a backlog), the editor can't accept your article. Fourth, journals just don't have space in their pages for all the good articles that they receive (Dirk 1996).

Unfortunately, editors rarely explain these circumstances to their prospective article authors. I once got a rejection within twelve hours of submitting an article to a top journal. Not long after, I ran into the managing editor and said with chagrin, "Wow, you really hated my article—you rejected it instantaneously." She laughed and responded, "No, it's just that we have such a huge backlog that we are currently rejecting everything. I didn't even read your article." I was lucky; I learned why my article was rejected—but how many other authors aren't so fortunate? While it's tough to avoid these types of rejections because of others' articles, the workbook will address what you can do to prevent such types in "Week 4: Selecting a Journal." Let's turn now to the chief cause of article rejection.

The Main Reason Journals Reject Articles: No Argument

The main reason why editors and reviewers reject articles is because their authors either do not have an argument or do not state it properly. Gary Olson, a journal editor so good that he received a lifetime award for his work, stated that "one of the most common and frustrating problems" that editors experience is scholars' failure to state their argument "clearly and early in the article" (1997, 59). The "single most important thing you can do to increase" your chances of publication, he said, is to sharpen your article's argument (61). When you center your article on a single persuasive idea, you've taken a giant leap closer to publication.

Editors or reviewers may not mention the lack of an argument as a reason for rejection. They may instead state that the article is not original or significant, that it is disorganized, that it suffers from poor analysis, or that it "reads like a student paper." But the solution for all these problems lies in having an argument, stating it early and clearly, and then structuring your article around that argument.

But what exactly is an argument? How is it different from a topic? And how do you go about making one?

Part of the reason that unclear arguments are so common in academia is because the rhetoric of argument is notoriously difficult to teach. One book on the subject, jammed with various teaching techniques, carefully acknowledged that postcourse surveys revealed that each technique failed to improve student papers (Fulkerson 1996, 165). Stephen Toulmin invented a model of argument in the 1950s ([1958] 2003), asserting that a good argument has at least three parts: *grounds* (your data or evidence), a *claim* (what you aim to show), and a *warrant* (the assumptions or principles that link the claim to the data)— but it takes a long time to learn how to use his model. Finally, different fields use different terms for the same rhetorical move: some use *argument* and others use *thesis, hypothesis,* or *research question*—or sometimes *findings* or even *conclusion.*

So if you feel confused about what an argument is or how to make one, you're in excellent company. Let's dare to figure it out anyway.

UNDERSTANDING AND MAKING ARGUMENTS

Succinctly, an argument is discourse intended to persuade. You persuade someone by engaging that person's doubts and providing evidence to overcome those doubts. A journal

article, then, is a piece of writing that attempts to persuade a reader to believe something (or to believe something more strongly). In other words, a journal article is a coherent series of statements in which the author leads the reader from certain premises to a specific conclusion.

In the sciences, the subjective nature of the term *argument*—which seems to suggest that research is about beliefs, not facts—alarms some scholars. They prefer to talk about testing a "research question" or "hypothesis." However, an argument is merely an answered research question or confirmed hypothesis. That is, if the research question is, "Does *x* affect *y* when *z* is present?" the argument is *yes* (*x* affects *y* when *z* is present), *no* (*x* does not affect *y* when *z* is present), or *sometimes* (*x* affects *y* when *z* is present if . . .). Even in the social, health, behavioral, and natural science fields, aiming for an argument rather than a hypothesis will better enable you to write publishable articles.

In the humanities, the aggressive nature of the term *argument*—which seems to suggest that locked-down conclusions are more important than open exploration—also alarms some scholars. They insist that considering all aspects of a question is more important than answering it, since answers always limit possibilities. They prefer to meditate on a key term (like *beauty* or *shipwreck*), building slowly to some resonance. Increasingly, however, US humanities journals don't publish such meditative articles, perhaps because it's more fun to write an article without an argument than it is to read one. Even if you don't like making arguments, knowing more about them can increase your chances of publication success.

Meanwhile, those in critical theory question the terms themselves. Isn't all discourse an argument? Aren't all texts meant to persuade? Can we know for sure that anything is a fact? Indeed, this is part of what makes argument so difficult to teach. Definitions begin to blur; meaning begins to slip. Therefore, let me say that my interest here is pedagogical, not theoretical. I merely want to provide some useful ways of thinking about writing that enable you to get your work published, so I won't go further into the thorny thickets of argument theory. Instead, I will define it.

Argument Defined

The wonderful essayist Lynn Bloom said long ago that an article is focused "on a single significant idea supported with evidence carefully chosen and arranged" (1984, 481). Adapting that statement, I define the term *argument* as follows:

> An argument is (1) your journal article's single significant idea (2) stated in one or two sentences early and clearly in your article and (3) around which your article is organized, (4) emerging from or linked to some scholarly conversation and (5) supported with evidence to convince the reader of its validity.

What Is Your Argument Currently?

