

Writing a Position Paper

Writing a position paper requires you to look critically at your own thinking and understand other people's points of view. The goal of a position paper is to persuade readers that your opinion is valid and worth listening to, therefore, structure your argument to persuade your reader to adopt your point of view. When that's not possible, try to make the best possible case for your view and strongly refute the opposing side's position. The most convincing arguments appeal to logic – by gathering persuasive and authoritative evidence to support your position. Ideas that you are considering need to be carefully examined in choosing a topic, developing your argument, and organizing your paper. It is very important to ensure that you are addressing all sides of the issue and presenting it in a manner that is easy for your audience to understand. Your job is to take one side of the argument and persuade your audience that you have well-founded knowledge of the topic being presented. It is important to support your argument with evidence to ensure the validity of your claims, as well as to address the counterclaims to show that you are well informed about both sides.

Issue Criteria

To take a side on a subject, you should first establish the arguability of a topic that interests you. Ask yourself the following questions to ensure that you will be able to present a strong argument:

- Is it a real issue, with genuine controversy and uncertainty?
- Can you distinctly identify two positions?
- Are you personally interested in advocating one of these positions?
- Is the issue narrow enough to be manageable?

Analyzing an Issue and Developing an Argument

Once your topic is selected, you should do some research on the subject matter. While you may already have an opinion on your topic and an idea about which side of the argument you want to take, you need to ensure that your position is well supported. Listing out the pro and con sides of the topic will help you examine your ability to support your counterclaims, along with a list of supporting evidence for both sides. Supporting evidence includes the following:

- Factual Knowledge - Information that is verifiable and agreed upon by almost everyone.
- Statistical Inferences - Interpretation and examples of an accumulation of facts.
- Informed Opinion - Opinion developed through research and/or expertise of the claim.
- Personal Testimony - Personal experience related by a knowledgeable party.

Once you have made your pro and con lists, compare the information side by side. Considering your audience, as well as your own viewpoint, choose the position you will take.

In considering the audience, ask yourself the following questions:

- Who is your audience?

- What do they believe?
- Where do they stand on the issue?
- How are their interests involved?
- What evidence is likely to be effective with them?

In determining your viewpoint, ask yourself the following:

- Is your topic interesting?
- Does your topic assert something specific and propose a plan of action?
- Do you have enough material to support your opinion?

Organization

Your introduction should lead up to a thesis that organizes the rest of your paper. There are three advantages to leading with the thesis:

1. The audience knows where you stand.
2. The thesis is located in the two strongest places, first and last.
3. It is the most common form of academic argument used.

Tips in writing a position paper

1. Form your opening statement. It should be an assertion – an opinion you want your readers to adopt or an action you want them to take. Make it brief and clear. Don't be wishy-washy.
2. Sometimes you may already have a clear opinion on the topic. Other times you won't know what you think. And sometimes you'll find yourself changing your mind as you write. That's all right.
3. Keep a calm, but determined tone. If you sound hysterical or rant like a maniac, people won't take it seriously.
4. Open with something catchy. Use a surprising fact, a snappy quote, or an anecdote.
5. Work through your evidence one piece at a time. Most writers like to save the best for last.
6. Devote some time to opposing views. Anticipate and acknowledge what the opposition will say and then do your best to explain the weaknesses in their position.

7. Restate your position in the conclusion. Try not to introduce any new ideas or evidence at the end. And don't apologize for not giving a longer or stronger argument.

Below is a generic sample outline for a position paper:

I. Introduction

- ___A. Introduce the topic
- ___B. Provide background on the topic
- ___C. Assert the thesis (your view of the issue)

II. Counter Argument

- ___A. Summarize the counterclaims
- ___B. Provide supporting information for counterclaims
- ___C. Refute the counterclaims
- ___D. Give evidence for argument

III. Your Argument

- ___A. Assert point #1 of your claims
 - _____1. Give your opinion
 - _____2. Provide support
- ___B. Assert point #2 of your claims
 - _____1. Give your opinion
 - _____2. Provide support

___ C. Assert point #3 of your claims

_____ 1. Give your opinion

_____ 2. Provide support

IV. Conclusion

___ A. Restate your argument

___ B. Provide a plan of action

HOW TO CITE PRINT AND ONLINE PERIODICALS AND ENCYCLOPEDIAS

PRINT

ARTICLE (Magazine or Journal)

Author/editor's surname, author/editor's first name or initial. Ed [if appropriate].
"Title of article." Title of magazine or journal volume, number (Year):
pages.

