ARGUMENT AND PERSUASION

Debating Current Issues

USING THE METHOD

Since we argue all the time—with relatives, with friends, with the auto mechanic or the shop clerk—a chapter devoted to argument and persuasion may at first seem unnecessary. But arguing with an auto mechanic over the cost of repairs is quite a different process from arguing with readers over a complex issue. In both cases we are trying to find common ground with our audience, perhaps to change its views or even to compel it to act as we wish. But the mechanic is in front of us; we can shift our tactics in response to his or her gestures, expressions, and words. The reader, in contrast, is "out there"; we have to anticipate those gestures, expressions, and words in the way we structure the argument, the kinds of evidence we use to support it, even the way we conceive of the subject.

A great many assertions that are worth making are debatable at some level—whether over the facts on which the assertions are based or over the values they imply. Two witnesses to an accident cannot agree on what they saw; two scientists cannot agree on what an experiment shows; two economists cannot agree on what measures will reduce unemployment; two doctors cannot agree on what constitutes life or death. Making an effective case for our opinions requires upholding certain responsibilities and attending to several established techniques of argumentation, most of them dating back to ancient Greece.

Technically, argument and persuasion are two different processes:

- Argument appeals mainly to an audience's sense of reason in order to negotiate a common understanding or to win agreement with a claim. It is the method of a columnist who defends a president's foreign policy on the grounds of economics and defense strategy.
- Persuasion appeals mainly to an audience's feelings and values in order to compel some action, or at least to win support for an action. It is the method of a mayoral candidate who urges voters to support her because she is sensitive to the poor.

But argument and persuasion so often mingle that we will use the one term argument to mean a deliberate appeal to an audience's reason and emotions in order to create compromise, win agreement, or compel action.

The Elements of Argument

All arguments share certain elements:

- The core of the argument is an assertion or proposition, a debatable claim about the subject. Generally, you express this assertion as your thesis statement. It may defend or attack a position, suggest a solution to a problem, recommend a change in policy, or challenge a value or belief. Here are a few examples:
  - The college should give first priority for on-campus jobs to students who need financial aid.
  - School prayer has been rightly declared unconstitutional and should not be re instituted in any form.
  - Smokers who wish to poison themselves should be allowed to do so, but not in any place where their smoke will poison others.
- You break down the central assertion into subclaims, each one supported by evidence.
• You raise significant opposing arguments and dispense with them, again with the support of evidence.
• You organize the parts of the argument into a clear, logical structure that pushes steadily toward the conclusion.

You may draw on classification, comparison, or any other rhetorical method to develop the entire argument or to introduce evidence or strengthen your conclusion. For instance, in a paper arguing for raising a college's standards of admission, you might contrast the existing standards with the proposed standards, analyze a process for raising the standards over a period of years, and predict the effects of the new standards on future students' preparedness for college work.

**Appeals to Readers**

In arguing you are appealing to readers: you want them to listen to what you have to say, judge your words fairly, and, as much as they can, agree with you. Most arguments combine three kinds of appeals to readers: ethical, emotional, and rational.

**Ethical Appeal**

The ethical appeal is often not explicit in an argument, yet it pervades the whole. It is the sense you convey of your expertise and character, projected by the reasonableness of the argument, by the use of evidence, and by tone. A rational argument shows readers that you are thinking logically and fairly (see pp. 332-34). Strong evidence establishes your credibility (see pp. 332, 339-40). And a sincere, reasonable tone demonstrates your balance and goodwill (see p. 343).

**Emotional Appeal**

The emotional appeal in argument aims directly for readers' hearts—for the complex of beliefs, values, and feelings deeply embedded in all of us. We are just as often motivated by these ingrained ideas and emotions as by our intellects. Even scientists, who stress the rational interpretation of facts above all else, are sometimes influenced in their interpretations by emotions deriving from, say, competition with other scientists. And the willingness of a nation's citizens to go to war may result more from their fear and pride than from their reasoned considerations of risks and gains. An emotional appeal in argument attempts to tap such feelings for any of several reasons:

• To heighten the responsiveness of readers
• To inspire readers to new beliefs
• To compel readers to act
• To assure readers that their values remain unchallenged

An emotional appeal may be explicit, as when an argument against capital punishment appeals to readers' religious values by citing the Bible's Sixth Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." But an emotional appeal may also be less obvious, because individual words may have connotations that elicit emotional responses from readers. For instance, one writer may characterize an environmental group as "a well-organized team representing diverse interests," while another may call the same group "a hodgepodge of nature lovers and irresponsible businesspeople." The first appeals to readers' preference for order and balance, the second to readers' fear of extremism and disdain for unsound business practices. (See pp. 52 and 343 for more on connotation.)

The use of emotional appeals requires care:

• The appeal must be directed at the audience's actual beliefs and feelings.
• The appeal must be presented dispassionately enough so that readers have no reason to doubt your fairness in the rest of the argument.
• The appeal must be appropriate to the subject and to the argument. For instance, in arguing against a pay raise for city councilors, you might be tempted to appeal to readers' resentment and distrust of wealthy people by pointing out that two of the councilors are rich enough to work for nothing. But such an appeal would divert attention from the issue of whether the pay raise is justified for all councilors on the basis of the work they do and the city's ability to pay the extra cost.

