

Constructing Arguments

YOU SEE AND RESPOND to arguments all the time. When you see a stop sign and come to a halt, you've accepted the argument that stopping at such signs is a sensible thing to do. But constructing an effective argument of your own isn't as easy as putting up a stop sign — or obeying its command to stop. Creating a thorough and convincing argument requires careful reasoning and appropriate attention to your audience, purpose, and other aspects of the rhetorical situation. It also calls for remembering *kairos* — recognizing the most suitable time and place for making your argument and for the most opportune way to make it.

CONNECT: What audience(s) do you want your argument to reach? **2e, 9f–h**

CREATE: Sketch or write a description showing what you know about your audience(s).

REFLECT: Go to macmillanhighered.com/smh, and respond to **9. Constructing Arguments > Student Writing > Argument project (Mercer-Golden)**.

9a Understanding contexts for argument

Remember that writing in general, and arguments in particular, exist in relationship to a larger conversation that surrounds the topic or subject and helps create the context for a particular argument. When you begin to think about making an argument of your own, then, it's important to see what other people are saying and thinking about the topic. Doing so often means doing some early research about your topic and learning about how others have approached the topic and what they have contributed to it. Then you can consider how your argument fits into this larger conversation and how it can make its own distinct contributions to it. You can then put your argument out in the world and see how others will respond — and how you might become a part of an ongoing intellectual conversation.

QUICK HELP

Checklist for constructing an argument

- What is the context of your argument? How much do you know about other arguments related to the one you are making? **(9a)**
- What is the purpose of your argument—to convince others? to make a good decision? to change yourself? **(9b)**
- Is the point you want to make arguable? **(9c)**
- Have you formulated a clear claim and given good reasons for it? **(9d and e)**
- Have you formulated a strong working thesis, and have you qualified it sufficiently? **(9d)**
- How have you established your own credibility in the argument? **(9f)**
- Have you respectfully considered, and addressed, counterarguments? **(9f)**
- How have you incorporated logical appeals into your argument? **(9g)**
- How have you used emotional appeals in your argument? **(9h)**
- How have you used verbal and visual sources in your argument, and how effectively are they integrated into your argument? **(9i)**
- Is your argument clearly organized? **(9j)**
- How will you deliver your argument to audiences? How effective is your design for your purpose? **(9k)**

9b Arguing for a purpose

Since all language is in some sense argumentative, the purposes of argument vary widely. For many years, however, traditional notions of argument tended to highlight one purpose — winning. Although winning is still one important purpose of argument, studies of the argument strategies of people from groups historically excluded from public debate—including women and people of color—have demonstrated that it is by no means the only purpose. Researchers Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin describe an *invitational argument* whose purpose is to invite others to join in mutual exploration based on careful listening and respect. In addition, *Rogsonian argument* (named after psychologist Carl Rogers) seeks to find common ground and establish trust among those who disagree about issues. Writers who take either of these approaches try to see where the other person is coming from, looking for “both/and” or “win/win” solutions when possible. You will probably find that your own arguments will serve several different purposes. For instance, if you are trying to decide whether to major in business or in chemistry, you may want to consider, or “argue,” all sides of the issue. Your purpose is hardly to win out over someone else; instead, it is to understand your choices in order to make a wise decision.

▣ Arguing to win

The most traditional purpose of academic argument, arguing *to win*, is used in campus debating societies, in political debates, in trials, and often in business.

TALKING THE TALK | ARGUMENTS

"Argument seems so negative — I don't want to attack anybody or contradict what someone else says." In some times and places — law courts, for example — argument may call for attacking the credibility of the opponent. Or you may have used the word *argument* in childhood to describe a conversation in which you voiced nothing more than "I did not!" or "You did too!" But in college writing, you have a chance to reject this narrow definition and to use argument in a much broader way. Instead of attacking or contradicting, you will be expected to explore ideas and to work toward convincing yourself as well as others that these ideas are valuable.

The writer or speaker aims to present a position that prevails over or defeats the positions of others. Presidential debates and trials, for example, focus most often not on changing the opponent's mind but on defeating him or her in order to appeal to someone else — the voting public, the judge, and so on.