Lemaster, David. "The Pathos of the Unconscious." Journal of Popular Film and
Television 25, 3 (1997): 110-117.

ENCYCLOPEDIA

Author's surname, first name or initial. "Title of article." Title of Encyclopedia.
Edition.

Dwyer, Johanna. "Nutrition." World Book Encyclopedia. 2002 Edition.

ONLINE

CITING A WEBSITE FROM THE WORLD WIDE WEB:

Author/editor's surname, author/editor's first name or initial. Ed. [if appropriate]
"Title of page in quotes." Title of site. Last update or copyright date.
[Online]. Available: URL. Retrieved (date).

McCarthy, John. "Hiking in the Rocky Mountains." Vacationadventure.com. February 2 2001. [Online]. Available: <http://www.vacationadventure.com/activities/hiking/adventurerockymts.html>. Retrieved June 10, 2001.

Woolf, Norma Bennett. "The Shetland Sheepdog." Dog Owner's Guide. 2002. [Online]. Available: <http://www.canismajor.com/dog/sheltie.html#Profiles>. Retrieved January 11, 2002.

WHAT IF YOU CAN'T FIND THE AUTHOR OF THE WEB PAGE?

If you are not able to locate an author or editor of a site, start with the "Title of page" for your citation as in the examples below:

"Celtic's Walker Undergoes MRI." Basketball.com. January 10, 2002. [Online]. Available: <http://www.basketball.com/nba/celtics.shtml>. Retrieved January 11, 2002.

"Herding Characteristics of the Shetland Sheepdog." American Shetland Sheepdog Association. 1999. [Online]. Available: <http://www.assa.org/>. Retrieved January 11, 2002.

"Researching People of the Civil War Era." The United States Civil War Center. June 6, 2001. [Online]. Available: <http://www.cwc.lsu.edu/cuc/other/genealogy/faq-gene.html>. Retrieved January 10, 2002.

CITING AN ONLINE ENCYCLOPEDIA

"Title of the article in quotes." Title of Encyclopedia underlined. [Online]. Available: <<http://> >. Retrieved date.

"Dickens, Charles." Encyclopedia Britannica. [Online]. Available: <http://search.eb.com/bol/topic?eu=114623&sctn=3>. Retrieved December 12, 2001.

CITING AN ONLINE DATABASE

Author's surname, author's first name or initial. "Title of the page in quotes." Title of Periodical underlined. Date. Title of online database. Retrieved (date).

Forman, Robyn. "Cameron Diaz." Teen Magazine. December 3, 2001. Infotrac. Retrieved December 12, 2001.

Angelou, Maya. "If I Knew Then..." Essence. May 2000, 31. Infotrac. Retrieved January 11, 2001.

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See the sample of a WORKS CITED page below. Remember to indent five spaces after the first line of the citation and for all subsequent lines. Think of the analogy of a “pot handle.” The author’s name (or, if no author, the title of the page) is the handle. Remember to list all works in alphabetical order as in the sample below.

WORKS CITED

- Angelou, Maya. “If I Knew Then...” Essence. May 2000, 31. Infotrac. Retrieved January 11, 2001.
- “Celtic’s Walker Undergoes MRI.” Basketball.com. January 10, 2002. [Online]. Available: <http://www.basketball.com/nba/celtics.shtml>. Retrieved January 11, 2002.
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- “Researching People of the Civil War Era.” The United States Civil War Center. June 6, 2001. [Online]. Available: <http://www.cwc.lsu.edu/cuc/other/genealogy/faq-gene.html>. Retrieved January 10, 2002.
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