

Making Arguments

A short guide to successful written assessments

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Why arguments?

Many students come into university thinking that the aim is to learn information on a particular subject, whether it be geography, history, politics, etc. However, while learning about geography is no doubt pertinent to this module, the transmission and absorption of information is not the primary aim. Indeed, most the information I have transmitted to you during the semester will be forgotten within 3-5 years of finishing your degree. The purpose of a university degree is to gain skills. As you will note from the learning outcomes, the assessment and the marking criteria of this module, we put great emphasis not on what you are able to show us you know, but on your ability to apply what you know to a particular debate, issue, question or case. The emphasis is on understanding and applying: you need to not simply understand the material provided in lecture and the reading, but apply it to a particular position, perspective or case.

The reason for this emphasis is because this is a skill that will serve you not only throughout your degree but throughout your career and indeed your life. While approaching an issue with an open-mind and unbiased attitude is good when attempting to understand an issue in its complexity, ultimately you are required to make a judgement about that issue – what aspects you agree with and what aspects you do not. Being an effective worker, as well as an engaged and responsible citizen, means being able to argue the rationale for your judgement convincingly. If you are to stand up for a position, you need to convince others of the virtue of your side. If want to assist people who are in need, you need to convince others that such people are deserving of aid. If you want to combat racism and prejudice you need to channel your convictions into compelling points and convincing themes. In short, being an effective individual means being able to apply information well, that is, being able to convince people of the credibility of your well-informed and well-judged position.

It is for this reason that you are not given much credit for passively engaging with course material. As you will see from the marking criteria, the emphasis is not on your ability to rehearse or memorise lectures and/or readings but on your ability to use the material in a convincing and rigorous fashion. The aim of this handbook is to help you do this effectively. You should use it in tandem with other forms of guidance such on Blackboard and Alistair Bonnett's book *How to argue: a student's guide* copies of which are in the library. It should also be used in tandem with any training or assessment preparations sessions incorporated into your modules. One final note is that this guidance comes from a social science and humanities perspective. The physical sciences have their ways of writing and what applies here does not necessarily apply everywhere and for everyone. Writing styles for the Law School, the Business School and the Medical School will also have their own traditions and preferred professional styles. That said, most of what is said here holds for all essays in human geography and is reflected in the departmental marking criteria.

What is an argument?

An academic argument is a form of writing that attempts to convince the reader of a particular position, idea or statement through the systematic use of evidence. It differs from a 'school-essay' in two significant ways:

1. *You are not given credit for showing me that you have done work*

One of the objectives of a school essay is to demonstrate to the reader that you have done your research, i.e., that you carefully considered all positions and that your ultimate conclusion is well-informed. This means that a lot of emphasis is on showing that you did a lot reading. The aim of the university essay is not to show me that you did the work. I will presume that you have read the reading and have carefully considered all the arguments. Your job is for you to show me that you can critically *use* – not just rehearse but use – the ideas that you have read. Arguments are about using the ideas to put forward a convincing piece of writing.

2. *You are not given credit for showing me both sides of a debate:*

In school essays, you were asked to show both sides of the debate in an unbiased manner and, in the conclusions, tell the reader which side you found most convincing. The purpose of the essay was to illustrate to the reader that you were objective and unbiased and considered all the evidence carefully. In a university essay, I will presume that you have carefully considered all sides of the debate. My interest is in knowing what you have concluded and why. *In this sense, your university essay begins where your school essay ended.* An argument uses the readings and other evidence to coherently and convincingly illustrate your point. The introduction should begin with a strong statement – e.g., 'I will argue in this essay that the rise of the skyscraper in New York was not simply the result of real-estate costs or the development of engineering

technologies, but also the result of a new capitalist class asserting its power in bold symbolic forms'. My point is not that you should be biased or ignore certain evidence but that you should make decisions on what you think is correct and organise your essays according to that position.

How to make an argument?

Quite simply, teaching you this skill will constitute much of the learning that you will do throughout your three year degree. It is a skill that you need *to learn*. It is not something most of you will naturally be good at but must practice. The quicker you begin attempting to write in this manner, the quicker you will come to learn the distinctive demands and style of this writing form.

