

# APPROACHES TO ARGUMENT IN A CRITICAL ESSAY

## **1 Take control of the question: ESTABLISH A TIGHT FOCUS, and maintain that focus**

Make the essay question your own: define the terms of the question that YOU want to address; challenge the terms of the essay question if you wish. Establish and maintain a tight focus by being selective: don't attempt to 'survey' the field; instead pick out key issues / passages from relevant texts and / or specific aspects of a question.

## **2 Construct a precise argument; conceive the essay as *debate***

Critical essays argue. Even if a question does not pose an argument (eg. 'Examine the role of revenge in *Hamlet*') your essay should construct a precisely focused argument (eg. 'Hamlet's inconsistent acts of revenge undermine audience sympathy for him'). Constructing an argument demands that you think creatively, transforming and focusing your critical interests into a hypothesis. You need not agree with that hypothesis; you can argue *against* it, or frame it as a question (eg. 'do Hamlet's inconsistent acts of revenge undermine audience sympathy for him?'). Plan the essay around the central argument or thesis statement [ see Stott, Snaith and Rylance, eds., *Making Your Case* (2001), pp.54-6 ]. More widely, conceive the essay as a high-pitched dialogue: *debate* your argument with an interested and informed reader in mind. The liveliest debates are argued with commitment and conviction.

### **Possible Approaches to Introductions [ see *Making Your Case*, p.43 ].**

- Focus on the objective of the essay. What is your 'driving' or dominant question?
- Engage with working definitions of key terms. Are there conflicting definitions? What problems do such definitions throw up?
- Make clear your line of argument and / or indicate the direction you are going to take in answering the question.
- Establish the context of the question you are addressing.
- Tell the reader why you think the question is important / interesting / relevant.

## **3 Develop an argument**

The key to strong essays is that they DEVELOP AN ARGUMENT. Don't ARRIVE at the essay's argument as late as the conclusion: INTRODUCE the argument at the essay's opening – and spend the rest of the essay DEVELOPING AND REFINING that argument. (Many student essays could be dramatically improved by making the 'draft' conclusion the essay's introduction – then going on to refine, nuance, complicate and develop the ideas raised in that introduction.)

HOW TO DEVELOP AND REFINE AN ARGUMENT by using examples and counter-arguments:

- **close reading: textual analysis** – not only to ILLUSTRATE your argument but to REFINE your argument. **Engage with the language of the text:** consider the impact of words, their resonances, and how particular readings develop or complicate your argument. **Respond** to the text.
- consider **alternative readings** of the text / issues (to REFINE your argument).
- examine moments of **tension / conflict / complication** in the text (to REFINE your argument).
- consider **counter-arguments**; ANTICIPATE OBJECTIONS TO YOUR ARGUMENT (to refine your argument).
- consider the **implications** of the argument: what impact does x have on y?; what does x reveal more widely about a, b, and c?; how does x bear upon our critical approaches to y?
- engage with **critical debates** relevant to the argument / text by considering HOW FAR YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH OTHER CRITICAL VIEWPOINTS, AND WHY. Don't just use critics as 'back-up': engage with their arguments / ideas (what are the problems with their reading?; what do they neglect?; how do you read the argument / text differently?; why, precisely, do you agree with them?). **Research** your topic to expand your ideas.

## **4 Clearly develop the argument by attending to paragraph and essay structure**

Carefully consider the progression of your argument, paying special attention to transitions from one paragraph to the next. Within each paragraph: identify the 'topic sentence' [key idea / argument] and its extension; use examples and / or evidence; develop an argument logically from point to point; consider the conclusion to the paragraph [ see *Making Your Case*, p.62 ]. You can use **footnotes** as another 'tier' of argument – to signal your further thinking around an issue / text, and avoid digression from the central argument in the maintext.

## **5 Don't describe; *analyse*.**

Your task is not to describe the text but to analyse it. Remember the distinction between *knowledge-telling* (description, involving recalling and reiterating) and *knowledge-transformation* (transformation of knowledge drawn from a number of sources used as evidence within a developing argument) [ see *Making Your Case*, pp.45-6 ]. Avoid paraphrase unless essential to the argument.

## **6 Don't state; *demonstrate*.**

Avoid simply stating a point; *demonstrate* it through careful elaboration of your ideas in relation to the relevant texts.

## **7 Write clearly**

Clear expression is crucial to clarity of argument. Use punctuation, syntax [sentence structure] and vocabulary to your advantage.