OXFORD AGORA

A Guide to Writing an Argument Worth Reading

Choosing a question, researching it with judgement, building an argument that survives objection, using assistance honestly, and preparing for the Oxford Defence.

Free to enter and open worldwide.
Junior, 11 to 13, up to 1,000 words. Senior, 14 to 18, up to 1,500 words.
Entries close 31 January 2027 at 23:59 GMT.

Student Information Pack
2027

What is in this guide

Twelve pages, meant to be read once before you begin and returned to while you write.

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How to use it

Read pages 3 and 4 before committing to a question. Pages 5 to 8 are working pages, most useful open beside a draft. Pages 9 and 10 should be read before you open any tool, not afterwards. The ten questions are published on the competition page rather than reprinted here, so that you always work from the current wording.

Raphael painted his philosophers mid-argument. Almost nobody is listening politely.

The competition in brief

What you are entering, and the four stages between choosing a question and defending your answer to it.

Oxford Agora asks for an argument rather than a survey. Ten questions are set each year by Oxford and Cambridge academics across five fields, and entrants choose one of them. What the judges want to see is a position you have reasoned your way to, supported by evidence you have read and tested against the strongest case on the other side.

Essays are read anonymously, and a shortlist is invited to the Oxford Defence to discuss the argument they made.

Entry	Free, open worldwide
Junior cohort	Ages 11 to 13, maximum 1,000 words
Senior cohort	Ages 14 to 18, maximum 1,500 words
Questions	Ten across five fields. You may enter one
Language	Essays are written and assessed in English
Deadline	31 January 2027, 23:59 GMT

Both cohorts answer the same questions. Junior entries are read against what is reasonable for a writer of eleven to thirteen and are never measured against Senior work.

THE TEN QUESTIONS

oxfordglobaleducation.com /oxford-agora

The same page carries the full rules, the awards, the dates and answers to common questions.

One · Choose

Register and commit to a single question.

Two · Write

Research it, form a claim, test it, revise.

Three · Submit

Essay, bibliography and declarations, sent anonymously.

Four · Defend

Shortlisted entrants discuss their argument.

How entries are read

Five dimensions, their weightings, and the question each one is really asking of your essay.

30%	Argument	*What exactly am I claiming, and why does it follow?*
25%	Intellectual independence	*Where in this essay have I made a genuine intellectual choice?*
20%	Evidence	*Does each source actually support the claim attached to it?*
15%	Complexity	*Have I confronted the strongest difficulty for my position?*
10%	Clarity	*Could an intelligent reader follow this without guessing?*

A demonstration only persuades if the audience can follow every step of it.

Independence carries the second heaviest weighting, which is worth dwelling on. The judges are not looking for an unusual opinion; they are looking for evidence that a person made decisions, about which interpretation of the question to pursue, which sources deserved weight, and which objection was worth taking seriously. That is also the reason the rules on pages 9 and 10 are strict. Where the thinking is delegated, whether to a tutor or to a language model, there is very little left to mark.

A note for parents and teachers

Support is expected and welcome. Discussing what a question means, recommending reading, pressing a student on why they believe something, explaining how citation works and commenting on the shape of a draft all improve an entry without compromising it.

Choosing the position, constructing the argument, selecting the evidence or rewriting passages is a different matter, and must be declared where it happens. The full boundary, for people and for software alike, is set out on pages 9 and 10. Where a student intends to use a generative AI service, please check its minimum age before they do.

Choosing a question

How to move from a broad question to a claim precise enough to be tested, and honest enough to be revised.

A question asks you to decide something. Answering the subject it happens to mention is the commonest way a promising entry goes wrong, and it usually happens in the first hour, long before any writing begins.

01 Restate the question in a single sentence of your own. If your version is vaguer than the original, you have lost the part that made it worth asking.

02 Identify the words that carry the disagreement. Terms such as fair, progress, intelligence or necessary can be read in several defensible ways, and an essay that never says which reading it uses will drift.

03 Establish what is at stake. If your answer were accepted, what would follow for policy, for scientific practice, for how we judge a historical case, or for how someone ought to act?

04 Commit to a working claim, understood as provisional. It is a position you intend to test and are prepared to abandon, not a verdict you have to defend to the end.

THREE QUESTIONS TO SETTLE FIRST

What is the most important disagreement hidden inside this question?

What would an intelligent person say against my position?

What evidence would persuade me to change my mind?

KEEP THE THIRD ANSWER

It is the question most often asked at the Defence, and the one entrants most often wish they had thought about earlier.

On the obvious answer

If your position is the one most readers would reach within ten seconds, you are writing against every entrant who reached it too. Contrarianism is no better: cleverness adopted for its own sake is visible on the page and tends to collapse under a single question at the Defence. What distinguishes a strong entry is a position arrived at by reasoning, where the reader can see the reasoning happen. The position itself is rarely what sets an essay apart; the route to it almost always is.

