Notes for Arguing Well
By Peter Nichols

Note: It would take an entire course to even scratch the surface of arguing well; what I am providing here are simply a few pointers to keep in mind.

1. **Know what an argument is.** Since this handout is on arguments, it’s best to start by defining an argument. An argument is a series of statements in which certain statements, namely the premises, are meant to provide support for another statement(s), namely the conclusion. Formally, an argument looks like this:

   (Example A1)
   All dogs are mammals (premise 1)
   All mammals are animals (premise 2)
   Therefore, All dogs are animals (conclusion)

   A1 is an example of a valid argument, that is, an argument where the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion. More specifically, in a valid argument, it is impossible to have BOTH of the following at once: (1) All true premises, AND (2) A false conclusion. By contrast, here is an invalid argument:

   (Example A2)
   All dogs are animals (premise 1)
   All dogs are mammals (premise 2)
   Therefore, All animals are mammals (conclusion)

   In A2, the conclusion does not validly follow from the premises; even though both premises are true, the conclusion is false. Obviously, then, when coming up with arguments for your position, you want to make sure that your main supporting claims (your premises) actually provide support for your thesis (conclusion); that is, at a minimum, you want your arguments to be valid.

   Of course, when writing your papers, you will not typically spell out your arguments formally (although it is common to do so in more advanced forms of philosophical writing, and you are welcome to do so if you like). Nonetheless, the basic idea is the same. You want to give the reader reasons—convincing reasons—for accepting your thesis (conclusion). Here is a brief schematic of some of the ways in which premises can provide support for a conclusion:

   (A) Each premise provides independent support for the conclusion.
   (B) None of the premises provides independent support for the conclusion, but when taken as a whole, the premises provide collective support for the conclusion.
   (C) Premise 1 provides independent support for premise 2, and premise 2 provides independent support for the conclusion.
Various combinations of (A-C) are possible. (e.g. Three different premises provide collective support for the fourth premise, which provides independent support for the conclusion.)

Remember—you don’t have to spell out your premises and conclusion formally. But you want your main argument to be such that you provide the reader with some good reasons for accepting your thesis, and you want your argument to be presented clearly in well-written prose.

2. **Come up with a thesis that requires argument, not just explanation.** The most important step in writing a paper with a good philosophical argument is to come up with a thesis that not everyone would accept. Thus, your thesis should require reasoning and argument—not merely explanation—for its defense. You need to provide the reader with convincing reasons as to why your thesis is a tenable one, and spell out those reasons in an orderly and focused fashion. Accordingly, outside sources should be used as means of supporting your arguments, rather than means of providing those arguments. The idea here is that you are making a unique contribution towards the development of your thesis—a contribution that invokes outside sources for support, but not in place of your own ideas.

3. **For a four-page paper, focus on approximately 2-4 main points of argument, and develop each of those points.** When arguing, you want to develop each of your supporting points, rather than string along a series of brief and unrelated criticisms. Each paragraph of your paper should focus on no more than one point of argumentation, and it is also often appropriate to develop one point of argumentation over several paragraphs. Always be sure that each supporting point relates to your main thesis. What you should end up with is a thesis with approximately 2-4 focused and developed supporting arguments. Of course, you also have to make sure that you have adequately explained any view you will be opposing (see # 5). (NOTE: 2-4 points of argument is a very loose approximation; it is a guideline, but not a strict rule. Your arguments could each support your thesis independently, or they could all be different aspects of one central argument. The main idea here is just to make sure that each argument is developed, whether or not it is independent of your other points.)

4. **Respond to objections.** Although this is difficult to do well in merely four pages, it is very important when arguing to anticipate and respond to likely objections to your view. These objections can either be points that have already been advanced by other thinkers, or they can be points that you think your opponents will likely raise. For a paper of this length, it will do to put forth and respond to 1-3 key objections—the number will depend on the length of your response. One objection is fine as long as it is an important one and you try to be thorough in responding to it.

