

College Writing: Supporting Your Thesis

You've written an arguable thesis. Now you've got to give some evidence to support your claim. Keep in mind our discussion in "Formulating an Arguable Thesis," and support your thesis with facts rather than with beliefs.

Think of your paper as a court case—your job is to support your thesis with solid facts so that the reader has no choice but to accept your argument as a possible option, even if the reader doesn't necessarily agree with what you've said. Remember that juries usually base their rulings on facts, not on beliefs, even in highly controversial and emotionally-charged cases. Your professor will view your paper the same way.

Before we get started with using our supporting information, let's briefly discuss how you should go about gathering that information in the first place. We'll need to think about

- Using appropriate sources for finding supporting evidence
- Learning about journals related to your topic
- Consulting with a reference librarian

Using Appropriate Sources for Finding Supporting Evidence

Let's talk briefly about using appropriate sources for finding supporting evidence. Now that you're a college student, this is more important than ever. Students often want to use sources like Wikipedia and Spark Notes to get information. Although these sources contain a great deal of information that can serve as a jumping off point for your support, neither one of them are scholarly enough to be appropriate for college-level writing. Instead, use more authoritative sources like

- reliable newspapers (like *The Wall Street Journal* or *The New York Times*)
- reliable magazines (like *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *Consumer Reports*)
- noted authorities on your topic

Learning about Journals Related to Your Topic

Ask your professor if there are any journals that you should consult. If the paper you're writing is for your major, you need to learn about these journals so you'll be knowledgeable about scholarship in your chosen field. Learning about these journals will help you not only with this assignment, but they'll also help you as you move forward into the job market. People who know about publications in their field have industry awareness, marketplace knowledge, and understanding of their competition, three things that will give them a distinct advantage when they start applying to graduate programs or interviewing for jobs.

Remember to ask your professor what format you should follow for this paper. If this paper is for a class in your major, you need to become familiar with the format people in your field use. Some professors deduct points if you don't follow the appropriate format.

Consulting with a Reference Librarian

If you're not sure where to start, go to your campus library and ask to speak to one of the reference librarians. Reference librarians are one of the greatest untapped resources on college campuses—they specialize in locating information. They won't do your research for you, but they can point you in the right direction. Many college libraries offer "reference by appointment," where you schedule an appointment to meet privately with a reference librarian, free of charge. Take advantage of this service—it can change the course of your college career in terms of the invaluable information you'll receive.

Now that we've learned about appropriate sources, related journals, and reference librarians, we can start learning about

- Citing your sources
- Using quotes of appropriate length
- Anchoring your quotes
- Explaining how the quote relates to your argument

Citing Your Sources

Of course, you'll need to properly cite the sources for your quotes. The way you do it is dependent on the style guide you're supposed to use for this assignment. Make sure you've asked your professor which style guide is appropriate for your paper.

Another thing to keep in mind—when in doubt, cite your source. Many professors use websites like TurnItIn.com, which make it easy to spot plagiarism. If the words you put in your paper aren't your own, cite your source, even if you've tried to paraphrase instead of including lots of quotes. In this handout, we use MLA format.

Using Quotes of an Appropriate Length

Many professors see long passages as the student's attempt to "pad" a paper without really analyzing the information. An argumentative paper is just as much about your ability to adequately explain *why* you interpret the argument as you do as it is about providing support for your argument.

Do your best to use short snippets of quotes rather than including long passages. Including long passages means your reader is doing most of the work because the reader has to figure out why you included this passage. As the writer, you must explain why this quote is relevant to your argument. If you find yourself thinking "they'll know what I mean," you're dead wrong. It's your job as the writer to explain exactly why you've used that quote, and how it relates to your argument.

Realize that you may not end up using all the information you gather. This is just a natural part of the process. Choose the best, most substantial and authoritative support that you find. If you cannot choose, try to rank the information from the best to the least convincing, and then use the top three quotes.



Anchoring Quotes into Your Sentences

You might be tempted to just cut and paste quotes into your paper. However, quotes cannot stand alone. A college-level writer finds a way to incorporate quotes into a sentence of his or her own commentary, which anchors the quote. Anchoring quotes into your own sentences is a more sophisticated technique that makes you a more masterful writer. We'll talk more about this technique in a moment.

Explaining How the Quote Relates to Your Argument

Comment on each quote you use immediately after you include it. Explain why it's important. Don't just expect your reader to see how the quote fits in—go the distance for your reader and tell him or her how *you* think this quote fits into your argument. If you need more than one sentence of explanation, that's fine. Do what it takes to flesh out your argument so your reader understands precisely what you mean. That's your job as the writer.

Your argument must be logical, sincere, and informed. Treat your readers like intelligent, reasonable adults, and explain to them precisely why they should see things your way and exactly how the quoted information supports your argument.

Now let's get down to the business of supporting that argument. We do this by

- discussing facts that support your thesis
- examining ideas that contradict your thesis

Our ultimate goal is persuading the reader that based on the evidence, the thesis is either correct, or that the thesis is a viable option.

