Understanding Argumentation

Essay/Exposition
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Rhetorical Purpose of Argument

• As a common form of academic writing, argumentation seeks to explore differences of opinion and attempts to build agreement.
• As such, argument is not only useful in classroom situations but also in the realm of civic life and discourse, for it provides reasons for people to agree with a particular point of view or at least come to an understanding of an individual’s or group’s perspective on an issue.
Rhetorical Purpose of Argument

- Aristotle, who wrote the first major work on argument, thought that the best and most effective argumentative writing blends rational, emotional, and ethical appeals in order to move an audience—whether one person or an entire nation—to desired action.

Rhetorical Purpose of Argument

- When you engage in argumentation, you offer reasons to support a position, belief, or conclusion. A typical argumentative essay presents a debatable thesis and defends it in logical fashion.
- Closely allied with argumentation is persuasion, in which the writer appeals to readers' intelligence, emotions, and beliefs in order to influence them to adopt a position or act in a certain way.
- Logic and persuasive appeal often combine when a writer tries to convince an audience that his or her position is valid and other perspectives, while understandable perhaps, require reconsideration.
The Language of Argument

• Writers of argument often employ various modes of exposition like definition, comparison and contrast, illustration, and analysis, but they incorporate these modes of critical thinking as the means of justifying, or supporting, a logical position.
• The study of the special language, logic, and structure of argumentation fills volumes. For college writing, there is a core group of critical terms that you should know before you design an argumentative paper. A discussion of these terms follows.

The Language of Argument

1. A claim is a statement to be justified or upheld. It is the main idea or position that you plan to present in an argument.
2. Thesis, proposition, assertion, and premise are all similar to a claim in that each is a positive statement or declaration to be supported with reasons and evidence. A premise should be distinguished from the other terms: It is a statement or assumption that is established before an argument is begun and is important to an understanding of logic and various errors or fallacies in reasoning.
The Language of Argument

3. **Grounds** are the reasons, support, and evidence presented to support your claim.

4. A **warrant** is a stated or unstated belief, rule, or principle that underlies an argument. A **backing** is an even larger principle that serves as the foundation for a warrant.

5. The **major proposition** is the main point of an argument, which is supported by the minor propositions.

6. The **minor propositions** are the reasons you offer in support of the major proposition.

The Language of Argument

7. **Evidence** is that part of the argument that supports the minor propositions. In argumentation, effective evidence is based either on facts, examples, statistics, and other forms of evidence or on accepted opinions. Without adequate evidence, the audience will not accept your major and minor propositions. Evidence in argument must be accurate and true.

8. A **fact** is a verifiable statement. A valid **opinion** is a judgment based on the facts and careful deductive or inductive reasoning. **Induction** is a process of reasoning by which you develop evidence in order to reach a useful generalization. **Deduction** is a process that proceeds from the general to the particular.
The Language of Argument

9. A valid conclusion of an argument derives logically from the major and minor propositions. The logical conclusion is termed the inference, in which you arrive at a decision by reasoning from the previous evidence.

10. A fallacy is a line of incorrect reasoning from premises.

11. Refutation is the acknowledgment and handling of opposing viewpoint. You must anticipate opposing viewpoints and counter them effectively (what we term rebuttal) in order to convince or persuade readers.

How Arguments Work

• Constructing an effective argument depends on the careful arrangement of major and minor propositions, evidence, and refutation.
• Like a lawyer, you build a position and subject your opponent’s position to dissection in an effort to win the case.
How Arguments Work: Toulmin

- From the time of Aristotle to the present, numerous critical approaches to the study of argument have been devised.
- One of the most useful recent approaches to argument appears in An Introduction to Reasoning and The Uses of Argument by British logician and philosopher Stephen Toulmin.
- Toulmin observed that any argument involves a claim supported by reasons and evidence. Whether you write a memo to your instructor contesting a certain grade, or a letter to the editor of your campus newspaper advocating a change in the cafeteria vendor because the food is terrible, the argumentative method is the same.
- Essentially you make a general assertion—a claim—and then offer the smaller propositions or supporting reasons along with the relevant facts, examples, statistics, and expert testimony to justify all claims. And underlying the nature of claims and evidence is recognition of the importance of warrants, those unstated beliefs that lead from evidence to claim.
Understanding Claims and Warrants: Claim = Thesis

- Think of the claim as the thesis or the main point of the argument that holds all other logically related statements together.
- The claim is the main idea that you set out to prove, and in a well-reasoned argument, everything makes the claim inevitable.

