

Argument Writing

When we hear the word *argument*, perhaps we think of Angie throwing Ziggy's new socks out the truck window because he was mean to her mom at the Dairy Queen. But there's another definition of *argument*. As Andrea Lunsford and John Ruszkiewicz explain in *Everything's An Argument*, "An argument can be any text--whether written, spoken, or visual--that expresses a point of view. When you write an argument, you try to influence the opinions of readers. . . . Sometimes arguments can be aggressive, composed deliberately to change what readers believe, think, or do. At other times your . . . writing may be designed to convince yourself or others that specific facts are reliable or that certain views should be considered or at least tolerated" (4).

In college, on the job, and in our personal life, knowing how to get other people to understand our point of view on an issue--and, perhaps, to come over to our point of view--is an invaluable skill. In college, we might write a political science paper arguing that a particular foreign policy has or has not been successful, a social work paper arguing that legislation should be passed to protect health care for the children of illegal immigrants, a psychology paper arguing that there is a causal connection between job loss and gambling. On the job, we might need to put together a memo to our co-workers urging them to implement or to abandon a certain policy, or a brochure persuading potential customers to include solar panels in building their new homes. In our personal life, we might send an email to the local newspaper, supporting a decision by the city council, or a letter to our child or friend urging them to take, or not to take, a major step. These are all examples of argument writing.

Note that a related term is *persuasion*. A commonly accepted distinction is that argument emphasizes reason (logos) and has the goal of discovering truth, whereas persuasion emphasizes emotion (pathos) and the credibility of the writer (ethos) and has the goal of getting people to change their minds or to act. The definitions of *argument* and *persuasion* vary and overlap, and the words are sometimes used interchangeably.

An argument paper generally requires a controversial issue, an issue on which reasonable people have differing opinions. We can't write an argument paper arguing that people shouldn't drink and drive: everybody already agrees on that. But we could write an argument paper for or against mandatory breathalyzers on every vehicle, or proposing that the United States adopt European attitudes towards youth drinking so that alcohol loses its glamour, or arguing that alcohol abuse is often linked to a consumer culture's spiritual emptiness.

Before we examine the elements of an argument paper, let's remember this: when we master effective argumentation, we will have the skill to persuade other people to our point of view. If we are responsible, we will use that power wisely. We will not use that power to bludgeon other people to our point of view, as some courtroom lawyers do. We will show respect for our opponents and try to understand their values. We will remember that when people have a different opinion than we do on an issue, it's usually not because they are stupid or bad; it's because in this particular issue, their values are different than ours. All of us have *values*, that is, standards of behavior that we believe deeply in and expect other people to meet and ideas that we find worthwhile and that are so important to us that they affect many of the decisions we make. Some examples of common values are adventure, altruism, ambition, autonomy, collective responsibility, comfort, competition, cooperation, courage, creativity, efficiency, equality of condition, equality of opportunity, excellence, flexibility, freedom of speech, frugality, generosity, harmony, honesty, justice, novelty, order, patriotism, peace, rationality, safety, security, spontaneity, tolerance, tradition, wisdom. Most controversies are based on differing values; for example, people in favor of motorcycle helmet laws are embracing the value of collective responsibility of citizens to protect each other, whereas people who are against helmet laws are embracing the values of freedom and thrills. It's important for two reasons to figure out what values are behind your opponent's position: first, so that you can treat your opponent with understanding and respect, and second, so that you can argue more effectively, by showing your opponent that you also cherish the values that they cherish, but that in this particular situation, those values are outweighed by other values. (Carl Rogers, a famous psychologist, was troubled by the win-lose nature of traditional argumentation. As an alternative, he developed a style of argumentation in which the

writer strives to find points of agreement with the other side and to arrive at a compromise with them rather than to convince them to abandon their positions.)

Logos, Pathos, and Ethos

You have three tools to help you bring others to an understanding of, perhaps even an embracing of, your position: **logos** (appealing to your readers' reason with evidence), **pathos** (appealing to your readers' emotions, for example, using vivid descriptions or powerful language to arouse their compassion or anger), and **ethos** (demonstrating to your readers that you are knowledgeable about the issue and that you have their best interests at heart, that is, that they can trust you.) Here are some examples of ethos: "As the father of three teenagers," "As a commercial pilot with twenty years of accident-free flights," "As a recovering alcoholic," "Because I had to work my way through college," "My six years of experience fighting wild fires," "As an avid skater," "Like most American families, my family struggles with rising fuel costs," "As a Head Start volunteer," "As the grandfather of a young man who is HIV positive," "Having spent three years in a state penitentiary," "As a member of the American Heart Association," "As an emergency room nurse," and so on. In other words, let readers know how you are knowledgeable about, and why you care about, the issue. This way, they'll trust what you have to say.

