

The Aims of Argument

A Text and Reader

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Understanding Argument

For some people, the word *argument* suggests conflict and heated debate; however, it has a much broader and more positive meaning, as the following pages will explain. College writing classes include argument as a key feature of critical thinking because most academic writing, by professors and students, takes the form of argument.

The perception of argument as verbal combat should not overshadow the positive role of reasoned argument in conducting human affairs. Through arguments based on good reasons and evidence, scientists advance our understanding of the world, citizens improve their communities, business leaders make decisions, and families work out compromises when interests conflict.

WHAT IS ARGUMENT?

The Aims of Argument is based on two related concepts: *argument* and *rhetoric*. We will define **argument** very simply, as *reasoned thinking*. The essence of an argument is a **claim**, which is also called a *thesis* because it is what an argument attempts to prove, and a *reason* that supports the claim. A **reason** is a *sentence telling why the claim should be accepted as true*. An example of the minimal

kernel of an argument would be Steven Johnson's case in favor of playing video games, as found in his book *Everything Bad Is Good for You*:

Claim: Video games are intellectually stimulating.

Reason: Video games force players to weigh evidence, analyze situations, and quickly make correct decisions.

To be convincing, however, arguments need much more: Reasons need to be supported with evidence, facts, examples, expert testimony, and so on. And claims usually need the support of more than one reason. However, the basic relationship of a claim and a reason underlies all self-aware rational thinking.

Besides a reasoned case, real-life arguments need another crucial ingredient: an audience. No one argues into the air; arguments are intended to influence others' beliefs, opinions, and behavior. For example, Steven Johnson wrote his book to convince critics of video games and TV shows that these forms of popular entertainment are not some kind of wasteland where brains go to rot. The need to win over a skeptical audience brings us to the other important concept of this book, rhetoric.

WHAT IS RHETORIC?

Like the word *argument*, *rhetoric* has a common negative meaning today, as it is often used to describe the empty promises and demagoguery common in political speeches. You hear people dismiss a candidate's words as "mere rhetoric." This meaning of *rhetoric* confers a judgment, and not a positive one. In this book, we define *rhetoric* in a positive way, as *the art of effective persuasion*.

In ancient Greece, where rhetoric was invented about 2,500 years ago, *rhetoric* referred to persuasive public speaking, as theirs was an oral culture. The Greeks had a goddess of persuasion (see Figure 1.1), and they respected the power of the spoken word to move people. Oral argument dominated their law courts, their governments and their public ceremonies and events.

Since the time of Aristotle, teachers of rhetoric have taught ways of reasoning well and arguing persuasively. The study of rhetoric, therefore, includes both what we have defined as reasoned thinking, the appeal through logic, and other ways of appealing to an audience. What are some other ways?

In addition to reasoning, which the Greeks called the appeal through *logos*, a speaker could persuade by presenting himself as a person of good, or ethical, character (*ethos*). The ancients put a high value on good character. Not just sounding ethical but being ethical contributed to a speaker's persuasive power. They also studied how to use emotional appeals (*pathos*) to move the audience. Obviously, emotional appeals can be abused, but they are, and have always been, a legitimate part of the art of rhetoric. Because the ancient Greeks made their arguments orally, the presentation or delivery of the speech was also part of the art of rhetoric for them. In written arguments today, we might see the style and written voice of the writer as an equivalent kind of appeal.

Defining Rhetoric

Rhetoric is the art of argument as responsible reasoning. The study of rhetoric develops self-conscious awareness of the principles and practices of responsible reasoning and effective arguing.

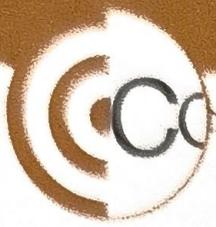
This old, highly valued meaning of rhetoric as oratory survived well into the nineteenth century. In Abraham Lincoln's day, Americans assembled by the thousands to hear speeches that went on for hours. For them, a good speech held the same level of interest as a big sporting event does for people today. In this book, we are interested primarily in various ways of using *written* argument, but the rhetorical tradition informs our understanding of all kinds of arguments.

