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Argumentation Trees

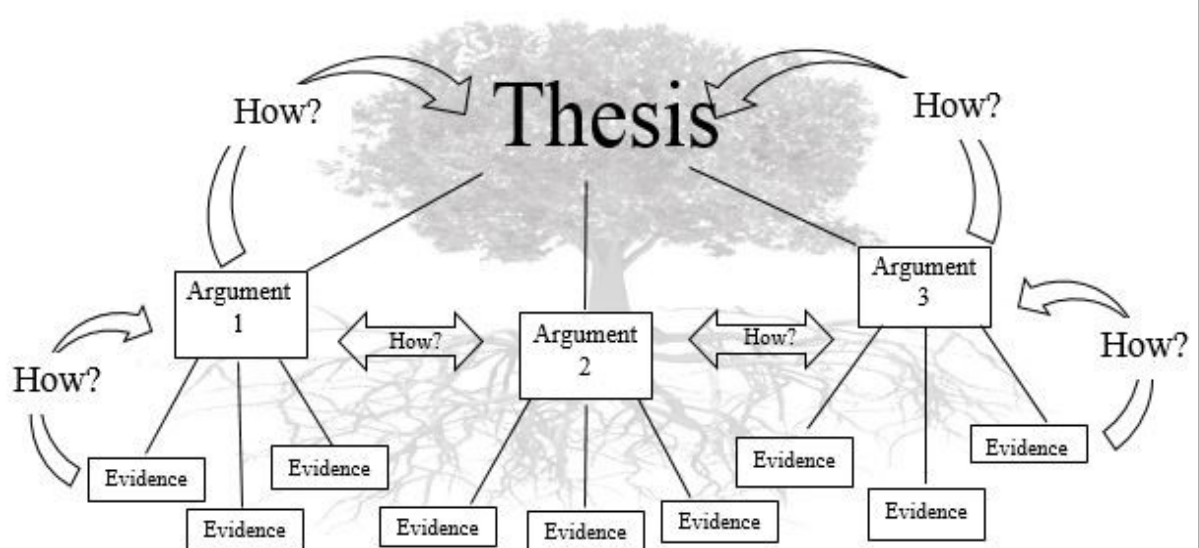
BREAKING DOWN & BUILDING UP ARGUMENTS

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Effective argumentation is one of the most important skills that any writer can develop. No matter what kind of essay you're writing, taking a systematic approach to argumentation makes breaking down the complex, scholarly sources college writers are often expected to engage with much more manageable. A systematic approach also provides a mechanism to formulate arguments of your own.

One such approach I've practiced in the course of my time at West Point, which includes years of competing on our championship-winning Parliamentary Debate Team, is called the 'Argumentation Tree.' Here's what it looks like:

Argumentation Tree



Look complex? This approach *is* systematic, but that doesn't mean it's simple or easy.

You're going to have to ask yourself lots of hard questions along the way, and press yourself to connect the different aspects of your argument. But developing argumentation trees will help ensure you're on the right path ... read on to learn how it works!

Break Down Existing Arguments

Tackling a scholarly source can be tough. Getting to the root of an author's work, whether it be a book, journal or other written source, is much more manageable when you take a systematic approach. The *Argumentation Tree* is a method of taking a scholarly work and breaking it down into its most essential elements: thesis, arguments, and evidence. Once the work is broken down into these components, from the trunk and leaves (i.e. the thesis—the core argument of the source) to the extensive root structure that supports them (individual arguments and evidence), you'll begin to understand **how** the pieces work together to create the scholarly work as a whole. Once you've got this understanding, you'll be in a better position to deal with the source in your own writing.

Build Up Your Own Arguments

You can also apply the same principles described above to develop and organize your own arguments. Start with the thesis to give the reader an idea of the focus of your paper. Within each body paragraph, establish an argument that the paragraph will focus on. Larger papers can have multiple paragraphs supporting the same argument. Then, get to the foundation of the paper by integrating pieces of evidence to support the sub-arguments in support of your thesis.

Note: even though this is the order in which your final paper will unfold, you'll almost certainly have to go back and forth between these elements at different stages of the drafting process. Complex papers are pretty much *never written* in a strictly linear fashion, even if in the end they'll *always read* as if they were.

Working with Evidence: Answering 'How?'

Whether building up or breaking down, you must ask yourself this question: *how* do these parts work together to make a whole, cohesive paper? Getting the answer still entails a systematic approach; you must look at each component and understand whether and how it supports the level of organization above it. Use the following questions and explanations as a check on the "How?" component of your Argumentation Tree:

- **How does the evidence support a given argument?**

Each quotation, example, or data point should directly support your argument. If it doesn't, or if it makes a weak connection, it does not belong in the paper.

- **How does the argument support the thesis?**

Each argument should make a clear link back to the thesis. If the link is unclear, revise the focus of your argument or thesis.

- **How do the arguments support each other?**

This is the most difficult question to answer. Drawing connections between your main arguments is essential for a cohesive paper and can best be illustrated through strong transition sentences that capture the logical flow from one part of the paper to the next. These sentences should guide the reader along your argumentative pathway towards the conclusion.

If you practice them regularly, argumentation trees will become almost second nature, helping you become a clearer, more effective thinker and writer. Keep at it!