Your revision process is still at the early stage, and you may learn a lot more about argument in the next sections; but it can help if you read these sections with a draft of your argument in mind. For the sake of experimentation, try writing in one or two sentences what you understand your argument to be at this point. (If you're still debating between which of two papers to pick for this assignment, complete this exercise for both. That

will help you to pick the best one.) If you're not exactly sure what your main argument is, write in several.

What is my argument?	

How Do You Know whether You Have an Argument?

Being able to define the term *argument* is less important than knowing whether the journal article you're working on has one. The following tests can help you identify whether the statement you wrote in the box above is an argument. Your statement doesn't need to pass all these tests, but it should pass at least one of them. Keeping your argument in mind, read each test below and then, in the box that follows it, answer the question (checking the square boxes, rather than the round ones, is ideal).

Argument Tests

Agree/disagree test. One of the easiest ways to distinguish whether a statement is an argument is if you can coherently respond to it by saying "I agree" or "I disagree" (Ballenger 2003, 127). For instance, the statement "Toni Morrison is a feminist writer" is one with which you can agree or disagree. It's possible to imagine two people debating this point, perhaps based on African American critiques of the term *feminism* and Morrison's own claims. On the other hand, the statement "Toni Morrison is a writer" is not a debatable argument. Upon hearing that statement, no one is going to assert loudly, "I agree!" because no one would dispute it. So the evaluation of "feminist writer" requires evidence in order to persuade the reader, whereas the actuality "writer" does not. Likewise, the statement "Many California schoolchildren are bilingual" is not an argument. It is a statistical fact. No one who has lived in or studied California would dispute it. However, the statement "Bilingual children do better in school than monolingual children" is an argument (adapted from Feliciano 2001, 876). (Note that here and later when I say "adapted from," the material within quotation marks is not from the article cited but rather an invention of mine, sometimes leaping quite far from the author's actual arguments.) Many might be inclined to disagree with this statement and would need data to be convinced otherwise. Others might immediately agree and eagerly cite it to others in various discussions. Therefore, the statement passes the agree/disagree test and is an argument.

Does my statement pass the agree/disagree test?	☐ I think so ○ I don't think so ○ I'm not sure

Gut test. Another test is emotional. What happens when you make a statement of your argument aloud to others (or imagine doing so)? If you feel calm and serene, your statement probably isn't an argument. If, however, you feel a little on edge or even anxious, then it probably is an argument. That is, your body will tell you whether you're about to

take the risk of entering a dispute—elevating your heart rate and making your stomach clench. Someone making an argument is often gearing up to fight, anticipating others' attack, and the body can reflect this fight response.

Does my statement pass the gut test?	☐ I think so ○ I don't think so ○ I'm not sure

Immediate dispute test. Another test is relational. When I'm teaching a writing workshop, I often have participants express their argument aloud and ask the others to judge whether it's an argument. Often, the others respond either by nodding and saying, "Yes, that's an argument," or by looking puzzled and saying, "I'm not sure whether that's an argument." However, sometimes the author states the argument and someone immediately responds by saying, "No, no, that's wrong, because..." As soon as someone says that, I cut that person off and announce, "Next!" There's no better evidence that you have an argument than if people immediately start arguing with you. (It can work the other way as well: if people respond with terrific enthusiasm—saying, "That's so true!" or "I couldn't agree more!"—then it's probably an argument.)

Does my statement pass the immediate dispute test?	☐ I think so ○ I don't think so ○ I'm not sure

Puzzle answer test. Another test is intellectual. Is your statement the solution to a puzzle, an answer to a question that people have about the world, a human creation, or a human behavior? Is it an explanation, however partial, of something mysterious (Harvey 1994, 650)? For instance, many wonder about the causes of violence, environmental degradation, and human inequality and how best to end them. Many wonder about the nature of gender or sexuality. A few wonder whether Shakespeare really did write all the plays attributed to him or whether yoga helps all back injuries. An argument addresses a question that deserves an answer. If your statement is the answer to something the public or scholars have actively wondered about, you probably have an argument.

Does my statement pass the puzzle answer test?	☐ I think so ○ I don't think so ○ I'm not sure

Now, some of these tests may not work for you. The gut test won't work for you if you're supporting the consensus (or preternaturally calm). The immediate dispute test won't work if your argument is subtle rather than blunt. If you didn't get clarity from any of these tests, it may be better to turn from confirming tests to negating tests. Therefore, the following tests will help you determine whether the statement you wrote above is *not* an argument.

Tests for Statements That Masquerade as Arguments

Quite a few statements look like arguments but aren't. Disconcertingly, some statements *are* arguments but not The Argument, not the single significant idea that undergirds your journal article. Further, many times authors deploy the formulation "I argue that . . ." in their published article to emphasize an idea, not mark The Argument (e.g., writing

"Against the first objection, I argue that . . ." or "I argue that researchers still have a lot to learn"). It's all very confusing! The following tests can help you identify whether your statement is *not* The Argument of your journal article:

Topic test. When I ask novice authors to articulate their argument, they frequently state their topic instead (i.e., the subject of their article). Confusing the two is a major problem in classroom essays, which often roam around a topic rather than presenting a clear argument. One dead giveaway is a statement that starts with "I'm looking at," "I'm examining," "I'm exploring," or "I'm interested in." A sentence that begins that way is usually just naming a subject—a problem, solution, theory, object, text, thinker, artist—rather than taking a stand about it. As one small clue, who can disagree that you're looking at something?