Today, rhetoric has become so broadly defined as to include almost any kind of communication or symbol that has the potential to influence people.



Figure 1.1

Peitho, the goddess of persuasion, was often involved in seductions and love affairs. On this piece (a detail from a terra-cotta kylix, c. 410 BCE), Peitho, the figure on the left, gives advice to a dejected-looking woman, identified as Demonassa. To the right, Eros, the god of love, stands with his hand on Demonassa's shoulder, suggesting the nature of this advice.



Defining Responsible Reasoning

Argument as responsible reasoning means

- Defending *not the first position* you might take on an issue *but the best position*, determined through open-minded inquiry
- Providing reasons for holding that position that can earn the respect of an audience

A classic textbook, *The Rhetoric of Popular Culture*, by Barry Brummett of the University of Texas, argues that almost anything in popular culture, from blue jeans to hairstyles to shopping malls, can be rhetorical. He means that anything we find meaningful has the potential to influence us. This is an interesting view of the power of rhetoric; however, in this book we will focus on rhetoric and reasoned thinking in purposefully crafted arguments, whether written, spoken, or visual.

AN EXAMPLE OF ARGUMENT

Most books are long arguments, containing many smaller arguments, such as the passage below, which is excerpted from Steven Johnson's book on popular culture, *Everything Bad Is Good for You*. In this excerpt Johnson anticipates that his audience might associate video games with stupid and socially unacceptable content. He claims that the content is not relevant to the educational value of the game. As you read, consider how he uses reasoning and other rhetorical appeals to persuade readers to see the value of video games.

From *Everything Bad Is Good for You*

STEVEN JOHNSON

1 De-emphasizing the content of game culture shouldn't be seen as a cop-out. We ignore the content of many activities that are widely considered to be good for the brain or the body. No one complains about the simplistic, militaristic plot of chess games. ("It always ends the same way!") We teach algebra to children knowing full well that the day they leave the classroom, ninety-nine percent of those kids will never again directly employ their algebraic skills. Learning algebra isn't about acquiring a specific tool; it's about building up a mental muscle that will come in handy elsewhere. You don't go to the gym because you're interested in learning how to operate a Stairmaster; you go to the gym because operating a Stairmaster does something laudable to your body, the benefits of which you enjoy the many hours of the week you're not on a Stairmaster.

- 2 So it is with games. It's not *what* you're thinking about when you're playing a game, it's the *way* you're thinking that matters. The distinction is not exclusive to games, of course. Here's John Dewey, in his book *Experience and Education*: "Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only that particular thing he is studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned. For these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the point, or claim, Johnson is attempting to get his readers to accept?
2. What reason does he give to support this claim? What evidence supports the reason?
3. Besides the reason and evidence, do you see any other kind of rhetorical appeals operating in this passage?
4. Do you find this argument convincing? Why or why not?

ARGUING RESPONSIBLY

By now it has probably occurred to you that argument is something that everyone does all the time. After all, we are usually expected to offer reasons for our opinions, such as why we think Lady Gaga is a great performing artist or a shallow publicity stunt, or whether the Red candidate or the Blue one would make a better governor. In addition to making our own arguments, we hear them all the time, from the candidates who want our vote, from businesses who want our dollar, from friends who want us to think the way they do on an issue. The point to remember is that the intelligent person is one who can distinguish good arguments from bad ones—whether he or she agrees with the argument or not.

In fact, responsible argument is not a one-way street, as Walter Lippmann said in his classic 1939 essay "The Indispensable Opposition." He wanted to correct the common notion that freedom of speech simply means that all opinions can be expressed. Lippmann calls the opposition "indispensable" because a free society depends not only on the right of free speech but also on the responsibility to actually listen to (and not just tolerate), those with opposing views. In Lippmann's words, "If we truly wish to understand why freedom is necessary in a civilized society, we must begin by realizing that, because freedom of discussion improves our own opinions, the liberties of other men are our own vital necessity."

Too often people do not think about whether an argument shows good reasoning. People tend to approve of arguments that align with their opinions and dismiss those that do not. They also tend to be convinced by arguments that appeal to their fears, their egos, their family's political views, and so on. In this book, we will use the term **responsible argument** to distinguish those that show responsible reasoning from those that show poor, or careless, reasoning.