□ Arguing to convince

More often than not, out-and-out defeat of another is not only unrealistic but also undesirable. Rather, the goal is to *convince* other persons that they should change their minds about an issue. A writer must provide reasons so compelling that the audience willingly agrees with the writer's conclusion. Such is the goal of advocates of assisted suicide: they well know that they cannot realistically hope to defeat or conquer those who oppose such acts. Rather, they understand that they must provide reasons compelling enough to change people's minds.

□ Arguing to understand

Often, a writer must enter into conversation with others and collaborate in seeking the best possible understanding of a problem, exploring all possible approaches and choosing the best alternative. The Rogerian and invitational forms of argument both call for understanding as a major goal of arguing. Argument to *understand* does not seek to conquer or control others or even to convince them. Your purpose in many situations — from trying to decide which job to pursue to exploring with your family the best way to care for an elderly relative — will be to share information and perspectives in order to make informed political, professional, and personal choices.

□ Arguing to change yourself

Sometimes you will find yourself arguing primarily with yourself, and those arguments often take the form of intense meditations on a theme, or even of prayer. In such cases, you may be hoping to *transform something in yourself* or

to reach peace of mind on a troubling subject. If you know a familiar mantra or prayer, for example, think of what it "argues" for and how it uses quiet meditation to help achieve that goal.

9c Determining whether a statement can be argued

An early step in an argument intended to convince or decide is to make a statement about a topic and then check to see that the statement can, in fact, be argued. An arguable statement has three characteristics:

1. It attempts to convince readers of something, change their minds about something, or urge them to do something — or it explores a topic in order to make a wise decision.
2. It addresses a problem for which no easily acceptable solution exists or asks a question to which no absolute answer exists.
3. It presents a position that readers might realistically have varying perspectives on.

ARGUABLE
STATEMENT

Advertising that features very thin models contributes to the poor self-image that afflicts many young women.

The statement here seeks to convince, addresses a problem — poor self-image among young women — that has no clear-cut solution, and takes a position many could disagree with.

UNARGUABLE
STATEMENT

Advertisers earn millions of dollars every year.

This statement does not present a position; it states a fact that can easily be verified and thus offers a poor basis for argument.

EXERCISE 9.1

Using the three characteristics just listed, decide which of the following statements are arguable and which are not.

1. *American Hustle* was the best movie of the last decade.
2. The climate of the earth is gradually getting warmer.
3. The United States must further reduce social spending in order to balance the budget.
4. Shakespeare died in 1616.
5. President Roosevelt knew that the Japanese were planning to bomb Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

6. Water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit.
7. Van Gogh's paintings are the work of a madman.
8. The incidence of breast cancer has risen in the last ten years.
9. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's response to disasters must be radically improved.
10. A fifty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit lowers accident rates.

9d Formulating a working thesis

Once you have an arguable statement, you need to develop it into a working thesis (3c). One way to do so — often called the Toulmin system — is to identify the elements of an argument (8e and 9j), which include the following: the claim or arguable statement; one or more reasons for the claim; and assumptions — sometimes unstated — that underlie the claim and reasons. Let's apply these elements to a specific topic — the use of pesticides.

Begin with an arguable statement (or initial claim). The following statement is arguable because it aims to convince, it addresses an issue with no one identifiable answer, and it can realistically be disputed.

ARGUABLE
STATEMENT (OR
INITIAL CLAIM)

Pesticides should be banned.

Attach a good reason. Although the preceding statement does make a claim — that pesticides should be banned — it offers no reason for doing so. To turn a claim into a working thesis for an argument, you need to include at least one good reason to support the arguable statement.

REASON

They endanger the lives of farmworkers.

WORKING
THESIS (CLAIM
WITH REASON
ATTACHED)

Because they endanger the lives of farmworkers,
pesticides should be banned.

Develop or identify assumptions underlying the claim and reasons.

Once you have a working thesis, examine your assumptions to help test your reasoning and strengthen your argument. Begin by identifying underlying assumptions that support the working thesis.

WORKING THESIS

Because they endanger the lives of farmworkers,
pesticides should be banned.

ASSUMPTION 1

Workers have a right to a safe working environment.

ASSUMPTION 2

Substances that endanger the lives of workers
deserve to be banned.