Understanding Claims and Warrants: Types of Claims

- A complex, extended argument in essay form often reveals several types of claims that the writer advances.
  - A claim about meaning is a proposition that defines or interprets a subject as it establishes an arguable point.
  - A claim about value advances an ideally open-minded view of the subject based on a coherent framework of aesthetic or ethical values.
  - A claim about policy advances propositions concerning laws, regulations, and initiatives designed to produce specific outcomes.
  - Finally, claims about consequences are rooted in propositions involving various forms of cause-and-effect relationships.
Understanding Claims and Warrants: Role of Warrants

• To gain assent, a claim must be justified by a warrant that links the claim with reasons and evidence such a way that the audience sees the train of thinking that leads from the data to the claim.
• Another way of understanding the concept of a warrant is to treat it as the process of thinking that leads writers to hold the opinions they present.

Understanding Claims and Warrants: Acceptable Warrants

• Thought of from this perspective, we can see that a weak or unclear warrant will undermine an argument and render it invalid.
• For example, the claim “Sara graduated from an excellent high school and consequently she should do well in college” is based on the warrant or unstated (and untested) belief that all students who graduate from good high schools perform well at the college level.
• Obviously, this warrant is not satisfactory: To state that college success is based solely on the quality of one’s high school education is to base the argument on a warrant that few readers would find acceptable.
Understanding Claims and Warrants: Acceptable Warrants

- If, on the other hand, a writer claims that “Sara graduated from an excellent high school with a 3.97 cumulative average, the third highest in her class, and consequently should do well in college,” we see that the warrant establishing the link between the claim and conclusion becomes more acceptable.
- In fact, there is a consensus, or general belief, among experts that a person’s grade point average in high school is a sound predictor—perhaps sounder than SAT scores—of a person’s potential for success in college.

Understanding Claims and Warrants: Acceptable Warrants

- If you disagree with a writer’s assumptions, you basically are questioning the warrants underlying the argument. An effective argument should rest on an acceptable warrant and also on the backing—some explanation or support—for it.
Reasoning from Evidence

- Evidence is the data, or grounds, used to make claims or general assertions clear, and convincing. In argumentation, the presentation of evidence must be examined from the perspective of logic or sound reasoning.
- Central to logic is the relationship of evidence to a generalization, a statement or conclusion that what is applicable in one situation also applies to similar situations.
- You cannot think and write clearly unless you test evidence to see that it supports your claims, assumptions, or general statements.
- Evidence in an argumentative essay provides a common ground of understanding that you and your reader can share.

Reasoning from Evidence

- College writers must know what constitutes evidence—examples, facts, statistics, quotations and information from authoritative sources, personal experience, careful reasoning—and how to use it to support certain claims.
- They must also determine if the evidence and assumptions surrounding the evidence are valid.
Five Basic Tests to Establish the Validity of Evidence

1. *Is the evidence typical and representative?* Examples must fairly represent the condition or situation if your claim is to be valid. If evidence is distorted or unrepresentative, a claim will not be logical or convincing.

2. *Is the evidence relevant?* The evidence should speak directly to the claim. It should not utilize peripheral or irrelevant data.

3. *Is the evidence specific and detailed?* In reading and writing arguments, do not trust broad, catchall statements presented as “evidence.” Valid evidence should involve accurate quotations, paraphrases, and presentations of data from authoritative sources.

4. *Is the evidence accurate and reliable?* A claim is only as valid as the data supporting it. Facts should come from reliable sources. Current rather than outdated evidence should predominate in a current argument. Sources should be cited accurately for the convenience of the reader. Although personal observation and personal experience are admissible as types of evidence, such testimony rarely serves as conclusive proof for a claim.

