The Aims of Argument

A Text and Reader

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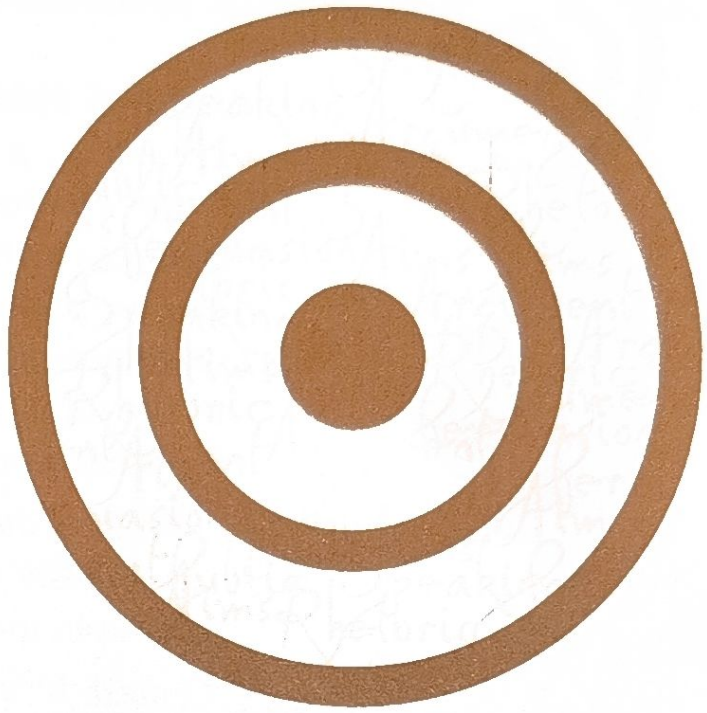

CHAPTER 4

Critiquing an Argument

Chapter 2 presented methods for reading an argument critically, and Chapter 3 presented a method for analyzing one. This chapter shows how you can apply critical reading and analysis to write a critique of an argument.

WHAT IS A CRITIQUE?

A **critique** is a written evaluation of some kind of performance. Examples of this genre, or kind of writing, are reviews, such as book or concert reviews, and evaluations, such as the terminal comments a teacher might write at the end of a paper when assigning a grade. We encounter critiques in "Letters to the Editor" in newspapers, in magazines that include reader responses to articles in previous issues, and in blogs devoted to some controversial issue or cause. Some, but not all, comments on blog posts are critiques.

A critique is not just a response but a close look at the quality of an argument someone else has made. In a critique, the writer explains what deserves respect in the argument and what does not—and why. It is not an attack on someone's argument, but rather a rational assessment, part of a search for truth.

Context and Critique

Most written arguments are "stand-alone" texts—such as an opinion column in a newspaper or online or an article in a magazine or on a website. However, they are not as isolated as they seem. Authors create **context**, a background against which they want you to see their argument—current events, an ongoing debate about the topic, and so on.

Context *always* matters for the following reasons:

- *Context is the key to understanding an argument.* For example, increasing the availability of loans for college students makes sense within the context of the rapid increase of higher education costs.
- *Context is the key to understanding why people disagree.* Those who favor increasing loans often see the issue in the context of opportunity, making college possible for modest-income students. Those who oppose it often see loans in the context of too much personal debt.
- *Context is the key to understanding your response.* If you or your family cannot afford college and you have taken full advantage of other forms of aid, loans may be very appealing.

WHY CRITIQUE AN ARGUMENT?

Every day, you will hear or read the arguments of other people, in conversation, in books and magazines, on television, radio, and the Net, in business meetings and community gatherings. Short of becoming a hermit, there is no way to avoid arguments designed to influence what you think and do. In college, you should sharpen your abilities to judge good from bad reasoning, even when you agree with the writer's position.

HOW A CRITIQUE DIFFERS FROM A REACTION

You may have noticed that most people merely react to arguments. They just agree or disagree, usually with anger and closed minds rather than any serious consideration of other views. A good example is what you hear on talk radio: Listeners call in to voice opinions on topics from political issues to the performance of their local sports team. Many people tune out such exchanges because they feel nothing is accomplished.

Why does public discussion often seem pointless? The problem is not in exchanging opinions. Saying what we think gets things off our chest. Finding out what other people think is stimulating. The problem is that public discussion tends to *stop* at exchanging opinions and reacting to them. People seldom get to the next level: real critique of each other's arguments.

Critical thinking is the difference between reacting and critiquing. To think critically, you need to step back and judge the quality of the argument, whether

you agree with it or not. Keep in mind that a critique can point out strengths as well as weaknesses in an argument, but the key to writing a good critique is to take an analytical stance or position.

People use the term *critical distance* to describe the space between a first reaction, which may be hot, and a cooler, more studied analysis. You can use some of the analytical strategies discussed below to open up critical distance and find good points to make in a critique of an argument.

Strategies for Critiquing Arguments

A critique requires analysis, so you will want to apply the strategies discussed in Chapter 2, on reading arguments critically, and Chapter 3, on analyzing arguments using the Toulmin method.

Begin by reading analytically and marking up the text of the argument with annotations that note where the author has stated his or her claim, or thesis. That statement may be explicit, or you may have to read between the lines to extract it for close examination. Consider whether you can think of exceptions to the claim and whether it applies in some circumstances but not all.

