



AP* English Language and Composition

Writing the Persuasive Essay Assembling an Argument

Student Packet



Writing the Persuasive Essay: Assembling an Argument Student Activity

Introduction

One third of the AP* English Language and Composition Exam will require you to write a persuasive essay. The good news is that this is your opportunity to use all of the skills and clever tactics that you have learned from reading established writers all year long. Even more good news is that steadily over the past few years, the writers of the exam have tried to make the persuasive prompt more and more “high school friendly;” in other words, you will get a topic that you, a young adult in high school, can answer.

The Five Canons of Rhetoric

Often the hardest part of writing a persuasive essay is beginning. The first of the five canons of rhetoric is called *inventio*, or **invention**. This is the point where you brainstorm, pre-write, use graphic organizers, etc. to plot out ideas for your essay. Once you know the evidence you are going to use, the essay is much easier to write because the hardest part is done—thinking of what to write and how to convince your audience.

The second canon is *dispositio*, or **arrangement**. In the Classical (with a capital ‘C’) Ages, rhetoric was performed before an audience that anticipated a particular order to the speeches. Speakers, or *rhetors*, studied a set pattern, wrote and practiced their speeches, and performed them in public in something approaching the way we think of trained actors performing today. Arguably, this should be the easiest of the five canons because it is a set pattern, yet structuring the essay trips up more than its fair share of students.

Third is *elocutio*, or speaking. Again, Classically speaking, this refers to how the *rhetor* performs the speech, but for modern purposes we call this **style**. Speeches were to be grammatically correct, clear, appropriate for their subject and audience, and “ornamented.” No doubt you recognize having been instructed by your teacher to do the first three. Ornamentation refers to the unusual uses of language that draw in and hold your audience, so this is your chance to use figurative language, avoid cliché, and be the new Twain or Hemingway or King.

The fourth canon is *memoria*: memory. Ancient *rhetors* memorized their speeches with the help of various methods of arrangement and study, and while this might seem like a canon that you, the modern essay-writing student, could ignore, you would do so at your peril. *Memoria* also involves the wide body of **examples** and knowledge of your subject that establish your credibility as an author. Every anecdote, every fact, every allusion you employ comes from memory, or that which you have learned. This is where your hours watching the news and reading snooty, east coast literary journals named after dead white guys pay off. (Or you could simply read the local newspaper and stay current.)



The final canon is *pronuntiatio*, or **delivery**. As new means of delivering a speech have developed, this canon has evolved right along with them. Essentially, the delivery deals with the method of presenting the material; fortunately, the method has already been chosen in advance. You will not perform a monologue, make a film, compose a poem, or interpret your position through dance; you will write an essay.

Activity One: Understanding the Prompt

Read the following prompt and answer the questions that follow:

A recent survey of the top 500 colleges found that fully 10% of admissions officers confessed to looking at social-networking sites to evaluate prospective students. Of those, more than a third said that what they read online negatively impacted their decision to admit; in contrast, only a quarter said their view changed for the better. While the overwhelming majority of the colleges have no official policy regarding the reading of social-networking sites, they admit that there is no clear boundary.

The dangers are plenty, and they are not limited to disqualification for college admission. Attorneys regularly use information gleaned on the Internet to prosecute criminal and civil suits against minors. In 2007, a vindictive mom concocted an online hoax that drove her daughter's "ex-best friend," a 13-year-old girl, to commit suicide. With so many potential threats online, the question becomes, then, should minors be allowed to post personal internet content about themselves or their friends?

Consider both sides of the issue. Then, using appropriate evidence, write an essay in which you evaluate the pros and cons of allowing minors to create personal web pages, and indicate why you find one position more persuasive than the other.

1. What is the subject of the paragraph and prompt?
2. What are the tasks of the prompt?
3. Where will the evidence for support come from?



