Writing a Good Social Science Paper

A social science paper is an argument. Something does not have to be wildly controversial to constitute an argument. A good argument simply states a position and supports it with evidence in a clear, logical fashion. Some of the most important skills a student can learn in college are to write correctly, effectively, and even elegantly. The paper assignment for this course provides one opportunity to develop these skills, and we will read your papers with those objectives in mind.

Thesis – stated position; what you want to argue.

The thesis is a focused statement that clearly expresses your argument. It is an assertion that can be supported with evidence. It may help to focus your thesis if you remember: you are writing this paper in response to some question. What is the question? What is your answer?

Evidence – support for your thesis; the development of your argument.

Evidence can take many forms, including: theories, facts, figures, stories, or anticipating and refuting counter-arguments*.

There are **three important points to remember when presenting evidence**:
1. Make sure the evidence supports your thesis.
2. Make it clear to the reader HOW the evidence supports your thesis.
3. Make sure your presentation of evidence is well organized.

Anticipating and refuting counter arguments can be a more difficult way to defend a thesis, than simply presenting facts and figures, but it can also be very powerful. It applies better to some arguments than others, and should be employed carefully.

To properly refute a counter argument you must:
1. Imagine an alternative explanation to your thesis.
2. Think of the evidence that this alternative explanation would need in order to be true.
3. Show either that this evidence does not, or cannot logically, exist.

Be sure to avoid logical fallacies, which will weaken your argument:
Argument by assertion – simply stating that something is true or obvious does not make it so.

Begging the question – make sure your argument actually provides evidence for your thesis. If the argument merely restates your thesis in different words, that is considered begging the question.

Ad hominem argument – your argument should be based on logic or reason. Arguments that appeal to personal considerations are considered ad hominem. For example, showing that a particular argument was made by an individual you despise (e.g., Adolf Hitler, Osama bin Laden) does not in itself make the argument incorrect. (Example: "Adolf Hitler and everyone in the Nazi party believed that the world was round, so obviously it must be flat.")

Context – the bigger picture; why this argument matters.

Context helps the reader think about possible applications of your argument. What does your argument mean for some broader issue? Keep in mind that this context doesn't have to be too broad. In fact, a more specific context is better than an overly general one. To use a biology analogy: if you argue that some treatment works, how would this treatment be applied? What diseases or conditions will be affected by this treatment? Phrased differently: If your argument is

correct, what are the potential consequences if we pay attention to it? What are the potential consequences if your argument is ignored?

Grammar & Style – yes, they matter.

Proper spelling and grammar are important because mistakes of this nature detract from your argument. Most word processing programs have corrective tools that should be used. For more complex grammar issues, *Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. is accessible online at: www.bartleby.com/141/

Citations and a bibliography are important, so that the reader knows where you found your evidence, and that you are using it properly. In-text citations and bibliography should be presented in a consistent format (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.). http://libraries.ucsd.edu/refshelf/refshelf-style.html has information on these options.

Use direct quotations judiciously. Stronger papers use direct quotations to boost their discussion and analysis, not to replace your voice/argument within the paper. Additionally, should you use long quotations (i.e. more than four lines), these quotes should be reduced in font, indented, and single spaced.

Organizational Model
Clear organization is essential for a good argument. Use your introduction to provide a kind of road map for the rest of your paper. Be sure to give the reader guideposts along the way, to help them follow your argument.

Introduction

1. General introduction to the context (not too general)
2. **Thesis statement** (don't hide this for later)
3. Hints about evidence – indicate the **main points (x, y, and z)** that you will use to support your thesis. (you develop these points in the body)
4. Hints about context (to be developed in your conclusion)

Body

In this section you are laying out your evidence, **the order in which you present your evidence must follow from the hints you gave in your intro** (x, y, z)
X All the information pertaining to this point should be presented here. Make sure it is clear to the reader how this point relates to your thesis statement.
Y Likewise for this point
To discuss more complex points, organize that section like a mini-argument. **If Z has sub-points (1,2,3) it should be presented as follows**:
Z introduction Indication of 1, 2, 3,
1
2
3
Pull all these sub-points back together and remind reader how this relates to the thesis.

Conclusion

1. Restatement of the argument
2. **Placement of the argument in Context** (this is the time to go beyond the argument you've outlined, and discuss its application/implications)