Consider key terms in the claim, in the reasons, and in background material that sets up the issue. How has the author defined important words? Or have some words been left vague, perhaps deliberately?

Next, ask what reasons and evidence the writer gives to convince readers that they should accept the claim as true. An argument may have just one reason or several, and for each reason, some further support should be offered in the form of specific facts or expert opinion. Do you see much specific evidence? Is it anecdotal, just a few examples from the writer's experiences, or has the writer found or done serious research to make a solid argument?

Most arguments are based on some kind of underlying beliefs or assumptions that can be questioned. In the Toulmin scheme, we called these assumptions *warrants*. To find warrants or assumptions, ask yourself, "In order to accept this reason as true, what prior belief would I have to hold?" For example, an argument showing that a seawall can protect homes along the shore of a barrier island is based on the assumption that barrier islands should be developed for commercial and residential use. Consider what the author has assumed that may or may not be true.

Another important question to consider in a critique of an argument is this: What will happen if everyone agrees with the author's position and what he or she is arguing for prevails? In other words, what are the implications of the argument? Sometimes even a policy that will bring about some positive results will have collateral or unplanned consequences. Project the situation into the future and imagine what will happen if the author has failed to anticipate some problems down the road.

Consider the context of the argument as you read. How have the author's background, profession, personal biographical experiences, or other formative forces influenced his or her perspective on the topic? Consider also the

context of the topic itself: What might have brought this topic to the author's attention? Has it been in the news? Consider what other people are saying on the issue, and why. Arguments do not exist in a vacuum; they are part of ongoing conversations situated in time and place.

Finally, if you disagree with the argument or find the reasoning weak, ask yourself what counterarguments you might offer that would be more valid and convincing to readers. Be sure that you can support any counterarguments with evidence.

The reading that follows shows how one writer critiqued the argument of a major figure in debates about the social and psychological effects of digital media. We have annotated it to show how the critic, Tom Stafford, asked some of the questions described above in his critique.

Stafford's article is a book review, a common genre for critiques of nonfiction books that argue a position on a debatable topic. The book being reviewed is by Sherry Turkle, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who argues that even though technology is connecting us on one level, it is actually getting in the way of our ability to form close human relationships. Stafford, the author of the review, is a lecturer in psychology and cognitive science at the University of Sheffield, in England. The review appeared on his blog *idiolect* (http://idiolect.org.uk/notes/).

Stafford writes his critique in first person and in a humorous style, beginning with this cautionary note to his readers. This style is appropriate for the medium in which the review appeared, a personal blog.

Stafford is reacting here rather than critiquing; however, he quickly moves into thinking critically about Turkle's evidence

Why Sherry Turkle Is So Wrong

TOM STAFFORD

(Attention conservation notice: a rambling 1800 word book review in which I am rude about Sherry Turkle and psychoanalysis, and I tell you how to think properly about the psychology of technology)

This book annoyed me so much I wasn't sure at page 12 if I could manage the other 293. In the end I read the introduction and the conclusion, skimming the rest. Turkle's argument is interesting and important[;] I just couldn't face the supposed evidence she announced she was going to bring out in the body of the book.

Psychoanalysts are conspiracy theorists of the soul, and nowhere is that clearer than in Turkle's reasoning about technology. Page after page of anecdotes are used to introduce the idea that communications technologies such as email, [F]acebook and Twitter offer an illusion of intimacy, but in fact drive us into a new solitude. This might be true, it's an important idea to entertain, but pause for a moment to think how you would establish if it really was the case or not.

This is the claim, or main part of the critique. Stafford qualifies his claim by saying that the argument could be worth making but is flawed because of weak evidence.

Stafford considers context for Turkle's argument here; psychoanalysis is one of Turkle's research interests.

Anecdotes, which are often hearsay or personal observations, may not be truly representative. Anecdotal evidence less convincing than scientific studies.

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Stafford summarizes Turkle's claim.

Stafford shows the need to think critically about Turkle's argument.

4 For Turkle, the evidence is all around, discerned by her keen psychoanalytically-trained psychologist's eye. A young woman chats to her grandmother on [S]kype for an hour a week—[a] touching example of a relationship deepened and sustained? No! Unbeknownst to the grandmother the young woman uses that hour to catch up on her emails, leaving her unsatisfied with the [S]kype conversation, with vague feelings of guilt and a failure to connect. Turkle combines stories like these of people she's met with sweeping generalisations about how "we" feel—increasingly disconnected, overwhelmed and unable to tell where the boundary between work and home life is. Text messages, originally a substitute of the phone call you couldn't make, "very quickly . . . became the connection of choice" she announces. Really? For everyone?

Stafford gives examples of Turkle's evidence to show why he does not accept it as convincing.

5 Throughout Turkle seems to assume that this new age of communications technology has accelerated us into an age of dislocation and disconnection. This may be so, but a few anecdotes about people's unsatisfactory relationships and yearning for deeper intimacy and authenticity don't establish this. Here is the news: it was ever so. Now people wonder if their [F]acebook friends are true friends[;] previously we wondered if our friends on the team, or in the pub, were our true friends. Now we wish for romantic relationships without betrayal and inconvenience[;] previously this is what we wished for too. Ambiguity, failure and fear of disconnection are not a novel part of online relationships[.T]hey are part of the human condition and it is mighty irksome that Turkle assumes the novelty of these things. She is seeing what she wants to see in the world around her. There is also an inherent conservatism in her assumption that things were better before this anarchy of technology was loosed upon the world, the assumption that not only were things better before, but that this was the way they were "supposed to be[."] The comic thing is that her historical benchmark is just as arbitrary—as if phone calls were a good and proper means of communication, a ceremony of innocence drowned by the destructive forces of text messaging and [S]kype. When the phone was invented there was a moral panic about what this technology would do for relationships, the same as there was a moral panic when printed books became widespread. There's no reason why we shouldn't invent a new form of communication, such as the text message, and it come to fill a niche in the ecology of how we relate to each other. People haven't stopped making phone calls[;] they have augmented the way they communicate with text messages, not substituted texting for phoning.

