# Interpreting and Writing an Argument Phillips

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| **What is an argument?**  Despite what the word may imply to you, an argument is not an angry discussion. Lawyers present arguments for their cases and use the conventions of effective argument. For our purposes, an argument will be deemed both valid and strong when it demonstrates the following characteristics: |
| * Valid arguments typically begin with a **premise** (a reasonable, foundational idea) upon which a writer can build a **thesis** (a claim asserted by the writer or speaker). In exploring the context for an issue, the premise should emerge somewhat naturally and become a foundational principle for the argument. One should also consider oppositional points of view during the development of the premise. Logical, **deductive reasoning** often involves **syllogism** (like the transitive property – All A is C; all B is A; therefore all B is C) where a series of related foundational ideas yields a defensible **thesis** (every virtue is laudable; kindness is a virtue; therefore, kindness is laudable). * All strong arguments present evidence to support the thesis, and the evidence may take many forms. The best arguments are unified or have **unity** (which means that all parts of the argument work together to prove a point of view in a balanced manner that utilizes the rhetorical triangle: *ethos*, *logos*, *pathos*). Also, the best arguments use **logic** (an implied comparison when one thing is directly called another), like **analogy** (a comparison to a directly parallel case) or other figurative and literary devices (simile, metaphor, allusion, etc). A writer might also use **authority** (for our purposes this means citing an expert to build a case with examples in the manner of **inductive** **reasoning**). Weak arguments\* oversimplify issues with **either-or** reasoning (reducing a complex issue to two polar opposite conclusions to the exclusion of alternatives), utilize ***ad hominem*** (name calling), or present **generalization** (a suggestion that an isolated example is true rather than probable and – even worse – that the example applies to all instances rather than some). (\**Though there are many fallacies in reasoning one might make, either-or, ad hominem, and generalization are some of the most common mistakes*.)      * Generally, after the writer or speaker presents his or her case, the opposition’s argument, (premise, thesis, & possible evidence) must be addressed and the writer must confront these opposing views and offer **rebuttals** (counterclaims in response to the opposition’s ideas). Essentially, the speaker or writer should make a reasonable effort to present a response to the major points of the opposition and should demonstrate where, when necessary, the opposition errs. * After presenting a response to the opposition, the speaker or writer must offer a reasonable solution to the issue’s problem. It is a serious mistake to conclude an argument without offering a reasonable **solution**. The solution should be a related outgrowth of the thesis without restating the thesis. |
| **How do I evaluate an argument?**  Use the graphic organizers I’ve provided to help you analyze arguments presented by both Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson. You should write your responses to these questions in the spaces provided on the handout. |
| **How do I select an issue to discuss in my argumentative essay?**  I recommend that you select an issue for which you have both knowledge and passion, a topic that doesn’t require research. The nature of the issue isn’t as important as the structure of your argument; just keep in mind that it must be appropriate for school. If you are not certain if your issue is appropriate for school, see me individually. Once you select an issue, you must look at the issue from both sides. Once you are certain about your opinion on the issue, you have the beginning of a thesis and an argument. Though researching your issue is discouraged, you are free to research as needed, but be sure to attribute external sources in MLA style. |

# Argument Evaluation Activity

# *Author:* *Title*:

Directions: In the spaces provided, you should write a one-to-two sentence response for each of the following questions. The exception to these directions is in the final question, which requires you to list the main ideas for each portion of the argument.

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| 1. What is the premise for the writer’s thesis? Think about the context for the case being made. |
| 1. What is the writer or speaker’s thesis for his argument? |
| 1. What evidence is presented to support the writer or speaker’s argument? |
| 1. What mistakes, if any, does the writer or speaker make in presenting his or her argument? |
| 1. Who is the opposition and what is the opposition’s view? |
| 1. In what ways does the writer or speaker confront rebuttals by the opposition? |
| 1. What solution does the writer or speaker offer his audience? |
| 1. Is the solution reasonable? |

1. Conclude your analysis of the argument by filling in the graphic organizer that analyzes the sequence and structure of the argument in a more concise manner.

I.**Premise&Thesis** II. **Argument & Evidence**  III. **Rebuttal**  IV. **Solution**

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| A. Premise? | List some of the major points | List the major counterpoints | List the major points of the solution |
| B. Thesis? |

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