5. *Is the evidence sufficient?* There must be enough evidence to support claims and reasons. One extended piece of evidence, no matter how carefully selected, rarely is sufficient to win an argument.
Appeals to Reason: Deduction

• The appeal to reason or logic is the primary instrument of effective argument.
• The most common way of developing an argument according to the principles of sound reasoning is deduction, which is most readily understood as an ordering of ideas from the general to the particular.
• With deduction you move from a general assertion through reasons and support focused on the main assertion.

Appeals to Reason: Deduction Example

• Anti-marijuana laws make people contemptuous of the legal system. (general assertion)
• This contempt is based in part on the key fact that there are too many contradictions and inconsistencies in criminal penalties for marijuana use. Laws vary radically from state to state. (reason)
• In Texas, you can be sentenced to life imprisonment for first-time use of marijuana. By contrast, in the District of Columbia the same “crime” would most likely result in a suspended sentence. (example)
Appeals to Reason: Deduction

- Deduction is a convincing way of arranging ideas and information logically.
- By stating the proposition or generalization first, you present the most important idea. Then, as in the paragraph above, you move to more specific ideas and details.
- Examined more rigorously, deductive reasoning involves a process of critical thinking known as *syllogism* in which you move from a major statement or premise, through another minor premise, to a third statement or conclusion.

Appeals to Reason: Deduction

- Aristotle’s famous syllogism captures this mental process:
  Major premise: All human beings are mortal.
  Minor premise: Socrates is a human being.
  Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.
Appeals to Reason: Induction

• Inductive reasoning reverses the process of deduction by moving from the particular ideas to general ones.
• By presenting his or her supporting—and provocative—ideas first, the author is able to interest us before we reach the climactic argument at the end of the paragraph or essay.

Appeals to Reason: Induction Example

“Twenty-five hundred years ago, Buddha, like other Eastern philosophers before him, said: “He who sits still, wins.” Asia, then immobilized in primitive torpor, had no difficulty responding. It sat still. What it won for sitting still was the perpetuation of famines and terrorizing superstitions, oppression of children, subjugation of women, emasculation of men, fratricidal wars, persecutions, mass killings. The history of Asia, like the history of all mankind, is a horrendous account of human suffering.”

—F. M. Esfandiary, “The Mystical West Puzzles the Practical East”
Appeals to Emotion

• Honest emotional appeal provides a human context for the rational ideas and evidence you present in an argumentative essay—ideas that might otherwise be cold and uninteresting to your audience.
• Assuredly if you want to persuade your audience to undertake a particular course of action, you must draw members of this audience closer to you as a person, perhaps even inspire them by your feelings about the subject or issue.
• Of course, in constructing an argument you should avoid the sort of cynical manipulation of emotion that is common in the world of spoken discourse and media in general. We will discuss unfair emotional appeals along with other logical fallacies later.

Appeals to Emotion Example

“When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!””
-- Martin Luther King, Jr. “I Have a Dream” speech, 1963 March on Washington

• King’s skillful application of balanced biblical cadences, of connotative and figurative language, and a strong, almost prophetic tone demonstrates the value of carefully crafted emotional appeal in the hands of an accomplished writer of argument.
Appeals to Ethics

- For an emotional appeal to achieve maximum effectiveness, it must not only reinforce the rational strength of your argument but also the ethical basis of your ideas.
- When you use ethical appeal, you present yourself as a well-informed, a fair-minded, and an honest person.
- Aristotle acknowledged the importance of ethos, or the character of the writer in the construction of argument, for if you create a sense that you are trustworthy, your readers or listeners will be inspired or persuaded.

Appeals to Ethics: Rogerian Argument

- In an appeal to ethics, you try to convince the reader that you are a person of sound character—that you possess good judgment and an acceptable system of values. As a person of goodwill and good sense, you also demonstrate an ability to empathize with your audience, to understand their viewpoints and perspectives.
- The psychologist Carl Rogers suggests that a willingness to embrace a potentially adversarial audience, to treat this audience more like an ally in an ethical cause, is a highly effective way to establish goodwill and the credibility of your beliefs.
- In Rogerian argument, your willingness to understand an opposing viewpoint and actually rephrase it reflectively for mutual understanding enables you to further establish your ethical and personal qualities.