CONCEPT CLOSE-UP

Four Criteria of Responsible Reasoning

RESPONSIBLE REASONERS ARE WELL-INFORMED

Their opinions develop out of knowledge and are supported by reliable and current evidence.

RESPONSIBLE REASONERS ARE SELF-CRITICAL AND OPEN TO CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM FROM OTHERS

They balance their passionate attachment to their opinions with willingness to evaluate and test them against differing opinions, acknowledge when good points are made against their opinions, and even, when presented with good reasons for doing so, change their minds.

RESPONSIBLE REASONERS ARGUE WITH THEIR AUDIENCES OR READERS IN MIND

They make a sincere effort to understand and connect with other people and other points of view because they do not see differences of opinion as obstacles to their own point of view.

RESPONSIBLE REASONERS KNOW THEIR ARGUMENTS' CONTEXTS

They recognize that what we argue about now was argued about in the past and will be argued about in the future, that our contributions to these ongoing conversations are influenced by who we are, what made us who we are, where we are, what is going on around us.

Responsible arguments can be forceful but never are rude or insult the opposition. More than half of Americans today disapprove of Congress because the members on both sides of the aisle would rather demonize the opposition than listen to each other's arguments and reason together to pass legislation. The media, especially talk radio, is full of irresponsible arguments aimed at stirring up the speakers' followers. These are fake arguments, not even intended to change opponents' thinking.

FOUR CRITERIA OF RESPONSIBLE REASONING

If you read the letters to the editor in almost any daily newspaper, you will see many short arguments by citizens. You might notice that some of them sound more intelligent than others. Whether you agree or disagree with the author's point, you may find yourself respecting some of the letters and dismissing others as laughable or at least not deserving any serious consideration. In this book, we will stress qualities of arguments that deserve respect. Such arguments display what we call responsible reasoning. Some criteria, or standards, for responsible reasoning are listed below.

Responsible Reasoning Is Well Informed

To argue responsibly, a person must support his or her opinions with reliable and current evidence. If the author has not made any effort to dig up and include some specific knowledge on the topic, the reader will dismiss the argument as having no weight or force.

You may have noticed that people have opinions about all sorts of things, including subjects they know little or nothing about. The general human tendency is to have the strongest opinions on matters about which we know the least. Ignorance and inflexibility go together because it is easy to form an opinion when few or none of the facts get in the way and people can just assert their prejudices. Conversely, the more we know about most topics, the harder it is to be dogmatic. We find ourselves changing or at least refining our opinions more or less continuously as we gain more knowledge and learn from well-argued opposing views.

Responsible Reasoning Is Open to Constructive Criticism from Others

We have opinions about all sorts of things that do not matter much to us, but we also have opinions in which we are heavily invested, sometimes to the point that our whole sense of reality, right and wrong, good and bad—our very sense of ourselves—is tied up in them. These opinions we defend passionately.

On this count, popular argumentation and responsible reasoning are alike. It is not a fault to be passionate about our convictions. A crucial difference, however, separates the fanatic's argument from that of the responsible person. The fanatic is all passion; the responsible person is willing to step back and ask himself or herself, "I may have believed this for as long as I can remember, but is this conviction really justified? Do the facts support it? When I think it through, does it really make sense? Can I make a coherent and consistent argument for it?" These are questions that do not concern the fanatic and are seldom posed in the popular argumentation we hear on talk radio or TV.

In practical terms, being open to well-intended criticism boils down to this: the ability to change our minds when good reasons to do so are presented. In popular argumentation, changing one's mind can be taken as a weakness, as being wishy-washy, and so people tend to go on advocating what they believe, regardless of what anyone else says. But there is nothing wishywashy about confronting the facts and realizing that our point of view is not supported by available evidence. In such a case, changing one's mind is a sign of intelligence and responsible reasoning.