Researching the question

Where evidence comes from, what to write down while it is in front of you, and how to cite it.

Useful research looks for evidence capable of testing a claim, including evidence that would defeat it. Assembling quotations that already agree with you is a different exercise, and an experienced reader can tell the two apart within a paragraph.

01 Original research, primary evidence and official data

02 Scholarly books and peer reviewed articles

03 Institutional reports, read with their funding in mind

04 Serious journalism, for contemporary examples

05 Encyclopedias and textbooks, for orientation only

Three habits prevent most of the trouble. Read what you cite rather than a summary of it. Interpret every quotation, since a passage never explains its own significance. And record sources as you meet them: bibliographies reconstructed the night before a deadline are where invented references appear.

RELEVANCE

Standing high on that list does not make a source relevant. A distinguished study can have nothing to do with the sentence it was attached to.

CITATION

Use APA style, and use it consistently throughout.

In the text: (Sen, 1999, p. 87)

In the bibliography: Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom.* Oxford University Press.

What to record for every source

The reference. Author, title, year, page

Its claim. In one sentence, in your words

Its evidence. Data, archive, or argument alone

Your use. Which of your claims it supports

Its limits. Scope, date, sample, funding, silences

The last earns the most credit: naming the limits of your evidence reads as seriousness.

Building the argument

The chain that holds an essay together, and how to test it before a judge does it for you.

CENTRAL CLAIM
The one thing this essay argues

↓ *because*

REASON
Why the claim should be accepted

↓ *supported by*

EVIDENCE
The source, data, case or example

↓ *which matters because*

EXPLANATION
Why this evidence supports this reason

↓ *and yet*

STRONGEST OBJECTION
The best case against you

↓ *therefore*

RESPONSE
Answer it, narrow the claim to survive it, or change your mind

No structure is prescribed, and the five paragraph formula taught for examinations is rarely the right shape here. What every convincing entry shares is a chain of the kind on the left, carried through two or three reasons rather than one.

The link most often missing is explanation. Evidence is presented, the reader is left to infer its significance, and the inference the writer wanted never arrives.

A MODEL FOR EACH PARAGRAPH

- **Point.** What this paragraph establishes
- **Evidence.** What supports it
- **Explanation.** Why that matters
- **Connection.** How it advances the case

A paragraph that cannot answer the fourth is background, and background belongs in fewer words.

A real objection rather than a convenient one

A token objection is chosen because it is easy to dismiss. A real one is the argument that would trouble you if a well read stranger raised it at the Defence. Use the second kind. You may answer it, or narrow your claim until it survives, or say frankly that it changed your mind, and all three are credited under Complexity. Only pretending that it does not exist costs you. If you cannot yet name the objection, the research is not finished.

Writing and revising

Three passes, each looking for one thing, and the rules governing the file you eventually submit.

Write the first draft to discover what you think, then revise deliberately. Reading for everything at once is how errors survive to the deadline.

First pass: the argument

- Does the opening answer the precise question asked?
- Does every section perform necessary work?
- Are there jumps where a step of reasoning is missing?
- Is the conclusion earned by what precedes it?

Second pass: the evidence

- Is every factual claim supported?
- Are sources represented accurately, including their limits?
- Is each quotation interpreted rather than left to stand alone?
- Has contrary evidence been faced rather than avoided?

Third pass: the prose

- Can long sentences be made more exact?
- Are abstract terms defined where they first appear?
- Have repetitions been cut?
- Does it sound like you rather than like borrowed academic phrasing?

PROPORTION

As a rough illustration of a well balanced essay, and not a rule: framing and definition around a sixth, reasons and evidence around a half, objection and response a quarter, conclusion the remainder.

The point worth taking is that background is not the essay. If a third of the words have gone and the argument has not begun, cut.

BEFORE THE DEADLINE

Leave two days between finishing and submitting. Nobody reads their own sentences accurately on the day they wrote them.

Rules for the file you submit

Word count. Quotations and substantive footnotes count; title and bibliography do not.

The maximum. A ceiling rather than a target; reaching it carries no advantage.

Format. DOCX, or a PDF whose text can be selected.

Anonymity. No name, school or nationality in the file or its properties.

File name. Use Q3.docx for Question 3. No entrant number is needed.

Footnotes. For references and brief clarification only.

AI and outside help: the rules

The binding position for every entry. If you read nothing else in this guide, read this page.

Generative AI may support parts of your research and writing. It may not replace the thinking and the writing that Oxford Agora assesses.

Your claim, your reasoning, your use of evidence and your conclusions must be your own, and you are responsible for every sentence submitted under your name.

Limited and honestly declared use costs you nothing. Concealed or substantial generation costs you the entry.