The best place to begin learning about how to make an argument is in Alistair Bonnett's book *How to argue: a student's guide*. I highly suggest you buy this text and refer to it throughout your degree. There is a lot of guidance in this text and more than I can cover in this handbook. That said, I think there are two points of guidance I would provide for how to write an effective essay:

1. *Decide what you are going to argue*

Most essay answers falter on this basic point: they do not have a clear idea of what they are going to argue. This means that the author does not have a clear idea of what their essay is about or (therefore) how to organise it and develop it effectively. Your introduction is the most important part of your essay since it is here that you state clearly what you are going to argue and how you are going to argue it. If you do not make this decision *before you start writing*, the essay will most likely end up as an unstructured report of ideas and facts from readings and lecture.

2. *Develop a coherent structure*

Many students think that the aim of the essay is to squeeze in as many possible ideas, quotes or bits of information as possible. This is patently false. An argument lives or dies upon whether it is well-organised and convincing. Arguments are convincing because they are rationale and coherent, not because they bombard you with information. By all means, use information to support your position, but if an idea does not support your argument toss it out. Remember you are not 'showing-teacher'. Arguments are about using information not rehearsing it. Think about how your ideas connect: how does one idea logically precede from the other? Your objective is quality over quantity.

How to write an argument

The question of how to make arguments is one that we will come back to repeatedly over the next three years, and again I strongly encourage you to read Bonnett for a step-by-step guide on how to do this effectively. The aim of the remaining sections of this handbook focus on the nuts and bolts of university writing. One of the biggest challenges students face when writing good essays is their ability to communicate their ideas in a clear, precise and active fashion. As you will note from the marking criteria, you are assessed on both the *content and style* of your essay. Thus, writing a good essay is not simply about relaying good ideas, it is also (and perhaps more so) about communicating them effectively.

The remaining portion of this handbook is divided into 8 sections. The first 5 sections (writing introductions, writing methodically, writing simply, writing precisely and active voice) focus on issues of clarity and style. The next two sections focus on how to use sources. The emphasis here is on using sources appropriately (not plagiarising) and effectively. Writing good essays involves evidencing your ideas to make them convincing. Knowing how to use sources in a manner that convincingly backs-up your argument gives your position substance and weight.

The final section is a list of 'dos' and 'don'ts' that I have distilled from over ten years of marking student essays. These rules illustrate the most common mistakes in student writing and I can say with confidence that marks off your essays will almost certainly come from transgressing these rules. The more you know, understand and are able to implement these rules, the better your mark will be.

Writing Introductions

Most students do not take introductions seriously but I would suggest that they are the most important part of an essay. If an essay has a good introduction that clearly states (1) what they are going to argue (2) how they are going to argue it and (3) how the essay is organised around this argument, then I feel I am allowed to sit back, relax and just make sure the author does what they have already told me they are going to do. A good introduction tells me that the author is in control and is driving the train. I will not need to guess what the author's central point is or what evidence they will bring because they have already told me.

A couple of key points that need to be remembered:

1. The point of an introduction is to state what you are going to argue and how you are going to argue it. If that argument is not clear in your mind and you do not know how you will bring together the evidence needed to support your central thesis, that will show up in your introduction. A lack of clarity up front is indicative of a lack of clarity in your mind. So if your introduction is wandering and vague I will expect the ideas to be vague and the essay to waffle.
2. Never use phrases like "I will discuss", "I will explore", "I will examine" etc. These phrases already suggest that the essay is going to be a discussion of something without purpose or direction. The key question you need to ask yourself is 'what purpose or thesis will the discussion that follows the introduction serve?' The phrase you need to embrace is 'I will argue' (or this essay will argue if you are not a fan of 'I' – though see the discussion of passive voice below). If you can finish the sentence 'I will argue' with a substantive predicate, then you are on your way to writing a good essay. If you find it difficult to answer this question and find yourself wanting to fall back on "I will discuss, explore, examine, etc." then this should be a sign that you are not clear about your topic and you need to refine the essay.
3. Do not feel you have to save the best for last. I do not want a surprising conclusion but a clear sense of what the essay's main themes and overall trajectory. Outlining the specific structure of the essay in the introduction is often very useful. For example, if you wanted to write an essay that attempts to apply Wallerstein's World System's theory to economic development in Singapore you could suggest the following structure: "in section one, I discuss Wallerstein's World Systems Theory, in section two I discuss the emerging hi-tech economy of Singapore, in section three I apply Wallerstein's theory to this specific case study and, finally, in section four I assess the applicability of Wallerstein's theory to this unique economic sector."