Fortunately, if you push the statement of your topic, you can often get to an argument. So for instance, a *topic* is, "I'm looking at the role of carnivals in the life of small Midwestern towns"; an *argument* developed from that statement is, "By portraying a more diverse world, carnivals drove the flight of young people from small Midwestern towns." Similarly, a *topic* is, "I'm interested in the challenges faced by Koreans in Japan over the twentieth century"; an *argument* is, "The lower social position of Koreans in Japan over the twentieth century is due to the decolonization process ending Japan's occupation of Korea and the contradictory policies of the Japanese government toward Koreans in Japan" (adapted from Chung 2004). As these examples suggest, one mark of an argument is specificity.

Is my statement merely articulating a topic?	○ I think so ☐ I don't think so ○ I'm not sure
If so, how can I reword it?	

Observation test. Another mistake often made by novice authors when stating their argument is that they state an observation instead (i.e., what they have noticed about their subject). Authors say things like "I argue that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) has a non-linear chronological structure" or "I argue that many of the older men in our study had lost their ability to hear high frequencies." Distinguishing observations from arguments can be quite tricky, as some observations are very sophisticated and not fully separable from arguments. But one main sign that a statement is only an observation is that it doesn't explain anything. The statement can't stand well alone; rather, it demands interpretation. Why does it matter that the novel has an unusual chronological structure? Or that older men are not able to hear high frequencies (the frequencies of women's and children's voices)?

Fortunately, many arguments start with observations; if authors interpret that observation, they can arrive at an argument. So for instance, maybe you conducted field research in which you studied blogs whose authors are living with lupus and then conducted

interviews with them, observing that they "view themselves as a distinct group with an experience so unique that others cannot possibly understand it, and thus they share less with those without the disease." Okay, that's thought-provoking, but what does it demonstrate? How do we interpret this different level of sharing? To get from this observation to an argument, you would have to interpret it, perhaps arguing that

> the quality of information garnered in doctor-patient encounters has long been a region of study. I argue that health practitioners receive the least and worst information possible from those with lupus because of the patients' perception that others cannot comprehend their experience. Further research is needed to determine whether instituting more online communication between health practitioners and those with lupus, approaching them in an environment where they are used to being more disclosing, would yield better and more complete information. (Adapted from Pony 2016)

Is my statement just an observation?	○ I think so ☐ I don't think so ○ I'm not sure
If so, how can I reword it?	

Obvious test. Sometimes when articulating their argument, novice authors formulate a statement that is obvious—so broad that any reasonable person would never dispute it. They say things like "I argue that colonialism had a lot of bad effects," "I demonstrate that sexism harms girls," or "I show how the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* is racist." These statements aren't wrong, but they represent beliefs so common that almost no academic would debate them, or they mention characteristics so apparent that almost anyone could notice them. When you're an undergraduate, it can seem as though the purpose of a paper is to say indisputable things like this, but the purpose of a journal article is the precise opposite: to say things that at least some scholars might contest. Further, as these examples suggest, novice writers wanting to right a social wrong often make such arguments. Righting wrongs is vital work, but the purpose of journal articles is to help us understand injustice better, not simply to declare that it exists. Vast swathes of scholarly research are dedicated to uncovering the roots of and solutions to injustice; to be a part of it, you need to add something new.

Unfortunately, getting from obvious arguments to subtle ones isn't easy. You need to proceed from a vague and general claim to a clear and specific one, which often requires deeper research. For instance, instead of saying "I argue that colonialism was bad and shouldn't have happened," you need to say something like "I argue that British colonizers went to great lengths to portray themselves as Christian civilizers in Kenya during the 1950s and to tarnish the Kikuyu as barbaric primitives, despite committing much greater atrocities during the Mau Mau Uprising" (based on the work of Elkins 2005). The first

statement is just an assertion—a vague, general statement with which almost no scholar would disagree—but the second is specific and interesting.

Is my statement obvious?	○ I think so ☐ I don't think so ○ I'm not sure
If so, how can I reword it?	

