close to its surface we feel we can touch it. Through the dolly-in, the camera sinks into and opens up the space of the painting. The closer we get, the more the flatness of the painting asserts itself.

b. The tracking shots that link Madeleine and the portrait first draw a series of simple comparisons. The camera dollies from the floral bouquet Madeleine holds to the identical one held by Carlotta. Likewise the camera moves from the spiraling arrangement of Madeleine's hairdo to Carlotta sporting the same curl in the portrait. Yet the camera movement used seems excessive if Hitchcock only intended to draw this comparison. A simple cut between the painted and real hairdos and bouquets would make the relation clear, whereas the dolly-in camera makes us gradually approach the painting, finally drawing so close to its surface we feel we can touch it. There is more involved in this elegant scene than a detective noticing significant details. Through the dolly-in, the camera seems to sink into and open up the space of the painting, not only directing Scottie's (and our) attention, but seemingly confusing the space of observer and painting, of representation and reality. However, the closer we get, the more the flatness of the painting, a barrier to our penetration, asserts itself. We must linger over this paradox, because it lies at the core of Hitchcock's use of the painting and its frame.

2) Stasis → destabilization

Exercise: What accepted or obvious convention (stasis) is being destabilized? Underline. What claim is proposed instead? What is the thesis argument? Underline.

This short essay contemplates a large problem: What is a (traditional Chinese) painting? The answer seems so self-evident that the question often eludes either an intrinsic analysis of style and iconography or an extrinsic study of social, political, and religious contexts. Both kinds of scholarship equate a painting with a pictorial representation, which is alone reproduced in scholarly works as the object of discussion. Missing here are a painting's physical form -- as a framed canvas, a piece of plastered wall, a scroll, an album, a fan, or a screen -- and all concepts and practices related to its materiality. An alternative approach, the one advocated here, is that a painting must be understood both as a an image-bearing object and as a pictorial image; the collaboration and tension between these two aspects make a work a "painting." As commonplace as it seems, this approach is rarely practiced. When seriously pursued, however, it naturally breaks down the confines between image, object, and context and provides a new ground for historical investigation.

3) Solution to a problem in the text

Exercise: What is the problem in the text the author has identified and how do they propose to address or "solve" it? Underline. What is the thesis argument? Underline.

- Remember, like "proving" things in literature, "solving" is about putting forward a persuasive account, not determining all possible readings or "answers."

In *The Confessions*, Saint Augustine writes more about his mother, Monica, than he does about any other character. She is the only woman given a voice throughout the book; we hear

next to nothing of Augustine's wife and various lovers, but passage after passage are dedicated to the depiction of his mother and of her devotion to Christianity. Such disparity in his treatment of women in this text, which details his path to Christian faith, may simply mean that Monica is a figure of paramount influence in Augustine's religious life. However, the disparity still seems odd in a text deemed autobiographical, since what we usually consider other important events in someone's life, like marriage, are mentioned only as an afterthought.

Perhaps the distinction given Monica is employed not simply to illustrate her patient and relentless effort to convert her son, but also to provide support to a persuasive text. Confessions is an autobiography with an agenda; it is political as much as it is religious. Though "confession" in the religious sense refers to the private confessing of one's sins to God, the intended audience of Confessions is not God himself, but other Christians and potential convert to Christianty. I submit here that Monica's function in the structure of Augustine's life-account is to provide an example of a path to conversion other than his own. By doing so, Augustine presents a more convincing argument for Christianity by describing the religious life of someone at once similar and dissimilar from himself. In other words, Monica exists not just to support Augustine's conversion but as an exemplary figure in her own right.

III) Sometimes it is helpful to compare and contrast the argument in your introduction with the one in your conclusion. Does it make sense to switch them, or to rewrite your introductory claim in light of what you have 'figured out' by the time you finish writing the paper? Often we have only a general idea of what we want to argue at the beginning, but we can talk about it much more specifically by the time we finish writing and have laid out our evidence.

Example of the introductory paragraph in an argumentative paper:

In the *Iliad* of Homer, the warrior ethic defines the social system of the Greeks. When Homer brings up the conflict between Achilleus and Agamemnon in Book I we are forced to decide who is "right" in the eyes of the warrior ethic.. This conflict is a fundamental theme of the Iliad.

Example of the last paragraph in the same paper:

Having seen that this conflict is central to the Iliad, we can now ask "why?" Was Homer questioning the validity of an ethic that had such a duality? There is some evidence for this in Book 9 when Achilleus says, 'A man dies still if he has done nothing, as one who has done much" (206). This statement is completely against the warrior ethic, yet Homer does not seem to look down on Achilleus' remark. Or, perhaps Homer was demonstrating how complex the system was. Even in a complex system of values compromise can be worked out, as seen when Antilochos submits to Menelaos.

We have seen how the conflict between Achilleus and Agamemnon is found throughout the Iliad. We have seen that, in the eyes of the warrior ethic, both were right. We have also seen another example of this idea. Regardless of its purpose, the conflict between two sides who were 'right' is a fundamental theme of the Iliad.

IV) Textual evidence: You must use evidence from the text to support your thesis claim. Remember that in literature classes <u>evidence is evidence FROM THE TEXT</u>, that is, actual specific words and phrases from the text that you quote and then explain in your paragraphs. Picking fewer examples or textual moments, and <u>spending more time discussing *how* and *why* they are significant</u>

for your claim, is usually more persuasive than listing many examples without much discussion. Do not assume that the significance of your quoted text is obvious; it's your job to explain for the reader how that piece of evidence fits into your overall claim, or into a sub-claim you are making as part of arguing your larger claim. **Pick the examples you think will best support your argument, and spend time elaborating what they mean for your argument.**

V) In terms of **organization**, you want to present your evidence as clearly and logically as possible so that your reader can easily follow the evidence you are presenting. You may want to include **topic points** for your paragraphs, which are basically sentences that let your reader know what you're going to be talking about in that paragraph. It provides a kind of road map, rather than just launching into the evidence. **Remember, your reader is not in your head and the logic of your argument is not self-evident to him/her.**

Example:
Topic point:
Other people besides the Arabs have used fire as a means of stopping rain.

Paragraph body or discussion after this topic point:
Thus the Sulka of New Britain heat stones red hot in the fire and then put them out in the rain, or they throw hot ashes in the air. They think that the rain will soon cease to fall, for it does not like to be burned by the hot stones or ashes. The Telugas send a little girl out naked into the rain with a burning piece of wood in her hand, which she is to show to the rain. That is supposed to stop the downpour. At Port Stevens in New South Wales the medicine-men used to drive away rain by throwing fire-sticks into the air, while at the same time they puffed and shouted. Any man of the Anula tribe in Northern Australia can stop rain by simply warming a green stick in the fire and then striking it against the wind.

- The topic point should set up reader expectations for what will follow in the paragraph. If your topic point is about one thing and the body of the paragraph contradicts or does not explain it, your reader will not follow your logic

Each paragraph should have one topic point, or possibly two if they are closely related. Too many points in a paragraph get confusing to read and often weaken your argument. You should think about the organization of your essay's points as reflecting your conceptual organization.

Use **MLA** citation formatting for your Bibliography at the end of your paper and for the in-text quotations in your paragraphs. The Purdue OWL is a good online source for formatting information.
In text example: Writing writing writing "quotation" writing (Morrison 16). Writing writing writing "quotation" writing writing (28).
Bibliography example: Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage International, 1970.