Discussing Facts that Support Your Thesis

Let's take another look at our thesis:

College students spend a great deal of time texting their friends and family. This offers them an easy way to stay in touch, and it can also provide a fun way to fill the time between classes. However, students pose a possible threat to themselves and to other people when they text while driving. Texting while driving is dangerous. Even if you think you can text while you drive, you cannot possibly pay enough attention to driving when you have your face pointed down to your mobile device. We need to support laws that make texting while driving illegal.

Let's start with something that's fairly easy to prove:

Everyone knows that drinking and driving is dangerous, but most of us do not realize that texting while driving poses an even greater threat.

Here's some information that supports that claim:

"The University of Utah confirmed that texting while operating a vehicle is twice as dangerous as driving drunk."

<http://www.distracteddrivinghelp.com/texting-and-driving/dui>

“Motorists who write text messages while driving are six times more likely to crash than those who don't text while driving, according to a new study by University of Utah psychologists.”

<http://www.uneews.utah.edu/old/p/121809-3.html>

Let's anchor these quotes by incorporating snippets from them into a sentence of our own commentary:

Everyone knows that drinking and driving is dangerous, but most of us do not realize that texting while driving poses an even greater threat. In fact, “the University of Utah confirmed that texting while operating a vehicle is twice as dangerous as driving drunk” (Distracted Driving Help). The study further indicates that you are “six times more likely to crash” while driving than you are if you concentrate solely on driving.

It's just that easy. Now we've anchored the quotes into our own commentary, which is a much more sophisticated technique than simply placing quotes in our paper where they'll just float around. You've distinguished yourself as a writer who truly understands how to use supporting evidence effectively. Now you need to comment on these quotes and to explain why they're important.

Everyone knows that drinking and driving is dangerous, but most of us do not realize that texting while driving poses an even greater threat. In fact, “the University of Utah confirmed that texting while operating a vehicle is twice as dangerous as driving drunk” (Distracted Driving Help). The study further indicates that you are “six times more likely to crash” while driving than you are if you concentrate solely on driving. This is a sobering idea because it adds scientific data that proves that texting while driving is dangerous.

Notice the use of the word “sobering” in the last sentence of the paragraph. It's a great choice because it relates back to the first sentence, effectively tying our sentences together, and making our argument look cohesive.

Examining Ideas that Contradict Your Argument

As you're writing, you always want to spend more time supporting your point of view than in examining the opposition. However, to have a strong argumentative paper, you have to confront the opposition head on. Doing so strengthens your argument because it demonstrates that you understand both sides. If you agree with something the opposition says, acknowledge it. This makes you appear open-minded. What you have to do next is to examine why the opposition's argument is wrong or why it isn't as compelling as it seems.

Check to see if the opposition has made any faulty assumptions. Here's an example:

Students at Gadsden High School in Gadsden, Alabama, participated in an anonymous survey about texting and driving. One student said, “I feel texting and driving is OK at speeds less than 45 mph.”

<http://www.gadsdentimes.com/article/20100411/NEWS/100419975>



On the surface, this claim sounds okay, but here's another quote that negates it:
Car and Driver magazine found that it took their test driver "an extra 21 feet (more than a car length) before hitting the brakes while reading and [the test driver] went 16 feet longer while texting" at 35 mph.

(<http://www.caranddriver.com/features/texting-while-driving-how-dangerous-is-it-the-results-page-2>)

The *Car and Driver* quote seemingly negates the student's quote because the student appears to have made a faulty assumption based on his or her feeling, while the writers at *Car and Driver* performed an actual test based on measurable data. The student's feeling, which contradicts our thesis, topples like a poor foundation for a house. It doesn't even really conflict with our argument because it's a statement of belief rather than a statement of fact.

Let's incorporate these two quotes into a supporting paragraph, making sure that we also comment on why the quotes contradict or support our argument.

Students typically think texting and driving is no big deal. In an anonymous survey at Gadsden High School in Gadsden, Alabama, one student said, "I feel texting and driving is OK at speeds less than 45 mph" (Students' opinions on texting while driving vary). While this statement makes sense on the surface, a recent test performed by writers at *Car and Driver* magazine showed that it took their test driver "an extra 21 feet (more than a car length) before hitting the brakes while reading and [the test driver] went 16 feet longer while texting" at 35 mph (Texting While Driving: How Dangerous is it? – Feature). Even at a relatively slow speed, the *Car and Driver* test driver's results demonstrate that it takes longer to brake while texting and driving. This negates the student's comment, which is based on his or her belief rather than on the measurable data gathered by the people at *Car and Driver* magazine. You simply cannot and do not react as quickly when you text and drive.

As you continue to build your argument, plan to put your most compelling support last, since this is the final time you can persuade your reader before concluding your paper.

Use This Supporting Your Thesis Checklist

Let's use this checklist to see if our supporting evidence helps us follow our goals.

Have you

- ✓ Used appropriate sources?
- ✓ Used journals related to your topic when possible?
- ✓ Cited your sources, even if you've merely paraphrased the source?
- ✓ Used quotes of an appropriate length?
- ✓ Anchored quotes into sentences of your own commentary?
- ✓ Explained how the quote relates to your argument?
- ✓ Used facts to support your argument?
- ✓ Examined ideas that contradict your argument?
- ✓ Put your most compelling supporting information last?



Works Cited

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