Writing an Extended Argument

Identifying a Thesis

The first step in constructing an extended argument is identifying a thesis — the issue on which you will be taking a position. The purpose of your written argument is to persuade others that your view on the issue is correct and preferable to other, contrasting views. It’s important that your thesis have at least two legitimate “sides” to it so that you can argue for one side and against the other. A thesis such as “Child abuse is a bad thing” is problematic since most people would agree with this point of view, and it would be difficult to present a compelling argument for the contrasting perspective: “Child abuse is a good thing.”

Imagine that you are assigned to write an argument paper related to the subject “abuse of alcohol” on college campuses. Where do you begin? One useful strategy to jump-start your thinking is to create a mind map. Mind maps are visual presentations of the various ways ideas can be related to one another. For example, each chapter in this book opens with a “mind map” that visually summarizes the chapter’s basic concepts as well as the way these concepts are related to each other. As you have seen, mind maps are an effective tool for taking notes on your reading assignments. However, using mind maps is also a powerful approach for writing, helping you generate ideas and begin organizing them into various relationships. Mind maps are well suited for the writing process for a number of reasons. First, the organization grows naturally, reflecting the way your mind ordinarily makes associations and organizes information. Second, the organization can be easily revised on the basis of new information and your developing understanding of how this information should be organized. Third, you can express a range of relationships among the various ideas, and instead of being identified once and then forgotten,
each idea remains an active part of the overall pattern, suggesting new possible relationships.

Fourth, you do not have to decide initially on a beginning, sub-points, sub-subpoints, and so on; you can do this after your pattern is complete, saving time and frustration.

In exploring the potential topics related to abuse of alcohol via a mind map, you may find that you’re most interested in the causes of alcohol abuse on college campuses. The common view is that abuse is the result of social pressure to drink that freshmen encounter almost on arriving on college campuses. However, you may believe that the “social pressure” view is overly simplistic and that in order to deal effectively with this problem, it’s necessary to see the abuse of alcohol as resulting from a variety of factors in addition to social pressure. In this case, the thesis that you intend to argue could be phrased this way: Abuse of alcohol on college campuses is the result not just of social pressure, but also of other factors such as general social practices, family history, advertising, and personal values and choices.

_Conducting Research_

Constructing a persuasive extended argument typically involves supporting your point of view with compelling reasons and objective evidence. Some of these reasons and evidence you may have at your fingertips, but in many cases you will have to conduct research: gathering relevant information from appropriate sources, integrating this information into your written analysis, and then documenting your sources with footnotes and a bibliography. Most professors who assign research-based assignments expect you to bring your perspective to the subject, but they also expect you to support your point of view with factual information and evidence drawn from authoritative sources.

Sometimes students constructing extended arguments in research papers make the mistake of simply reporting the information from research sources, excluding their own
perspective entirely. At other times students make the opposite mistake, including mainly their own ideas with little support from research sources. A properly balanced research-based paper integrates both.

*Finding Electronic and Print Sources in the Library*

Finding information is easier now than it was in the past simply because of computers. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if too much data are available when the entry of a key word brings up 100 (or more) possible matches! You are probably accustomed to asking an online service or a search engine to connect you with all kinds of information. However, if you are not yet comfortable online, you should take a class, find some up-to-date instructional books, have a skilled friend teach you, or get help at your college’s computer center or library.

Your college library is designed to assist you, your classmates, and your professors. Your library has a collection of books, magazines, journals, newspapers, pamphlets, and other print material that has been assembled for you and your fellow students. The librarians are specially trained to guide students and faculty to material for their work.

Also, your library uses computers in at least four ways to direct you to source material:

1. The library’s holdings are *catalogued* via a computer program, so the best way for you to find books, articles, and videos is to learn to use the terminals in your library.

2. Most college libraries subscribe to *databases*, such as Expanded Academic ASAP and National Newspapers, that contain whole texts of articles from newspapers, magazines, and specialized journals, so a good way for you to find solid information is to learn to use whatever service your library has. The library provides databases that cannot be accessed on most home computers.
3. Your library probably has a collection of CD-ROMs containing encyclopedias, books, poems, and visuals.

4. Your library probably has computer terminals through which you can access the Internet and use various search engines to find an infinite variety of material. Most college libraries provide guides to their resources. Some instructors or departments require completion of a workbook or physical or online attendance at library orientation sessions. You should take every opportunity to improve your ability to use your college library and the Internet.

_Evaluating Sources_

Finding material is relatively easy. Dealing with it is the challenging part. First, you must evaluate what you’ve found. Then, you must select what you will use, a process that involves thinking critically, and you must write your paper, a process that involves all the interrelated elements of the Thinking-Writing Model. In addition, you must integrate and cite source materials in a prescribed academic format, a process that may at first seem difficult. A goal of this chapter is to help you to do all these things by showing you some of the thinking that directs the research and writing of academic papers.