Critiques look at the assumptions behind an argument. Stafford says that Turkle is assuming effects of technology rather than proving them.

6 Reading the book, it is hard to shake the impression that everything Turkle says is in a slightly dismayed and hysterical tones[:] "Oh no! The kids are using text messaging" "Oh no! People underestimate the distracting effect of checking their email!" "Oh no! The kids find face to face conversations threatening, the little dears can't live in the real world[."]

A critique can include observations of ethical or emotional appeals, not logical appeals only.

7 Again: it was ever so. And of course, with anything new, you can always find some genuinely [misled] and bewildered people. Turkle has some striking examples of people who wish for relationships—both romantic and sexual—with robots. This shows, she says, that we are in the "robotic moment[."] It is not that robots are ready for our desires, but that our desires are now ready for the idea for intimacy with robots. A young woman yearns for a robot lover, wanting to trade her human boyfriend for a "no risk relationship"; an elderly woman saying that her robot dog "won't die suddenly and abandon you and make you very sad"; the genuinely astounding

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argument of David Levy's "Love and Sex with Robots" which proposes that soon we'll be fighting for the right to marry robots in the same way we fought for the right to marry people of the same sex. Are we only discussing these possibilities, asks Turkle, because we are failing each other in human relationships?

8 The impression I get is of a very earnest anthropologist, speaking to the young people of a alien tribe, ready to be shocked and titillated by their revelations. Do the people speaking to Turkle really believe what they say, or are they egged on by her credulity, just as the tribespeople compete to tell the anthropologist ever more outrageous things? Yes, yes I would prefer a robot lover. Yes, yes, real men are a disappointment—irritating, changeable—and the simulation of intimacy would be better than a risk on authentic intimacy.

9 My problem is not that people are seeking to escape human frailty and ambiguity with robots, but that Turkle seems to assume that there was ever a time when some people didn't try to escape human frailty and ambiguity. It isn't that we are newly dissatisfied with our relationships, that we are newly struggling for authenticity. Rather it is that the old struggle has found a new form, that the eternal uncertainties we have of ourselves and each other are given a new light by technology.

A critique acknowledges what is both good and bad in an argument. He points out that a concern over human relationships "ramping down" is a valid point, but placing the blame on technology is a faulty assumption.

10 Turkle has an important point disguised by a boring pessimism. "Relationships with robots are ramping up; relationships with people are ramping down"; she says, "of every technology, we must ask, Does it serve our human purposes?" This later point is vitally important. The idea that Turkle has proven that human relationships are "ramping down" due to the current communications technology is the distraction. This is just a generational cry of despair, common to every age, when one age group realise they don't understand or don't like how their children behave.

11 True, we must ask how technology can be built to enhance our relationships, and [whether] true intimacy and authenticity are endangered, but it was always so and Turkle's speculations of doom help only to muddy the waters.

This paragraph returns to the question of the author's context; what does she bring to the topic that causes her to interpret the evidence in such a negative way?

12 I find myself wondering why Turkle has this pervasive pessimism about our ability to sensibly navigate these new technologies. Perhaps, it is related to the stance she seems to adopt to the characters that populate her anecdotes, which is of subjects under her microscope, an amorphous mass of "them" rather than as unique individuals with stories and weaknesses just like all of us. This may just be my knee-jerk dislike of psychoanalysts but her stance towards these characters in her argument always felt condescending and arrogant, as if she alone possessed the objective stance, as if only she, with her psychoanalytic training, was expert enough to discern the loneliness and feel what they themselves didn't know they felt. Again, the tone reminded me of the naive anthropologist—aren't they strange?! Isn't their confusion fascinating?!

13 I would have had more faith in Turkle's reasoning if she talked more about her experience, rather than relating [these] anecdotes from people she met at conferences and at Parisian dinner parties.

This paragraph offers a counterargument to Turkle's assumption that humans related more directly before the new technology.

14 Turkle's underlying assumption is that technology is a thing separate from, or gets in between, authentic relationships. (There's a comparison to those who diagnose an addiction to the internet, as if the internet were a substance, when it is just a medium). In fact, technology is part of relationships because it is part of our minds (see Andy Clark's book Natural Born Cyborgs for an exploration of this idea). Technology cannot get in the way of some kind of natural detection of reality because we never have direct

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contact with reality—it is always mediated by culture, history, language, expectations, and the whole architecture of our minds for understanding the world. As every psychologist should know, the idea of "virtual reality" is a misnomer because reality has always been virtual. A concrete example of this confusion is when Turkle assumes that she (alone) can tell the real (flesh and blood) encounters from the fake (technologically mediated) encounters. "The ties we form through the internet are not, in the end, the ties that bind[,]" she says solemnly. This is a ridiculous generalisation, and must be confusing to all those who met over the internet, or have had relationships deepened because of the internet. Can you imagine how ridiculous Turkle would sound if she'd made such a generalisation about another medium. "The ties formed through writing are not the ties that bind[."] "The ties formed by those speaking French are not the ties that bind[."] Nonsense! Again Turkle has been distracted by her pessimism and her conservatism. The problem of human bonds is not a new one[;] we've always struggled to find rapprochement with each other[;] the internet doesn't change that. It does give the problem interesting new dimensions, and I've no doubt that we'll struggle collectively with these new dimensions for decades, but I don't see Turkle doing anything to make clear the outlines of the problem or advance any solutions.

