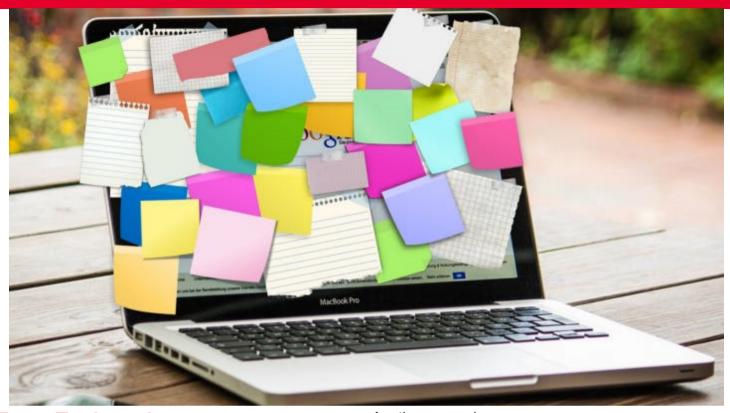# Constructing an Argument
## Writing Resources



## From Topic to Argument

The **topic** of an essay is the aspect of a literary text you choose to write about.
The **argument** is your particular take on that topic.

For example:
**'The role of Eve'** in *Paradise Lost* is a good choice of **topic**.
But it isn't enough to write an essay that just tells us what Eve does in Milton's poem. In fact, this wouldn't be an essay at all but rather a summary of the poem.

You need to consider what you think about Eve in the poem, about Milton's portrayal of this Biblical figure, about her as a victim or heroine, about Eve and the idea of 'knowledge'.

Once you decide you want to write about Eve, you then need to do some close reading of the scenes where she appears and some research on Milton and other areas you might want to pursue

Another example:
**'London places'** in *The Waste Land* is another great choice of **topic**.
You should look for examples of the London places Eliot includes, but an essay should not be a list of examples. To construct an essay that moves beyond a list of examples, you need to think of *how* Eliot uses London places and come up with an idea that others may not have considered when they read the poem.

**Keep these in mind when considering your essay topic and argument:**

- An essay should not be a summary of a book/poem/story you read.
- You should not just describe characters and events.
- You need to say something about characters, events, images, etc. that others might not have considered.
- An essay should also not be a list of examples.

You need to think about how or why a writer uses these examples.

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The **argument** is based on your reading of a text. This means you should express ideas about a text that others in your seminar/class may not have considered. You might even express ideas that others disagree with (as long as you can offer evidence in support).

**To construct an argument consider these strategies:**

- Close reading
- Keywords
- Cluster
- Contexts
- Connections

## 1. Close reading

Examine specific sections/lines/words of a text in detail. Find sections that draw your interest, that confuse you, that frustrate you. Look for words/images/ideas that a writer repeats. Annotate your books: underline sections and take notes in the margins. Keep track of sections you want to go back to and analyse.

See our article on Close reading within this website for more information.

## 2. Keywords

To help you keep track of sections that you annotate, assign each a keyword that you write in the margin or at the top of a page. Create whatever keywords make sense to you. Examples: 'decay', 'water imagery', crowds', 'time', 'epic simile'.
Keywords should be specific enough to identify what is included in the passage you annotate but general enough so that you can repeat them within a text.

## 3. Cluster

When you finish a text, go back and look at the keywords you have repeated. Cluster these together and consider making one of the keywords the topic of your essay (for example, 'Decay' in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*). Look at the sections of the text to which you have assigned the same keyword and use these to construct your argument and provide evidence.

## 4. Contexts

You now need to do some further reading to find additional evidence. You must put your ideas of a literary text into a particular context to move from topic to argument. Contexts can include:

- the historic period/culture in which the work was produced
- other writings by the same author
- other writings from the same period
- a theoretical perspective (Marxist theory, eco-criticism, etc.)
- literary forms (You could argue that *As I Lay Dying* is an epic, for example)

## 5. Connections

To construct an argument you must make connections that are not readily apparent upon first reading of a text.

First, make connections between different sections through clustering.

Next, connect these passages to a particular context. You must make these connections explicit in your writing through sentences such as 'In *The Waste Land* Eliot critiques the invasions of privacy that come with the modern city similar to other commentators on urban life in the early twentieth century.'

You do not need to find a critic who has also made these connections in order to justify your work. The best essays are those that make us look at familiar texts in unfamiliar ways.

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