Responsible Reasoning Considers the Audience

Nothing drains energy from an argument more than the feeling that it will accomplish nothing. As one student put it, "Why bother? People just go on thinking what they want to." This attitude is understandable. Popular, undisciplined argument often does seem futile: Minds are not changed; no progress

is made; it is doubtful that anyone learned anything. Sometimes the opposing positions only harden, and the people involved are more at odds than before.

Why does this happen so often? One reason is that nobody is listening to anyone else. We tend to hear only our own voice and see only from our own point of view. But there is another reason: The people making the arguments have made no effort to reach their audience. This is the other side of the coin of not listening: When we do not take other points of view seriously, we cannot make our points of view appealing to those who do not already share them.

To argue persuasively, we have to respect the opposition, see them—rather than others on our own side—as the audience for our arguments. We have to write in ways that will not turn off the very people whose minds we want to change. Because we have to imagine this audience as our readers, *adapting to the audience* is the biggest challenge of argument.

Responsible Reasoning Understands an Argument's Contexts

All arguments are part of an ongoing conversation, not the isolated events they seem to be in the news. Part of being well-informed means knowing something about the history of an argument. An argument's history tells us how and why people's viewpoints formed and gives us a context for our own views. Knowing context means knowing the current range of opinion on an issue. We have to know what other people are saying to make our own reasoning relevant. To some extent, we need to see into the future of an argument, recognizing the cutting-edge issues that people might argue about in the future. In sum, knowing the past, present, and future of arguments on an issue helps ensure that we are making arguments on issues that matter and will continue to matter.

READING

As citizens, we all have a stake in the quality of arguments in the public arena, whether in newspapers, talk shows, political speeches, or, on a more personal level, class discussions, lunch-table debates, and campus forums. As a college student, you may be concerned about how debates on public policy are shaping the world you are inheriting. In this opinion column from a student newspaper, Vanderbilt University student Kelby Carlson worries that responsible reasoning is in decline.

Fighting Words: Why Our Public Discourse Must Change

KELBY CARLSON

Americans have always loved to argue. From our country's founding, debates over political principles, the nature of government, and the relation between liberty and equality have been vigorously and vociferously argued. The most famous debates of

our country's history were perhaps the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1860. In some (though only some) respects, it was a time quite like our own: Americans were polarized (over, obviously, the nature of slavery) and the rapidly deteriorating relations between Northern and Southern states (with some secession and more yet to come) caused no end of consternation. A quick study of those debates, however, reveals that both candidates for the presidency in 1860 had rhetorical skills that few today can match: their debate points sound like they've been ripped straight from a political treatise.

2 Today's landscape of argument is quite different. Technology has radically re-shaped the ways in which discourse is connected in public life. Television transformed a word-oriented culture into one more focused on images; the recent advent of social media, by contrast, brought words back—and made the process of argument more public than ever before. In the wake of these changes lies a landscape of sound bite polemic and rhetorical politics desperately in need of re-appraisal. I'd like to offer a case in point (with which readers will likely be quite familiar) and a couple of suggestions on where things went wrong and how to chart a new course.

3 In early February [2012], a new amendment to health care legislation began the process of working its way through Congress. This amendment modified employer requirements and would mandate that private institutions include medical contraceptives in their health care plans. Almost immediately, an outcry arose among private religious institutions, spearheaded by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Furthered by Rick Santorum's opposition to the amendment, an increasing groundswell of public opinion developed on both sides of the debate. Later that month, Sandra Fluke, a first-year law student at Georgetown University, testified before the Senate regarding the legislation and made a case for compliance (particularly at schools).

4 This may not have been national news if it were not for a number of incendiary comments by well-known talk-radio kingpin Rush Limbaugh. In his comments, Limbaugh called Fluke a "slut" and a "prostitute" and insinuated that Fluke should be required to video-tape herself having sex for Limbaugh (and those like him) to watch. This led to almost immediate outrage, with many of Limbaugh's sponsors quickly pulling their advertisements and public opinion supporting the sponsors' decisions.