Below is a portion from a third year essay that I take to be a model example of how to write a good introduction. I have highlighted the key statements of argument and structure respectively.

This essay will discuss the extent to which trade during the Islamic Caliphate period could be described using the geographical concept of 'thin globalism.' Thin globalism can be broken down in its most basic sense to be globalisation that has: high extensity, low intensity and low impact (Keohane and Nye 2000). This paper will argue against Keohane and Nye's theory, instead suggesting that while the trade networks were highly extensive, it was more intense than thin globalism admitted as well as having an impact across the whole empire. This is because trade during the Islamic Caliphate is often understated and trade played a crucial role in establishing and maintaining the Islamic Empire. The first section will provide a short contextualisation of trade within early Islamic history, followed by a critical discussion on the trade routes during the caliphate period in relation to their extent. The main section of this essay will look at the intensity that these connections existed. The final section will look at the impact of trade and evaluate why the period of the caliphate can be described as more than thin globalism.

Write methodically

There is much to be said about essay organisation and I would once again point student's to Alistair Bonnet's book for a detailed discussion. That said, I offer the following specific points for guidance.

- a. *Organise your essay so it makes an argument from beginning to end.* One of the things we look for in an essay is a strong 'line of argument.' The key term here is 'line'. What we mean is that the essay has a clear purpose throughout and that the points it makes, the stories it tells and the evidence it brings to bear all ultimately work to serve an overall argument. In this sense, you need to think carefully about how you link up the various points you make and the various kinds of evidence you use. Think carefully about the connections: how does talking about x serve my overall goal? How does discussing y connect to my discussion of z and the purpose of my paper overall? The more carefully you make these links, the stronger your line of argument.
- b. *Connect the dots between sentences and paragraphs.* Make sure you make clear connections between your ideas. Oftentimes students raise a point that is not clearly connected to the surrounding sentences or paragraphs. Do not assume I will automatically make connections between your various thoughts. Even if I see a connection (or a potential connection), the point is for me to know that *you see the connection* and that you are not just raising random ideas.
- c. *Finish your idea.* Do not say something and drop it. If you raise a point then take the time to explain it. The purpose of your essay is not to give me food for thought. If you have a point to make then give yourself the space to work it through – explain it properly and illustrate its relevance. But if you do not think the point has much purpose then it's just padding (Rule #7). Give the important ideas space and the unimportant ones the boot.
- d. *Use sections.* It is often useful to divide your essay into discrete sections with subheadings. IN the structure I propose for the Wallerstein essay above, I suggest four sections. These sections break down the argument into four key points that need to be illustrated to make the overall argument. Sign-posting these sections through some separation – like a sub-heading – usefully guides the reader through your logic.
- e. *Write in paragraphs.* The paragraph is your constituent building blocks for writing. Students should think about their writing paragraphs and ask themselves if each paragraph is making a distinctive point. The definition of a paragraph is a group or series of sentences that work together to put forth a single idea. It constitutes (at a minimum) 4-5 lines of text separated either by a double-space (i.e. a hard return) or by an indentation in the first line of the first sentence (i.e. a tab). A single sentence is not a paragraph nor is a grouping of one or two lines of text. Please do add hard returns between sentences to make them stand out. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence, and usually 3 to 5 additional sentences that clearly support that topic sentence. Each paragraph should explain one major idea, not 3 or 4. Each paragraph should have a clear connection to the next.

Writing Simply

Students have a habit of attempting to imitate a certain mode of writing that they perceive to be ‘academic’. Thus, they often choose a convoluted manner of writing a very simple idea. Some of this is caused by the predilection for passive voice (discussed below). But students also seem to value making something straightforward sound immensely complicated. While it is important for your ideas to be complicated (and not simplistic), your writing should be clear. Look at the following example from a second year essay in cultural geography:

This essay will take the form of a geographer’s point of view in order to provide a substantive argument in a spatial-social language which diffuses a socio-spatial language where literatures argue that gender identities constructs the way space is understood.