Activity Two: Brainstorming Ideas

Fill out the chart to help you evaluate both sides of the argument and to develop ideas for supporting those points.

| Reasons to allow minors to create personal web pages | Evidence to support your claim | Type of Appeal |
|--|---|----------------------------|
| <i>Minors' primarily use for web pages to discover their world and themselves.</i> | <i>Fact/Statistic: According to watchdog groups the average blogger is a teenage girl who communicates with 5-10 friends.</i> | <i>logical and ethical</i> |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

| Reasons not to allow minors to create personal pages | Evidence to support your claim | Type of Appeal |
|--|--|------------------------------|
| <i>Peer pressure often makes people post things they later regret.</i> | <i>Anecdotal: Current media campaign to keep teens from posting revealing personal photos.</i> | <i>logical and emotional</i> |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |



Activity Three: Writing the Thesis Statement

What is the topic?

Make a general statement about it.

Now write a thesis statement in which you take a position you will defend with appropriate evidence.

- Look at the pre-writing you have done.
- What is your position on the topic?
- Remember that the task demands that you examine and evaluate *both sides* of the issue.

| |
|--|
| (I believe that) Minors should _____ |
| (write your position for or against) |
| because _____ |
| (give a GENERAL statement of your reasoning) |
| _____. |

FYI: First Person Personal Pronouns

The jury is out on using “I” in an essay. Many teachers discourage their students from using it, even going so far as marking down papers that contain “I.” After all, even when you write a rhetorical analysis in third person about another author’s work, “I believe” or “I think” is implied because it’s what you wrote when you thought about the topic; it is therefore redundant (some teachers claim) to use the first person.

On the other hand, first person is a legitimate writing tool. In many cases it personalizes an argument, making that which is cold and clinical warmer and more palatable. Furthermore, a great many of the texts used by the exam itself are first person explorations of a topic. Ultimately, you will have to decide whether or not to write in first person based on your reading of the prompt and your evaluation of the topic’s seriousness, but take heart in this: the reader of your AP* exam has been instructed to reward you for your argument, not penalize you for your style choice.



Activity Four: Writing the Introduction

The introduction to the paper is your opportunity to capture the reader’s attention, to give some general information about the subject, and to provide the “road map” for your essay—your thesis statement.

Here are some strategies that you might use to begin your introductory paragraph. You can begin with:

- a short anecdote that deals with the “big idea” of your argument
- a concession
- an interesting or controversial fact or statistic
- a question or several questions that will be answered in your argument
- relevant background material
- an analogy or image that you can sustain (revisit) throughout the argument
- a definition of a term or idea that is central to your argument

1. What kind of introduction strategy (from the choices above) might you use to begin this essay?

2. Choose one and write a “trial” introduction. You may want to revise or change this once you have written the essay. You should end the introduction with your thesis statement from Activity Three.



Activity Five: Writing the Persuasive Essay

Below is a sample persuasive essay based on the prompt in the box. Read over it and think about how the essay is organized and what kinds of strategies are used to defend the claim, which is made in the thesis statement.

Recently, several states have enacted legislation to limit the use of cellular phones in public places. Their reasoning was simple: cell phones are dangerous. Write an essay in which you defend, challenge, or qualify the lawmakers' assertion.

Introduction: As states initiate more and more strict legislation of cell phone use, the greater public seems to find ever more foolish things to do with their devices. From text messaging while driving to blatant disregard of safety warnings, one conclusion seems inescapable: cell phones are, indeed, dangerous tools.

Body paragraph 1: Topic sentence (which may include a concession/ counterargument): Only “other people” do idiotic things, not rational people like us.

Evidence 1 to support claim: Only the most foolhardy and irresponsible members of society would take their eyes off the road and their hands off the wheel while driving to read and text on their mobile phones. **Explanation of how evidence 1 supports claim:**

After all, when operating a roughly one ton machine at speeds regularly in excess of 20mph, “we” would never allow ourselves to flaunt the laws of common sense.

Transition to next idea: Unfortunately, we have all been guilty at some point of ignoring the fundamentals of common sense because we do not believe bad things can happen to us. **Evidence 2 to support claim (This should be the same type of**

evidence): Something as simple as reaching for an open soft drink container can perilously divert our attention from the road; therefore, an engaging conversation about a legal brief, a homework assignment, even a particularly juicy piece of gossip can be just as deadly. **Explanation of how evidence 2 supports claim:** We can safely assume that with the exception of getting directions to a particular destination, few if any conversations are about the road conditions around us. Cell phones are a dangerous distraction.

