

Some arguments about a desk:

1. A desk exemplifies the individualistic priorities of contemporary American society because it physically enforces personal space, which deemphasizes community collaboration and favors competition.
2. By establishing an unequal power dynamic between teachers and students, a desk socializes future “knowledge workers” to accept such a relationship with their bosses as a matter of course.
3. A desk is an ineffective mechanism for learning. After all, it forces every student into one particular learning modality: the lecture format.
4. In order to help students acquire the knowledge and abilities—such as computer literacy and communication skills—that the best jobs require, a desk is an indispensable tool for learning.

An argument is a debatable claim about some idea, event or text that another reasonable person could disagree with. An argument is NEVER a summary of that topic or a statement of fact. It is NEVER a question. It is NEVER a vague generalization or simply an unsubstantiated opinion. Instead, it backs up its initial claim with specific rationale. This claim and at least a glimpse of the rationale should appear on the first page of your essay. Therefore,

Claim + Rationale = Argument

Examine your assigned argument in pairs and work through the following questions:

What part of these arguments is the claim?

What part is the rationale?

What words link these two parts to show their relationship?

What topics or ideas do you anticipate in the body paragraphs of the essays that would follow this argument?

Nota Bene: For the purposes of essay writing, the words argument and thesis are interchangeable. I prefer to use the word argument, rather than thesis. The word thesis sounds, to my ears, exclusively formal and academic. The word argument has those connotations, too, but it seems more straightforward and practical. More importantly, the word argument conjures up the idea of a contribution to an ongoing debate, which is, at root, the purpose of any essay. Indeed, the word essay means to attempt, to test, to try something out. Therefore, an essay, however forceful and elegantly written, is a provisional document, one that must invite disagreement.

Inviting disagreement might make you anxious, especially if you have been taught that learning how to get the right answer is the object of your education. Nevertheless, given that all texts and especially works of art are open to interpretation, it is imperative that we disagree about their meanings. Such disagreement is a generative, collaborative practice that enriches the value of the text.