The sentence is convoluted because it attempts to say something very simple in a complex way. What the author wants to say is simply the following: “this essay takes a geographic perspective on gender by illustrating how social constructions of women (and men) affect the way space is created and understood”. Here I have expressed a clear idea in 25 words as opposed to a muddled, wordy and confusing idea in 40. Now let us look at another sentence.

The man who dominated cultural geography was Carl Sauer head of the Berkeley School. Sauer focused his career on the material aspects of culture and the cultural landscapes. He believed that culture was to be studied by examining how everyday landscapes were organised, as culture was the force shaping the landscape. Sauer believed that the landscape was a record of previous cultures as culture left imprints on the landscape. The style of artefacts and housing left on the landscape would tell what community lived here and from this Sauer said it was possible to plot migration patterns.

While this is a basic explanation of Sauer’s ideas and could definitely benefit from more detail, it does a good job of communicating the ideas in a clear manner. Thus, I would give this explanation a 2.1 because it is clear and gets across Sauer’s main ideas.

My point here is to always choose clarity when you write. A mantra you should repeat to yourself when writing is ‘just say it!’. Thus, rather than writing long drawn-out, run-on sentences just say what you mean. Ask yourself how you would ‘just say it’ if you were talking out loud and use this as your basis. To be clear, *this is not an invitation to use colloquial language*. But it is an invitation for you to simplify your writing and sentence structure so you can communicate your ideas clearly.

A final point here is to avoid using the Thesaurus tool in word. Students often search the Thesaurus for better or more complex ways of saying something simple. This leads to confusion because synonyms rarely map onto each other directly and almost always bring with them different inflections.

Writing Precisely

The other problem I often notice with student writing is the habit of writing sentences that do not communicate anything of substance. See the two examples below:

The attempts to solve the problems of overcrowding in the city changed women's experiences. Many changes occurred in America in the 19th century, with people of different class, race and gender responding in different ways.

The American wilderness landscape has been a vital part of the United States of America since the initial conception of the nation. During this period, wilderness has meant different things to the many of those that have inhabited it, traversed through it and made a living on it; the wilderness has been seen as a source of fear for newcomers in a strange land, and a resource for a growing nation, and an area of immense natural beauty. These different feelings about wilderness have been ever-present throughout American history, but only during certain times and events have they come to the forefront, impacting on how Americans feel about wilderness.

Both sentences suffer from vagueness. In terms of the former, it states a number of things: (a) there was overcrowding in American cities (b) that this overcrowding changed women's experiences (c) there were many changes in America and (d) these changes affected different people in different ways. Thus, there is a lot of information suggested here but nothing is actually said. How exactly did overcrowding change women's experiences? What precisely were the changes happening in 19th century America? Who did those changes affect and how did it affect them? The sentence is what I would term 'empty' – it puts words on the page but no information is being put forth.

Similarly the second essay, while structurally sound, does not actually say very much: 'wilderness has meant different things to many', it has been a 'vital part of the USA' and 'ever-present throughout American history.' My issue here is that while there are many sweeping grand pronouncements, there is precious little substance. What exactly has the wilderness meant for America? How exactly has it been a vital part? What are some of those different feelings? A proclivity for grand statements over specific points makes me think that you do not understand the subject matter in detail and are hiding this lack of knowledge behind sweeping rhetoric.

Using Active Voice

The final problem I often notice is the over-use of passive voice. By passive voice I mean sentences that hide their subject – e.g., sentences that start with "It is....", "There is..." or "There are....". Such sentences are to be avoided in this and most modules in the humanities and social sciences. They are avoided not only because they are feeble and cautious, but also because they rarely amount to saying anything important or interesting. For example look at the following sentences:

1. It can be shown that farmland on the Great Plains was harmed by poor farming practices.
2. Farmers on the Great Plains ploughed on steep slopes, causing soil erosion.

In sentence 1 the author is using the passive voice. She is not saying anything very direct, specific or interesting – she uses a lot of words that, in the end, do not amount to anything very important. There is very little that is actually being said here. Who can show it? What harm was done? What kind of poor farming practices?