Carefully used, emotional appeals have great force, particularly when they contribute to an argument based largely on sound reasoning and evidence. The appropriate mix of emotion and reason in a given essay is entirely dependent on the subject, your purpose, and the audience. Emotional appeals are out of place in most arguments in the natural and social sciences, where rational interpretations of factual evidence are all that will convince readers of the truth of an
assertion. But emotional appeals may be essential when you want an audience to support or take an action, for emotion is a stronger motivator than reason.

Rational Appeal

A rational appeal is one that, as the name implies, addresses the rational faculties of readers—their capacity to reason logically about a problem. You establish the truth of a proposition or claim by moving through a series of related subclaims, each supported by evidence. In doing so, you follow processes of reasoning that are natural to all of us and thus are expected by readers. These processes are induction and deduction.

Inductive reasoning moves from the particular to the general, from evidence to a generalization or conclusion about the evidence. It is a process we begin learning in infancy and use daily throughout our lives: a child burns herself the three times she touches a stove, so she concludes that stoves burn; we have liked four movies directed by Oliver Stone, so we form the generalization that Oliver Stone makes good movies. Inductive reasoning is also very common in argument: you might offer facts showing that chronic patients in the state's mental hospitals receive only drugs as treatment, and then you conclude that the state's hospitals rely exclusively on drugs to treat chronic patients.

The movement from particular to general is called an inductive leap because you must make something of a jump to conclude that what is true of some instances (the chronic patients whose records were available) is also true of all other instances in the class (the rest of the chronic patients). In an ideal world we could perhaps avoid the inductive leap by pinning down every conceivable instance, but in the real world such thoroughness is usually impractical and often impossible. Instead, we gather enough evidence to make our generalizations probable.

The evidence for induction may be of several kinds:

- Facts: statistics or other hard data that are verifiable or, failing that, attested to by reliable sources (for instance, the number of drug doses per chronic patient, derived from hospital records).
- The opinions of recognized experts on the subject, opinions that are themselves conclusions based on research and observation (for instance, the testimony of an experienced hospital doctor).
- Examples illustrating the evidence (for instance, the treatment history of one patient).

A sound inductive generalization can form the basis for the second reasoning process, deductive reasoning. Working from the general to the particular, you start with such a generalization and apply it to a new situation in order to draw a conclusion about that situation. Like induction, deduction is a process we use constantly to order our experience. The child who learns from three experiences that all stoves burn then sees a new stove and concludes that this stove also will burn. The child's thought process can be written in the form of a syllogism, a three-step outline of deductive reasoning:

All stoves burn me.
This is a stove.
Therefore, this stove will burn me.

The first statement, the generalization derived from induction, is called the major premise. The second statement, a more specific assertion about some element of the major premise, is called the minor premise. And the third statement, an assertion of the logical connection between premises, is called the conclusion. The following syllogism takes the earlier example about mental hospitals one step further:

**MAJOR PREMISE** The state hospitals' treatment of chronic patients relies exclusively on drugs.

**MINOR PREMISE** Drugs do not cure chronic patients.

**CONCLUSION** Therefore, the state hospitals' treatment of chronic patients will not cure them.

Unlike an inductive conclusion, which requires a leap, the deductive conclusion derives necessarily from the premises: as long as the reasoning process is valid and the premises are accepted as true, then the conclusion must also be true. To be valid, the reasoning must conform to the process outlined above. The following syllogism is not valid, even though the premises are true:

All radicals want to change the system.
Georgia Allport wants to change the system.
Therefore, Georgia Allport is a radical.

The flaw in this syllogism is that not only radicals want to change the system, so Allport does not necessarily fall within the class of radicals just because she wants to change the system. The conclusion, then, is invalid.
A syllogism can be valid without being true if either of the premises is untrue. For example:

All people who want political change are radicals.
Georgia Allport wants political change.
Therefore, Georgia Allport is a radical.

The conclusion here is valid because Allport falls within the class of people who want political change. But the conclusion is untrue because the major premise is untrue. As commonly defined, a radical seeks extreme change, often by revolutionary means. But other forms and means of change are also possible; Allport, for instance, may be interested in improving the delivery of services to the poor and in achieving passage of tougher environmental-protection laws—both political changes, to be sure, but neither radical.

In arguments, syllogisms are rarely spelled out as neatly as in these examples. Sometimes the order of the statements is reversed, as in this sentence paraphrasing a Supreme Court decision:

The state may not imprison a man just because he is too poor to pay a fine; the only justification for imprisonment is a certain danger to society, and poverty does not constitute certain danger.

The buried syllogism can be stated thus:

MAJOR PREMISE The state may imprison only those who are a certain danger to society.
MINOR PREMISE A man who is too poor to pay a fine is not a certain danger to society.
CONCLUSION Therefore, the state cannot imprison a man just because he is too poor to pay a fine.