Once you have a working thesis, you may want to use qualifiers to make it more precise and thus less susceptible to criticism. The preceding thesis might be qualified in this way:

- **Because they *may* endanger the lives of farmworkers, *most* pesticides should be banned.**

EXERCISE 9.2

Find or create two arguable statements. Then formulate two working theses based on these statements, identifying the claim, reason(s), and assumption(s) for each thesis.

EXERCISE 9.3

Formulate an arguable statement, and create a working thesis, for two of the following general topics.

1. legalizing marijuana
2. creating an amnesty program for illegal immigrants
3. lowering college tuition
4. reinstating a military draft
5. downloading music

EXERCISE 9.4

Working with two other members of your class, find two current advertisements you consider particularly eye-catching and persuasive. Then work out what central claim each ad is making, and identify reasons and assumptions in support of the claim. Finally, prepare a brief collaborative report of your findings for the class.

9e Finding good reasons

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle discusses various ways that one can support a claim. Torture, he notes, makes for a very convincing argument but not one that reasonable people will resort to. In effecting real changes in minds and hearts, we need instead to rely on *good reasons* — reasons that establish our credibility, that appeal to logic, and that appeal to emotion (9f–h). You can use these appeals to analyze the arguments of others (8d) as well as to construct arguments of your own.

9f Making ethical appeals

To make your argument convincing, you must first gain the respect and trust of your readers, or establish your credibility with them. The ancient Greeks called this particular kind of character appeal *ethos*, often known today as an ethical

appeal (8d). You can establish credibility by demonstrating your knowledge of the topic, by showing that you and your audience share at least some common ground, and by showing yourself to be fair and evenhanded. Visuals can strengthen your ability to make such ethical appeals.

□ Demonstrating knowledge about the topic

A writer can establish credibility first by demonstrating knowledge about the topic at hand. You can show that you have some personal experience with the subject: for example, if you are a former preschool teacher, you could mention your teaching background as part of an argument for increased funding of universal pre-K programs. In addition, showing that you have thought about and researched the subject carefully can help you establish a confident tone.

To determine whether you can effectively present yourself as knowledgeable enough to argue about an issue, consider the following questions:

- Can you provide information about your topic from sources other than your own knowledge?
- How reliable are your sources?
- Do any sources contradict one another? If so, can you account for or resolve the contradictions?
- If you have personal experience relating to the issue, would telling about this experience help support your claim?

These questions may help you see what other work you need to do to establish credibility: perhaps you should do more research, resolve contradictions, refocus your working thesis, or even change your topic.

□ Finding common ground

Many arguments between people or groups are doomed to end without resolution because the two sides occupy no common ground, no starting point of agreement. They are, to use an informal phrase, coming from completely different places. Such has often been the case, for example, in India-Pakistan talks, in which the beginning positions of each party have directly conflicted with those of the other side, leaving no room for a settlement that appeases both nations.

Lack of common ground also dooms many arguments that take place in our everyday lives. If you and your roommate cannot agree on how often to clean your apartment, for instance, the difficulty may well be that your definition of a clean apartment conflicts radically with your roommate's. You may find, in fact, that you will not be able to resolve such issues until you can establish common definitions, ones that can turn futile quarrels into constructive arguments. (For more on establishing common ground, see Chapter 28.)

Common ground is just as important in written arguments as it is in diplomatic negotiations or personal disputes. The following questions can help you find common ground in presenting an argument:

- What are the differing perspectives on this issue?
- What common ground can you find — aspects of the issue on which all sides agree?
- How can you express such agreement clearly to all sides?
- How can you discover — and consider — opinions on this issue that differ from your own?
- How can you use language — occupational, regional, or ethnic varieties of English or languages other than English (29c-e) — to establish common ground with those you address?

□ Showing fairness toward counterarguments

Being fair and reasonable in arguments you make calls for considering counterarguments and alternative points of view. When you begin work on an argument, you need to look not only for sources and evidence that support your point of view but also for those that take different or even opposing points of view. Only when you have considered those counterarguments carefully and tried to look at your topic from their vantage point can you go on to address them in your own argument. Addressing alternate points of view goes a long way to convince readers that you are fair, credible, and ethical. To do so, ask questions like these:

- How can you show that you are taking into account all significant points of view?
- How can you demonstrate that you understand and sympathize with points of view other than your own?
- What can you do to show that you have considered evidence carefully, even when it does not support your position?