All material found during research has to be evaluated. Sometimes evaluation is easy — a source may be so obviously good that you know you will use it, or it may be so clearly weak or irrelevant to your inquiry that you know you will not need it. Here are some guidelines for deciding whether material will be useful to you:

1. _How reliable is the source?_ Some sources, such as advertising, can be unreliable. Some that are clearly presenting a particular point of view, such as political campaign material or a newspaper editorial, can be one-sided. Some may be outdated. In order to identify solid, well-informed, current, and balanced material, ask yourself:
• What kind of text is this? An editorial? A report? An advertisement?

• Who is its intended audience? Is this audience important to the text’s point of view?

• When was it written? Is the date relevant to my research question?

2. How knowledgeable or experienced is the author? Some people of authority or recorded references offer stronger information than others. Scholars, scientists, and people whose lives have been devoted to a field can usually give broad and deep coverage of their areas of expertise. Nevertheless, personal experience can often provide intense accounts of a situation, so sometimes an inexperienced observer can present a fresh point of view. Ask yourself:

• What credentials does the person who provided this information have?

• If the person is not an expert, under what circumstances did she or he provide the information?

3. What specific ideas are being presented? Ask yourself these questions about any material that you find:

• What is the main point, claim, or thesis?

• What reasons or evidence support the information? Does anything about it seem false?

• Does anything seem to have been left out?

• Are interests, purposes, and intended audiences apparent?

• If an argument is presented, can you identify its warrants?

Material found on the Internet needs to be carefully evaluated. Online texts of articles from well-known publications have some built-in reputation since they have undergone a review process before being printed and posted online. If a newspaper, magazine, or journal is known for publishing sound material, then an article from it is probably reliable. However, if the publication is considered biased or shallow, then you must examine the article more carefully.
Material from individual Web sites needs special scrutiny. If you recognize the source and are sure that it is operating the site, you are likely to be on solid ground. But don’t forget that some of the people running sites are trying to confuse you, that sites on a particular topic often carry opposing messages, and that hackers can sometimes commandeer legitimate sites. If you come across unfamiliar topics or Web site authors, run their names through a search engine to see what other people have said about them.

Organizing Ideas

Extended arguments generally include three essential elements:

• Defending the main idea

• Refuting the opposing view(s)

• Reaching a conclusion or proposing a solution

Just as the same ingredients can be combined in different amounts to create varying recipes, these elements can be organized in a variety of different ways. For example, here are some possible organizations:

1. Your paper can focus on the viability of your main idea, emphasizing the supporting reasons and evidence and providing modest treatment of opposing views.

2. Your paper can focus on key issues one at a time, supporting your view and refuting opposing views in each instance.

3. Your paper can focus on the inadequacy of the opposing views, identifying each weakness and explaining why your view is superior.

4. Your paper can take a balanced approach, examining various perspectives in an objective and evenhanded fashion, and then ending with your own conclusion and solution.
In the case of dealing with the topic “abuse of alcohol,” let’s suppose you discover that in conducting your research there seem to be a number of legitimate perspectives on this complex problem. As a result, instead of emphasizing the pro/con, adversarial approach evident in organizations 1, 2, and 3, you decide to use organization 4, leading you to the following format:

• Part 1: one perspective on this problem, supported by appropriate research
• Part 2: a contrasting perspective on this problem, supported by relevant research
• Part 3: your own well-reasoned perspective, including what approaches might be effective in addressing the problem

A sample draft of a paper on student drinking follows.

Sample Extended Argument: Critical Thinking About Uncritical Drinking

There is widespread agreement that excessive student drinking is a serious problem on many college campuses. However, there are different views on the causes of this problem and the best solutions for dealing with it. In this paper I will present two contrasting perspectives on the problem of student drinking and conclude with my own analysis of how best to deal with this serious threat to student health and success.

Perspective 1

Why do college students drink to excess? According to many experts, it is mainly due to the influence of the people around them. When most students enter college, they do not have a drinking problem. However, although few realize it, these unwary people are entering a culture in which alcohol is often the drug of choice. It is a drug that can easily destroy their lives. According to some estimates, between 80 percent and 90 percent of the students on many campuses drink alcohol. Many of these students are heavy drinkers. One study found that
nearly 30 percent of university students are heavy drinkers, consuming more than 15 alcoholic drinks a week.\(^3\) Another study found that among those who drink at least once a week, 92 percent of the men and 82 percent of the women consume at least five drinks in a row, and half said they wanted to get drunk.\(^4\) The results of all this drinking are predictably deadly. Virtually all college administrators agree that alcohol is the most widely used drug among college students and that its abuse is directly related to emotional problems and violent behavior, ranging from date rape to death.\(^5,6\) For example, at one university, a twenty-year-old woman became drunk at a fraternity party and fell to her death from the third floor.\(^7\) At another university, two students were killed in a drunk-driving accident after drinking alcohol at an off-campus fraternity house. The families of both students have filed lawsuits against the fraternity.\(^8\) When students enter a college or university, they soon become socialized into the alcohol-sodden culture of “higher education,” typically at formal and informal parties. The influence of peer pressure is enormous. When your friends and fellow students are encouraging you to drink, it is extremely difficult to resist giving in to these pressures.

