By Jessica Shumake

Writing an argumentative essay is frequently misunderstood to be solely an act of persuasion. We tend to think that we need to advocate for our position to change readers’ minds and to perhaps move them to take action or adopt some belief. Argumentative writers, however, understand that demonstrating their ability to consider other perspectives, imagine alternatives, and write critically is required in all situations where opinions differ. Argumentative writing is more than simple pro-con writing, showing that you understand course content, or the presentation of research and facts: argumentation is a dialectical activity that helps you imagine, analyze, and evaluate your position by internalizing interested critics. Argumentative writers view contradictory positions dialectically. Thinking about your topic dialectically means that, as a writer, you have more tools to help you discover how to begin an argument.

Coming up with an argument and identifying counterarguments does more than help a writer find things about which to write. The benefit of considering multiple sides of a position is that you can demonstrate to readers, who do not necessarily share your perspective, that you are a thoughtful person who is willing to approach a controversial topic with an open mind. An argumentative essay, then, is a written record of intellectual inquiry into some controversy that interests you. Argumentative writing also helps you probe an argument’s strengths and weaknesses, weighing it against alternatives. This is not an exercise for those who are comfortable parroting

Dialectical thinking requires considering and responding to different viewpoints. A dialectical thinker is someone on the lookout for opposing or contradictory arguments. He or she uses counterarguments as tools for gaining familiarity with a topic.