Variable test. When I ask novice authors to articulate their argument, they frequently state their variables instead (i.e., the attributes of the subject that are in relation). They say things like "I'm looking at how *x* affects *z*," "I'm arguing that *x* and *z* are correlated," or "I contend that factors *a, b,* and *c* either facilitate or hinder *z*." Such statements are close to being arguments, but they aren't arguments. The nature of the variables' relation—positive or negative, helping or hindering, negligible or strong—goes unstated. You must state *how* *x* affects *z*. So if a mere statement of *variables* is, "I show how rates of gun ownership affect death rates," an *argument* is, "Gun ownership increases death rates." Or, to state a journal article type of argument, "I argue that gun control is vital to the safety of white Americans, not African Americans, because I found that the high levels of white gun ownership are positively correlated with suicides among whites, but that the low levels of black gun ownership are not correlated with reduced homicides of blacks" (adapted from the work of Reeves and Holmes 2015). One sign that a statement is about variables instead of an argument is whether, as in the preceding examples, it includes the words *how* or *why*. Another sign is people's response; if they respond to your statement with "Oh, interesting, what *did* you find?" or "Oh, interesting, how *does x* affect *z*?" it's not yet an argument.

Fortunately, you're very close to an argument in such a case; you can get to it by stating exactly how or why the variables are related. So for instance, a statement of *variables* is, "We argue that individuals' psychological state impacts their perception of tinnitus"; an *argument* is, "We argue that [PTSD] affects individuals' ability to cope with painful disorders [more negatively than other psychological states] because of our finding that individuals with tinnitus and concurrent PTSD reported significantly . . . more handicapping tinnitus effects when compared with individuals with other psychological conditions" (Fagelson and Smith 2016, 541). At first, it may seem as though the first statement is an argument. It isn't vague, and it lists variables. But it doesn't specify which psychological state is being studied or how it affects the perception of tinnitus—we don't know whether the argument might be that happy people are more affected by pain or that those with obsessive-compulsive disorder might be better at documenting their pain. The second statement really is an argument, clarifying the variables and their specific relation. One trick to reframing a statement of variables into an argument is to replace words that don't have valence (i.e., a negative or positive charge) with words that do. So instead of saying "US radio station DJs in the 1950s gave certain messages about race and gender," replace the word *certain* with a positive word like *radical* or a negative word like *damaging*.

Finally, note that you can't publish an article arguing that many variables are determinative. A student once said to me that she had read many articles about girls' education in

a West African country, and each argued for a different variable as the most important in ensuring that girls had access to education (e.g., class, region, siblings). She said that she wanted to write an article arguing that all of them were important, plus another twenty. I told her that no doubt she was right, but that she'd never be able to publish an original research article stating that. Saying that everything is important is not how research moves forward.

Is my statement just naming variables?	○ I think so	☐ I don't think so	○ I'm not sure
If so, how can I reword it?			

Gap/overlooked test. When I ask academics to articulate their argument, they frequently state their claim for significance instead. They say things like "I argue that there is a gap in the literature" or "I argue that x is more important than previously thought." The latter frequently takes the shape of "X is viewed incorrectly and therefore is misunderstood" (or overlooked, understudied, undervalued, overvalued). Yes, such statements are types of argument, and should be included in your article if true—but they're not The Argument. Rather, they're claims for significance, claims about the value of the article as a whole—that it fills a research gap, brings attention to unjustly ignored subjects, rectifies incorrect observations, or examines the right things in the right ways. One sign that a statement is a claim for significance instead of an argument is if it's a value judgment, either about the value of your subject of study or about scholarly gaps and oversights. Another sign is if you don't need your whole article to substantiate your statement. If you can address it in a paragraph in the first few pages and never mention it again, it's not your argument.

Fortunately, it's often just one step from your claim for significance to your argument—just state what backs your claim for significance. What does your fill-the-gap scholarship show? Why is your subject important? For instance, a claim for significance is, "No one has looked at the femme fatale character in film noir, even though she is quite fascinating," while an argument is, "The femme fatale character in film noir is not merely a male prop but a woman who controls her own destiny" (adapted from Bronfen 2004, 106–7). The first statement is about the gap in scholarship (claim for significance); the second is about interpreting content in the film (argument). Likewise, a claim for significance is, "The development of democracy in Malawi over the 1990s illuminates the struggles that states face in democratizing when a significant proportion of the population is illiterate"; an argument is, "This study of 1990s Malawian elections reveals that illiteracy is a major obstacle to voting and thus democratization."

Is my statement a claim for significance?	○ I think so	☐ I don't think so	○ I'm not sure
If so, what is my argument?			

Speculative test. Another argument articulation error frequently made by novice authors is that they state speculations, not arguments; that is, they state what they conjecture rather than prove. Your statement should not be, as a professor in one of my workshops once said, "applied wishes." An argument can't be what you think should be done in the world because of your research. One form of this problem is a statement that is a policy recommendation. Having policy recommendations in your article is fine, even good, particularly in the conclusion; but a recommendation emerges from the argument and is speculative. Let me alter some of the preceding examples to demonstrate this. Those writing the article about gun ownership might recommend, "I argue that African American members of Congress should stop drafting gun control bills." That's a policy recommendation, not The Argument. Those writing the article about tinnitus and PTSD might recommend, "I argue that the US government's Veterans Administration should provide better support to soldiers with PTSD being tested for tinnitus." That's also a policy recommendation.