15 New technology is easy to think about, partly because the novel always stands out against the background of the old, and partly because it is easier to think about the material aspects of things, and the material aspects of technology can be ubiquitous (like text messages and email) or particularly entrancing (like robots). But let me give an alternative vision to Turkle's Cassandra wail. Rather than technology, a far more real threat to intimacy and authenticity in the modern world is the continuous parade of advertising which tries to hock material goods with the promise that they can give access to transcendent values. Cars which give freedom, cameras which give friendship, diamonds that give love and clothes that give confidence. Here is a cultural force, with a massive budget and the active intention to make us dissatisfied with our possessions, our lifestyles, our bodies and our relationships. How about we worry a bit more about that, and less about the essentially democratic technologies of communication.

Cassandra was a figure in Greek mythology who had powers to predict the future.

Stafford offers a counterargument to show a better cause of "ramping down" of human relationships today

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Any reader of this critique who has not read Turkle's book will have to depend on Stafford's summary of Turkle's argument to judge the fairness of the critique. Do you think Stafford gives enough examples to show that Turkle's evidence is not representative of people's experiences with technology? Have you observed evidence to support Turkle's point that technology is causing a breakdown in real human interaction?
2. Do you share the assumption that human relationships were more genuine at some earlier point in time, such as in the generation before yours? Why or why not?
3. What do you think of Stafford's argument about advertising's effects on human relationships, in the final paragraph? What is his point? What messages does advertising send us that could explain a "ramping down" of human relationships?

ACTIVITY: Finding Arguments to Critique

Choose some short arguments from the op-ed pages or letters to the editor of your local newspaper or from an online news and opinion source. Examine the opinions and cases made to convince readers of the author's position. Using our list of strategies on pp. 53–54 and the Best Practices Box on page 62, be ready to share one of the arguments with the class. Find at least two points that you would make if you were to write a critique of that argument.

THE ASSIGNMENT

If your instructor does not assign one, locate any short (750–1,000 words) argument on a controversial topic and write a paper of about the same length critiquing it.

Topic and Focus

Obviously, you need to respond to what the article says. However, you can relate the argument's topic to matters the author does not mention. For example, an article advocating laws prohibiting handheld cell phone use by drivers may focus entirely on this particular device. You might respond by pointing to other driver distractions that also contribute to accidents, such as putting CDs in audio equipment. Perhaps the real problem is driver distraction in general, not cell phone use in particular?

Audience

Usually you will write to the same readership your argument addresses. However, when an argument you are responding to targets only one of several readerships with a stake in the topic, it is legitimate to respond by addressing your critique to one of the other audiences. For example, an argument addressed only to parents about a public school issue, such as classes that are too large, might well address the students affected by too large classes instead.

Voice and Ethos

Be sincere, project confidence, have command of the facts and what they mean, and show respect for the argument you are evaluating.

Writing Assignment Suggestions

This assignment could be written in many genres, the most common being a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine. Others include an op-ed piece; a response to a blog; a short article for a newspaper, magazine, or newsletter; or an assessment of a classroom discussion, debate, chat room exchange, public speech, or some other oral argument.

We suggest that you pick an argument you disagree with or an argument you partly agree with and partly disagree with in almost equal measure. It makes little sense to critique an argument you find wholly convincing.

CHOOSING AN ARGUMENT

When you have a choice, opt for the provocative or extreme argument. They almost beg for critique, and evaluating them is more fruitful than the predictable position defended in predictable ways.

You can locate suitable arguments by recalling something you read in a newspaper, magazine, or on a website, by doing subject searches on LexisNexis (see page 107 for how to use this resource), and by Googling a topic in the news. Consider also the following possibilities:

- *Class readings.* Class readings can provide arguments for critique, especially if the readings themselves are arguments.
- *Local news or observation.* Read your local and campus newspapers for arguments relating to your community. Sometimes these can be more interesting than overworked topics like abortion or gun control.
- *Internet discussions.* Blogs are often good sources for arguments. Visit blogs on issues of public concern, such as one of National Public Radio's blogs at www.npr.org/blogs/.

EXPLORING YOUR TOPIC

So that you can see how to explore the argument you have selected or been assigned, we need to work with an example argument. Here's one on an issue of some concern on most college campuses. Read it once or twice, just to understand what it says and to form a first reaction to it.

Open Your Ears to Biased Professors

DAVID FRYMAN

David Fryman was a senior at Brandeis University when he wrote this opinion column for the school's newspaper, *The Justice.* He's offering advice to younger college students who often encounter professors with political opinions different from those endorsed at home or in their local communities. Fryman's question is, How should they respond?

