

## Checking Your Arguments 1

There are two ways of checking the significance and logical validity of your arguments. One is "positive" checking, to make sure that your essay includes certain specific features; the other is "negative" checking, to make sure that your essay avoids certain logical fallacies. Negative checking is the subject of the second memo in this series.

To do a "positive" check on the arguments in your essay, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is there a thesis, not just a statement of procedure?

Remember, a thesis announces your position; it is something you can argue for:

*Revelle's "Stonehenge" sculptures are not worth the money that was spent on them.*

A statement of procedure is something that may follow a thesis, but it is not the thesis itself:

*In this paper, I will discuss Revelle's "Stonehenge" sculptures and the amount of money that was spent on them.*

2. Is the thesis clear enough and strong enough to provoke counterarguments? Could an intelligent person who is also enrolled in your Humanities class argue against the thesis? In short, does the thesis argue for something worth arguing for?

Read your thesis and ask, "So what?" If the point you plan to make is so obvious that every reasonable person would agree with it even before he or she had read your argument, then why bother to argue for this point at all?

*Despite their artistic problems, the Revelle "Stonehenge" sculptures will be with us for a long, long time.*

That's not much of a thesis; it emphasizes the fact that the sculptures will be here a long time, which no one would disagree about. The debatable point is whether they present artistic problems, and this is what gets de-emphasized in the example above.

3. Does the essay lay to rest the obvious counterarguments?

Two problems frequently arise in this connection. Rather than defending a thesis against serious counterarguments and examining the reasons behind them, a writer may defend it against some peripheral objection--or may merely reverse the thesis and attack this reversal as if it were a counterargument:

*Some people might object that the sculptures are in fact worth the money that was spent on them. But as I have shown, they are not.*

Will this refute anyone who wants to argue against what you've "shown"? No. A real counterargument is an attack on the arguments that support your thesis, not merely a reversal of the thesis. Suppose you have argued that the statues are mere replicas of Stonehenge and therefore not enough of a contribution to art to justify their expense. A strong counterargument might claim that they are not simply replicas of Stonehenge, that they are indeed very different from the ancient monument. To refute this counterargument, you would need to point out evidence indicating that they closely imitate Stonehenge, and discount any purported evidence about their difference from it.

4. Does each paragraph of your essay extend or support the thesis? Perhaps every paragraph has something to do with the thesis. But can you say precisely in what way every paragraph supports it? If not, then some of your essay is useless or misleading.
5. Are all the arguments of the essay necessary to support the thesis? Are all their parts necessary?

Are there phrases, sentences, quotations, paragraphs, that might be omitted without seriously detracting from your argument? If so, omit them; they merely distract the reader's attention from what is really important. Check your quotations carefully: do they need to be so long? Could you not summarize the information contained in some of them without losing any of their value as evidence? Quote only what you need to quote.

6. Is all your evidence as specific as you can make it?

If you're writing about the politics of ancient Athens, it's not very useful to write at length about how all humans desire power; what you need is specific evidence about the Athenians' specific uses of power.

7. Does the meaning of every key term remain clear and consistent throughout your essay?

Suppose you are arguing that Aristophanes' *The Birds* supports the value of individualism. Your readers need clear indications--probably in the first or second paragraph--of what you mean by individualism. And you should make sure that this key term means the same thing at the end of the paper that it does at the beginning.

8. Are all your lines of argument consistent?

It's a mistake to use the "shotgun" technique of including every kind of argument that occurs to you. Would you be convinced by someone who claimed that the "Stonehenge" sculptures are good because they are fully original works, and also that they are good because they are such good imitations of ancient monuments? Each of these arguments might be convincing independently, but they are unconvincing in combination with each other.

9. Is your conclusion consistent with your introduction?

Most of us learn a good deal about our subjects while we are writing about them. Sometimes we change our opinions without realizing it. Read over your first and last paragraphs and see if they are arguing the same views on the same subject. Also check to see if the final paragraph presents a more concise and forceful thesis than the first. If it does, why not substitute the language of the final paragraph for the language of the thesis paragraph? But if the last paragraph disagrees with the first, you will need to ask yourself what your real views are, and rewrite whatever portions of the paper disagree with these ideas.