Sentence 2 however is not only shorter but also active, powerful and direct. There are no extra words - no padding or filler. The author is saying something specific in a precise fashion. She tells me (the reader) *who* harmed the soil and *how*. In other words, she tells me she knows what she is talking about.

Passive voice is used in English to avoid attributing responsibility. Thus, we can say, 'the toy was broken' rather than 'I broke the toy'. In essay writing, however, it is your job to take responsibility for what you say. Thus, you should be thinking in active terms – i.e., 'this essay will argue x' not 'it will be argued'. Writing in an active voice forces you to communicate in a direct manner. Indeed, I tell students not to write in the passive voice because it is often used as a copout. Students can hide behind the passive voice, never taking responsibility for what they are saying and thus saying very little of consequence or substance. Writing in active voice not only helps you avoid wordiness, redundancy and vagueness, it tells your reader that you have something worthwhile to say.

Avoiding Plagiarism

Students need to be extra cautious about how they use sources. While the Department of Geography has always taken plagiarism and unfair means extremely seriously, the use of *Turnitin* has made it easier for the Department to catch instances of plagiarism and act accordingly. You will note from the DGUH, the penalties for being caught for plagiarism are extremely serious (at a minimum you fail the module). In addition, *not knowing the rules is not considered to be a convincing defence*. It is imperative that students take the time to learn the rules and how to apply them.

The Rules

The guidance given in the DGUH states that to avoid plagiarism students must provide a reference in the following scenarios:

1. When you use a direct quotation from a source of information.
2. When you paraphrase (put into your own words) someone else's ideas that you have read or heard.
3. When you use statistics or other pieces of specific information, which are drawn from a recognisable source.

In addition, the DGUH states that you must avoid the following unacceptable practices

1. Presenting statements from another person's work in your own essays without citation or any indication that the statement is a quotation (i.e. a verbatim transcription). Failure to provide a source or to put quotation marks around material that is directly copied from elsewhere gives the appearance that this constitutes your own work, when it is manifestly not.
2. Closely paraphrasing another person's work, such that the original is still identifiable, and there is no acknowledgement of the source. *Paraphrasing* means to copy the sense of another's work. If you reproduce material from a reference with a few words changed, without citing the source, this is classed as paraphrasing
3. Assembling unacknowledged passages copied from different sources, linked by a few words of your own and/or changing a few words from the original sources. This form constitutes a 'trap' for the unwary, especially if material is downloaded (cut and pasted) from the web. Be very, very careful to avoid this all too common mistake

Dos and Don'ts

There are a number of points here that students need to pay attention to:

Don't copy text from another source. You cannot copy from the web, an article and/or any other source. While you can *quote* another source, you need to put the quote within quotation marks and reference the source and page appropriately. Be warned that *Turnitin* is very good at finding matches between the work you submit and a variety of internet and published sources. If *Turnitin* sees overlap (even it is only a few words) it will bring it to our attention and be marked for a fuller examination of plagiarism. As a general rule I strongly recommend that *you do not copy and paste text from another source* except in situations when you want a direct quote.

Don't copy ideas from another source. While you can *use* ideas from another source, you need to reference the source of those ideas appropriately. While *Turnitin* is less good at catching your use of ideas, we (as instructors) are very good at. It is often very obvious when students borrow ideas from another source.

Do reference and reference a lot. Your instructors like references. We like to see that you are reading and using the material you read. While we want you to express arguments in your essays, those arguments are more convincing when they are backed up by evidence – *i.e., backed up by references*. In this sense, you should be actively looking for readings and resources to back-up the things you say. As a general rule the more you can evidence your ideas, the more convincing your work.

Using Quotes

Learning how to navigate plagiarism involves learning the correct way to use quotes. In general students should not use quotes to (a) illustrate that they have read or (b) to say what they could easily say in their own words. For example, let's look at the following sentence:

Smith (2012) believes that “the question of the cultural landscape is very complex” (page xxx).

