Writing Argumentative Essays at the College Level
or,
How OJ Can Help Us Learn to Write Better
or,
What I Want

Preliminary

It is important, before you sit down to write an essay for your composition class (or any
class, for that matter), to remember this:

"essay" is a verb that means "to attempt or to try."

Why is this important? Because essays are a courtroom. They are a trial. They involve
an introductory presentation of a theory of the crime (a thesis), the presentation of direct
evidence in support of the theory (direct quotations from the text under scrutiny), and
end with a conclusion that leads the jury (the reader) to render the appropriate verdict
(conclusion).

"Stay on target! Stay on target!"

Because of this, it is important for you to do a good bit of thinking about what it is you're
trying to say in your essays. You must know, well before you hammer out that final draft,
precisely what it is that you are trying to say. Even more important, however, is that
everything you say in the essay must be designed to help prove your claim. Everything
must be connected. Everything must be relevant.

Think of it this way. During the OJ trial, everything Johnny Cochran described in his
argument(s) was geared toward one thing: presenting an alternative theory to the crime.
It was for this reason that Cochran didn't go off on some wild tangent about how "all we
need is love" or "my cat's breath smells like cat food." Had he gotten off track, his
argument, and therefore his client, would've been in terrific danger.

Your essays are no different.

Just the Facts, Ma'am

And just like in a trial, in an essay you present the reader/jury with evidence supporting
whatever claim it is that you're trying to make. Imagine it: OJ is there, sitting in his chair
next to Cochran. The prosecuting attorney (Marcia Clark, no less) presents her
arguments and the floor is given to Cochran to deliver his defense. He rises to his feet,
his suit sharp and pressed, his teeth dazzlingly white, and he simply says:
"OJ is not guilty. The defense rests, you honor (Judge Ito, no less)."

And then he sits back down. The entire courtroom stares at him in disbelief. Did he really just do that? Did he really just make a claim without offering any evidence? He's going to get OJ locked up for life (since California doesn't have the death penalty)! No evidence? Nothing? That's why trials take so long. Attorneys have to spend large amounts of time presenting evidence to the jury, presenting arguments to the jury, trying to get the jury to come to the right conclusion. This takes time. This takes effort and thought.

Imagine, again, that Cochran stands up to defend OJ (having reconsidered resting his case) and offers only this:

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, OJ is innocent because I asked my sister what she thought and she said that there was no way he could've done it because she knows him and he's just not that kind of man. He's so nice and sweet and he sure did play ball well for the Colts."

The problem here is that what Cochran's sister thinks about OJ has nothing whatsoever to do with the issue at hand. Her opinion is at best anecdotal evidence in the form of a character witness and at worst completely irrelevant. Who cares what she has to say about this? What does it have to do with anything?

The answer? Nothing whatsoever.

And so as you gather your evidence for your essays, you'll need to make sure that everything you want to point out is relevant. You don't want to endanger your client by getting off-track and presenting random claims. You must mine the text at hand for quotations that bear directly on whatever point it is that you're trying to make.

**We Hold These Quotes to be Self Evident**

No. We don't. Jefferson may have believed that "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" were rights that were so obvious that they didn't need explaining, but you can bet that when he went about starting a revolution he gave a bulleted list of reasons why. He presented evidence. He explained himself. With that said, remember this. Burn it into your brain:

**The importance, relevance, and significance of quotations and evidence to your argument are not self-evident.**

You must explain them. You can't just make a claim, drop in a quote, and then move on. You need to explain to your reader why this quote you've given is important, what it has
to do with what you're talking about, why you've given it, and what it has to do with whatever larger argument you're making. Imagine, again, that Cochran is standing before the jury presenting evidence. He pulls from the table Exhibit A: the infamous glove. He places it on the barrier between the jury and the well, and he says...

Nothing. He just points at it. And he nods knowingly. And no one, no one has any idea why he's shown them this glove.

That's because he didn't explain why he had presented this evidence. This is precisely the same thing as when you drop in a quote into an essay and then don't discuss it. You must always contextualize quotations (tell us what's going on when the quote occurs) and then connect the quotation to whatever it is you're talking about.

**Speaking of Quoting**

When you quote, it is important that you let your reader know both that the material is not yours and where the quote is coming from. Failure to do this constitutes plagiarism, which would be very bad and is to be avoided at all costs. It's easy to avoid, though. You do it every day, I promise.

When we tell a story we've heard somewhere to our friends, we often offer up a stunning amount of attribution. You hear it all the time, and even engage in it, but maybe you're unaware of it. Here's how it might work:

Someone asks you about some gossip. That's always how it starts. And then you have to explain what it is you know:

"Well, Bob told me that he was talking to Sarah at the party on Saturday about it and she said that Jamie told her that what was going on was that... ."

You see what's going on there? Every time the speaker indicates where he or she has heard something a citation has been provided. You need to do the same thing when you write. Just like in the example above, you need to indicate who said what to whom.

Here's how you do that:

In the middle of discussing her experiences running Ms. magazine, Gloria Steinem explains that, generally speaking, readers of magazines are often unaware "of advertising's control over the words and images" contained in the text (187).

See here how language that is not my own is clearly indicated by the quotation marks? See how the quoted material is integrated into the sentence? See how the page number
of the quoted material is clearly indicated in parenthesis at the end of the sentence? See how the period comes last? None of this is accidental.

Here's what not to do:

Gloria Steinem ran *Ms.* magazine and stuff and she was all feministy. She didn't like advertiser's because their pushy and wanted control and stuff, and she wanted to make sure her readers got good information. "most of them were not aware of advertising's control over the words and images around it."

See how the quote is just dropped in there? What does it have to do with anything? How is it connected? We have no idea. Additionally, what page is it from? We have no idea. Is Steinem even talking about the same thing in this quote that the author is in that "paragraph"? Additionally, note how vague and awkward the sentences are. "Stuff"? "Feministy"? That's not even a word! See how the author even made an error using the tremendously simple there/their/they're? See how there's an apostrophe error?

Wrapping Up

Writing is both a skill and a talent, and while this means that some people seem to simply know how to do it, it also allows for the possibility that, like working on a car, it can be learned, as well. If the advice I am offering here can be distilled to a single point or two, it is this: when you make a claim, you must explain yourself. When you offer a quote as a means of explaining something, you must, in turn, explain what function how that quotation accomplishes for you. This is really a simple thing, and once you get into the habit, you'll find that your essays are stronger and that they are written with less pain and anguish.