1 One of the most important lessons I've learned in three years of higher education is the value of creativity and critical thinking, particularly when confronted with a professor whose ideology, political leanings or religious viewpoint fly in the face of what I believe. In fact, with a good professor, this should happen often. It is part of a professor's job to challenge you, force you to reconsider, encourage you to entertain new ideas and the like.

2 My first year here, it bothered me. Some professors subtly endorsed certain ways of thinking over others without always justifying their biases. They offered opinions on issues beyond their academic expertise. Many showed partiality to the political left or right.

3 How should we react when a professor with a captive audience advances a perspective we find offensive, insulting or just ridiculous? Perhaps we would

benefit from treating our professors, who often double as mentors and advisers, the same way that we're taught to approach great works of literature: With critical respect.

4 The truth is many faculty members are at the top of their fields. They read, write and teach for a living. We're generally talking about the most well-educated and well-read members of society. So when a professor has something to say about politics, religion, war or which movie should win the Academy Award, I think it's a good idea to take him seriously.

5 It certainly doesn't follow, though, that there's a direct relationship between what a professor says and what's true. In fact, there may be no relationship at all. While our professors generally are leading scholars, some are also biased and fallible. I don't mean this as an insult. Professors are human beings and, as such, carry with them a wide array of hang-ups and prejudices.

6 Interestingly enough—if not ironically—our professors often teach us how to deal with biased and opinionated scholars like themselves. When we read novels, journal articles, essays and textbooks for class, we're taught—or at least this has been my experience—to be critical. We're expected to sift through material and distinguish between what holds water and what doesn't, what is based on reasoned analysis and what is mere speculation.

7 If we treat our professors similarly it should no longer bother us when they use the classroom as their soapbox. They have important things to say and we're here to learn from them. I've come to appreciate professors' opinions on a variety of issues not directly related to the subject at hand, and I think it helps us build relationships with them. While it's unfair for a professor to assign high grades only to students who echo their view or to make others feel uncomfortable to disagree, I prefer that professors be honest about what they think.

8 While it's a disservice to our own education to be intimidated or too easily persuaded by academic clout, it's just as problematic, and frankly silly, to categorically reject what a professor has to say because we take issue with his ideology, political leanings, religious views or cultural biases.

9 It's become popular, particularly among conservatives responding to what they perceive as a liberal bias in academia, to criticize professors for espousing personal views in the classroom. The ideal, they argue, is to leave students ignorant to their instructors' beliefs.

10 First of all, I think there's a practical problem with this strategy. It's more difficult to be critical if we're unsure where our professors stand. For the same reason that it's often helpful to have background information about an author before analyzing his work, it's useful to see our professors' ideological cards on the table. For instance, if I know my professor loves hunting and believes everybody should have firearms in his basement then when I hear his interpretation of the Second Amendment, I'm better equipped to evaluate his thoughts.

11 Secondly, if we proscribe what views may or may not be expressed in the classroom, we limit our own access to potentially useful information. Even if most of the extraneous digressions aren't worthy, every once in a while we might hear something

that goes to the heart of an important issue. To limit this because we don't trust our own critical abilities is cowardly.

12 To return to the question I posed above: How should we respond to politically charged, opinionated, biased professors? I think we should listen.

Forming a First Impression

It is impossible to read an argument without having some kind of response to it. Objectivity or neutrality is either possible or desirable. Start by being honest with yourself about what your first impression is.

ACTIVITY: First Response

After reading your argument, state your reaction simply and directly. Write it down in your notebook or a computer file reserved for this assignment. Read the selection again. Is your reaction changing? How? Why?

The first response of most of our students to Fryman was favorable. He offered practical advice, and more appealing yet, *safe* advice. You may have had an entirely different reaction. First reactions cannot be right or wrong, good or bad. They just are what they are. The important thing is that *you* know what your reaction is.

Stepping Back: Analyzing the Argument

Critiques require **critical distance** from first responses. "Critical distance" does not mean "forget your first response." On the contrary, first impressions often turn out to be sound. Critical distance does mean setting your first response aside for a while so that you can think the argument through carefully.

Use the questions in the Best Practices box to guide your analysis. It deals with parts of an argument that can be challenged. In contrast, there is nothing to be gained by challenging the following items:

- *Values everyone in our culture accepts.* For example, Fryman appeals to "creativity and critical thinking" (paragraph 1). Who can argue against these two values?
- *Statements of personal feelings.* For example, Fryman states that he was bothered at first by opinionated professors (paragraph 2). We can't say, "No you weren't."—or "You shouldn't have been." What would be the point?
- *Information only the author would know.* For example, if Fryman had mentioned something he read or heard that caused him to be more tolerant of bias in the classroom, we would just have to accept what he says.
- *Incidental facts whose accuracy is not important for the argument.* For example, if Fryman had referred to a particular class and professor, we would have to accept the information as factual. Even if his memory was faulty, it does not matter so far as assessing the argument is concerned.