This is a poor use of Smith. First, the fact that Smith believes the question of culture is complex is not very interesting and is self-evident. Thus, you have not used the source to make a point or even to say anything very important. If you used Smith to illustrate his unique perspective on the cultural landscape I would be more interested – but simply saying that he thinks the issue is complex makes me wonder if you have any idea what Smith thinks.

Second, you do not need Smith to write this sentence. You could easily write ‘the question of cultural landscape is very complex’. Smith does not do anything for you here. He does not add any intellectual merit or make any particular point.

Finally, it seems to me that you quoted Smith simply to illustrate that you read the source. Ultimately, however, *I do not care that you read the source*. What I care about is whether you have understood the source and can use its insights to effectively make or back-up a point. In addition, the quote you have provided gives me no reason to believe that you understand Smith or have even read Smith past the first page. Thus, there is absolutely nothing gained from using Smith in this fashion.

Students should endeavour to use quotes as a means to back-up points they are making themselves. A good example of this would be the following:

In this essay I will argue that our everyday material landscapes reflect certain cultural ideas, traditions and values. As Lewis argues, landscape is our “unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, or aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form” (Lewis, 1979 p. 23). By this Lewis means that

Here we have the student attempting to make a point about landscape and backing that point up (or elaborating that point) through a quote. The quote shows that the student understands the reading and is able to use it effectively in order to make an argument.

In short, quotes are good for illustrating or evidencing an idea, reinforcing it and/or making it more powerful. But do not use a quote to explain what you could explain yourself. You are writing the essay. Explain your points in your own words and use quotes and examples to provide further support.

Dos and Don'ts

- **Don't** use quotes to prove that you have read.
- **Don't** use quotes to say something you could easily say yourself
- **Do** explain your points in your own words
- **Do** use quotes to reinforce, evidence or elaborate a point you have already made or are going to make.

Mitch's Rules of Writing

The name of the game in writing essays is making arguments. By this I mean that your task *is not* to reiterate lecture material; *is not* to demonstrate that you know and understand what I have said and it *is not* to simply demonstrate that you have read. Rather your task is to use lecture material and the reading to make substantive claims. Alastair Bonnett's *How to argue: a student's guide* (available at Waterstone's and in BJJ) remains one of the best explanations of what an argument is and how to make one effectively. In addition to this text I provide the following rules that should provide guidance for you in preparing your essay. Take heed, the reasons you will most likely lose points are written out before you. The better you understand and can implement these rules, the better your mark will be.

Rule 1: You need to make choices

All writing involves making decisions. For any one topic, event, character or situation, there are endless things you could say about it. The problem is, of course, that you cannot say it all. Indeed, the more you try to say, the more chaotic and jumbled your writing becomes. You need to make decisions about what you are going to say: what you are going to argue (and what are you not going to argue), what potential points of evidence will you provide (and what evidence will you decide is irrelevant), what points will you focus on and in what order will you organise them? Your objective here is to create a coherent argument. Thus, the first decision you need to make is what you are going to argue. The key to essay writing at university level is **not** to argue all sides of the debate. While you are welcome and encouraged to acknowledge counter arguments, ultimately your job is to defuse those arguments by garnering evidence supporting your own conclusions. Your job, in short, is to make choices. Decide what you are going to argue and choose appropriate evidence to support your position. Again please see Bonnet's book '*How to argue: a student's guide*' for further discussion about what constitutes a substantive argument

Rule 2: Do not 'Chuck it all in'

The aim of an essay is not to demonstrate all you know. You are **not** trying to advertise how much you have read or memorised from lecture. In line with Rule 1, you need to *choose* what information is most relevant given the argument you are trying to make. This means refraining from 'banging it all in' or stuffing the essay with facts you have picked up during your revision. Remember the art of essay writing involves showing that you can line up the evidence – not simply collect it.

