

## Making Your Argument!

Since historians deal with the past, and much of the past is unknown to us, researchers and writers of history make arguments that are inductive. This generally means that we seek out specific facts, documents, letters, artifacts, and other evidence—and then use those pieces of detailed evidence to draw more general conclusions about the past. For example we draw a general conclusion that General Robert E. Lee experienced both military success and military failure by describing the specifics of his battles—some losses and misjudgments, some victories and pure genius. Historians can prove some specific facts such as the date Congress passed a law since that date is recorded in the *Congressional Record*; but we cannot “prove” historical conclusions about that law. What we can do is discover enough evidence, organize it well, and express the evidence so that our conclusions seem “likely” or appear reasonable. This type of inductive argument is similar to a persuasive argument, or a persuasive essay. As a student researcher and writer of history you must do the same thing. Historical “facts” do not speak for themselves.

Inductive logic requires several specific steps. The first step is to state a thesis, then state a premise or argument, and finally research and document specific evidence making the premise likely and reasonable. Researchers use this process to make the best argument, and to organize their written description of that argument. Everything starts with your

thesis! Always look to support your thesis. Begin by making general statements or propositions—these are called premises. A beginning premise might state that Lee “failed” at Antietam. Then your research kicks in and you detail the fighting at Antietam, Lee’s losses, Lee’s retreat, Union failure to follow up, and any evidence to the contrary. Use the specific facts to make your argument. Make the conclusion obvious, likely, or probable. Address evidence to the contrary. Eliminate superfluous details that do not directly support your premise and the thesis.

Use the flow of the argument to organize your paper. Lee’s loss at Antietam might be the first section of your paper. Think of this as a “roman numeral” in a traditional outline. Your research on Antietam gives you vivid information which must be described and documented. This means you may have one paragraph on Antietam in general; one paragraph on Lee’s decisions; one to two paragraphs on Union forces; one paragraph on Lee’s retreat; one paragraph on the consequences of the battle; and one paragraph rebutting evidence contrary to your conclusions. You have supported your thesis with a strong premise statement, and now you have several paragraphs worth of detailed evidence for premise number one in support of your thesis. Avoid overkill. It would not be necessary to detail every nuance of the Battle of Antietam to get your point across. While you must use specific historical evidence that directly supports your thesis; you should also rebut evidence that might undermine your thesis. After finishing

your argument about the Battle of Antietam you may go on to the next premise; in this case, another example of Lee's generalship that supports your thesis.

Planning your argument is critical. An outline is useful. The following is a simplified "argument-outline" for a paper on General Lee's effectiveness. Thesis: *Lee's failed strategies at Antietam and Gettysburg cost the South the war.* Note each lettered item is probably a paragraph, and eighteen paragraphs produce a ten page paper plus endnotes and bibliography. Also note the need to provide a "transition" from one premise to the next.

- I. Lee's background, bio
  - a. Lee's iconic status then and today
  - b. Early career
  - c. Lincoln's request to lead Union
  - d. Service to President Davis; transition to Antietam
- II. Antietam
  - a. Details
  - b. Details
  - c. Details; transition to Gettysburg
- III. Gettysburg
  - a. Ignore Vicksburg, advice of others
  - b. Details
  - c. Details
  - d. Details; transition to contrary evidence
- IV. Tactical skills not enough
  - a. Victory at Fredericksburg
  - b. Chancellorsville
  - c. Wilderness & Cold Harbor; transition to conclusions
- V. Conclusions
  - a. Only Union's ineffectiveness allowed Lee to continue
  - b. Failure to relieve Vicksburg significant error
  - c. After Antietam/Gettysburg cause was lost
  - d. Summary/conclusion
- VI. Endnotes & Bibliography

It is also important that your writing and organization avoid logical fallacies. Below is a brief list of the most common logical errors students make when researching and writing history:

1. Avoid misinterpretation of sources. When you read another professional historian, be sure you interpret and use that historians work correctly without twisting the meaning to suit purpose.
2. Avoid sweeping all-encompassing premises and conclusions. Writing “all the Yankees wanted to free the slaves” is an over-generalization and was most likely not true.
3. Avoid or justify personal bias and biased evidence. If you really wanted the North to win at First Bull Run, do not allow that to creep into your paper.
4. Avoid stereotypes about people. Statements like women are “natural caretakers” might be suitable with sufficient evidence, but otherwise is a stereotype to be avoided.
5. Avoid false cause (called *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*) which means that just because one thing (event A) happens before a subsequent thing (event B); the first (A) does not necessarily “cause” the second (B).
6. Avoid poor and weak comparisons or analogies. If you compare things, make sure it is a realistic comparison.

7. If you ignore contrary evidence you create the fallacy of *observational selection* (selecting only evidence obviously in favor of your thesis). This is also referred to a *cherry-picking* only those arguments that help your case.
8. Avoid or justify arguments which use a person's reputation as evidence. There are three fallacies involving personal reputation: *ad hominem* arguments critical of a person, a variation of *ad hominem* arguments critical of the hypocrite, and appeal to authority. The first fallacy states that we cannot believe a certain source because that person is a bad person, uninformed, etc. The second fallacy criticizes sources as hypocritical; a person says one thing but does another. You should avoid both of these positions. The appeal to authority argument is not always a fallacy, especially in history. If you state that President Lincoln was a good Commander in Chief because James McPherson's research provides evidence of Lincoln's command-- then that is a good argument based on authority. Historians use this often but combine it with other evidence.
9. Avoid false dichotomy wherein you reduce your argument to only two choices when often other choices exist.
10. Avoid seeing the past through the present (presentism). This means you respect the past for what happened at that time.

Do not project a present day ideal or technique into the past. Students often commit presentism when discussing science, technology, medicine, transportation, communications and other “technical” subjects. It is too easy to say that people in the past did not have “modern” capabilities, so avoid this.

11. Avoid silliness. Too often students have had little exposure to historical research and writing and so come to the task with a host of silly ideas. The following notes correct some of the most blatant silliness about history: history does not always repeat itself; history does indeed change; history is not always written by the victors alone; cause and effect in history is never simple.

Writing is the only means you have of making sense of historical facts. It must be well organized, well documented, supportive of your thesis and logical. Good luck!