Concepts and Questions for Analyzing an Argument

1. *The claim or thesis.* Find the main point the writer wants you to believe and/or be persuaded to do. Sometimes the claim will be stated, sometimes implied. Ask, Is the claim clear and consistent? Is it absolute, no exceptions allowed? Assess the claim: Is it reasonable, desirable, practical?
2. *The reasons.* Find answers to the question, Why? That is, given the claim, what explains or justifies it? Like the claim, reasons will be stated or implied. Ask, Does each reason actually explain or justify the thesis? How convincing is the reason?
3. *The evidence.* Reasons will be supported or developed with something: more reasoning, examples, data, or expert opinion. Look at the evidence offered for each reason and ask, Does the evidence actually support the reason? How convincing is each piece of evidence, and how convincing is the evidence for each reason taken together?
4. *Key terms.* Often without defining them, writers use words that should be carefully pondered. When a claim is justified, for instance, as the right or moral thing to do, we need to ask what "right" or "moral" means in this case.
5. *Assumptions.* It is impossible to argue without assuming many things—and "assume" means "often not stated." Ask, What must I believe to accept that claim, or reason, or piece of evidence? Is the assumption "safe," something that any reasonable person would also assume?
6. *Implications.* Like assumptions, implications are usually not stated. To uncover them, ask, If I accept this statement, what follows from it? Are its implications acceptable or not?
7. *Analogies.* Many arguments use comparisons and some depend on them—on reasoning based on something being like something else. Look for analogies. Ask, Are the items compared close enough to permit reasoning by similarity? How important are the differences between the items compared?

Here are some illustrations of how the analytical concepts and questions apply to Fryman's argument:

1. *Thesis*

   Fryman: College students should listen to biased and opinionated professors with critical respect.

   Comment: Note that you have to piece together the thesis from several statements he makes. We can respond by saying, "What sort of opinions *merit* critical respect?"

2. *Reasons*

   Fryman: "Many faculty members are at the top of their fields."

   Comment: Clearly, this statement is a reason—it explains why the author thinks students should accord professors respect. We can respond by saying, "Yes, some professors are quite accomplished *in their fields.* But when they venture outside them, do their opinions count for more than any other relatively well-informed person's?"

3. *Evidence*

   Fryman: "Many [professors] showed partiality to the political left or right."

   Comment: In backing up one of his statements—that it bothered him at first when professors offered their opinions—he points to political bias as one of the irritating factors. We can respond by saying, "*Under what circumstances* would expression of political opinions be appropriate?"

4. *Key terms*

   Fryman: "hang-ups and prejudices"

   Comment: Fryman admits that professors have such things when he talks about the relationship between opinions and truth (paragraph 5). We can respond by saying, "What exactly is a 'hang-up,' and how do we distinguish it from a legitimate concern with something?" Or "We *all* have 'prejudices.' When are they justified and therefore worth taking seriously?"

5. *Assumptions*

   Fryman: He assumes that there are no ethical constraints on what professors should talk about in class.

   Comment: We can respond by asking, "Shouldn't there be professional ethics at work here? What moral or ethical principles should govern what's discussed and under what conditions?"

6. *Implications*

   Fryman: He implies that students should tolerate whatever the professor dishes out.

   Comment: We can respond by saying, "How much student toleration is too much toleration? Suppose that a professor is openly sexist, for instance? Shouldn't we not only reject the opinions but also report the behavior to university authorities?"

7. *Analogies*

   Fryman: He compares the approach students should take to opinionated professors with the critical respect accorded great works of literature (paragraph 3).

   Comment: We can respond by saying, "Great works of literature have typically survived for years. We call them classics. Does it make sense to meet the casual opinions of professors the same way that we approach Shakespeare?"

ACTIVITY: Analyzing the Argument

If you are working alone on an argument, use the seven questions in the Best Practices box. Record the results in your notebook, your computer file for this assignment, or online as a blog that presents the argument and your analysis of it.

If your class is working on the same argument, divide into small groups of about three or four people and do an analysis. Share what your group found with the class as a whole in discussion.

Doing Research

Logical analysis focuses on *what an argument says*. The challenge of analysis is to discover what you can say back.

As important as analysis is, there is another way to explore an argument. Test what it says *against reality,* your experience with life and the world, what you know about the topic, and what you can find out from research.

The Reality Test for Arguments

The following questions should help you test the argument against reality:

1. What is my own experience with the topic or issue or problem the argument takes up?

   In the case of Fryman's argument, when have the comments of "biased teachers" been illuminating or helpful to you? When have they been boring, irritating, or useless? What is the difference between the two?

2. What relevant information do I have from reading or from some other source?

   Perhaps you have heard other students complain about professors pushing their political convictions on their students. What did they say? Did their complaints seem justified? Why or why not?

3. What could I find out from research that might be relevant to assessing the argument?

   Most arguments suggest opportunities for at least checking up on information relevant to the argument. For instance, you might investigate the idea of academic freedom. How does it apply to professors? How does it apply to students? (For detailed guidance on ways to research any topic, see Chapter 6, pages 95–111.)

4. If the argument reasons from data, in what other ways might the data be interpreted?

   Research will often lead you to other arguments that interpret the same or similar data differently or that supply additional data the argument you are critiquing did not know or ignored. For example, arguments for stronger border patrol enforcement

sometimes fail to mention that about 40% of illegal immigrants got here legally and simply stayed. Enhanced border control obviously will have no effect on that group.

5. In what other contexts might the argument be placed?

   All arguments state or assume a context within which what they say is valid or true. What other contexts might be relevant? For instance, using the Constitution as context, the Supreme Court has ruled that public flag-burning qualifies as free speech. You could reason based on some other context, such as the wisdom of burning a flag as a gesture of protest. Does it make a point or just make people mad?

