

Argument from Personal Experience

For most of us our values and beliefs about life and society are formed by our personal experiences, which include not only what has happened to us or what we've done but also who we've known, talked to, admired, or even disliked. What we believe in, how we think life should be lived, what we feel is important in life, and what we know about the world don't come out of thin air but from our experiences.

When we encounter people who have had different experiences and therefore have different beliefs, values, and ideas we often argue about what is true or correct about an issue, their beliefs or ours. These arguments are not necessarily heated or violent; often they are just friendly discussions as we explore our individual differences and try to come to some common ground on which we can build a relationship. These discussions invariably are based on personal experience. When you argue in academia, in a public forum, or in a professional context, your argument is usually more like a friendly discussion with a generous interlocutor than a heated argument.

The Assignment: Create a single focused argument about a debatable issue based on an experience that has brought you to your position on this issue today. Direct this argument to a specific audience. You don't necessarily have to focus on an earth-shattering experience that changed your life; a common, ordinary experience or series of experiences can be just as influential and persuasive to make your argument.

How to Get Started:

- First, select an issue on which you have a fairly strong position. Make sure your selected topic is not on the excluded topics list on the course syllabus. If you have a question about the suitability of your topic, please email me to request a meeting to discuss your topic.
- Next, think about the experiences that have contributed to your position.
- Then, select a representative first-person experience that you can narrate in order to form your argument.
- Finally, select an audience you would like to target with this argument, and think about how you can present your experience in order to best appeal to this audience and fulfill your argumentative purpose. Who do you want your audience to become upon hearing your argument and what kinds of interventions, actions, inquiry, or advocacy work do you want them to perform?

Skills You Will Use in This Essay: This is an argumentative essay, but the main skills you will use to persuade your readers are narration and description. Although telling a story may seem easy and straightforward, there is more to think about than you might imagine. Consider the elements below as you begin drafting.

- **In order to write good narration:**
 - Select only the details of the experience that will help your readers see and understand the experience you narrate. For example, if you are going to discuss a harrowing car ride to school, it isn't necessary to include details about waking up and preparing to leave for school unless the fact that you got up late and had to hurry contributed to danger you encountered, which wouldn't have occurred had you left for school on time. Thus, if you are going to include details, consider what they contribute to the narrative.
 - Arrange the details in the best order to make the most of the story. Many stories are effective if you start at the beginning and relate the story chronologically, but other stories might be more suspenseful or involving for the reader if you begin in the middle (*in medias res*) or at the end of the story and then go back to the beginning and work your way forward. If your draft doesn't seem that effective, try rearranging the order in which you present the events or details of the story.
 - Don't make the story all summary or all specific details. The best stories are a combination of detail and summary: details and scenes are needed for the most important parts of the story and summary is needed for information your reader should know for context but which is not essential to the story. For example, you can say, "I got in the car and started to drive to school" rather than putting in detail like "I inserted the key into the door lock and unlocked it. Then I opened the door and got in and buckled my seat belt, inserted the key into the ignition, turned it and heard the engine start, shifted into reverse, checked the backup camera, and slowly backed out into the street." All these details are not necessary if they don't contribute directly to the experience you are communicating or the evidence you are offering to show why your perspective ought to be considered or adopted.

- **In order to write good description:**
 - Use concrete details—for example, in describing the setting, you might state "lush maple and elm trees shaded either side of the road" instead of "trees grew on either side of the road." A reader can "see" the first description; the second is vague.
 - Show important people, actions, and scenes rather than just quickly summarizing them. Whatever you really want your reader to see or experience must be "shown" as evidence rather than "told" as a claim.
 - Use sensory details—details that appeal to the senses of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell—to make readers feel as though they are experiencing the story right along with you.

Using Your Rhetorical Situation to Develop Your Narrative Argument:

- What is your purpose? What do you want to accomplish through this narrative argument?
- Who is your audience? What are they able to accomplish after reading your narrative argument? What are you inviting them to consider?
- What does your audience already know about the issue?

- Does the audience already have an opinion or position on the issue? If so, what is it? If not, why not?
- Who are the members of this audience in terms of level of geographical location, interests, education, age, ethnic or racial background, gender, and experience? (Not all of these may be relevant to your issue or purpose, but think as specifically as possible about the audience to whom you are directing your narrative argument.)
- In view of your purpose and what you know about this audience, what strategies should you use in your argument, such as word choice, amount of description, events you will narrate, explanation, rhetorical figures, and even secondary sources you may use?
- What elements of the audience's context (current events, life experience, other commonplace arguments that bear on your argument, etc.) do you need to address in your essay?
- What is your relationship to your audience? How will you position yourself in relation to them? What persona will you adopt?

How This Project Will Be Evaluated: I will consider the following criteria when I grade your essay:

- Level of concrete detail, sensory description, and organized argument used to make your writing effective.
- The clarity of the argument to an appropriate and identifiable target audience.
- The style and expressiveness of the writing and how engaging it is for the intended audience.
- Your target audience's ability to engage or act based on your argument.
- The relevance, use, and effectiveness of the secondary sources (**at least two are required**).
- The length requirement is approximately **1,750 words**.