Another form of this argument articulation error is a statement that is a prediction. No human being can provide evidence for something that *will* happen. You can speculate about the future, but you can't prove what will happen—therefore, you can't make arguments about it. One sign that you have a speculative argument is the use of the future tense: "I argue that the United States will be better off if it . . ." or "I argue that if the United States does *x*, then it will have *y*." Another sign is if your statement of your argument contains the words *if*, *must*, or *should*. For instance, "Schools should listen to students more" is not an argument. Again, speculations are fine; they simply can't be your argument.

Fortunately, someone with a speculative statement often does have an argument, but just hasn't stated that argument. Go back to your article and look at what backs your policy recommendation or speculation. The basis of that recommendation or speculation is often your argument.

Is my statement speculative?	◯ I think so ☐ I don't think so ◯ I'm not sure
If so, what is my argument?	

How Do You Shape a Nonargument into an Argument?

Here are two imagined examples of authors reshaping their nonargumentative statement into an argument, step by step. Since this shaping often does happen in conversation, I've formatted these examples as skits.

HumInt Reshaping an Argument Skit
AUTHOR: I want to tell you about a new book I'm reading.
FRIEND: That's not even a topic.

AUTHOR: That was just me winding up! Wait a second. . . The purpose of this article is to analyze Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Annie John*.

FRIEND: That's a project, not an argument.

AUTHOR: Oh, right. Um, Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Annie John* is a brilliant postcolonial novel that should be studied more.

FRIEND: So true! But I think that's a claim for significance.

AUTHOR: Right, right. This article uncovers what we can learn about the colonial experience from Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Annie John*, set in 1950s Antigua.

FRIEND: That's a topic, and a vague one.

AUTHOR: You're right. Okay, Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Annie John* shows how the colonial experience shaped familial relations.

FRIEND: Interesting! But I think that's a statement of variables, not an argument.

AUTHOR: Hmm. How about: Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Annie John* shows how colonial education shaped familial relations.

FRIEND: That's just a sharpened statement of variables.

AUTHOR: Aargh! Okay, Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Annie John* details how Annie John's British education increasingly alienates her from her mother.

FRIEND: That's an observation about the book, not an argument.

AUTHOR: (*after a sigh and a long pause*) In Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Annie John*, colonial education breeds generational alienation.

FRIEND: Nice! That's an argument. But it could use a little more detail, right?

AUTHOR: Yes. In Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Annie John*, the contempt for local knowledge that colonial education breeds in the new generation causes familial alienation, as the educated younger generation learns disdain for the older generation.

FRIEND: Now, that's an argument!

SciQua Reshaping an Argument Skit

AUTHOR: I'm interested in studying sexual minorities.

FRIEND: Come on! Didn't you read Belcher's chapter?! That's not even a topic.

AUTHOR: Sorry. Okay, I analyze the mental health of sexual minorities in the United States.

FRIEND: That's a research project, not an argument.

AUTHOR: I'm looking at rates of suicide among US sexual minorities.

FRIEND: Hello? Scholar, meet topic.

AUTHOR: Less of the sarcasm, please!

FRIEND: Sorry. Resetting for supportive friend mode.

AUTHOR: Okay, thank you. How about: rates of suicide among US sexual minorities have been studied before, but always poorly; this article rectifies previous errors.

FRIEND: That's cool! But I think that's a claim for significance.

AUTHOR: Oops. Right. Rates of suicide among US sexual minorities must be addressed by the government.

FRIEND: So true. But that's a policy recommendation.

AUTHOR: Oops. Many lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals join LGB communities looking for support.

FRIEND: Hey, did I tell you that my friend Vinay is trying to start a group for queer students of color here?

AUTHOR: Don't distract me! That's off topic.

FRIEND: Oops. Well, I think that you're just making an <u>observation</u> anyway.

AUTHOR: Aargh. Okay, this article suggests how the percentage of sexual minorities in a community affects that community's suicide rates.

FRIEND: Interesting! How does it affect . . . hey, my question about "how" is a sign that it's a <u>statement of variables</u>.

AUTHOR: Oops. Participation in LGB communities affects LGB individuals' suicide rates.

FRIEND: That's just a <u>sharpened statement of variables</u>. You dropped the "how," but I still have the same question: how does it affect suicide rates?

AUTHOR: LGB communities reduce LGB individuals' suicide rates.

FRIEND: Yes!! That's an <u>argument</u>. But wait, can you say that? Isn't that assuming that correlation equals causation?

AUTHOR: Good catch. LGB individuals with high rates of participation in LGB communities have lower rates of suicide.

FRIEND: Wow, that's really great to hear, but are you sure? How can you prove that? Wait—my questions are a sign it's an <u>argument</u>!

Deciding about Argument

Your revision process is still at the early stage, but given what you know at this point about your article, what is your argument?

> Have I learned anything so far that can help me reformulate my statement as an argument? What is my argument now?

How Do You Create an Argument?