ACTIVITY: Summing Up

In your notebook or computer file, sum up the results of applying the above questions. Highlight the best insight you gained. It could be a major point in your critique, perhaps even the central point around which you structure it. •

Preparing to Write

Thoughtful exploration of an argument—responding to what it says and pondering its fit with reality—results in much you *could* say. However, a critique is not a collection of comments or a list of criticisms. Rather it is *a coherent evaluation from a particular point of view,* your view. Consequently, in preparing to write, formulating your stance matters most.

Formulating Your Stance

Stances toward an argument range from total acceptance to total rejection, with many possibilities in between. You can reject an argument in general, but see value in a part of it. You can accept an argument in general, but with major reservations. The key question is, *What do you really think?*

Here are a few of the stances our students took on "Open Your Ears to Biased Professors."

1. He focuses entirely on what *students* should do. He's one-sided. The key question is, What should professors do to deserve the critical respect Fryman says students should have?
2. He says students should listen with critical respect. Fine, but shouldn't we do more than that? If professors are free to give their opinions on just about anything in class, shouldn't students have at least the freedom to question the opinions offered?
3. Professors should limit their opinions to the subject matter of the course and topics they have special knowledge about. They shouldn't offer opinions on "politics, religion, war, or which movie should win the Academy Award" if these topics do not arise from the course's subject matter.

ACTIVITY: Determining Your Stance

Using the examples above as models, write down your stance. If you are having difficulty, consider the following possibilities:

- *Return to your first impression.* Perhaps a revised version can be your stance.
- *Review the statements in the argument that you found open to question.* Is there a pattern in your criticisms? Or perhaps one statement stands out from the rest and seems central? Your stance may be implied in your most important criticism.
- *Do you detect one place where the reasoning breaks down?* Try fashioning your stance around the reasoning you think the author should have used to reach conclusions you favor.
- *Look for places where the author's view of reality or what is needed or desirable parts company with yours.* Your stance may be implied in it.
- *Talk through possible stances with another student or your instructor.* Just talking helps, and sometimes a comment from someone else can help your stance emerge.

Sometimes you will discover your best stance only through writing a first draft. For now, try out the stance that appeals to you most. You can always revise and rewrite.

Consider Your Reader, Purpose, and Tone

As you approach the first draft, review the key variables discussed earlier (page 58). In sum,

Reader. Most critiques address the same audience as the argument.

Purpose. A critique contributes to a conversation seeking the truth about a controversial issue or question. Connect your criticisms with the truth as you see it.

Tone. You want to sound engaged, fair, balanced, and respectful. Assert your criticisms firmly and forcefully.

ACTIVITY: Refining Your Stance

Add notes about the key variables to your stance statement. Answer these questions: Do you intend to address the same readers that the argument does? Why or why not? How *exactly* does your version of the truth differ from the author's and how great is the difference? How friendly to the author do you want to sound?

DRAFTING YOUR PAPER

As you write your paper, focus on organization and development. The following advice should help.

Organization

Whether you write first drafts in chunks and then fit them together or write from a plan more or less in sequence, beginning to end, have the following organizational principles in mind:

Introduction

Begin by identifying the argument you are critiquing: who wrote it and for what group of readers, when and where it appeared, what it is about, and the position the author takes. Make your main point about your overall evaluation of the argument clear and give it an emphatic position, near the end of your introduction.

Body

From everything you found questionable in the argument, select *only* what is relevant to your main point. No one expects a critique to deal with everything an argument says or everything that can be said about it.

Do not let the order of the argument determine the order of your critique. Order in relation to your stance and for maximum impact on your readers.

If you can say positive things, deal with these points first. Readers listen to the negative more willingly after hearing the positive.

Conclusion

Short critiques of short arguments do not need summarizing conclusions. Strive instead for a clincher, the memorable "parting shot" expressing the gist or main thrust of your response.

Development

For each part of your critique, you have many options for development. Here are some of them.

Introduction

Besides identifying the argument and taking your stance, you can also include material about context, background information, and a preview of your critique. A critique of Fryman, for instance, might deal with his argument in the context of efforts to restrict academic freedom; research about the author might reveal relevant background information, such as what was happening at Brandeis University when he wrote the article. Previews summarize the points you are going to make in the order in which you are going to discuss them.

Body

Take up one point at a time. Each point will challenge either the reasoning of the argument or its fit with reality. If the former, be sure to explain inconsistencies or contradictions fully, so that your reader understands exactly where and

why the reasoning went wrong. If the latter, provide counter-evidence from personal experience, general knowledge, or research.

Conclusion

To clinch your critique, consider the following possibilities: a memorable quotation with a comment on it from you; a return to a key statement or piece of information in your introduction that you can now develop more fully; remind the reader of your strongest point with additional support or commentary.

REVISING YOUR DRAFT

Whenever time permits, it is best to get away from your draft for a day or two, come back to it fresh, assess it first yourself, and then seek input from others. The Best Practices checklist should help both you and the persons you consult in assessing the first draft.

Excerpts from a Sample Discovery Draft

The following excerpts come from student D. D. Solomon's draft in response to the Fryman argument.

Excerpt 1: Introduction

"Open Your Ears to Biased Professors," by David Fryman, deals with a common complaint among students: teachers who express their political or religious views in class. The article was published in *The Justice,* Brandeis University's student newspaper. In the article Fryman discusses how students should deal with a professor's opinion that differs from a student's own. By examining the situation from a student perspective, Fryman illuminates the implications and ramifications of professor bias. The author concludes that bias should be avoided, but if it isn't, students should deal with the situation by following several basic guidelines.

