Tips on Structuring an Argumentative Essay

Introduction

If it helps, picture the introduction like an inverted pyramid—it begins general and becomes more specific. However, most professors don’t want you to begin TOO general; for example, you probably shouldn’t begin a paper on a short story by saying “Human beings have told stories since the beginning of time.” You probably shouldn’t begin this way either: “F. Scott Fitzgerald was one of the greatest writers in American Literature.” On the other hand, this sentence might work: “F. Scott Fitzgerald’s short story, ‘Bernice Bobs Her Hair,’ which he published in 1920 at the beginning of the Jazz Age, is one of his first stories but also one of his best.” From there you might say what makes it good (lively characters, a plot with a conflict we can all relate to, and a surprising twist at the end). Finally, most introductory paragraphs work toward and end with a thesis statement that tells readers what the paper is about (although the thesis can appear elsewhere). The thesis should be a specific statement of your opinion that is arguable, using evidence from the text, and not obvious. For example: “The characters in ‘Bernice Bobs Her Hair’ show that giving in to peer pressure can be good for you, but not if it forces you to act contrary to your morals.”

Body paragraphs and evidence

In general, each paragraph in the body of the paper should make a point or a claim and provide evidence to support it. Having a topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph might help you to keep the paragraph focused and on point. When your assignment is to analyze a text (as in the Fitzgerald example above), your evidence will come from the text in the form of quotations and references to the plot, characters, setting, and other elements. Be sure to give context for your quotations; for example, if the paper has introduced the reader to Bernice and Warren, you might lead into a quotation like this: “In their first encounter at a dance at a country club, Warren says to Bernice, ‘You’ve got an awfully kissable mouth’ (48).” In other words, remind us what’s going on in the section from which you’re taking your quote and give a page number after it according to the rules of MLA style. Ask your professor if he/she has a preference for how many quotations you should use; you might be limited to one quotation per paragraph, or your professor might say that no more than 25% of your paper should be quotations. After you give the quotation, unless its meaning is perfectly clear, explain why you’ve used it, what it shows, what it means. However, don’t simply restate the quotation.

Plot summary: A fairly common problem in papers on fiction is too much plot summary. Ask your professors for guidelines, but if they don’t give you any, limit yourself to one or two sentences of plot summary (the introductory paragraph or first body paragraph are the places they’re usually found). Throughout the paper you can mention things that happen in the story to give context for your discussion, but focus on the events that are most important and relevant to your thesis.

Transitions: Your sentences and paragraphs should flow from one to another with the natural logic of your thoughts. Good writing provides transitions to help readers follow that logic. A
transition might be a word or phrase, such as *furthermore, therefore, for example, in addition, on the contrary*...

There’s no magic number for how many body paragraphs you should have. If you have three points to make, you should probably have three body paragraphs, and you’ll have a standard five-paragraph essay. However, your paper might require fewer or more.

**Conclusion**

Some professors don’t require a formal conclusion, but if the professor doesn’t mention it, you should assume that you need one. A traditional conclusion is in some ways the reverse of the introduction and might look like a pyramid: it begins by reminding the reader of the thesis and then summarizes the main ideas of the paper. Finally, it might say something about the wider significance of the topic (but it should not introduce completely new ideas). Borrowing a technique from creative writing, you might end with a vivid, meaningful image that tightly closes the lid of the box.

The paper should have a satisfying sense of closure--your readers should feel that you’ve said everything you wanted to say, they understand your meaning, and they understand why it matters.

Beginning the conclusion with “In conclusion” is not necessary.