9.

HOW AND WHY TO STUDY ARGUMENTS

Learning Objectives

- Define the parts of an argument
- Identify specific argument strategies in a text
- Distinguish between facts, opinions, and assumptions
- Read inferentially

Understanding Arguments Makes You Smarter

In his book, *On Becoming a Novelist*, John Gardner writes, "One reads other writers...to see how effects are achieved, how things are done, sometimes reflecting on what he would have done in the same situation and on whether his was would have been better or worse, or why. He reads the way a young architect looks at a building, or a medical student watches an operation, both devotedly, hoping to learn from a master, and critically, alert for any possible mistake" (45-46). Gardner is offering advice to would-be novelist, but the same advice applies to those learning to write in an academic setting: one way to learn is to study what others have accomplished in their published texts.

The same is true for anything you want to be good at in life. If you play the piano, you listen to and watch great pianists. If you play basket ball, you study how accomplished players spin, dribble, pass, and shoot. Medical students watch experienced doctors at work before they begin practicing. Teachers work with other teachers before they get certified. Most likely, many of the writing skills or strategies you already know are skills and strategies you learned—at least in part—by reading. Now that you are going to be writing for college, you need to study how arguments work so that you can write your own arguments.

Studying arguments also helps you become a more discerning reader and listener. Many college professors will want you to question what you read and hear in their classes, and most of what you read and hear will

be arguments–attempts to convince you of something. In questioning arguments, you can't simply agree or disagree; you have to pinpoint the specific reasons the argument is or is not convincing, and that requires understanding how arguments work.

A loftier reason to learn how arguments work is because we are exposed to arguments all of the time (see Chapter 7). Whether you're getting career advice from your uncle, reading parenting advice in a blog, or being told to vote for a certain candidate, you will need to think critically about attempts to persuade you to think or act a certain way. Being ignorant of how arguments work can make you vulnerable to bad ideas and propaganda. As Thomas Jefferson's said, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." Learning how arguments work is one way to educate yourself in the way Jefferson's quote implies.

The Parts of an Argument

Some disciplines will use other terms to discuss how arguments work, but in general, the different parts of an argument can be defined as follows:

- **Claims:** any statement that readers will not readily accept without some support. Claims might be strong opinions, such as "We need to abolish the death penalty," but they can also be true statements that readers might be skeptical about, such as "A significant number of students who graduate high school are underprepared for college." Claims are usually presented explicitly, but sometimes, a claim might be implied. For example, if someone writes, "Anyone who thinks TikTok needs to be regulated needs to have his head examined!" The person hasn't made a direct claim, but the argument is certainly implied: Don't regulate TikTok.
- **Main claim:** the thesis of an argument—the specific opinion or idea the author wants the audience to accept or understand. Unlike the essays you write for most college classes, published arguments rarely present the thesis in the first paragraph, and sometimes, the thesis is implied.
- **Sub-claim:** the claims offered in support of the overall claim, also called **reasons.** All arguments consist of main claims and sub-claims.
- **Support:** the strategies the author uses to get the audience to accept the claims, including logical appeals, emotional appeals, ethical appeals, and counterarguments. Sometimes, support is called "grounds."
- **Logical appeals (logos):** evidence organized in a way that convinces readers to accept a claim. What counts as evidence differs in different fields and in different situations, but usually, evidence refers to something you can point to–something verifiable.
- **Ethical appeals (ethos):** statements that create a positive impression of the author and that make the audience more likely to accept the author's authority. Ethical appeals sometimes need to be explicit, such

as when the author of the argument shares her credentials, but other times, the context of the argument will create ethos. For example, educated readers will be more likely to trust an argument that appears in a scholarly journal, even if the authors of the article don't present their credentials.

- **Emotional appeals (pathos):** statements that create an emotional appeal by highlighting shared values. Facts alone are rarely going to convince someone to think or behave differently, so all arguments rely, to some extent, on emotional appeals. Most academic arguments, however, rely more on logos and ethos than on pathos.

- **Assumptions:** ideas or opinions that the author takes for granted and that readers may or may not share. These are sometimes called "warrants," and they are the most difficult parts of an argument to identify.

- **Counterarguments:** the author's attempt to address the audience's questions about, concerns about, or objections to a claim. Counterarguments are also referred to as "rebuttals" or "refutations." Contrary to what the name implies, counterarguments are not simply statements that contradict the main claim of an argument. Counterarguments occur any time the author of an argument anticipates and responds to the questions or concerns readers might have.