**Perspective 2**

Other experts believe that although peer pressure is certainly a factor in excessive college drinking, it is only one of a number of factors. They point out that the misuse of alcohol is a problem for all youths in our society, not just college students. For example, a recent study by the Surgeon General’s Office shows that one in three teenagers consumes alcohol every week. This is an abuse that leads to traffic deaths, academic difficulties, and acts of violence.\(^9\) Another study based on a large, nationally representative sample indicates that, although college students are more likely to use alcohol, they tend to drink less quantity per drinking day than nonstudents of the same age.\(^10\) In other words, college students are more social drinkers than problem
drinkers. Another sample of undergraduate students found that college drinking is not as widespread as many people think.\(^\text{11}\) The clear conclusion is that, although drinking certainly takes place on college campuses, it is no greater a problem than in the population at large.

What causes the misuse of alcohol? Well, certainly the influence of friends, whether in college or out, plays a role. But it is not the only factor. To begin with, there is evidence that family history is related to alcohol abuse. For example, one survey of college students found greater problem drinking among students whose parent or grandparent had been diagnosed (or treated) for alcoholism.\(^\text{12}\) Another study found that college students who come from families with high degrees of conflict display a greater potential for alcoholism.\(^\text{13}\) Another important factor in the misuse of alcohol by young people is advertising. A recent article entitled “It Isn’t Miller Time Yet, and This Bud’s Not for You” underscores the influence advertisers exert on the behavior of our youth.\(^\text{14}\) By portraying beer drinkers as healthy, fun-loving, attractive young people, advertisements create role models that many youths imitate. In the same way that cigarette advertisers used to encourage smoking among our youth — without regard to the health hazards — so alcohol advertisers try to sell as much booze as they can to whomever will buy it, no matter what the consequences. A final factor in the abuse of alcohol is the people themselves. Although young people are subject to a huge number of influences, in the final analysis they are free to choose what they want to do. They don’t have to drink, no matter what the social pressures. In fact, many students resist these pressures and choose not to drink excessively or at all. In short, some students choose to think critically, while others choose to drink uncritically.

Part 3: My Perspective

In my opinion, both of these perspectives on excessive drinking on college campuses have merit. I believe that there are a complex variety of factors responsible for this problem, and
the specific explanation varies from context to context and individual to individual. With this in mind, I believe that there are a number of strategies that would be effective in solving this problem.

a. Colleges should create orientation and education programs aimed at preventing alcohol abuse, and colleges should give campaigns against underage drinking top priority.

b. Advertising and promotion of alcoholic beverages on college campuses and in college publications should be banned. Restrictions should be imposed on liquor distributors that sponsor campus events. In addition, alcohol beverage companies should be petitioned not to target young people in their ads.

c. Students at residential colleges should be able to live in “substance-free” housing, offering them a voluntary haven from drugs, alcohol, and peer pressure.

d. Colleges should ban or tightly restrict alcohol use on campus and include stiffer penalties for students who violate the rules.

e. Colleges should create alcohol-free clubs to combat alcohol abuse and find alcohol-free alternatives for students who are under twenty-one.

f. The drinking age should be reduced to eighteen, so that students won’t be forced to move parties off-campus. At off-campus parties there is no college control, and as a result students tend to drink greater quantities and more dangerous concoctions, like spiked alcohol.

g. Colleges should ban the use of beer kegs, the symbol of cheap and easy availability of alcohol.

h. Fraternities should eliminate pledging in order to stop alcohol abuse and hazing.

In conclusion, I believe that alcohol abuse on college campuses is an extremely important problem that is threatening the health and college careers of many students. As challenging as
this problem is, I believe that it can be solved if students, teachers, and college officials work together in harmony and with determination.


Note the numbers in superscript used in this essay. Each number (known as a *callout*) directs the reader to a note that credits the source of either the information used or the language quoted. If the writer is using a footnote style, each note would appear at the bottom of the page on which it is called out. In end-note style, the notes are listed together, in order, after the conclusion of the essay (as is done here). However, some documentation methods use parenthetical style, in which each source is credited in parentheses directly after it is used. Whatever style of documentation is used, the last element of the essay will be the bibliography or
reference list. Here, all sources are listed alphabetically. The difference between a note and a reference citation is that the note contains specific information (such as the exact page that was used for a quotation) and the reference citation includes complete information about the source: page range, place of publication, etc.