

Developing an argument (adapted from <http://library.bcu.ac.uk/learner/writingguides/1.15.htm>)

It is very important that you recognize which type of essay questions are looking for some sort of judgement, and then to be able to construct an effective, convincing argument in your answer. A major cause of complaint from tutors is that students at all levels do not do this very well, and make their writing descriptive rather than argumentative. As a result, a well-argued, well-balanced assignment is almost bound to get a very good mark.

The following essay titles all require a judgement or argument:

Should capital punishment be reintroduced in the UK?

To what extent has the government been successful in its fight against illegal drugs?

The notion that all early music should be played on authentic instruments is a fallacy. Discuss.

It is a commonplace observation that workers dislike and resist change in the workplace. How far do you think this is a rational response to their economic position and how far simply a result of the mismanagement of change?

If you were to write a very general essay, for example, about capital punishment, without answering the specific question asked, your mark is going to be low. Instead, what you need to do is:

- decide basically what your opinion/standpoint is on the question, either from your own experience, from what you have covered on your course, or from additional reading on the subject.
- think what the main points of your argument would be.
- do extensive reading to find evidence to back up your points, and at the same time note down counter-arguments and contradictory evidence. There is always more than one side to an argument, and it is very important in a piece of academic writing to show that you are aware of these different opinions. Your approach must be balanced, not one-sided.
- structure your answer carefully. You should state what your conclusion will be right at the start in your introduction; then present both, or all, sides of the argument in a logical, coherent manner, showing clearly which side you stand on by the specific use of language (see below) and use of appropriate examples and evidence; and finally include a well-developed conclusion which draws all the strands together and makes completely clear where you stand. In an argumentative essay the conclusion is probably the most important part, so don't make it too short.

What is an appropriate position to take?

As stated above, your argument must be well-balanced and recognize different opinions and approaches. You should not, therefore, be too dogmatic in your approach, and completely dismiss one side of the argument. At the same time, you should not “sit on the fence” and take an indecisive approach, as this may be interpreted as you not having an opinion, or simply not knowing. (In terms of pure argument, you don't necessarily have to completely agree with what you are saying).