5. **When critiquing another person’s view or responding to objections to your view, always be sure to (1) portray your opponent’s argument accurately, and (2) respond to the strongest of your opponent’s arguments.** This is a very common error in arguing and debating, and it is called the “straw man” fallacy. One commits this fallacy when one does either of two things (1) one distorts the opponent’s argument so that it is easier to attack (thus, setting up a “straw man” and knocking it down), or (2) one attacks the opponent’s
weakest argument(s) instead of addressing the opponent’s strongest argument(s). Here is an example of an argument, in prose, that commits this fallacy (in the first of the two ways mentioned above):

(A3)
The student status committee has presented us with an argument favoring alcohol privileges on campus. What do the students want? Is it their intention to stay boozed up from the day they enter as freshmen till the day they graduate? Do they expect us to open a bar for them? Or maybe a chain of bars all over campus? Such a proposal is ridiculous! (Hurley, P., *A Concise Introduction to Logic, 8th Ed.*, Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, Belmont, CA, 2003, p.122.)

In A3, the arguer exaggerates and distorts the opponent’s argument, to make it sound ridiculous. Here is another example:

(A4)
Mr. Goldberg has argued against prayer in the public schools. Obviously Mr. Goldberg advocates atheism. But atheism is what they used to have in Russia. Atheism leads to the suppression of all religions and the replacement of God by an omnipotent state. Is that what we want for this country? I hardly think so. Clearly, Mr. Goldberg’s argument is nonsense. (Hurley, P., *A Concise Introduction to Logic, 8th Ed.*, Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, Belmont, CA, 2003, p.122.)

We see a mistake in A4 similar to that in A3, namely, the arguer distorts the argument to make it look ridiculous, but in the process misrepresents the opponent (assuming that this is not how Mr. Goldberg formulated his argument). Incidentally, there are two fallacies in A4—the other one is called the slippery slope fallacy, but I am not concerned with that one here.

Thus, there are two main things to keep in mind here. First, you always want to make sure that you have portrayed your opponent’s position accurately, and second, you always want to make sure that you are responding to your opponent’s strongest points.

6. **Avoid the fallacy of “begging the question.”** This is another common fallacy, and it occurs either when one assumes what one is trying to prove, or what is tantamount, when one argues in a circle. Here is an example of an argument that begs the question:

(A5)
The Bible says that God exists (premise 1)
God inspired the Bible (premise 2)
*Therefore*, God exists (conclusion)

In the above example, the two premises are meant to support the conclusion, but the conclusion already appears in premise 2. That is to say, we have to already accept the conclusion as true if we are to accept its supporting reasons (namely, premise 2) as true. Here is another example of this fallacy, this time in prose:
(A6)
Capital punishment is justified for the crimes of murder and kidnapping because it is quite legitimate and appropriate that someone be put to death for having committed such hateful and inhuman acts. (Hurley, P., A Concise Introduction to Logic, 8th Ed., Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, Belmont, CA, 2003, p.149.)

In A6, the conclusion (what comes before the ‘because’) merely re-states what was said in the premise (what comes after the ‘because’). Here is another one:

(A7)
Murder is morally wrong. This being the case, it follows that abortion is morally wrong. (Hurley, P., A Concise Introduction to Logic, 8th Ed., Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, Belmont, CA, 2003, p.148.)

In A7, the arguer begs the question because s/he assumes that abortion is murder. In this case, the arguer has left out a premise, namely, the premise that abortion is murder. Here’s one more:

(A8)
Ford Motor Company clearly produces the finest cars in the United States. We know they produce the finest cars because they have the best design engineers. This is true because they can afford to pay them more than other manufacturers. Obviously they can afford to pay them more because they produce the finest cars in the United States. (Hurley, P., A Concise Introduction to Logic, 8th Ed., Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, Belmont, CA, 2003, p.149.)

In A8, the arguer reasons in a circle; the conclusion is used in a premise, just as in example A5.

Obviously, we don’t expect you to be experts with these fallacies; the main idea here is to begin to give you a sense of some better and worse ways of reasoning. There are dozens of fallacies and each of them is tricky to avoid, including the two I have mentioned above. The straw man and begging the question are, however, very common and also very devastating to any argument that commits them. Thus, even watching out for these two errors could dramatically improve your arguing skills.