

POSITION PAPERS

Writers of position papers usually feel strongly about the issues they address, and they strive to convince readers to accept their opinions as valid and reasonable. To achieve this end, position papers typically include the following features: a well-defined, controversial issue; a clear position on the issue; a convincing argument; and a reasonable tone. Furthermore, position papers will often attempt to make use of emotional appeals as well as intellectual appeals to sway an audience.

A WELL-DEFINED, CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE. Although the issue addressed in the position paper may be complex, it should be carefully defined so that readers understand exactly what is at stake and why the issue is important. Moreover, the issue must not be only controversial but also arguable. Some issues upon which there is considerable debate are not arguable because they can either be resolved by fact or are so deeply rooted in belief that they are impervious to fact or reason. For example, arguing over which river is the longest in the world is pointless because the answer is a simple matter of fact that can be easily demonstrated. Arguing over matters of faith is just as pointless for somewhat more subtle reasons. The issue of whether abortion should be legal, for example, is not arguable for those who oppose abortion on religious grounds. The best issues for position papers are matters of opinion – judgments rather than certainties. Fact and belief should be brought to bear on these issues but cannot easily resolve them.

A CLEAR POSITION ON THE ISSUE. A position paper makes explicit the opinion it advocates by announcing it directly in a thesis statement, which may appear at any point in the essay. In long, complicated essays, the thesis may even be restated several times. Although it should be stated emphatically, the thesis can be modified in the course of the argument. In fact, qualifying a position to accommodate objections or limiting the conditions under which it is true strengthens rather than weakens an argument. What writers should avoid is equivocation – backing away or hedging so much that the readers cannot determine what position is being taken. The thesis must be clear, neither ambiguous nor vague.

A CONVINCING ARGUMENT. A position paper does not merely assert an opinion; it also presents an argument designed to persuade readers that the opinion is valid and reasonable. Ideally, readers should be so impressed by the argument that they willingly give up their own opinions and adopt the writer's. Arguments are rarely that convincing, however. It is more realistic to expect that readers might be persuaded to accept the legitimacy of the writer's position on the issue and to adjust their own opinion to accommodate what they have learned.

A REASONABLE TONE. In debating controversial issues, writers naturally assume that their readers will either disagree with them or be skeptical. Because they seek to build bridges between their own opinions and those of others, writers of position papers typically adopt a tone that will be perceived as reasonable and trustworthy. Even when challenging their reader's basic assumptions about deeply felt issues, writers try to inspire respect and confidence. They attempt to demonstrate their good will and understanding by anticipating objections to their argument and, whenever possible, by making concessions and qualifying their position to accommodate objections. Even when they cannot agree with readers' objections, writers of proposal papers nonetheless acknowledge these objections as legitimate and explain their reasons for rejecting them.

Questions for Critiquing the Position Paper

These questions will help you to analyze and evaluate position papers on any issue. Refer to these questions as you read position papers and as you draft and revise your own paper.

1. How has the author defined the issue?
2. Does the author provide sufficient background information for you to understand the issue?
3. Is the issue clearly arguable? If not, why not?
4. How does the author establish that this issue is important and, thus, worthy of discussion?
5. What is the writer's position on the issue? Is the author's position presented in a clear, assertive thesis statement?
6. What are the main arguments that the author uses to support his position? Are these arguments reinforced with evidence (facts, statistics, expert opinion, etc.)?
7. Are opposing positions fairly presented?
8. Does the author present sufficient reason to reject these opposing positions?
9. Overall, does this paper convince you/change your mind about this issue? If not, why not?

Source: Aselrod, Rise B. and Charles R. Cooper. Reading Critically, Writing Well. New York: St. Martin's, 1987.