

## Troubleshooting Your Claim

1). In Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the Mariner shoots the albatross because he is clearly crazy and irrational.

Reader's reaction: this argument becomes too simplistic and dismissive. It forfeits several valuable opportunities to generate a more valid and compelling argument. Furthermore, there is little evidence that the Mariner is "crazy."

Revised argument: In Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the poem sets up the Mariner's slaying of the albatross as a sort of sin against the natural world, such that the latter portion of the poem deals with the Mariner's attempt to relieve his guilty conscience.

2). In Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the poem's tone demonstrates a dramatic shift after the Mariner kills the albatross.

Reader's reaction: although this statement is probably true, it does not amount to much of an argument. Instead, it simply points out something that occurs in the poem. Remember that your argument should be *analytical*; it should analyze the significance of the poem rather than just making observations.

Revised argument: Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" demonstrates a dramatic shift in tone after the Mariner kills the albatross, thereby indicating an implied and specifically Romanticist hope that the natural world itself will somehow defend itself against humankind's transgressions.

3). Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" proves that you should not mess with Mother Nature.

Reader's reaction: this argument is extremely weak because it relies on generalized opinion and lacks textual grounding. Although the writer believes that he/she is making a convincing argument, he/she has only succeeded in revealing his/her personal bias (i.e. the writer believes one should respect the natural world). A poem, however, should be considered a work of fiction; by definition, a poem "proves" nothing. Also, avoid second person references ("you"), as readers tend to bristle at being addressed in this fashion.

Revised argument: By personifying its landscapes and instilling them with supernatural powers, Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" offers key insights into various Romanticist value systems that gained prominence during Coleridge's life.

Tips:

1). If you find terms like "feel" or "believe" turning up in your argument, consider revising. What you "feel" or "believe" usually has no place in an academic argument, which should be grounded in intellectual, logical analysis rather than emotional investment.

2). In general, verbs like “says,” “does,” and “is” are not conducive to establishing a strong argument. Instead, consider verbs like “posits,” “enables,” “suggests,” “facilitates,” “indicates,” “sustains,” “implies,” “complicates,” “argues,” “postulates,” “proposes,” “offers,” “maintains,” “refutes,” “empowers,” “generates,” “engenders,” “demonstrates,” “alludes,” “ascertains,” “approaches,” etc.

3). Avoid using rhetorical questions in your papers. Ex: But why does the Mariner shoot the albatross?

Rationale: your job is to answer these questions rather than ask them. Generally, when a reader finds rhetorical questions in an analytical paper, he/she will assume that the writer must not know the answer and is therefore stalling.

4). Resist the urge to summarize what happens in a text/poem. Assume that your reader has a fair understanding of what actually happens in the text. Rather than wasting precious space summarizing, jump into the debate *immediately*. The first line of your first paragraph should make a clear and specific claim.

5). Failing to follow up a quotation with a proper citation constitutes a form of *plagiarism*.

Ex): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. At first, the crew members condemn him for  
killing the bird that “made the breeze to blow” (93-94). \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_\_. When the mist clears, however, the crew agrees that “twas right... such  
birds to slay.” \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

The writer offers no citation for the second quote. A corrected version might look like this:

\_\_\_\_\_. At first, the crew members condemn him for  
killing the bird that “made the breeze to blow” (93-94). \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_\_. When the mist clears, however, the crew agrees that “twas right . . . such  
birds to slay” (101). \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

[Note the use of ellipsis ( . . . ) in the second quote. This technique is used to eliminate the unnecessary portions of a quote for the purpose of clarity and brevity; however, the quote must still make sense logically and grammatically.]

6). Quotes integrated into sentences should still make grammatical sense.

Ex): The Mariner describes the sea in a state of putrefaction “The very deep did rot” (123).

As it is, the sentence becomes a run-on. A colon can remedy this problem.

Ex): The Mariner describes the sea in a state of putrefaction: “The very deep did rot” (123).

OR

Ex): The Mariner describes the sea in a state of putrefaction, such that “The very deep did rot” (123).

7). *Dangling quotes* are quotes for which the writer offers no set-up or context. Also remember that all quotes should be followed up with a thorough analysis to demonstrate their significance.

Ex): After the Mariner shoots the albatross, Coleridge’s imagery shifts. “The death-fires danced at night; / The water, like a witch’s oils, / Burnt green, and blue and white” (128-30).

The reader might guess that the quote is somehow related to the previous sentence, but there is a good deal of room for doubt. Quotes should be integrated and set up in a manner that makes the context/significance of the quote abundantly clear to the reader.

Ex): After the Mariner shoots the albatross, Coleridge’s imagery shifts from images with heavy religious connotations to images which carry hellish and malevolent connotations: “The death-fires danced at night; / The water, like a witch’s oils, / Burnt green, and blue and white” (128-30). The significance of these descriptions emerges when one considers that \_\_\_\_\_.

8). Edit out unnecessary prepositional phrases or you risk falling into the passive voice.

Weak: The name of the first novel of John Smith’s career is *Killed by a Toaster*.

Better: *Killed by a Toaster* is John Smith’s first novel.

The easiest example to keep in mind is this:

A). John was hit by Nathan.

B). Nathan hit John.

Which sounds more powerful and direct to you?

Prepositional phrases are sometimes necessary, but in excess they tend to clutter up and obscure the gravity of the sentence. If the sentence may be phrased more directly, phrase it more directly.

9). Eliminate weak or informal language from your prose. Ex: way, big, a lot, a ton, anywhere, everywhere, nowhere, way, good, bad, huge, crazy, big time, anyways, and so on.

10). Avoid any pronouns that might leave doubt in the reader’s mind.

Weak: Dunn’s *Geek Love* attempts a critique of normative western society. This is most evident during . . .

(The problem is that while the reader might be able to guess what “this” references, there is room for uncertainty. Instead of referencing “this,” specify what “this” is).

11). If you do not understand how possessives work, please learn about them.

Incorrect: It is crucial to remember that different society’s reinforce different cultural values.

Correct: It is crucial to remember that different societies reinforce different cultural values.

[In the first sentence, there is no possessive object for societies, so no apostrophe is needed]

Incorrect: Western societies anxieties about atomic warfare find expression in Amis’ short story.

Correct: Western society’s anxieties about atomic warfare find expression in Amis’ short story.

[In this example, “anxieties” is an object of society, so an apostrophe must be included]

- FINALLY...The best tip I can offer you about writing is to **PROOFREAD!!** And have others proofread your work before you hand it in.