Responding to Arguments

Simply knowing the parts of an argument won't help you analyze and evaluate an argument. You also need to understand how the author attempts to shift the readers' perspective by convincing them to accept smaller arguments that, taken together, support the main claim. In other words, all arguments consist of several mini-arguments, so you need to analyze and evaluate the mini-arguments. If you disagree with an argument, you probably disagree with several of the smaller arguments, whereas if you agree, you probably accept the sub-claims that make up the larger argument. Most likely, you will agree with some sub-claims and not others, and if you're asked to respond to an argument, you'll explain why you agree and/or disagree with certain sub-claims.

When analyzing arguments, your first step is to identify the main claim and the sub-claims, as you do when you summarize. It's worth repeating that a claim is not always a controversial opinion; it could be a true statement the reader might not accept without more evidence. For example, if in an essay arguing that students should be required to study a foreign language, the author might devote one paragraph to proving that many companies value bilingual employees. The claim that many companies value bilingual employees is not an opinion, but it is a statement that the audience might not find convincing without evidence. To strengthen the argument, therefore, the author will give examples of companies that are seeking bilingual employees for high-paying jobs, or maybe the author will quote a Chief Executive Officer at a prestigious company. In other words, the author will support the sub-claim, which is a generalization that readers might not readily accept,

in order to support the main claim, a proposal to require students learn a foreign language. When analyzing an argument, you will need to look for examples like this: sub-claims followed by evidence.

Arguments can have hundreds of sub-claims, most of which can be classified into a few general categories. Knowing these categories may help you identify the sub-claims:

- **Claims of fact:** statements about whether something is real (e.g., more students are starting college classes in high school); look for generalizations and definitions.
- **Claims of value:** statements about how good, worthwhile, or important something is (e.g., Rilla Askew's novel *Fire in Beulah* is an excellent examination of the Tulsa Race Massacre.)
- **Causal claim:** predictions and statements about what has caused something to occur. Not all casual statements are claims. Some causal statements have been tested so much that we don't question them anymore. For example, smoking increases your chances of contracting lung cancer. At one point, the tobacco industry argued against this claim, but it has been verified as fact. The causal claim that
- **Claims of policy:** a statement about what we should do. Claims of policy include the words *should, ought,* or *must*.

Knowing the different parts that comprise an argument is the first step. While this first step is easier than analyzing why an argument succeeds or falls short, being able to recognize the different parts of an argument in an 8-10 page article, published in a scholarly journal or magazine, is challenging and will take time.

Fact, Opinion, or Assumption?

Recognizing the different parts of an argument is challenging because we sometimes confuse opinions for facts. The difference between facts and opinions is seemingly simple: a fact is a statement that we can verify whereas an opinion is a judgment or belief about a situation, something that may be based on facts but that can differ among people, depending on personal, cultural, or faith-based beliefs. Opinions are also subject to change if new information (facts) emerges or if people change. Even though people can interpret facts differently, facts can be verified. So, the distinction between opinions and facts is that facts are consistently true in many circumstances and can be verified, whereas opinions can vary and change.

Determining whether something is a fact or an opinion, however, can be difficult. For various reasons, people can mistake an opinion for a fact. If someone presents an opinion forcefully or in a manner that suggests the opinion is irrefutable, we might think it's a factual statement, especially if it's an opinion we share, or if we don't know enough about the topic to know whether the statement is fact or opinion. Similarly, we might not want to believe a statement is a fact if it contradicts something we believe strongly. Adding to the difficulty is that a fact *can* be questioned. You can't say you don't "believe" a fact, but you can say that a fact is inaccurate,

taken out of context, or atypical. When arguments present questionable facts or facts that don't tell the whole story, we can question the claims that the facts are supporting.

Complicating matters further are the assumptions on which the argument rests. Assumptions are beliefs, ideas, and common-sense generalizations that people may not stop to examine and question. In other words, an assumption is something we take for granted; we may not even realize an assumption is not necessarily a fact. When an assumption is widely shared, it can function *like* a factual statement. For example, consider the statement, "the First Amendment of the constitution is essential to our democracy." Technically, that's an opinion, but it can work as good evidence in an argument because it's a widely held opinion or, in other words, **a shared assumption**. Most likely, no one is going to interrogate that statement.

Other assumptions, though, are not as widely shared or may not always be accepted in every instance, in which case, they function more like opinions and can weaken an argument if they are not supported with evidence. To determine if an opinion is a shared assumption or one that functions more like an opinion, consider the audience. For example, in their editorial, "Why Writing Better Will Make You a Better Person," the authors write, "Since writing is an action, done for an audience, it matters how writers view and treat their readers." Some readers may question this statement. Is writing always for an audience? Does it really matter how writers treat their audience? But the editorial is published in *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, a journal that caters to educators–in other words, an audience that is likely to share this opinion. The authors don't need to back up this generalization with examples because the statement works as a shared assumption *for the intended audience*. Readers who don't readily accept the statement don't have the experience and knowledge that the intended audience has. When analyzing an argument, therefore, you must understand who the audience for the argument is and consider which assumptions that audience shares.