It may be that you got through the previous sections and know that you don't have a clear argument or any argument, but aren't sure how to construct one. In that case, you can try out some argument templates. Of course, all templates are reductive, straitjacketing some possibilities and eliminating others. But I like templates because they give you a norm to play with, recast, and even resist. Without rules, there can be no revolution.

Posusta's and Simpson's Argument Templates

The first person to invent an argument phrasal template, as far as I know, is Steven Posusta. After teaching in a UCLA composition tutoring lab as an English major, Posusta wrote a hilarious sixty-two-page book for undergraduates titled *Don't Panic: The Procrastinator's Guide to Writing an Effective Term Paper (You Know Who You Are)* (1996). The aim of the book, according to its jacket blurbs, is to provide the "cool tricks" and "fast fixes" that can enable a student to read Posusta's text in one evening and "hand in your paper tomorrow." As you can imagine, *Don't Panic* has inspired horror in some corners (R. Davis and Shadle 2000) and admiration in others (some teaching assistants have used it in composition classes after learning about it from me). In it, Posusta provides a phrasal template for creating a

one-sentence argument, which he calls the "Formula for an Instant Thesis" (1996, 12). It goes like this (the below is verbatim from his book):

#1. Although (general statement, opposite opinion)
#2. nevertheless (thesis, your idea)
#3. because (examples, evidence, #1, #2, #3, etc.). (12)

Of course, some arguments cannot be expressed using Posusta's thesis maker, which was intended for undergraduate papers, not journal articles. It works better for contesting current theories rather than confirming them. Further, few published articles state an argument in one sentence like this; even fewer use these exact words to signal their argument. All the same, rhetorical structures like this back the arguments of many articles.

I like Posusta's Instant Thesis formula, because it distills the requirements of academic discourse to an easily understood essence. It reminds authors that they must do three things to get published: (1) cite others' ideas (although), (2) take a stand (nevertheless), and (3) provide evidence (because). If you think it could be useful, try it out.

Other scholars have worked on argument phrasal templates, including the literature professor Erik Simpson, who arrived at a "magic thesis statement" for undergraduate literary essays: "By looking at [x], we can see [y], which most people don't see; this is important because [z]" (2013). Simpson's aim with this template is to help authors arrive at what he considers to be the essence of a good argument: saying something "a little strange." His template is a useful alternative to Posusta's, because it doesn't foreground contradicting previous scholarship.

Other templates exist as well. The authors of the best text for undergraduates on argument present many (Graff and Birkenstein 2014). Scholars in the humanities used to be told to choose two theorists and point out how one is better than the other, or how one has the better idea. You may find it interesting to ask some faculty whether they know of any templates like this in your field.

Belcher's Argument Templates

If Posusta's Instant Thesis Maker doesn't seem to fit what you want to say, here's my version of it for journal articles, to make it allow for more possibilities.

#1. Other scholars debate/argue/assume/ignore [a problem].
#2. In relationship to that debate, argument, assumption, or gap, I argue/demonstrate/suggest/agree that [y is the case],
#3. based on my qualitative study/quantitative study/experiment/archival research/fieldwork/textual analysis of [my evidence].

Likewise, if Simpson's "magic thesis" doesn't quite fit, another, broader variation is

Through my study of [topic], I found that [evidence], which suggests that [idea] is true.

Do any of the preceding templates help me articulate my argument better? If so, what is my argument now?

Argument Drawing

Since argument templates can limit thought, some find that sketching ideas out, diagramming them, or storyboarding them can provide authors a better idea of their argument (Buckley and Waring 2013). You can map or diagram your article by writing down key words or phrases and drawing arrows between them to indicate the relationships between various theories, topics, and texts. You can storyboard it by writing your article out like a cartoon, with panels, characters (e.g., portraying problems as villains taken down by you or other scholars), and thought bubbles. You have several options for performing such an exercise. You can make it social by drawing it on a whiteboard with others. You can use some of the online argument-mapping software (e.g., Rationale or Argunet). Or you can try playing with your ideas below.

Drawing My Argument

Being in Argument Crisis

If you have an argument that you can work with, no matter how weak or awkwardly formulated, you can skip this paragraph. Or if you're a little uncertain about your argument but mostly feel that it's okay, you can skip this paragraph. If, however, you're now certain that you don't have an argument and, further, that the draft you're working on can't support an argument, don't get discouraged! When I present an argument in my workshops, at least 10 percent of the participants sneak up to me afterward and whisper, as if confessing to murder, "I don't have an argument!" That's okay, it happens to the best of us. Truly.

You have a couple of options. I recommend that if you haven't done yet done so, talk with someone in your field about your topic and see whether you can work up an argument with that person. If that doesn't work, I recommend turning to "Week 0: Writing Your Article from Scratch" and trying out the instructions there. That chapter gives information about the mysterious process of where we get our arguments and what motivates them, as well as how to spot opportunities for adding to a discipline and cultivating questions that deserve answers. All scholars, whether experienced or inexperienced, do their work haunted by this mystery.

