

Argument Prompts

“Relinquish your attachment to the known, step into the unknown, and you will step into the field of all possibilities.” Deepak Chopra

Consider the value Deepak Chopra places in choosing the **unknown**. Then write an essay in which you develop your own position on the **value** of exploring the unknown. Use appropriate, specific **evidence** to illustrate and develop your position.

- **Determine the question.** Figure out what the prompt is asking you to do.
- **Pick an opinion and stick to it.** Choose one side of the argument and one clear claim to support all the way through.
- **Craft a thesis statement.** Your thesis should be clear, concise, and introduce the content of your essay.
- **Craft a chronological argument.** Make an argument that builds on its prior points.
- **Support your claims.** Support yourself with concrete, specific evidence and examples.

2018

In her book *Gift from the Sea*, author and aviator Anne Morrow Lindbergh (1906–2001) writes, “We tend not to choose the unknown which might be a shock or a disappointment or simply a little difficult to cope with. And yet it is the unknown with all its disappointments and surprises that is the most enriching.”

Consider the value Lindbergh places on choosing the unknown. Then write an essay in which you develop your own position on the value of exploring the unknown. Use appropriate, specific evidence to illustrate and develop your position.

2017

The passage below is an excerpt from *Empire of Illusion* by Chris Hedges. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you develop a position on Hedges’ argument that “the most essential skill . . . is artifice.” Use appropriate, specific evidence to illustrate and develop your position.

The most essential skill in political theater and a consumer culture is artifice. Political leaders, who use the tools of mass propaganda to create a sense of faux intimacy with citizens, no longer need to be competent, sincere, or honest. They need only to appear to have these qualities. Most of all they need a story, a personal narrative. The reality of the narrative is irrelevant. It can be completely at odds with the facts. The consistency and emotional appeal of the story are paramount. Those who are best at deception succeed. Those who have not mastered the art of entertainment, who fail to create a narrative or do not have one fashioned for them by their handlers, are ignored. They become “unreal.”

An image-based culture communicates through narratives, pictures, and pseudo-drama.

2016

In 1891, Irish author Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) observed, “Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man’s original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion.”

Wilde claims that disobedience is a valuable human trait and that it promotes social progress. Write an essay that argues your position on the extent to which Wilde’s claims are valid. Use appropriate examples from your reading, experience, or observations to support your argument.

2015

An anthropologist studying first-year students at a university in the United States writes that friendly phrases like “How are you?,” “Nice to meet you,” and “Let’s get in touch” communicate politeness rather than literal intent. What, if anything, is the value or function of such polite speech?

In a well-written essay, develop your position on the value or function of polite speech in a culture or community with which you are familiar. Use appropriate evidence from your reading, experience, or observations to support your argument.

2014

Authors Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman published “The Creativity Crisis” in *Newsweek.com* in July 2010. They reported that the Torrance Test, a test of creativity that has been administered to millions of people worldwide in 50 languages, indicates that the public’s “creativity quotient” has steadily crept downward since 1990. In their article, Bronson and Merryman cite the claim of Professor Kyung Hee Kim at the College of William and Mary: “It’s very clear, and the decrease is very significant.” Kim reports that it is the scores of younger children in America—from kindergarten through sixth grade—for whom the decline is “most serious.”

Bronson and Merryman state that “[t]he potential consequences are sweeping. The necessity of human ingenuity is undisputed. A recent IBM poll of 1,500 CEOs identified creativity as the No. 1 ‘leadership competency’ of the future. Yet it’s not just about sustaining our nation’s economic growth. All around us are matters of national and international importance that are crying out for creative solutions, from saving the Gulf of Mexico to bringing peace to Afghanistan to delivering health care. Such solutions emerge from a healthy marketplace of ideas, sustained by a populace constantly contributing original ideas and receptive to the ideas of others.”

One possible approach to this reputed decline in creativity is to explicitly teach creative thinking in school. Write to your school board explaining what you mean by creativity *and* arguing for or against the creation of a class in creativity.

2013

For centuries, prominent thinkers have pondered the relationship between ownership and the development of self (identity), ultimately asking the question, “What does it mean to own something?”

Plato argues that owning objects is detrimental to a person’s character. Aristotle claims that ownership of tangible goods helps to develop moral character. Twentieth-century philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre proposes that ownership extends beyond objects to include intangible things as well. In Sartre’s view, becoming proficient in some skill and knowing something thoroughly means that we “own” it.

Think about the differing views of ownership. Then write an essay in which you explain your position on the relationship between ownership and sense of self. Use appropriate evidence from your reading, experience, or observations to support your argument.

2012

Consider the distinct perspectives expressed in the following statements.

If you develop the absolute sense of certainty that powerful beliefs provide, then you can get yourself to accomplish virtually anything, including those things that other people are certain are impossible.

William Lyon Phelps, American educator, journalist, and professor (1865–1943)

I think we ought always to entertain our opinions with some measure of doubt. I shouldn’t wish people dogmatically to believe any philosophy, not even mine.

Bertrand Russell, British author, mathematician, and philosopher (1872–1970)

In a well-organized essay, take a position on the relationship between certainty and doubt. Support your argument with appropriate evidence and examples.

2011

The following passage is from *Rights of Man*, a book written by the pamphleteer Thomas Paine in 1791. Born in England, Paine was an intellectual, a revolutionary, and a supporter of American independence from England. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay that examines the extent to which Paine’s characterization of America holds true today. Use appropriate evidence to support your argument.

If there is a country in the world, where concord, according to common calculation, would be least expected, it is America. Made up, as it is, of people from different nations, accustomed to different forms and habits of government, speaking different languages, and more different in their modes of worship, it would appear that the union of such a people was impracticable; but by the simple operation of constructing government on the principles of society and the rights of man, every difficulty retires, and all the parts are brought into cordial unison. There, the poor are not oppressed, the rich are not privileged. . . . Their taxes are few, because their government is just; and as there is nothing to render them wretched, there is nothing to engender riots and tumults.

2010

In his 2004 book, *Status Anxiety*, Alain de Botton argues that the chief aim of humorists is not merely to entertain but “to convey with impunity messages that might be dangerous or impossible to state directly.” Because society allows humorists to say things that other people cannot or will not say, de Botton sees humorists as serving a vital function in society.

Think about the implications of de Botton’s view of the role of humorists (cartoonists, stand-up comics, satirical writers, hosts of television programs, etc.). Then write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies de Botton’s claim about the vital role of humorists. Use specific, appropriate evidence to develop your position.

2009

Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents which in prosperous circumstances would have lain dormant. —Horace

Consider this quotation about adversity from the Roman poet Horace. Then write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Horace’s assertion about the role that adversity (financial or political hardship, danger, misfortune, etc.) plays in developing a person’s character. Support your argument with appropriate evidence from your reading,

observation, or experience.