Tools that need no declaration

Ordinary spelling and grammar checkers, dictionaries, formatting, citation managers, screen readers, text to speech, and help from an adult with the upload. The distinction that matters: a spellchecker corrects a word you wrote, a generative tool writes the sentence for you.

Permitted, and declared

- Generating search terms
- Exploring possible lines of enquiry before you choose a position
- Identifying terms in the question that may need defining
- Challenging an argument you have already built
- Commenting on the organisation of your own outline or draft
- Marking unclear sentences, or claims that need evidence, where you do not accept its replacements
- Limited grammar, accessibility or translation support

A tool may comment on a structure you made; it may not make the structure.

Never permitted

- Deciding your position or formulating your central claim
- Producing a plan that supplies the substantive argument
- Writing or rewriting sentences, paragraphs or sections
- Analysing your evidence, or selecting it and drawing the conclusion for you
- Summarising sources in place of reading them
- Generating a bibliography you have not verified yourself
- Inventing quotations, statistics, cases or references
- Concealing generated text, by editing or by evasion tools
- Submitting anything you cannot explain and defend, or declaring your use incompletely

Detection software is never proof. Concerns are reviewed by people, who ask about your work first.

Using help well

A test to apply before you open any tool, and the same standard applied to help from people.

01 **Is the tool doing work the judges are meant to be marking?** Position, reasoning, interpretation and prose belong to you. If so, stop there.

02 **Have I checked the output against a real source?** A model can be fluent, confident and wrong in the same sentence, and its answer is not evidence.

03 **Could I explain and defend this without the tool?** If not, the work has not yet become yours.

04 **Could I describe exactly what I did in my declaration?** Where the honest description sounds like a problem, it generally is one.

PROMPTS THAT HELP

"Here is an argument map I made. Ask me five difficult questions about its assumptions. Do not suggest replacement arguments or sentences."

"Identify which factual claims in this paragraph need evidence. Do not provide or invent sources."

"Which term in this question has more than one reasonable definition? Give me definitions to investigate, not a thesis."

PROMPTS TO AVOID

"Choose the strongest position and build the argument for me."

"Generate ten academic sources that support my thesis."

Age, permission and privacy

Most generative services set a minimum age, commonly thirteen and sometimes eighteen. Use only a service whose age requirement you meet and which your parent, guardian or school permits, and if you are in the Junior cohort assume an adult should be involved. Nothing here requires you to use these tools, and entries written without them are at no disadvantage.

Keep personal details out of anything you type, along with confidential or unpublished material, and paste the smallest passage that will do rather than a whole essay.

Help from people is held to the same standard. Discussion, recommended reading, questions about your reasoning and comment on organisation sit within the rules; choosing your position, building the argument or rewriting passages do not. Help of either kind is declared in your process statement.

Submitting your entry

Two short declarations, written as you go rather than at the end, and a final check before you send.

Your process statement

Submitted with the essay and bibliography, outside the word count. It is a brief record rather than a second essay, and finalists find it the most useful preparation they did.

Why I chose this question

Whether my position changed while researching, and how

The evidence that most influenced my thinking

The strongest objection I met, and what I did with it

Help I received, from teachers, parents, tutors, translators or AI

How I checked my factual claims

Your AI declaration

The form offers a clear option for entrants who used none. Anyone who did should complete the fields rather than write "I used ChatGPT".

Tool and version

Dates used

The specific tasks I used it for

What it did not do, in your own words

How I verified what it told me

Records I have kept, and can supply on request

BEFORE YOU SEND

- [ ] The essay answers the question I registered for, and only that one
- [ ] It is within the word count for my cohort
- [ ] No identifying detail appears in the file or its properties
- [ ] The filename is the question number only, for example Q3.docx
- [ ] The format is DOCX or selectable PDF
- [ ] Every claim is supported, and I have read every source I cite
- [ ] The bibliography is complete and formatted in APA style
- [ ] I have engaged the strongest objection, not a convenient one
- [ ] My statement and declaration are complete and accurate
- [ ] I could explain and defend every sentence myself

KEEP A SIMPLE LOG

Date, tool, what you asked, how you used the response, how you checked it. The records stay with you, and are requested only if a question arises.

The Oxford Defence

A conversation about the argument you made, with people who have read it closely.

Do not memorise a speech. Know the argument well enough to say why you reached it, where it is weakest, and what would persuade you to abandon it. Entrants who have done that find the Defence enjoyable; entrants who have rehearsed a performance rarely do.

Shortlisted entrants receive the format, date and joining details when the shortlist is announced.

KEEP FROM THE FIRST DAY

- Your argument map
- Your key sources
- Your notes on objections
- A record of how your thinking changed
- Your declarations

Questions

The full rules, dates and awards are published at oxfordglobaleducation.com/oxford-agora. Anything this guide does not answer can be sent to info@oxfordglobaleducation.com.

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