

The Essay Guide:

Finding your argument

01 Finding your argument

To write a good essay or dissertation, you must have a clear idea of what you want to achieve. 'To look at how X influenced Y' isn't clear enough, likewise 'To investigate Riefenstahl's stylistic representations of power.' These only describe a subject area and are not solid enough foundations for a purposeful essay. Other examples of *weak* essay outlines could be:

- What the real reasons for X were.
- A look at the rivalry between Y and Z.
- Some differences between the work of A and B.

What does central argument mean?

A central argument is the backbone of your essay, what you want to persuade your reader is true. It gives your writing a sense of purpose. It does not have to be 'argumentative' (see below), but it is normally reducible to a single statement (not a question). If you can't express it in a single statement, then you may not have a clear enough idea of where your essay is going. It represents the difference between *descriptive* and *analytical* writing.

Reducing your central argument to a single statement is 1 method of cracking the essay; it may be frustratingly difficult, but it is an invaluable way to check if you are ready to begin. Here are some examples of what a statement of the central argument might look like:

X's photographs of disabled and insane subjects can be seen as self-portraits.
The most important differences between the Art Deco and Bauhaus styles are X, Y and Z.
The 19th Century Gothic novel allowed women new literary freedoms, in particular X and Y.
X is caused by Y.
This artist's work successfully overcomes the limitations of Z.
The reason rocks A and B are found in formation X is Z.
Fukuyama's notion of 'the end of history' is flawed because it fails to consider X and Y.
The notion of matrixial space raises questions A and B.

Notice that all of these statements explicitly answer questions about the true nature of the subject they address: What are X's photographs about? What were the most important differences between Bauhaus and Art Deco? In what way did the Gothic novel impact on

gender roles? What explanation is there for X? and so on. A central argument should say something important about the topic, and say it clearly. *Please note, however, that a central argument can raise questions at the same time as being explicit and clear – as is the case with the last example.*

Testing relevance

The examples above each represent a particular argument, or position on the subject material. For this reason, they allow you to judge the relevance of everything in your essay: ‘Does this material support my central argument?’ should be the question that you keep asking yourself. If it doesn’t then you must either find a way of making it relevant (and explicitly showing the reader that it is), or leaving it out. In this way, your central argument is the *organising principle* of your essay or dissertation. You might want to write down your central argument and stick it above your desk to refer to.

Avoiding questions that are too broad

If you are writing about ‘the way architecture reflects political ideology,’ and you want your first chapter to provide historical background to your essay, you will be faced with an unmanageably vast amount of possible material. This is because you do not have a central argument, only a description of the subject area. But, if you can formulate a central argument on the subject, such as ‘Religious and secular architecture represent ideology in radically different ways’ or ‘Democracies are happy to borrow from the architecture of dictatorships’, then you immediately have an organising principle which will allow you to choose the material for your historical chapter in a much more directed way.

Finding the Central Argument

Even though it should be possible to express the central argument in a single sentence, it is extremely difficult to find the right argument for your essay or dissertation. The process usually involves pacing around a room, coffee-drinking, etc. It may help if you can find a patient listener and talk through the thoughts you have on a subject and how you want to link them. Questions you might ask yourself to help arrive at a possible thesis statement could be:

What areas have I been researching and what is the connection between them?
What subjects have been the most interesting to read about?
With what subject material do I feel confident (or uncertain)?
What is at the heart of this subject area?
Why does it matter?

Equally, you have to be careful when committing to a central argument, and make sure that it is not fatally restrictive. *In other words, you need to make sure that your essay (and especially a dissertation) is 'do-able'.* Some points to consider might be:

Does this central argument allow me to cover the subject areas I am most interested in?
Am I able to satisfy the requirements of the assignment brief by pursuing this argument?
Is this really a good way of explaining the subject material?
Can I cover this amount of material in sufficient depth or should I narrow my focus?

The moment when you realise what it is your essay is about could come anytime and anywhere – make sure you write it down! Few feelings are more frustrating than knowing that you *had* a good idea. At the same time, having that breakthrough is very exciting: Archimedes, according to the story, jumped out of the bath and ran down the street shouting 'I've got it!'

However, this is only the *starting point* for writing your essay. A day or two before the deadline is too late to be having your eureka moment. You will have to try to find a central argument relatively early to leave time for writing a good essay; this is even more true of the dissertation.

Finally, a qualification: some essays may not seem to need a central argument. If the question asks you to 'compare and contrast', the body of your essay may just break down into 3 sections, each one comparing or contrasting in a different way. In this case it is easy to think that you don't have a central argument, but it is still there: '3 ways these works can be compared or contrasted are A, B and C.'

Section Summary

Come up with a central argument which is clear and directed.

Make sure that it allows you to fulfil the requirements of the question / brief.

Use it as your organising principle and means for testing relevance.