Making an Argument

Since you've all been through some sort of writing training in high school, and since you've all been in college for a bit, you have probably heard too many times a professor talking about how your paper should have an "argument." The truth is that this term can mean different things to different professors, based on discipline, training, and their own personal disposition. But in general, the idea of an "argument" is that it supplies the most crucial "why" of your essay, namely "why am I writing this?". And a successful argument can deliver an answer to the equally important "why" for your professors, when they ask themselves "why am I reading this?".

That's to say, your paper's argument is simply the main thing your paper is trying to say. That thing can be broad or specific, though it's often the case that specific arguments can make the writing process easier.

So, as you write, you should always and continuously be asking yourself: "What is this paper about? What am I trying to say?"

But let me be frank. This is a hard question to be able to answer in the beginning of the writing process. So, I have found that the easiest way to devise an argument is to think backwards, and to pose possible questions about your subject matter. Your answer is the argument. There are lots of ways of doing this, but I tend to break it down into two types of questions: "why" questions, and "how" questions.

Why Questions: These are great questions, and often come out of a real sense of curiosity. Some of these questions are too easily answerable (via Wikipedia, etc.) and not deserving of a whole paper. For example, "Why do Buddhists call themselves 'Buddhists'?" is probably not a good question. But here are some good ones, and again, the answer is your argument:

Question: Why do Mormons put such emphasis on youth programs?

- Possible Argument #1: Mormons put emphasis on youth programs because they are worried that children will grow up and leave the Mormon church.
- Possible Argument #2: Mormons put emphasis on youth programs because they want Mormon youth to build friendships with other Mormons.

Question: Why do Unarians talk so much about their past lives?

- Possible Argument #1: Unarians talk so much about their past lives because the possibility of having been Cleopatra or George Washington makes them feel more important than they would have felt otherwise.
- Possible Argument #2: Unarians talk so much about their past lives because it gives them a sense of the vastness of the universe, which then supports their belief in aliens.

Of course, I've just made these up. I have no idea about whether these are at all true, but they're examples of how you could ask a question and attempt to answer it.

How Questions: These are pretty self-explanatory. You simply ask how a thing has changed, or how a ritual has affected a community, or how members of a community talk about a certain thing. Some examples:

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Question: How do Hare Krishnas talk about the Hare Krishna chant?

- Possible Argument #1: Hare Krishnas talk about the Hare Krishna chant in two ways: as a reminder of Krishna's centrality in their worldview, and as a way to build community.
- Possible Argument #2: Hare Krishnas talk about the Hare Krishna chant using a semi-scientific language, claiming that the chant sends positive vibrations through the atmosphere.

Question: How has Buddhism changed since coming to the United States, and how do Buddhists themselves make sense of this change?

- Possible Argument #1: Buddhism in the United States has changed especially in the adoption of Sunday sermons, and Buddhists make sense of this change in a number of interesting ways.
- Possible Argument #2: Buddhism has a more diverse community of followers in the United States, and because of this American Buddhists speak a lot about the importance of diversity and social justice.

(Again, I have no idea if these things are true.)

So, once you find what question interests you, and find a suitable—and suitably interesting—answer, that's your argument.

Then there are two things left to do.

First, you need to make clear what your argument is. People often talk about doing this with a "thesis statement," which is an explicit declaration of what you want to say: "My argument is…," "My thesis is…," or something like that. You can do that if you'd like, but it's not a requirement as far as I'm concerned. All you have to do is make clear, somewhere in the first page or two, what your argument is. You can isolate it into one sentence, or you can dance around it in a paragraph. Whatever suits you, as long as the reader understands what you're trying to say.

Second, you need to prove your point. Over a series of pages, you need to back up your argument. If you think Unarians talk about past lives because it makes them feel important, you need some evidence of that being true. If you think Buddhism in the United States emphasizes diversity, show me where that's the case. If you can't back up your argument, then it's not a good one.

Lastly, remember this: if you find that your argument is too broad or too narrow—or doesn't quite work—then change it. It might not require too much work to change a few paragraphs or change the wording of a few sentences. If it strengthens the argument, it may very well be worth it.