Each of these tools, logos, pathos, and ethos, can be used irresponsibly. A responsible writer learns how to use them in an honest and non-manipulative way. (And a smart reader learns how to avoid being manipulated by them.)

Pathos is misused when it is not combined with logos. Arguments that offer readers only emotion and no evidence are simple-minded or unethical attempts to manipulate readers to accept an unreasonable and possibly disastrous position. Wise readers always ask, "Where's the logos?" However, using pathos *along with* logos is perfectly ethical: while reason is persuading the reader's mind, emotion is persuading their heart.

Ethos is misused when it is not combined with logos. Some arguments devoid of any solid evidence seem persuasive simply because of the apparent ethos of the person advocating the position. An advertising example would be the actor in the white doctor's coat telling TV viewers that a new product will cure their heart problems. Viewers are lulled by his wise grey hair and his stethoscope and don't notice that he isn't offering any evidence to support his claims that this product will actually help them. This same abuse of ethos occurs regularly in politics as well as in advertising. Wise viewers and readers always ask, "Where's the logos?" Of course, using ethos *along with* logos is perfectly ethical: if someone is offering solid evidence for a position, they can enhance the effect of their evidence by demonstrating to their readers that they are knowledgeable and trustworthy, as indeed their good evidence shows them to be.

Logos is misused when it is not engaged with the heart--mind and heart are designed to work together to make wise decisions--and **when it is not solid evidence but is based on statistical or logical fallacies.** For statistical fallacies, see John Lannon's *Technical Communication*. Logical fallacies are errors in reasoning, usually accidental but sometimes deliberate. The main types of logical fallacies follow, each with some examples.

Non sequitur: Latin for "It does not follow." "Monica's such a sweet girl. I'm sure she'll do well in college."

Hasty generalization: A general statement based on inadequate or prejudiced evidence: "I loaned him my car, and it can back with a big dent. All teenagers are irresponsible!" "You just can't trust any priests: look at those sex abuses cases!" "My sister had a single mom for a tenant and she trashed the place. Single moms make terrible renters."

Ad hominem: Latin for "at the man," that is, an attack on the person rather than on his or her idea. Attacking the appearance, personal habits, or character of your opponent instead of discussing the issue. "Don't listen to Jones's ideas about balancing the city budget. Why, he's just an alcoholic busybody." (He may be both of those things but that doesn't mean his ideas on how to balance the budget aren't excellent.)

“These education reforms are proposed by a senator who has been divorced three times and whose daughter is a night club dancer!” “My opponent is a New Age freak.” No matter how much you disagree with a person’s political, philosophical, religious, etc. way of life (bleeding-heart liberal, reactionary conservative, communist, fascist, New Age freak, tree-hugger, secular humanist, fundamentalist), they may have excellent ideas on the particular issue at hand.

Bandwagon (also called *ad populum*, appeal to the people): Suggesting that something is wholesome or morally right simply because *everybody’s* doing it. “Watching TV all evening can’t really be bad for kids--they all do it.” “Partying can’t turn me into an alcoholic. Everybody does it.” “But Mom, everybody else gets to do it!” “Everybody knows the world is flat!” “Everybody’s going to vote for him!” “Of course he’s guilty. Everybody in town knows it.” “Join the millions of satisfied Americans who. . .” “Using your cell phone up against your ear can’t be dangerous--everybody does it.” “Don’t be left out! Send in your order form today!” “Everybody agrees that capital punishment is necessary to prevent crime.” “Everybody is enjoying the bright new flavor of Zing Toothpaste.” “Join the 45,000 subscribers who already get *Junk Magazine*.” “A million flies can’t be wrong: eat garbage.”

Red herring (also called *ignoring the question*): distracting people from the real issue by talking about one that’s completely unrelated (a red herring dragged across a track distracts bloodhounds from the chase). “My opponent is worried about Internet porn when the hole in the ozone is getting bigger every minute!” (If you scold your kid for not doing his homework, and he starts telling you he doesn’t have any friends at his new school, he’s using the red herring.)