5 This is a case-in-point of the kind of public discourse we see regarding both important and unimportant issues, and showcases the good and the bad in American public life. First, the bad: Limbaugh's comments were inappropriate and offensive on every level imaginable. From publicly shaming Ms. Fluke to more generally placing sexual objectification on women, his acidic remarks reveal deep problems with the way many in America see sex, gender, and their intersections with politics, regardless of what anyone believes about this specific legislation. But, there is a glimmer of hope in this situation: Social media allowed the public instantly and massively to pressure sponsors to respond. Even ten years ago, a mass reaction this visible and immediate would not have been possible.

6 If I were more cynical, I could list dozens of examples from both left and right, from inappropriately sexualized attacks to caricatures that would make most cartoonists blush. But a more important question is: How did we get here?

7 In his trenchant and prophetic book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neal Postman dissects the last century of cultural changes, backed by technology. Postman's basic thesis is that Western culture became strongly word-oriented after the invention of the printing press. Along with an orientation around words came a love for rationality, tempered argument and civility.

8 Television completely changed the way discourse was conducted. It moved culture in a visual direction, focusing on a successive series of rapid images. This appealed to different centers of the human mind, concentrating more on instinct and emotions and leading to what Postman calls a culture of the sound bite. This new need for fast, punchy delivery—style over substance—leaked into the culture of speech and print. Now, the ability to fire a sarcastic barb—no matter how hurtful or unnecessary—is seemingly more prized than the ability to construct a rational argument.

9 As explored above, social media has had both negative and positive effects on this trend. While it has allowed more participation in political action and protest, sites like Facebook—with its constant updates, pictures, and incomplete life snapshots—do as much to encourage the current sound bite culture as suppress it. If a cultural dominance of style and image over substance and dialogue has combined with political uncertainty and unrest, is it any wonder our public discourse appears to be in such a shambles?

10 What is the solution? Quite frankly, there is no simple answer to that question. The technology we have is affecting our culture in ways that are still difficult to predict. The only advice I can offer that I think has any semblance of hope is not political, and not cultural. It is personal. Those who communicate in public forums must seek to reaffirm kindness and respect. This means more than just putting on a nice face. It means making a genuine attempt at dialogue with those with whom we disagree. It means assuming benevolent, rather than malicious, motivations of those with whom we differ. It means not resorting to insults, objectification, and personal attacks, but instead focusing on concrete issues and ways to solve them.

11 No one person can single-handedly solve the problem of a dominantly polemical and aggressive public discourse. Instead, each one of us—in our writing, in our speech and in our actions—must do what we can to set an example of how real debate must happen.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Carlson gives evidence of the decline in public discourse by summarizing an incident in which a talk radio host crossed the line of decency by failing to respect a person whose ideas differed from his and his listeners'. Why is it important to maintain civility toward those with whom you disagree?
2. What influences does Carlson see as contributing to a decline in public discourse, especially the decline in the quality of arguments? Do you agree? Can you think of other influences?

3. What can you as a college student, a citizen, and a member of various communities do to contribute to a solution to the problem of “fighting words” dominating Americans’ idea of argument?

WHAT ARE THE AIMS OF ARGUMENT?

The heart of this book is Part Two, the section titled “The Aims of Argument.” In conceiving this book, we worked from one basic premise: Responsible reasoners do not argue just to argue; rather, they use argument to accomplish something: *to inquire* into a question, problem, or issue (commonly part of the research process); *to convince* their readers to assent to an opinion, or claim; *to persuade* readers to take action, such as buying a product or voting for a candidate; and *to mediate* conflict, as in labor disputes, divorce proceedings, and so on.

Below, we explain each of these aims in more detail.

Arguing to Inquire

Arguing to **inquire** is using reasoning to determine the best position on an issue. We open the “Aims” section with **inquiry** because responsible reasoning is not a matter of defending what we already believe but of questioning it. Arguing to inquire helps us form opinions, question opinions we already have, and reason our way through conflicts or contradictions in other people’s arguments on a topic. Inquiry is open-minded, and it requires that we make an effort to find out what people who disagree think and why.

The ancient Greeks called argument as inquiry *dialectic*; today we might think of it as **dialogue** or serious conversation. There is nothing confrontational about such conversations. We have them with friends, family, and colleagues, even with ourselves. We have these conversations in writing too, as we make notations in the margins of the arguments we read.

