Argument Development

Though the requirements of academic writing are often highly structured and formal, we create arguments every day and in many different situations. Persuading people to go to a movie or eat at a particular restaurant requires one to suggest a course of action and reasons that the group should go along. Though we are familiar with this process, bringing it into an academic setting can prove difficult. This handout demonstrates how arguments are constructed and explains how a basic argument structure can be developed into an essay.

An argument consists of two elements: a claim and at least one premise. The claim is a statement of belief, and the premises specify reasons for accepting the conclusion. In other words, an argument should give the reader a clear idea of what the writer believes (the claim) and why (the premise).

For example, imagine that a writer is struggling with the issue of whether to tear down Smalltown’s town park, Greenspace Park, so that a strip mall can be built in its place. A claim our author might offer is:
This claim is not very useful by itself. Imagine having a conversation with someone who gladly offers his opinion on a subject but then refuses to explain why he believes as he does. This person’s opinion is weaker if unsupported. So, our writer needs to provide evidence supporting the belief that Greenspace Park should be preserved. This evidence, the argument’s premises, have been added to the claim below:

**Claim:**
It is not in Smalltown’s best interest to demolish Greenspace Park in favor of a strip mall.

Premise 1:
Greenspace Park remains a vital element of Smalltown’s social life.

Premise 2:
The cost to develop Smalltown’s infrastructure to accommodate the proposed strip mall far outweighs any potential benefits.

Premise 3:
The proposed strip mall will hurt local businesses.

**Essays contain many arguments like the one above; however one central argument should sit “above” the others. This central argument provides structure and focus to the writer’s presentation. The claim of this argument, often called the central claim, is more commonly known as the **thesis statement**. One might also hear the central claim called an **enthymeme** – common in W131 – or **hypothesis**. The premises that support the thesis statement are called **main points** (or evidence). This language helps set the central argument apart from other arguments which play supporting roles.**

While thesis statements are often (though not always) found at the end of the introduction, the support for the thesis statement is contained in the **body** of the essay. Writers must accomplish two things in the body paragraphs: develop the main points and offer rebuttals to counter-arguments.

**Developing Main Points**

Up to this point, the only claim in question has been the thesis statement, for which the writer has offered three main points of support. Though these main points support the thesis, they must also be supported with evidence. The example below shows how Main Point 3 (called Premise 3 in the previous chart) both supports the thesis statement as a premise and as a claim which is supported by Sub0point 3a:
Thesis Statement:
As a claim: supported by Main Point 3

Main Point 3
As a premise: supports the Thesis Statement
As a claim: supported by Sub-point 3a

Sub-point 3a
As a premise: supports Main Point 3