ESSAY 5: Arguing against Convention

For this essay we will discuss the basic structure of an argument: a claim supported by a logical structure of reasons and evidence. For yr own argument you will challenge the conventionally held view of the value of some object, activity, or abstraction. You may either argue the value of something that most people find tasteless, a waste of time, or otherwise undesirable or, conversely, argue that something most people value is actually a waste of time, etc. If yr topic permits, you may write from personal experience and observation alone; if you pick a more public topic (or if you wish to bolster yr argument with the views and voices of others), you may choose to add some researched information. If you do use research, please pay attention to the credibility of sources, and be sure to follow MLA citation guidelines.

READ: Look at course blog to find links to several articles. Read each article, and for each article write down the conventional view the author challenges and the framework of reasons he/she uses to support his/her minority view.

BRAINSTORM: It is important to spend some time considering yr topic, making sure that you have reasons and evidence enough to develop a convincing argument. Here are some of the ideas I’ve been tossing around (plus some promising ones from yr colleagues):

- Cell phones are a dreadful invention.
- Democracy’s insistence that everyone over 18 be allowed to vote is a misguided ideal (voters should be a privilege granted only to those who know the positions of the candidates and the proper functioning of government).
- Civilization would be better off if electricity had not been invented.
- Teachers/society should accept “flexible” spelling.
- Homelessness has its advantages. (or renting an apt. is better than owning yr own house).
- It’s a faulty idea that one needs to be married (or partnered or a parent) in order to be happy.
- Anger can be a productive emotion. (or pick yr favorite deadly sin)
- Educational toys damage children’s development.
- The main problem with the American marketplace is too many choices.
- Grades should be abolished (pick yr level of schooling, or conditions); or gen ed requirements should be abolished (why does an engineer need to learn history?)
- Boredom is a productive state of mind that should be encouraged in children and others.
- The conveniences of modern-day life destroy our potential for a rich and happy life.
- Fashion (or the jewelry industry) should be abolished.
- Computers should not be used in a writing classroom. (or in elementary school)
- Sesame Street (pick yr own favorite) has done more harm than good.
- Virtual (online, computer) relationships are just as valuable as “real-life” ones.
ORGANIZE: Once you decide on a topic, free-write or bullet point the reasons you hold this position. What details could you use to support or develop or explain those reasons? Write a tentative thesis statement that gives yr claim along with the strongest several reasons you have come up with. (For example, “The invention of the microwave oven has damaged civilization by weakening the institution of the family dinner table, encouraging us to expect instant gratification, and loosening the ties to our ethnic heritages.”)

The most obvious way to structure yr argument is to first set out the conventional view (extolling the virtues of that wonderful invention, the microwave), concluding that first paragraph with yr thesis statement (which will challenge or overturn that conventional view). Yr paragraphs should be developed to focus on one reason per paragraph, filling out the paragraph with evidence drawn from yr personal experience. Consider the best way to order these reasons. Typically you may want to start with a strong reason, bury the weakest one in the middle, and end with yr strongest reason (if you have three reasons; you may have two or four, probably not many more than that). There may, however, be other factors that dictate a different logic (maybe chronological or a progression from outside to inside, for example).

DRAFT: The usual--target length: 750–1000 words.

CRITERIA FOR GRADING:
- clear statement of the conventional view
- a strong thesis statement that challenges that view
- focused, unified, and coherent paragraphs that give a logical framework for yr argument
- use of specific details to provide evidence for yr reasons