Support: Beyond Logos, Ethos, and Pathos

If you've written a rhetorical analysis for a high school English class, you probably learned about logos, ethos, and pathos, and you may have written a good analysis using those terms. In a college, though, you are expected to demonstrate a more sophisticated and in-depth understanding of how arguments work. Arguments work when the author provides sufficient, relevant, and representative support for the sub-claims. Although support is often divided into logos, ethos, and pathos and counterarguments, these categories are so broad as to be meaningless when analyzing, so when you look for support, look for specific examples of logos, ethos, and pathos.

Look for the following types of logical appeals:

- facts
- statistics
- examples

- hypotheticals (made-up examples)
- analogies
- comparisons
- previous research
- shared assumptions

Look for the following strategies that can evoke an emotional response and think about what emotional response the author wants–anger, fear, concern, delight, etc.:

- language with strong connotations. Connotations are the emotional associations we bring to a word. The word "wrong" and "incorrect" mean the same thing, but doesn't "wrong" sound worse?
- anecdotes. When an author tells a story, personal or otherwise, it may serve as an example (logical appeal), but stories also evoke emotions. How are readers likely to feel about specific stories?
- imagery. Detailed descriptions can cause readers to feel specific emotions. Think of how you react to horrific images, to videos of puppies, to photographs of nature.
- figurative language: similes, metaphors, personification. When an author uses figures of speech, the figures of speech most likely have connotations. Comparing someone's lips to the color of blood creates a gruesome image whereas comparing them to cherries creates a positive image.
- humor. Authors may tell jokes, use hyperbole (overstatement), or sarcasm to shape our thoughts and feelings about an idea. Humor can make us feel more comfortable about difficult topics and/or make us see something in a new way.
- value statements. When an author speaks about what we value or care about, we are likely to react emotionally. All emotional reactions are based on our values.

Look for the following strategies authors use to create ethical appeals:

- citations. When authors cite their sources, either formally using a citation format, or informally, listing their credentials and other information, they demonstrate that they have studied what the experts say, and readers tend to trust experts.
- personal stories. As with emotional appeals, stories may be presented as evidence, but when the story paints the author in a positive light, it might also be an ethical appeal. Think about what the story tells readers about the author.
- a balanced, reasonable tone. Authors can express strong opinions, but they shouldn't do so using slanted or inflammatory language.
- qualifiers. Words like "often," "in most cases," and "seldom" show the author understands exceptions.
- fair presentation of opposing views. Authors need to recognize when readers might disagree or question something in the argument, and they need to respect those who disagree.

Counterarguments

Counterarguments are another kind of support you should identify. When an author uses phrases like "some would argue" or "many believe," it's likely that what follows is the author's attempt to address a concern, objection, or question the audience might pose. You can also look for words that signal a contrast: however, yet, but, while, although. What follows these words is likely the author's attempt to address the audience's concern, objection, or question.

Typically, authors address counterarguments in one of three ways:

1. Dismiss: the author explains why the audience's concerns are not really relevant to the issue at hand. The author understands that readers might think he means X when he really means Y, or the author anticipates that her readers will mistake her argument for a different, similar argument. A dismissal occurs when authors tell readers something to the effect of "you may think I'm saying this, but I'm really saying this."

2. Accommodate: the author agrees that an objection to the claim is valid, but explains why the objection doesn't really destroy the claim. Authors will often find points of agreement with those who hold different opinions; in fact, highlighting points of agreement can be a means of establishing ethos. One type of argument, The **Rogerian Argument**, focuses on points of agreement and attempts to reach consensus with those who hold different opinions. Rogerian Argument requires a thorough and in-depth understanding of those who hold different perspectives, but all arguments benefit from understanding opposing views and finding common ground with those that hold the opposing views.

3. Refute: the author offers support to show that the audience's concern or objection is misguided. Sometimes, the attempts to find fault with specific arguments is called a rebuttal or refutation. Many students who have been taught to write arguments are most familiar with this approach. Maybe they've been told to devote at least one paragraph to counterarguments, with the goal of showing why the counterarguments are flawed. Such an approach may work, depending on the argument, but it's seldom what happens in published arguments. More often, an author will try to anticipate when in the argument the readers will raise objections and will present evidence to refute those objections.

When studying arguments, make sure you don't confuse an attempt to address a counterargument with the author's viewpoint. Sometimes, authors will present counterarguments so eloquently that it may seem as if they hold that position, but careful reading will help you distinguish between the author's opinion and the counterarguments.

