

The Classical Argument

Since rhetors began teaching Greek farmers strategies for appealing their cases to Greek courts in the fifth century B.C., the *classical argument* has stood as a model for writers who believe their case can be argued logically and plausibly to an open-minded audience. In its simplest form, the classical argument has five main parts:

The *introduction*, which warms up the audience, establishes goodwill and rapport with the readers, and announces the general theme or *thesis* of the argument.

The *narration*, which summarizes relevant [background material](#), provides any information the audience needs to know about the environment and circumstances that produce the argument, and set up the stakes—what’s at risk in this question.

The *confirmation* lays out in a logical order (usually strongest to weakest or most obvious to most subtle) the [claims](#) that support the [thesis](#), providing evidence for each claim.

The *refutation and concession*, which looks at opposing viewpoints to the writer’s claims, [anticipating objections](#) from the audience, and allowing as much of the opposing viewpoints as possible without weakening the thesis.

The *summation* provides a strong conclusion, amplifying the force of the argument, and showing the readers that this solution is the best at meeting the circumstances.

Each of these paragraphs represents a "chunk" of the paper, which might be one or more paragraphs; for instance, the *introduction* and *narration* sections might be combined into one chunk, while the *confirmation* and *concession* sections will probably be several paragraphs each.



Here are some suggestions and strategies for developing each section of your classical argument.

The **introduction** has three jobs: to capture your audience’s interest, establish their perception of you as a writer, and set out your point of view for the argument. These multiple roles require careful planning on your part. You might capture interest by using a focusing anecdote or quotation, a shocking statistic, or by restating a problem or controversy in a new way. You could also begin with an analogy or parallel case, a personal statement, or (if you genuinely believe your audience will agree with you) a bold statement of your thesis. The language choices you use will convey a great deal about your image to your audience; for instance, if you’re writing about abortion, audiences will react differently to language about "pro-lifers" than they will to language about "people who oppose abortion" or "pro-family supporters." This introduction usually

funnels down into a solid, clear thesis statement; if you can't find a sentence in this chunk that explicitly says what point you are supporting, you need to keep refining the introduction.

In the **narration** you want to establish a context for your argument. This means that you need to explain the situation to which your argument is responding, as well as any relevant background information, history, statistics, and so on that affect it. (For instance, the abortion argument might well mention *Roe vs. Wade*, more recent cases, legal precedents, and even public opinion polls.) Once again, the language with which you describe this background will give the audience a picture of you, so choose it carefully. By the end of this chunk, the readers should understand what's at stake in this argument—the issues and alternatives the community faces—so that they can evaluate your claims fairly.

The **confirmation** section allows you to explain why you believe in your thesis. It takes up several **supporting** claims individually, so that you can develop each one by bringing in facts, examples, testimony, definitions, and so on. It's important that you explain why the evidence for each claim supports it and the larger thesis; this builds a *chain of reasoning* in support of your argument.

The **refutation and concession** is sometimes a hard section for writers to develop—who wants to think of the reasons why an argument *won't* work? But this can often be the strongest part of an argument, for when you show an audience that you have anticipated potential opposition and objections, and have an answer for them, you defuse the audience's ability to oppose you and persuade them to accept your point of view. If there are places where you agree with your opposition, *conceding* their points creates goodwill and respect without weakening your thesis. For instance, if you are supporting parental notification for abortions, you might concede that there are times when girls can't be expected to get their parents' permission, such as in abuse or incest cases—but then suggest that a court-appointed counselor give permission instead so that the young girl gets an adult's support in making this decision.

It's tempting in the **summation** just to restate the claims and thesis, but this doesn't give a sense of momentum or closure to your argument. Instead, try to harken back to the narration and the issues—remind your readers what's at stake here, and try to show why your thesis provides the best solution to the issue being faced. This gives an impression of the rightness and importance of your argument, and suggests its larger significance or long-range impact. More importantly, it gives the readers a psychological sense of closure—the argument winds up instead of breaking off.

More readings on classical argument:

Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (Oxford, 1971)
Walter H. Beale, *Real Writing* (Scott Foresman, 1986)