Notes On Writing Arguments

From *Writing Arguments* (1999-2007)

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Allyn & Bacon Publishing

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ENC 1101

Notes On Writing Arguments

**An Introduction**

*Principles of Argument*: "Core, Logical Structure, Accommodating Your Audience, Evidence, Logos, Ethos & Pathos"

Six types of argument essays are

Definition of argument

Causal argument

Resemblance of argument

Evaluation of argument

Proposal argument

Ethical argument

**Chapter 1**

**Argument:** not a fight or quarrel, nor does it imply anger. Argument is not a pro-con debate. Rather, argument should grow out of a pursuit of truth - that is looking at all sides of an issue and desiring to find the best solution (3).

Arguments can be explicit or implicit. **Explicit** argument directly states a claim and supports it with reasons and evidence. An **implicit** argument can be a poem or short story, a photograph or cartoon, or an autobiographical narrative. Both types of argument persuade their audiences of a certain point of view. An example of an implicit argument is Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* that argues for unionization of farm workers (4-5).

Argument requires justification of its claims. Two conditions must be met to call something an argument: 1) there must be two or more conflicting assertions and 2) the attempt to resolve the conflict through an appeal to reason. However, and effective argument must clarify and support the reasons presented (7).

**Argument is both a process and a product**. The *process* is the argument where two or more people seek the best solution to a question or problem. The *product* is the contributions from each party. During the process, argument seeks both truth and persuasion. By seeking both truth and persuasion two questions immediately come to mind:

1) What is the best solution to the problem at hand?

2) What reasons or evidence would best speak to the audience's values? (8-17)

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**Chapter 2**

**Reading Arguments:** *Seven Suggestions for Reading Arguments*

1. **Slow down:** Expert readers adjust their reading speed to the complexity of the text, quite often reading two or three times and marking in the margins
2. **Get the dictionary habit:** Mark unfamiliar words and look up their definitions
3. **Lose your highlighter/find your pen:** Before reaching for your highlighter, write in the margin why the passage is important. Using a highlighter makes for a passive reader.
4. **Reconstruct the rhetorical context:** Ask who wrote the passages/text, why and what the occasion was. By answering these questions, readers will be able to make sense of the writing.
5. **Explore your views on the text's subject before reading:** Make note of the title, scan the paragraphs' topic sentences to gain a sense of the writers' views and explore your own views. Then read more thoroughly, critically and pleasurably.
6. **Continued conversing with a text after reading:** After reading the text, ask yourself or journal the following questions.

What is the most significant question this essay raises?

What is the most important thing I learned from this essay?

What did I agree with the author about?

What did I disagree with the author about?

1. **Try "translating" difficult passages:** By summarizing difficult passages into the readers own words, readers are then forced to focus on precise meaning of the words and help readers to discover areas of confusion.

**Strategies for Reading Arguments**

1. Read as a believer.
2. Read as a doubter.
3. Seek out alternative views and analyze sources of disagreements to clarify why participants in the conversation disagree with each other.
4. Evaluate various positions.

*Strategy #1 reading as a believer:* This is what psychologist Carl Rogers calls empathetic listening. This requires the reader to see the situation from the author's point of view and temporarily adopt the author's belief and values, thus suspending any skepticism or biases.

The best way to read as a believer is to summarize the argument in your own words.

1. Read for general meaning first without judgment.
2. Read slowly a second time writing brief says or does statements for each paragraph.

Five categories are: definitional arguments, cause/consequences arguments, analogy/resemblance argument, evaluation arguments and proposal arguments.

*Strategy #2 reading as a doubter:* To read as a doubter, thereader must raise objections, ask questions, and express skepticism. In the margins, make notes for demanding proof, doubting evidence, and challenge the author's assumptions and values.

*Strategy #3 seeking out alternative views and analyzing sources of disagreement:* When analyzing an argument, the reader must evaluate both sides of the argument. Two categories make up the various points of view.

1. Disagreement about the facts or truth of the case.
2. Disagreement about underlying beliefs, values or assumptions.

A theoretical definition of a fact is the empirical data on which all parties agree. The disagreement arises over the way facts are interpreted. A second source of disagreement is in the differences of values, beliefs and assumptions. Some disagreements over assumptions arise from differences of opinion regarding definition of terms such as life, pornography, legal age, . . .

*Strategy #4 evaluating the conflicting positions:* When evaluating an argument or set of arguments, examine lines of reasoning that seem strong, that seem weak, facts that are disputed. Ask at what point the arguers disagree about values. Ask what additional research needs to be pursued and what questions are crucial.

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**Chapter 3 Writing Arguments**

**The following process is suggested by Ramage and Bean:**

*Stage 1 Starting Point:* Begin with a sense of a problem or issue. Sometimes writers already have taken a position.

*Stage 2 Exploration or rehearsal:* Explore the issue by reading, interviewing, and recall personal experiences. Identify disagreements about the facts as well as conflicts regarding values, assumptions and beliefs.

*Stage 3 Write a discovery draft:* Writers now shift from gathering data and exploring issues to drafting their findings without regard for potential audiences. Ideas are clarified for the writer as he or she notes the issues and findings.