Am I in argument crisis?	☐ I think I'm okay ○ I think I don't have an argument ○ I'm not sure
If I am, what will I do?	

How Do You Make Strong Arguments?

Once you learn to recognize what makes a statement an argument, you can learn how to make strong arguments. Certain aspects of a strong argument are surprising.

When some people hear the word *argument*, they think of two people yelling, with neither person listening to the other or conceding legitimate points. This is exactly the kind of argument you don't want in your article. An argument is about the search for answers through exchange, a way of thinking through a problem. To have a successful argument, you don't need to annihilate scholarly opponents. That is, you don't need a bulletproof argument or unassailable evidence. Most authors know of evidence against their argument and proceed to publish it anyway. A difficult truth is that those issues most worth arguing over almost never have all the evidence on one side or the other. If you have taken up an argument that has no compelling evidence against it, you probably haven't chosen a publishable argument. In the humanities, scholars have often preferred interesting wrong arguments than dull right ones. Frederic Jameson's claim (1986, 69) that "all third world texts are necessarily . . . national allegories" exemplifies a generative wrong argument (it's impossible that all these texts are any one thing).

So one technique for constructing a strong argument is to build in a consideration of opposing voices. Use counterarguments to modify and sharpen your argument. Don't ignore those scholars who have published opposing arguments—cite them. You may want to take them on directly and dismantle the architecture of their side. That's fine. But you don't have to. Indeed, you don't need to cite them at length, attack their ideas wholesale, or nitpick over minute problems in their research to prove your point. Sometimes strong arguments can consist of showing how the other side is wrong, but mostly they consist of showing how you are right. Anticipate and vitiate possible rebuttals to your argument.

Another technique is not just to acknowledge the limits of your argument but to put them to good use. This is a mark of the best academic writers. For instance, one of the articles published in the academic journal I managed, *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, is an excellent example of a confidently written article with a clear argument that does not silence all opposition. In it, Eric Avila (1998) analyzes different communities' views of the Los Angeles freeway. The article has three sections: in the first, Avila argues that Anglos loved the freeway, and in the second that Chicana/os (now Chicanx) hate the freeway for destroying their neighborhood. In the third section, however, he notes a group that doesn't fit his argument—gay Chicanos, who largely love the freeway as a way out of the space of patriarchy. This final section is what makes his article great: he shows where his argument breaks down in an interesting manner. In the social, health, behavioral, and natural science fields, such openness often shows in authors' descriptions of the limitations of their study. The authors analyze their data as supporting their hypothesis, but admit that variations in sample or variables might have delivered a different conclusion.

Novice writers sometimes ask me, "Why would I want to include evidence that weakens my own position?" The answer, as these techniques suggest, is that it makes your article stronger. If you ignore research that conflicts with your claims, you must assume that the reader won't know of that research, a risky assumption at best.

In my own experience, some of my best work has emerged from being uncertain about

which side of my argument was right. I published an article queer-reading the lifelong partnership between two seventeenth-century Ethiopian women in an early African text (Belcher 2016). As I wrote, I kept imagining the wildly different responses and interpretations of traditional Ethiopians, queer Ethiopians, queer theorists, and American LGBTIQA activists, taking into account their best points. Now, the most common comment I receive about the article is that it is "persuasive." If so, the validity of opposing points pushed me to make the best argument possible.

Have I built in a consideration of opposing viewpoints?	☐ I think so ◯ I don't think so ◯ I'm not sure	
If not, how will I do that?		

How Do You Write an Argument-Driven Article?

Once you have an argument, you're still not done. A problem of many unpublished articles is that they're not argument driven. Sure, such articles may have an argument, and even have one announced early and clearly, but that argument isn't connected to what's going on in the rest of the article. Its relation to the data and evidence remains unarticulated and unclear to the reader. So—and this is extremely important—don't fall into the trap of letting your evidence organize your article rather than your argument about that evidence.

The best advice for avoiding this trap is given by Tim Stowell of the UCLA Linguistics Department. He tells his doctoral students that when writing a journal article, they should write not like a detective collecting evidence but like a lawyer arguing a case. A detective's report is long, documenting all the items found at the crime scene, all the interviews with the dozens of persons somehow related to the crime, and all the suspects considered, and then noting that John Doe was arrested. By contrast, a lawyer's brief states, "I argue that the defendant murdered his partner for the insurance money, based on evidence from ballistics and two eyewitness accounts." The detective's report is organized by evidence; the lawyer's brief is organized by argument. A detective is keenly aware of the incompleteness of the evidence; the lawyer is forced to act based on that incomplete evidence. To write an argument-driven article, think like a lawyer and present evidence that supports your case; cross-examine the evidence that doesn't support your case; ignore evidence that neither contradicts nor supports your case; and make sure that the jury always knows whom you're accusing of what and why. One easy test of whether your article is poorly organized by evidence instead of argument is to review it for the following: (1) it presents every bit of evidence you analyzed to arrive at your conclusion, and/or (2) it presents that evidence in the order you found it. In this case, you've written a report, not a publishable article.