Often, one of a syllogism’s premises or even its conclusion is implied but not expressed. Each of the following sentences omits one part of the same syllogism:

All five students cheated, so they should be expelled. [Implied major premise: cheaters should be expelled.]
Cheaters should be punished by expulsion, so all five students should be expelled. [Implied minor premise: all five students cheated.]
Cheaters should be punished by expulsion, and all five students cheated. [Implied conclusion: all five students should be expelled.]

Fallacies

Inappropriate emotional appeals and flaws in reasoning—called fallacies—can trap you as you construct an argument. Watch out for the following, which your readers will find if you don’t:

- Hasty generalization: an inductive conclusion that leaps to include all instances when at best only some instances provide any evidence. Hasty generalizations form some of our worst stereotypes:
  - Physically challenged people are mentally challenged, too.
  - African Americans are good athletes.
  - Italian Americans are volatile.

- Oversimplification: an inductive conclusion that ignores complexities in the evidence that, if heeded, would weaken the conclusion or suggest an entirely different one. For example:

  The newspaper folded because it couldn’t compete with television. Although television may have taken some business from the paper, hundreds of other papers continue to thrive; thus television could not be the only cause of the paper’s failure.

- Begging the question: assuming a conclusion in the statement of a premise, and thus begging readers to accept the conclusion—the question—before it is proved. For example:

  We can trust the president not to neglect the needy, because he is a compassionate man.

  This sentence asserts in a circular fashion that the president is not uncompassionate because he is compassionate. He may indeed be compassionate, but this is the question that needs addressing.

- Ignoring the question: introducing an issue or consideration that shifts the argument away from the real issue. Offering an emotional appeal as a premise in a logical argument is a form of ignoring the question. The following sentence, for instance, appeals to pity, not to logic:

  The mayor was badly used by people he loved and trusted, so we should not blame him for the corruption in his administration.

- Ad hominem (Latin for “to the man”): a form of ignoring the question by attacking the opponents instead of the opponents’ arguments. For example:

  O’Brien is married to a convict, so her proposals for prison reform should not be taken seriously.
Either-or: requiring that readers choose between two interpretations or actions when in fact the choices are more numerous.

Either we imprison all drug users, or we will become their prisoners. The factors contributing to drug addiction, and the choices for dealing with it, are obviously more complex than this statement suggests. Not all either-or arguments are invalid, for sometimes the alternatives encompass all the possibilities. But when they do not, the argument is false.

Non sequitur (Latin for "it does not follow"): a conclusion derived illogically or erroneously from stated or implied premises. For instance:

Young children are too immature to engage in sex, so they should not be taught about it.

This sentence implies one of two meanings, both of them questionable: only the sexually active can learn anything about sex, or teaching young children about sex will cause them to engage in it.

Post hoc (from the Latin post hoc, ergo propter hoc, "after this, therefore because of this"): assuming that because one thing preceded another, it must have caused the other. For example:

After the town banned smoking in closed public places, the incidence of vandalism went up.

Many things may have caused the rise in vandalism, including improved weather and a climbing unemployment rate. It does not follow that the ban on smoking, and that alone, caused the rise.

**ANALYZING ARGUMENT AND PERSUASION IN PARAGRAPHS**

David Lindorff (born 1949) is a free-lance journalist who has written extensively about the death penalty. The following paragraph is adapted from "The Death Penalty's Other Victims," an article Lindorff wrote for the online magazine Salon in 2001. The paragraph offers an inductive argument.

A major and controversial element of the death penalty system is being largely ignored: the right of prosecutors and judges to eliminate, "for cause," any potential jurors who say they might not be willing or able to vote for death during the penalty phase of a murder trial. Whatever one might think about the death penalty itself, the trouble with screening out death-penalty skeptics—a process known as "death-qualifying" the jury—is that it does a lot more than simply eliminate jurors opposed to capital punishment. It makes for juries that tend to be white, male, and significantly more likely to convict the person accused of the crime in the first place. In a 1968 landmark study, Hans Zeisel found that death-qualifying juries led to an 80 percent increase in the conviction rate. In a 1994 study Craig Haney, Aida Hurtado, and Luis Vega reported that while minorities accounted for 18.5% of the people in California jury pools they examined, they represented 26.3 percent of those excluded from jury panels through the death-qualifying process. And a North Carolina jury study conducted in 1982 found an even greater disparity, with 55.2 percent of black potential jurors being excluded during the death-penalty qualifying process, in contrast to 20.7 percent of whites. Studies also indicate that women tend to be excluded, since they are also more likely to oppose the death penalty.

Rush Limbaugh (born 1951) is a nationally syndicated radio talk-show host known for his outspoken conservative views. The following paragraph, from Limbaugh's book The Way Things Ought to Be (1992), uses examples to make a deductive argument against distributing condoms in schools.

Advocates of condom distribution say that kids are going to have sex, that try as we might we can't stop them. Therefore they need protection. Hence, condoms. Well, hold on a minute. Just whose notion is it that "kids are going to do it anyway, you can't stop them"? Why limit the application of that brilliant logic to sexual activity? Let's just admit that kids are going to do drugs and distribute safe, untainted drugs every morning in homeroom. Kids are going to smoke, too, we can't stop them, so let's