Rule 3: Analyse and explain don't describe

Arguments favour analysis and explanation over description. For example, let's say you are given the following essay question: "Critically analyse the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC." There are several ways you could potentially approach a question about the Lincoln Memorial. First, you could talk about the monument itself, e.g., its history, the artist that designed it, when and why it was commissioned, when it was unveiled, or who attended the unveiling. You could also potentially read the monument for its symbolism, e.g., you could talk about how Lincoln is represented, why the memorial has the Gettysburg Address etched into the walls, why the memorial faces east or why it looks like a Greek temple. Finally, you could critically *analyse* the symbolism for its importance. Thus, rather than simply talking about the memorial or describing its symbolism you could analyse the social, political or geographic significance of the symbolism; explain why that symbolism was used and what it meant in relation to other issues. For example, you could explain what the monument's symbolism says about American culture and why that particular symbolism is significant? *Explanation and analysis involves discussing why or how specific events and processes transpire they way they do.* It means going beyond a surface understanding or description of things. It involves analysing something like a monument in a deep and critical fashion.

Rule 4: Use evidence

The difference between writing an opinion and writing an argument is predicated on one thing – your ability to support your opinion with empirical evidence. Otherwise, why should the reader believe you? What evidence have you brought to bear on your thesis? The good news is that not all the work of

‘proving an argument’ has to be done by you alone. For example, let’s say you are asked the question “to what extent can the New York suburb of Westchester be considered a cultural landscape?” You cannot do the research on this question yourself because you cannot go to Westchester, New York and gather the appropriate evidence. However, you can find other people who have done that work already and use their evidence (as well as their conclusions) to support your case. Keep in mind it is important to be selective in how you use other peoples’ work. Usually someone’s research is only partially relevant to your project so be careful to use only what will suit your argument.

Rule 5: Show don’t say

Saying that something proves an argument does not mean that it proves an argument. For example, let’s take the question ‘how do the Washington Monument and other national memorials create feelings of national identity in Americans?’ If, in your answer, you discuss when the monument was built, how many stones are used, what it looks like, how many tourists visit it a day and then, in the conclusion, say: “therefore, we can see that the Washington Monument definitely creates strong feelings of national identity,” I will not be convinced. To answer the given question, you have to actually show *how* the Washington Monument creates feelings of national identity. Do not simply *say* a particular example illustrates a particular idea, theory or point in lecture or reading but *show how it does this* – i.e. explain how the idea that you want to illustrate is exemplified through the evidence you have chosen. For example, you might say: “there are three ways that the Washington Monument has been used to create feelings of national identity in Americans. First, it was used during the Vietnam War to symbolise American bravery and courage. President Nixon gave a speech in front of the Washington memorial where he stated....” This example is fabricated but it gives you an idea of what I mean by illustrating (showing) an argument.

Rule 6: Do not re-hash lectures

I do not expect students to cover all the major themes from lecture in essays. Again, the aim of an essay is not to summarise what I have taught. It is to use what I have discussed (as well as the reading) to make an argument. This means the fact that you were listening in lecture or that you have read the assigned reading *does not* guarantee you a good mark. If you never came to lecture but were able to write a good argumentative essay that did not talk about lecture material at all, it would not hurt your grade. Your aim is to illustrate that you can **use** lecture material – not simply repeat it.

Rule 7: Don’t be rhetorical

Rhetoric is a speaking style that is employed to convince someone of your argument by saying it with beauty and style. Politicians and priests tend to use rhetoric. They attempt to sway you to their side by arguing something emphatically – with passion and felicity but often, with little substance. Your job is very different. You have to prove your argument with evidence, not with rhetorical style. This rule is similar to Rule #4 (show don’t say). Simply saying something over and over or saying it with style does not prove your point. Your job is to illustrate your position to me by using evidence you find through your own research or through the reading. On a similar note do not use colloquial language. Writing and speaking are two different modes of communication.

Rule 8: Don’t pad

Do not extend your word count by talking around or along the surface of the topic. By giving a profusion of useless detail or going off on tangents you can potentially write thousands of words without every saying anything of consequence. Writing that is circular or full of empty generalities is often referred to as ‘padding’ since it just takes up space. As a rule you want to keep your argument as streamlined and structured as possible. This means making choices about what is relevant and throwing out the rest. Beware of tangents and the allure of unnecessary detail. Keep asking yourself if the information you are providing is necessary: ‘do I really need to provide a dictionary definition of this term? Have I been asked to define it?’ The more information or detail you add, the more your argument potentially gets lost in the padding. Also remember that you do not get marked down for being under the word count. If you answer a 2500 word essay effectively in 2000 words, there is no reason it should not get a good mark.