For your use, not for the essay:

Note the type of evidence you use here: Anecdotal evidence about talking and driving.

Body paragraph 2: Transition to the next paragraph/ topic sentence (which may include a concession/ counterargument): Putting aside abuses of common sense, the question of public health must be addressed as well; cell phone users risk exposure to potentially harmful doses of microwave radiation. **Evidence 3 to support claim:** The federal government does issue maximum allowances for cellular phones' microwave emissions, and current models stay well within those regulations. Still, cell phone manufacturers and communications experts alike recommend using wired ear-buds rather than holding the devices against the head for prolonged periods of time because—let's face it—radiation is radiation. **Explanation of how evidence 3 supports claim:** If you hold a minimally shielded microwave emitting device against your head (in other words, if you use a cell phone like a normal person) you risk your future health. **Transition to next idea:** The most popular alternative to speaking directly into the phone is not much better. **Evidence 4 to support claim:** Even the Bluetooth capable headsets do, by design, transmit and receive a signal. **Explanation of how evidence 4 supports claim:** If we grant that a cellular device's microwave transmission may be potentially harmful to the outside of our heads, then it does not follow that we should instead put it inside our ears.

For your use, not for the essay:

Note the type of evidence you use here: facts about the dangers of microwave radiation.

Conclusion: Whether it is because of handheld use while driving or ignorance of the dangers of unshielded radiation, the federal government is absolutely in the right to regulate cell phone use in public. It is a fact that cell phones have saturated society to the point where even elementary school children regularly use them—they are simply too entrenched in daily life to ban outright; however, efforts must be enacted to control their public use to protect society against the reckless, and to protect society's health against a poorly recognized danger.



Template for Writing the Persuasive Essay

Introduction: (Use the trial introduction you wrote that includes your thesis.)

Body paragraph 1: (Should include a topic sentence)

Topic sentence (which may include a concession/counterargument): _____

Evidence 1 to support claim: _____

Explanation of how evidence 1 supports claim: _____

Transition to next idea: _____

Evidence 2 to support claim (This should be the same type of evidence): _____



Explanation of how evidence 2 supports claim: _____

For your use, not for the essay:

Note the type of evidence you use here: _____

Body paragraph 2: (When you change the type of evidence, you begin a new paragraph.)

Transition to next paragraph/ topic sentence (which may include a concession/ counterargument): _____

Evidence 3 to support claim: _____

Explanation of how evidence 3 supports claim: _____

Transition to next idea: _____

Evidence 4 to support claim (This should be the same type of evidence): _____



Explanation of how evidence 4 supports claim: _____

For your use, not for the essay:

Note the type of evidence you use here: _____

Conclusion: Use one of the strategies below.

Conclusion strategies:

- Ask a pertinent question
- Present a final vivid and memorable image
- Provide an accurate and useful analogy
- Dismiss an opposing idea
- Predict future consequences
- Call for further action
- Return to a scene or anecdote from the introduction

For your use, not for the essay:

The conclusion uses _____ strategy to provide a strong ending for the essay.



Activity Six: Evaluating Your Argument

These are the same questions you have answered when evaluating other pieces of persuasive texts. One of your goals should be to make your persuasive writing as polished and professional as possible. So, treating your own persuasive writing as a piece of published work, you will evaluate your own argument by answering the following questions. Use the text from your essay to complete the “textual evidence” column.

| Questions to evaluate the argument | Textual Evidence | Answer |
|--|------------------|--------|
| What is the writer’s/speaker’s purpose? | | |
| What does he/she hope to accomplish? | | |
| Who is the audience? | | |
| What assumptions about the audience does the writer/speaker make? | | |
| What authority does the writer/speaker have that makes him/her credible? | | |
| What claims does the writer/speaker make? | | |
| What issues are addressed or ignored? | | |