Either . . . or fallacy (also called *false dilemma*): talking as if there are only two possible choices, when in fact, there are more. “Either we’re going to have to make alcohol illegal, or we’re going to have to accept our staggering highway death toll.” “You’ve got a choice: vote to cut out education and medical care for the children of illegal immigrants or watch our country go bankrupt.” “Come work for me or spend your summer flipping hamburgers at McDonald’s.” “My way, or the highway.”

False analogy: Just because two things are alike in some ways, doesn’t mean they’re alike in all ways. “You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs, and you can’t fix a company without firing employees.” “We build a sea-wall to hold back the tide. In the same way, we must build more prison walls to hold back the rising tide of violence.” “I love you, Marlene, but I’ll never marry you. You can’t keep a bird in a cage.”

Slippery slope: carrying a sensible idea to ridiculous extremes to make the idea look silly or dangerous. “If toddlers are allowed to choose what they want for a snack, before you know it, they’ll be bossing their parents around.” “Handgun control will lead to a police state.” “I’d never let my kid taste champagne, not even on New Year’s Eve! Before I knew it, she’d be an alcoholic.” “Don’t lend Joe \$5. Before you know it, he’ll be knocking on your door every weekend for a loan.”

Circular argument (also called *begging the question*): you make it sound as if you’re giving evidence to support your argument, but you’re really just repeating your argument in different words. “Biking without a helmet is dangerous because it’s simply not safe.”

False cause (also called *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, Latin for “it happened after this, therefore it happened *because* of this.”) “As soon as my sister moved in with me, the washing machine broke.” “The crime rate has doubled ever since Joe Schmoe took office.” “They launch a new satellite, and two days later, we have the worst snowstorm in fifty years.” “As soon as prayer left the schools, drugs came in.” “Every time I wash my car, it rains.” Notice that when one thing happens after another thing, it could, in fact, be because of the first thing. But it’s not *necessarily* because of the first thing--there could be other reasons. “The semester we started using the new math textbook, math scores increased by 25%.” Check the facts out carefully. Yes, it could be the new math book; but it could also be that a new recruitment program attracted academically strong students. “As soon as I started college, I began to get headaches.” Yes, it could be because of college stress, but it could also be because of your roommate’s hairspray.

False authority: using as evidence the opinion of someone who isn't a qualified expert in the field. "Global warming is caused by women's hair dryers. I read it in the *National Enquirer* at the grocery check-out stand." Another example: just because your favorite singer buys a certain brand of spark plug doesn't mean that it's the best kind. Now, if the American Automobile Association or NASCAR recommended it, that would be worth paying attention to.

Appeal to tradition: trying to prove that something is right or good just because it's traditional (it may in fact be right or good, but not every tradition is *automatically* good.) "Students have traditionally had to study Latin in schools, so they should study it now." "Bribes are traditional in our culture." "Hunting whales is part of our culture." "Having slaves is part of our traditional way of life." "Genital mutilation is a traditional religious ceremony in our country." "Americans have always circumcised their sons." "Cannibalism is part of our traditional culture." "In our family, it's traditional to vote Republican/Democratic." Most traditions are good things, but some are evil. For example, any tradition that interferes with a person's rights is an evil tradition: slavery, forced mutilation, etc.

Oversimplification: Offering overly simple solutions to complex problems. "All we need is love." "We can end pollution: just don't use so much energy." "Just bomb them back to the Stone Age and the problem will be solved."

Appeal to fear: Using fear to make someone agree with you. "If you believe in the theory of evolution, you're going to hell." "If we don't get stop illegal immigration, America will fall apart." "If you don't use Minto Mouthwash, you'll be alone every Saturday night." "If you don't use Blitzo Bleach, your neighbors will snicker at your dingy towels." "If you're not willing to give up your civil liberties, terrorists will take over your country."

Appeal to pity: This one says something couldn't happen or couldn't be true because it would just be too terrible to contemplate. "Acid rain can't really be destroying all our eastern forests. That would just be too awful!" "We couldn't really have a nuclear war. It would be too terrible to imagine." "I just can't believe hundreds of thousands of poor children are suffering from lead poisoning. It would be too horrible!" Just because something is too awful to think about doesn't mean it couldn't actually happen.