Inquiry centers on questions and involves some legwork to answer them—finding the facts, doing research. This is true whether you are inquiring into what car to buy, what major to choose in college, what candidate to vote for, or what policy our government should pursue on any given issue.

Arguing to Convince

The goal of inquiry is to reach some kind of conclusion on an issue. Let’s call this conclusion a **conviction** and define it as “an earned opinion, achieved through careful thought, research, and discussion.” Once we arrive at a conviction, we usually want others to share it. The aim of further argument is to secure the assent of people who do not share our conviction (or who do not share it fully).

Argument to **convince** centers on making a case, which means offering reasons and evidence in support of our opinion. Arguments to convince are all around us. In college, we find them in scholarly and professional writing.

In everyday life, we find arguments to convince in editorials, courtrooms, and political speeches. Whenever we encounter an opinion supported by reasons and asking us to agree, we are dealing with arguing to convince.

Arguing to Persuade

Like convincing, persuasion attempts to earn agreement, but it wants more. **Persuasion** attempts to influence not just thinking but also behavior. An advertisement for Mercedes-Benz aims to convince us not only that the company makes a high-quality car but also that we should go out and buy one. A Sunday sermon asks for more than agreement with some interpretation of a biblical passage; the minister wants the congregation to live according to its message. Persuasion asks us to do something—spend money, give money, join a demonstration, recycle, vote, enlist, acquit. Because we do not always act on our convictions, persuasion cannot rely on reasoning alone. It must appeal in broader, deeper ways.

Persuasion appeals to readers' emotions. It tells stories about individual cases of hardship that move us to pity. It often uses photographs, as when charities confront us with pictures of poverty or suffering. Persuasion uses many of the devices of poetry, such as patterns of sound, repetitions, metaphors, and similes to arouse a desired emotion in the audience.

Persuasion also relies on the personality of the writer to an even greater degree than does convincing. The persuasive writer attempts to represent something higher or larger than him- or herself—some ideal with which the reader would like to be associated. For example, a war veteran and hero like Senator John McCain naturally brings patriotism to the table when he makes a speech.

Arguing to Mediate

By the time we find ourselves in a situation where our aim is **mediation**, we will have already attempted to convince an opponent to settle a conflict or dispute our way. Our opponent will have done the same. Yet neither side has secured the assent of the other, and “agreeing to disagree” is not a practical solution because the participants must decide what to do.

In most instances of mediation, the parties involved try to work out the conflict themselves because they have some relationship they wish to preserve—as employer and employee, business partners, family members, neighbors, even coauthors of an argument textbook. Common differences requiring mediation include the amount of a raise and the terms of a contract. In private life, mediation helps roommates live together and families decide on everything from budgets to vacation destinations.

Just like other aims of argument, arguing to mediate requires sound logic and the clear presentation of positions and reasons. However, mediation challenges our interpersonal skills more than do the other aims. Each side must listen closely to understand not just the other's case but also the emotional commitments and underlying values. When mediation works, the opposing



Comparing the Aims of Argument

The aims of argument have much in common. For example, besides sharing argument, they all tend to draw on sources of knowledge (research) and to deal with controversial issues. But the aims also differ from one another, mainly in terms of purpose, audience, situation, and method, as summarized here and on the inside back cover.

	Purpose	Audience	Situation	Method
Inquiry	Seeks truth	Oneself, friends, and colleagues	Informal; a dialogue	Questions
Convincing	Seeks assent to a thesis	Less intimate; wants careful reasoning	More formal; a monologue	Case-making
Persuading	Seeks action	More broadly public, less academic	Pressing need for a decision	Appeals to reason and emotions
Mediating	Seeks consensus	Polarized by differences	Need to cooperate, preserve relations	"Give-and-take"

We offer this chart as a general guide to the aims of argument. Think of it as the big picture you can always return to as you work your way through Part Two, which deals with each of the aims in detail.

sides begin to converge. Exchanging viewpoints and information and building empathy enable all parties to make concessions, to loosen their hold on their original positions, and finally to reach consensus—or at least a resolution that all participants find satisfactory.