Now of course, when conducting your research, you very much need to be a detective. After all, a strong court case cannot be built on slim or shoddy evidence or a failure to make sense of complicated evidence. But you need to know when to be a detective and when to be a lawyer. So perhaps the best way to put this advice is, "Think like a detective, write like a lawyer."

Let's study an example of this point on a small scale, using different drafts of an abstract that two scholars invented for one article. As you can see, the first abstract is organized by the evidence and the second by the argument (Swales and Feak 2004, 282–83). Notice how much easier it is to read and understand the second version.

> **Evidence organized.** A count of sentence connectors in 12 academic papers produced 70 different connectors. These varied in frequency from 62 tokens (*however*) to single occurrences. Seventy-five percent of the 467 examples appeared in sentence-initial position. However, individual connectors varied considerably in position reference. Some (e.g., *in addition*) always occurred initially; in other cases (e.g., *for example, therefore*), they were placed after the subject more than 50% of the time. These findings suggest that a search for general rules for connector position may not be fruitful.

> **Argument organized.** Although sentence connectors are a well-recognized feature of academic writing, little research has been undertaken on their positioning. In this study, we analyze the position of 467 connectors found in a sample of 12 research papers. Seventy-five percent of the connectors occurred at the beginning of sentences. However, individual connectors varied greatly in positional preference. Some, such as *in addition*, only occurred initially; others, such as *therefore*, occurred initially in only 40% of the cases. These preliminary findings suggest that general rules for connector position may prove elusive.

Both abstracts state the argument, but only one is argument driven. The strong second abstract is well organized, announcing its topic and significance in the first sentence, its method in the second sentence, its findings in the three following sentences, and its argument that sentence connectors likely do not have general rules in the last sentence. The weak first abstract is not well organized—providing no context, reams of unexplained data, and an unconnected argument. It is organized by the evidence. Now, imagine having to read article upon article organized as this abstract is. Welcome to a journal editor's life! Many submissions come in that are organized by evidence, not argument. As a result, you can make a huge difference in your publication rate by organizing your article around your argument.

Why is this a common problem? People analyzing texts or conducting ethnographic field studies are particularly likely to write evidence-organized articles. That's because the evidence is more real to these authors than their analysis of it. If you admire a canonical author or artist, you may spend much of your article just summarizing the many beauties of that person's creations. If you spent a year as a participant-observer in a village or a corporation, it seems incredibly reductive to pick some argument and force your evidence to fit that tiny glass slipper. You have dozens of hours of recordings, thousands of hours of observation, and more insights than a lifetime's worth of communication. Such authors when told, "Your article is evidence organized!" often plaintively respond, "But you just don't understand! I have to represent all the extraordinary things about this author/artist/ village/corporation. And besides, it took me three months to transcribe these recordings, because voice recognition couldn't deal with the language or accent—it cost me so much time that I've got to use as much of it as I can!" But publishable articles are argumentative, not representative. Don't represent all the information you have collected and abandon the reader to making the links. Evidence must be subordinated.

When I make this point about not writing evidence-organized articles, my social science students sometimes counter with the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's famous insistence on "thick description." A student will say, "In my field, it's okay to give a lot of description in a journal article." I always counter by saying, "Fine; bring me one published in the last year in a US journal." No one has been able to do that yet. And experts have long warned against evidence-organized articles, even Geertz, in his very article about "thick description":

> The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its authors' ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement—what manner of men are these? . . . It is not worth it, as Thoreau said, to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar. (Geertz 1973, 16)

So, don't count the cats in Zanzibar. Don't include streams of data without providing any argument. Make sure that your ideas about your evidence are organizing the article, not the evidence itself.

Is my article argument organized?	☐ I think so ○ I don't think so ○ I'm not sure
If not, how will I do that?	

Arguments against Argument

Scholars occasionally tell me that authors in their field don't need to have an argument. Rather, they can explore a series of questions without favoring any answers. Here is my response: use of the phrase "I argue that" has seen a spectacular increase in books ever since 1965, almost doubling in frequency every year, according to Google Books Ngram Viewer. Doubling. Every year. Whatever was true in the past is true no longer. A few social, health, behavioral, and natural science articles may not state an argument in their introduction, but nowadays almost all of them state the argument in their abstract—which is as early as you can get! Further, just because an argument is stated as a question doesn't mean it isn't an argument. Often, the phrasing of the question is argumentative, and it's clear from the outset what the answer is likely to be. For instance, let's say the question posed in an article's introduction is, "Do US students who retain their immigrant culture have lower school leaving rates?" The positive words *retain* and *lower* signal the argument. In the humanities, it can get a bit trickier. In heavily theoretical fields, a premium is placed on asking questions and opening up possibilities rather than tying them off neatly with definitive answers. But many questions are simply masked arguments. Insisting that some text or moment cannot be reduced is often the argument.