Reading Inferentially

Reading an argument for analysis is not like a scavenger hunt. You can't simply read through, find the different parts of an argument, and evaluate them. Instead, you have to look for what that author implies but does not state directly. An author may imply a claim, the argument may rest on an unstated or tacit assumption, or the connection between the support and the claim may not be obvious at first. Reading to understand what the author implies is called **inferential reading** or reading to make inferences. **To infer** means to pick up on what an author means without explicitly stating what she means. For example, in his famous argument, "The Indispensable Opposition," published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1939, Walter Lippmann references Socrates, a philosopher, who says "The unexamined life...is unfit to be lived by man." He doesn't tell his audience that he's referencing Socrates because Socrates is the founder of Western philosophy and much of what he argued in 399 BC is still relevant today. He's presenting a fact—something Socrates said that we can verify—but we have *to infer* that the statement is still relevant today. Most likely, those who read *The Atlantic Monthly in 1939* knew who Socrates was, considered him an expert on matters of morality, and believed his statement applies to questions of free speech. Lippmann, therefore, didn't need to explain why he presented Socrates; in fact, doing so might have seemed odd to the readers.

When reading arguments to analyze, therefore, you have to constantly ask questions about why the author is presenting the support they present. On what assumptions does the support rest? What assumptions do readers have to share to think the support is good? You can answer these questions by making inferences. An inference is a means of uncovering an idea that is not stated directly but that is nonetheless there in the argument (or speech, or story, or other text).

The Rhetorical Situation

Once you've identified several sub-claims, support for the sub-claims, and assumptions, you still have to evaluate the argument. To evaluate, you have to think about how the intended audience will respond to the support. Thinking about the audience's response can be difficult because they may not respond the same way you would respond. For example, maybe you have no idea who Socrates was. If you read Lippmann's argument, "The Indispensable Opposition," you might think, "Who is Socrates? I don't think this is a good expert to quote!" But you shouldn't evaluate the support based only on *your* reaction. You have to ask whether the intended audience (readers of *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1938) knows who Socrates is and what they would think of him. That means you always need to know a little bit about what's called the **rhetorical situation**. The rhetorical situation is the context in which the argument was presented: where it was published, when it was published, who the likely audience is, and why the author felt compelled to reach out to this audience.
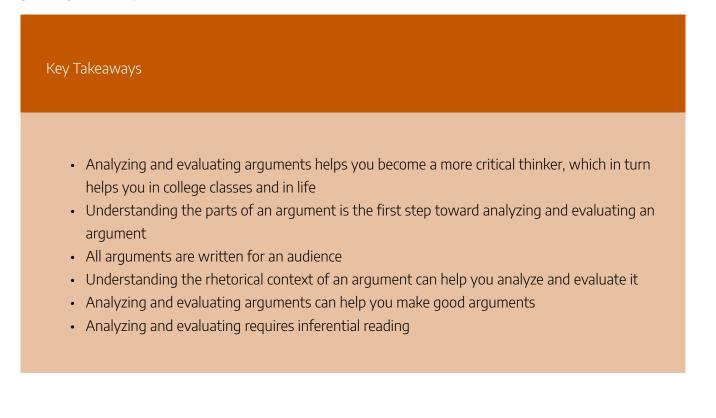
With the rhetorical situation in mind, you need to critique the support. Would the audience find certain facts are questionable, taken out of context, or contradicted by other facts? Would the audience interpret facts

differently, or can you show that audience a different interpretation of the facts? Did statistics come from what the audience would consider a good source or can you tell the audience why the source of the statistics might be questionable? If the author has used strategies to create an emotional appeal, what specific emotional reaction is the audience likely to have and why? Would the audience think that emotion distracts from the issue? Does the author do enough to establish trust among the readers? Does the author commit what readers might consider a **logical fallacy**? (See Chapter 10)

Good arguments are never merely exercises in creating logos, ethos, and pathos. They are always directed at an audience, for the purpose of enlightening that audience, changing their minds, convincing them to act, or something else. You may be giving a presentation or writing an essay only because you want to earn a passing grade in a class, complete your degree, and get a good job. But you will do a much better job on any writing assignment or giving a presentation by imagining a rhetorical situation. In other words, always think about who might read or watch and appreciate your arguments and why.

When evaluating an argument, you also think about who might read this argument and why. If you can effectively evaluate an argument by considering its rhetorical situation, you will be much more likely to make a good argument of your own.

Key Takeaways

- Analyzing and evaluating arguments helps you become a more critical thinker, which in turn helps you in college classes and in life
- Understanding the parts of an argument is the first step toward analyzing and evaluating an argument
- All arguments are written for an audience
- Understanding the rhetorical context of an argument can help you analyze and evaluate it
- Analyzing and evaluating arguments can help you make good arguments
- Analyzing and evaluating requires inferential reading

Works Cited

Gardner, John. *On Moral Fiction.* New York: Basic Books, 1979.