The Seven Deadly Sins of Argumentative Writing

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General

1. The Minimal Answer

You will typically write a paper or an essay in answer to a prompt or a question. The sin of the Minimal Answer is to write the absolute minimum that could possibly be considered a complete answer to the question you have been asked. This strategy might be perfectly appropriate for exams that test factual recall, for example, because providing extra information is just an extra opportunity to be wrong about something, but essay writing (in papers or exams) is not like that. An essayÕs quality is determined in large part by the depth of understanding of the issues that it exhibits, the comprehensiveness with which it treats them (within the limits specified by the assignment), and by how thorough and convincing a case the essay makes for its thesis. Thus, essay writing is always an open-ended affair in which the quality of the finished product is determined by how much you are able to do with the question or prompt, not how little you can put down that technically constitutes an answer to it. Always take the question or prompt as an opportunity to show how *much* understanding of the (relevant!) material and how *much* independent thinking and creative argumentation you can weave into a powerful, subtle, comprehensive and convincing answer to the question you have been asked.

2. Irrelevant Material

On the other hand, you should not avoid the sin of the Minimal Answer by packing in discussions of issues that are simply not relevant to the argument or conclusion of your essay, even if these are issues that were discussed in class or in the reading. Many students in the Natural Sciences and elsewhere seem to think that the primary difference between themselves and their colleagues in the Humanities consists in the ability of these colleagues to pack a lot of flowery bullshit into an attractive package (indeed, this is often viewed as the primary skill required for writing college essays and this is, in many cases, the very reason that students have chosen to pursue less writing-intensive studies). Let me assure you that this is not the skill we are looking for, nor is it what separates good writing from bad. There is nothing wrong with rhetorical polish, but those who evaluate your writing are not interested in seeing flowery rhetoric or irrelevant discussions packed in around the points you need to make your case. You should be able to go through your finished paper and explain how each paragraph (and each sentence) is making some contribution towards supporting the thesis you are seeking to establish by argument: e.g., Òhere I am providing evidence for claim X, which I need to make the case for claim Y later on, which is one of my three main arguments for the paperÕs conclusion.Ó It may be painful

to eliminate material from your paper when you realize that it is ultimately not relevant to the thesis you are trying to establish, but it is a mistake to leave such material in just because you worked hard on it. To do so actually weakens your essay by making your argument harder to follow and therefore less convincing, and it suggests that you canÕt see the difference between what is relevant to your thesis and what isnÕt. Some of the most important work of writing an essay lies in choosing what things you will weave together into a single coherent argument and what you will leave behind as irrelevant. A clear and convincing essay is recognizable evidence of your having done this editorial work well.

Attacking Your OpponentÕs Position or Argument

3. Regurgitation/Excessive Quotation

It is very common for inexperienced writers to simply regurgitate views or arguments as they have been presented in class or to rely on the excessive use of quotations to articulate or explain the views and arguments they wish to discuss. Long quotations show your audience (including your TA) that you could find where a view or argument is described in a book, not that you understand it. Use quotations sparingly, especially long ones: put things in your own words whenever possible, and use short quotations, if appropriate, simply to illustrate the points you are making. (Use long quotations only when you wish to discuss the authorÕs words themselves, rather than her view or her argument.) You will also demonstrate a better understanding of an argument or view considered in lecture if you can put it in your own words, illustrate it with your own examples rather than the ones given in class, etc. As a general rule, the more original thinking you can show, whether in your articulation of the view or argument you are discussing or in the objections, replies and arguments that you yourself offer, the better your essay will be.

If your paper makes any use of facts, arguments, descriptions or ideas you found in outside sources (including the internet), be sure to*cite them!* Plagiarism is representing someone elseÕs ideas as your own or making use of those ideas without acknowledgment, whether you use the same words they did or not. It is something that I take extremely seriously and it is often very easy to detect.