*Stage 4 Revision or "see again:"* Writers now rethink the issue at hand and discuss their ideas with others. The revision now becomes audience focused with concern for clarity, coherence, unity and emphasis.

*Stage 5 Editing:* Polish the draft for precise wording, checking for clarity in each sentence and links between sentences. Check spelling, punctuation and standard grammar (41).

**Using Exploratory Writing with Two Sets of Exploratory Tasks**

**Set 1 Starting Points:**

*Task 1:* Make an inventory of issues that interest you. For example ask yourself the following questions:

What do my friends and I disagree about?

What do I think is wrong when…?

Or say (our campus, this city, my hometown, our state, the country) would be better off if…

Person X believes …, however, I believe …

When people discuss X, what do they disagree about?

*Task 2:* Choose several areas of "Controversy for Exploration."

1. What is my position on this issue and why?
2. What are the opposing or alternative positions on this issue?
3. Why do people disagree about this issue? Do they disagree about the underlying values, assumptions and beliefs?
4. What evidence do I need to find and what further research will be required to argue this position?

*Task 3:* Identify and explore issues that are problematic for you: Identify several issues which you are undecided and explore your current uncertainties.

*Task 4:* Deepen your response to readings. Why do writers disagree? Identify "hot spots" that evoke strong agreement, disagreement, or emotion. What new questions have been raised as you read? How did your thinking change? Where do you stand now and why? What would you say to one of the authors if you had a chance to meet him or her?

**Set 2 Exploration and Rehearsal:**

*Task 1:* Plan to address the selected issue in a one-sentence question.

*Task 2:* Explore the reason(s) for disagreement. Is there sufficient evidence to resolve the issue? What different values, beliefs, and assumptions do disputants hold to? Is there disagreement about key definitions?

*Task 3:* Do you have personal connection with the issue? If so, what is it? What effect, if any, does the issue have on your life?

*Task 4:* Decide your current position on the issue and write the major claim as a single declarative statement in response to the issue question you wrote in Task 1.

*Task 5:* Free write or map ideas thinking of possible reasons and evidence supporting your position. By gathering reasons and evidence, gaps in personal knowledge may surface. How can those gaps be filled in? Interview? Library research? Internet or Worldwide Web? Could additional data bolster the argument?

*Task 6:* Consider your argument from the perspective of neutral or hostile audiences and decide what assumptions, beliefs, and values they must hold to accept your agreement.

*Task 7:* Oppose your own position and make a case against it, thus creating counter-agreement.

*Task 8:* Decide the importance of the issue and its broader implications and consequences. The network related issues (this task helps with the introduction and conclusion).

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**Chapter 4**

**The Core of an Argument: A Claim with Reasons**

*Logos:* Refersprimarily to the internal consistency and clarity of the message and to the logic of its reasons with support.

*Ethos:* Refers to the credibility of the writer/speaker. Ethos is mostly a function of the tone and style of the message and the care with which alternate views are considered.

*Pathos:* Associated with emotional appeal - more to our audience's imaginative sympathies - their capacity to feel and see what the writer feels and sees.

Issue Questions versus Information Questions:

Ramage, Bean, and Johnson define issue questions as any question that is a controversial topic such as “labeling of biotech foods” or “racial profiling”. The difference between an information question and an issue question is an issue question can evolve into more questions; whereas, an information question is merely asking for facts. “Rhetoricians have traditionally distinguished between *explication*, which is writing that sets out to inform or explain, and *argumentation,* which sets out to change the reader’s mind.” (77).

Audiences can generally tell the difference by examining the purpose in relationship of the writer to his or her audience. For example, a teacher to leaner is one of explicating information. However, if the speaker or writer is that of advocate to a decision maker or jury, the question is then viewed as argumentation… trying to change the audience’s mind.

**Pseudo VS Rational Argument:**

*Pseudo Argument:* An argument degenerates when disputants are fanatically committed to their positions.

*Rational Argument:* Requires two additional factors to a featured issue question with alternative answers.

1. Reasonable participants who operate within the conventions of reasonable behavior.
2. Potentially sharable assumptions that can serve as a starting place or foundation for an argument.

A reasonable (or rational) argument assumes the possibility of growth and change; disputants may modify their view as they acknowledge strengths in an alternative view or weaknesses in their own. Participants must share common assumptions on which the agreement is grounded.

*Fanatical Believer:* Believes their claims are true because they say so period. Usually because of their narrow quirky reading of a text or faith in an author.

*Fanatical Skeptic:* Dismisses the possibility of proving anything. He or she demands ironclad demonstration of our claim's rightness. In the presence of fanatics (either end of the spectrum) genuine agreement is impossible. Therefore, **fanatical believers say this is the way it is, period, while in a pseudo argument, a fanatical skeptic says “you can’t prove anything, therefore, the argument is fallacious.**

*A Claim Supported By Reasons:* State your position in the form of a claim, which functions as the thesis statement of your argument. A claim should provide a one-sentence answer to the issue question.

*Reason:* A reason is a claim used to support another claim, usually linked to their claims with words like -- because, thus, since, consequently, and therefore...

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