Some writers, instead of demonstrating fairness, may make unjustified attacks on an opponent's credibility. In your writing, avoid such attacks, which are known as fallacies (8f).

□ Making ethical appeals with visuals

In arguments and other kinds of writing, visuals can combine with text to help present a writer or an organization as trustworthy and credible. Like businesses, many institutions and individuals are using logos and other images to brand themselves as they wish the public to see them. The Sustainable Food Laboratory

logo, seen here, suggests the organization is concerned about food production as well as the environment.

Visuals that make ethical appeals add to your credibility and fairness as a writer. Just as you consider the impression your LinkedIn profile image makes on your audience, you should think about what kind of case you're making for yourself when you choose images and design elements for your argument.



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EXERCISE 9.5

List the ways in which the Sustainable Food Laboratory's logo demonstrates knowledge, establishes common ground, and shows fairness. Do you think the visual is helpful in convincing you of the organization's credibility? Why, or why not?

EXERCISE 9.6

Using a working thesis you have drafted for a current project, write a paragraph or two describing how you would go about establishing your credibility in arguing that thesis.

9g Making logical appeals

While the character a writer presents in writing always exerts a strong appeal (or lack of appeal) in an argument, credibility alone cannot and should not carry the full burden of convincing readers. Indeed, many are inclined to think that the logic of the argument — the reasoning behind it — is as important as its ethos. Logical appeals (8d), known to the ancient Greeks as *logos*, can thus be very effective; particularly useful types of logical appeals include examples, precedents, and narratives; authority and testimony; causes and effects; and inductive and deductive reasoning. In addition, visuals can help you enhance your logical appeals.

□ Using examples, precedents, and narratives

Just as a picture can sometimes be worth a thousand words, so can a well-conceived example be extremely valuable in arguing a point. Examples are used most often to support generalizations or to bring abstractions to life. In an argument about American mass media and body image, for instance, you might

make the general statement that popular media send the message that a woman must be thin to be attractive; you might then illustrate your generalization with these examples:

At the supermarket checkout, a tabloid publishes unflattering photographs of a young singer and comments on her apparent weight gain in shocked captions that ask “What happened?!?” Another praises a starlet for quickly shedding “ugly pounds” after the recent birth of a child. The cover of *Cosmopolitan* features a glamorously made-up and airbrushed actress in an outfit that reveals her remarkably tiny waist and flat stomach. Every woman in every advertisement in the magazine is thin — and the context makes it clear that we're supposed to think that she is beautiful.

The generalization would mean far less without the examples.

Examples can also help us understand abstractions. Poverty, for instance, may be difficult for us to think about in the abstract, but a description of several residents of a poverty-stricken community, vying for low-paying jobs, visiting local food pantries and soup kitchens, or facing homelessness, speaks directly to our understanding.

Precedents are particular kinds of examples taken from the past. The most common use of precedent occurs in law, where an attorney may ask for a certain ruling based on a similar earlier case. Precedent appears in everyday arguments as well. If, as part of a proposal for increasing lighting in the library garage, you point out that the university has increased lighting in four other garages in the past year, you are arguing on the basis of precedent.

In research writing (see Chapters 10–15), you must identify your sources for any examples or precedents not based on your own knowledge.

The following questions can help you check any use of example or precedent:

- How representative are the examples?
- Are they sufficient in strength or number to lead to a generalization?
- In what ways do they support your point?
- How closely does the precedent relate to the point you're trying to make? Are the situations really similar?
- How timely is the precedent? (What would have been applicable in 1980 is not necessarily applicable today.)

Because storytelling is universal, narratives can be very persuasive in helping readers understand and accept the logic of an argument. Narratives that use video and audio to capture the faces and voices of the people involved are often particularly compelling. In *As We Sow*, a documentary arguing against corporate pork production methods, the farmers shown on p. 170 told of their struggle to continue raising animals as their families had for generations — ultimately urging their children not to follow in their footsteps.