Arguing from ignorance: The person tries to use the absence of proof as evidence for his or her argument: "Ghosts don't exist: nobody has ever proved that they do." "Ghosts exist: nobody has ever proved that they don't."

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Learning about the ethical use of pathos and ethos and learning how to avoid the logical fallacies will not only give us skills to write solid and effective arguments, but will also equip us to resist manipulation. It will make us alert when misguided or unethical advertisers, newscasters, politicians, employers, or acquaintances are trying to manipulate us into agreeing with something that isn't good, or that isn't good for us. We'll be able to read (or listen to) advertisements, the news, political speeches, and messages from our employer or from acquaintances and to recognize what is **true and beneficial to us** versus what is **manipulation**.

A final note--too often, we let family, teachers, friends, or the media make up our minds for us about important issues. This is easy to do, because many issues seem, at face value, very simple to us. As parents we might think, "Lower the drinking age? That's crazy! Are they trying to kill our teens?" But if we read more about the issue, we might realize that lowering the drinking age might take much of the seductive glamour away from drinking and would make it possible for teens to have a beer in the safety of their homes. This might prevent teens from partying out in the countryside and then driving home intoxicated. Learning more about the issue might change our mind--or might not--but at least we'll be forming an educated opinion instead of a face-value one. To become independent thinkers, we need to get in the habit of doing the following:

1. Gathering a broad range of reliable and current information about an issue (the reference desk at the library can help)
2. Carefully examining all sides of the issue with an open mind and an engaged heart

3. Clarifying where we stand, and having the courage to change our minds or take an unfashionable position if that's where our search for the truth leads us.

### Elements of an Argument Paper

**Introduction** with **hook**, any **background material** necessary for the reader's understanding (including definitions of any ambiguous terms), and clear **thesis statement**.

**The Body Paragraphs** include your **reasons** for the position you hold, typically one reason per paragraph. Each reason needs to be supported with **evidence**, that is, material that helps you prove your point, such as facts, statistics (facts proved with numbers), expert opinions, examples, and firsthand experience or observations.

**The Body Paragraphs** also include something surprising: a brief but fair statement of the main opposing argument/s. Every kid instinctively knows how to do this: "Mom, I know you don't want me to go trick-or-treating late because the neighborhood isn't safe (acknowledging the main opposing argument). But Jimmy's big brother is going to go with us" (refuting it). By **briefly acknowledging opposing argument/s** and then immediately **refuting** (rebutting/countering) them, you show that you've already thought of them. Now your reader will see that you're a responsible thinker who has carefully examined both/all sides of the issue. You can **acknowledge/rebut** opposing arguments in one of three different ways: 1. *As your first body paragraph*: give your opposing arguments first, immediately refute them, then devote the rest of your paper to your reasons for your position. 2. *As your last body paragraph*: state all your reasons for your position (usually one per paragraph) and then devote the last body paragraph to listing the main opposing arguments and refuting them. This is the "classical argument" style that goes back to ancient Greece and Rome. 3. *Paragraph by paragraph*: as you give each of your reasons (usually one per paragraph), anticipate and rebut any possible opposing arguments. All three strategies are equally good.

**Conclusion** restate your thesis in your conclusion in a powerful, and, if possible, catchy way that leaves no doubt in your reader's mind as to what your position is. Avoid weak endings like this: "Well, I've done with my argument. Now you be the one to decide." "You can make your own choice to be for it or against it." "So, as you can see, there are many points both for and against it. You decide."

Lunsford, Andrea A. and John J. Ruszkiewicz. *Everything's an Argument*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001.

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Note to Instructors:

You might choose to include some assignment instructions like this at the end of this handout:

Your argument paper must be at least \_\_\_\_\_ pages long and must include at least \_\_\_\_\_ outside sources (quotations and paraphrases) from outside sources. Provide a Works Cited page. You must acknowledge and refute at least the major opposing points in your paper. You must show your ethos at least once and use at least one example of pathos. So that I can see you're using these tools of argument consciously, I'm asking you to underline or italicize them and label them in the margin ("acknowledge/rebut" "ethos" "pathos"). This is your most challenging paper of the semester--enjoy it! And go to the Writing Center and/or come see me if you'd like a little extra support.