4. Uncharitable Reading

An important part of argumentative writing is careful reading of the views and arguments you will discuss. Because these views and arguments are typically complex, you will often have to make decisions about how to interpret or understand what it is that an author is saying, and one of the easiest mistakes to make is to read an authorÕs views and arguments uncharitably. When you you must decide whether an author is offering a weaker argument or a stronger one (or trying to defend a dumb view or a more plausible one), you should make the charitable assumption that she is offering the stronger argument and/or

defending the more plausible view. You might have to decide, for instance, whether an authorÕs argument assumes that fraud never occurs in science, or just that it does so rarely and is usually caught in important cases. If the authorÕs argument gives you room to do so, you should interpret her as making the second, more plausible, assumption. In general, a charitable reading or interpretation makes an argument or position as strong as it can be while remaining compatible with what the text of the argument actually says, while an uncharitable reading makes an argument or position weaker than it has to be to fit the text. Charitable interpretation will not only convince your audience that you are being as fair as you can be to your opponent, but will also dramatically increase the significance of your own essay by engaging important and intelligent arguments on its topic rather than trivial or silly ones.

5. Glancing Blows

Part of making a convincing case against your opponentÕs view or argument is showing why some objection or challenge you are raising against her is an important one. If you are arguing that the authorÕs view has an implication she has not noticed, explain why that implication is an implausible or undesirable one that she should wish to avoid. If you are suggesting that she has not done enough to convince us of the truth of some premise she needs to make her case, go on to explain why this premise is crucial to her case and give us any reasons you can for thinking that the crucial presumption she is making is probably mistaken (rather than just pointing out that the presumption might be mistaken, or asking rhetorically ÔWhoÕs to sayÕ that itÕs trueÑin this case, youÕre the person whoÕs to say why the authorÕs presumption is (is probably? may well be?) mistaken and why this matters). If your objection will force the author to modify her view or argument in order to meet it, explain why the modification will be a significant one that will really impact or even undermine the point she was trying to make. As a general matter, always try to show why the objection you are raising to an authorÕs view or argument is an *important* one: make sure that the author could not just grant your objection without that greatly affecting the conclusions she can justifiably draw.

Constructing Your Own Arguments

6. Reporting Beliefs Instead of Giving Arguments

Inexperienced argumentative writers often simply report their beliefs about the issue they are discussing, rather than giving arguments for their position, and they sometimes have trouble seeing the difference. Simply announcing that you reject the authorÕs conclusions because they conflict with some particular belief that you hold dear does not constitute an argument for your position. Similarly, telling your audience that your brother was killed by a drunk driver may explain why you feel particularly strongly about the issue and

why you oppose the authorÕs proposal to lighten sentences for first-time drunk drivers, but it does not give your audience any reason to share your view, nor does it serve to undermine any argument the author has given in support of her proposal. As a general matter, giving an argument for the view you are advocating is a matter of giving your audience something that should count *for them* as a reason that they, too, should hold your view, rather than your opponentÕs. Inexperienced writers also sometimes make this mistake in discussing the work of others, simply reporting and commenting on an authorÕs own beliefs instead of evaluating the arguments she has given for them.

7. Ignoring Obvious or Powerful Objections

If you cannot imagine even one good objection to the argument you are making, you are probably defending a trivial thesis (i.e. an uncontroversial claim that noone would disagree with in the first place). Inexperienced writers sometimes think the best strategy is to ÔprotectÕ their arguments by ignoring potential objections so as to avoid drawing their readerÕs attention to something that might weaken the case they are trying to make (especially if they cannot think of any convincing reply to the objection). This is a mistake. One of the best ways you can strengthen the argument of your essay is to face head on as many of the most powerful objections to your argument that you can think of, especially if these objections are obvious ones or ones that are likely to occur to an intelligent or informed reader (e.g. your TA) anyway. Sometimes replying to possible objections will lead you to develop or sophisticate the position you are advocating. In other cases, you may not be able to think of anything convincing to say in response to an especially powerful or compelling objection, in which case you might want to rethink which side of the issue you want to defend. There is no shame in being convinced by good arguments that you were previously mistaken about some issue, and your earlier work is not wasted, because the objection itself can become the centerpiece of your new essay arguing against your own former view!