Excerpt 2: A Counterargument

Although Fryman is right about how students should respond, he left out the obligations professors have. Fryman dealt with how teachers sometimes deviate from the topic at hand, and begin to speak of their own personal opinions on a topic. In my ethics class last year, my teacher told us she was a lesbian. In one of our discussions we spoke about gay rights, and whether or not marriage should be legal for homosexuals. She believed strongly in the right of homosexuals to marry. Some of the students, including myself, did not agree with her. Yet, when we tried to discuss our side of the issue, she cut us off. Fryman neglected to discuss such instances when a teacher's opinions infringe on the students' right to open debate.

Critique Revision Checklist

1. Look at all places where you have summarized or paraphrased the argument. Compare them against the text. Are they accurate? Do they capture the author's apparent intent as well as what she or he says?
2. Locate the argument's context—the existing view or views the author addressed. If the critique does not mention context, would it improve if it did? If so, where might a discussion of context work best?
3. Critiques are written either to the same readers the author attempted to reach or for readers with a stake in the argument the author left out. Where in the critique can you detect the writer appealing to readers? Compare the opening paragraphs with the ending ones. Is the reader conception consistent?
4. Critiques seek the truth about some controversial issue or question. What is the issue or question the argument addresses? Is it stated in the critique? Does the difference between the author's view of the truth and the view in the critique emerge clearly? If not, what could be done to make the difference sharper?
5. Underline the critique's stance. Is it stated explicitly and early in the essay? Examine each critical point. How does it develop, explain, or defend the stance? Consider cutting anything not related to the stance.
6. Check the flow of the critical points. Does each connect to the one before it and the one after? If not, consider rearranging the sequence. How might one point set up or lead to another better?
7. How does the critique sound? The tone should be thoughtfully engaged, fair, balanced, and respectful, but also confident and forceful. Look for places where the tone might make the wrong impression. Consider ways to improve it.

Fryman believed that professors should express their stands on controversial issues. When expressing his or her opinion, professors should not neglect to introduce all aspects of the issue at hand. Sometimes professors get caught up in their own view too much and fall into preaching, rather than sharing what they know with the class. Students should hear about other viewpoints so they can view many sides of the issue. The professor should offer his own position as an opinion, not as fact, and should encourage students to form their own opinions.

Fryman fails to deal with the negative impact when teachers stray from the subject matter of the course. His point that teachers should express their opinions is relevant only when related to the topic at hand. In my ethics class, the teacher was always returning to the issue of gay rights, even when the topic of discussion didn't relate to it. She wanted to convert students to her point of view more than teach us ethics.

Example Assessment: Sizing Up D..D. Solomon's First Draft

Solomon felt that his first draft lacked punch and that the body of his critique did not unfold the way he wanted it to. Questions 4 and 5 in the revision checklist helped him see why he felt his paper lacked punch. Fryman sees biased professors as a fact that students must cope with as constructively as they can. For Solomon the professor–student relationship should be a two-way street. He did not bring out this fundamental difference well.

A student collaborator helped him see why his critical points did not flow as well as he wished. "What should come first," Solomon's partner asked, "staying on topic or not ignoring student opinions?"

Finally, Solomon's instructor helped him detect another problem, a place where he did not represent Fryman's position accurately. "The author concludes that bias should be avoided," Solomon claimed. "Does he?" his teacher asked, adding, "Where?" Solomon could not find it in the argument because Fryman does not say it.

Solomon had much to consider and a number of decisions to make. The revised draft appears below and on page 71.

Develop a Revision Strategy

Make a list of both your assessments of the draft and those of anyone who responded helpfully to it. Which criticisms seem valid or sound? Take these and plan your second draft. It can be a sentence or two, "I'll cut this, rearrange that, and add a point here," a full-blown outline, or something in between. *The important thing is to have a clear idea of what you plan to do and in what order.*

Before attempting your revision, read Solomon's revised draft. It is a good example of what cutting, adding, and rearranging can do.

REVISED DRAFT: D. D. SOLOMON'S EVALUATION OF FRYMAN'S ARGUMENT

How Professors Should Deal with Their Biases

D. D. SOLOMON

1 "Open Your Ears to Biased Professors," by David Fryman, deals with a common complaint among students: teachers who express their political or religious views in class. Fryman believes that students should treat the personal opinions of professors with critical respect. I agree, but think that his view is one-sided and therefore not fully persuasive.

2 Because he is writing only to students, he has very little to say about how professors should conduct themselves. Fryman deals with the problem of bias as if only what students should do matters. Actually, professors have more responsibility.

They're older, more knowledgeable, and more experienced. I think if professors are going to express their political and religious views in class, they should do so in certain ways or not do it at all.

3 Fryman fails to consider professors who try to convert students to their own ideology. Because professors know so much, they can appear very appealing to students who have not encountered an issue before. By leaving out other interpretations, the professor assures that students hear only the teacher's side, which does not allow students to form their own conclusions. I saw this happen in a government class which discussed the 2008 Presidential election. Most of the class did not know much about politics, and therefore accepted the professor's view completely. They didn't have the critical capacity Fryman assumes all college students have. Certainly professors should challenge students, but what my government professor did was convert.

4 Sometimes professors get caught up in their own view too much and fall into preaching, rather than sharing all they know with the class. Students should hear about other viewpoints so they can view all sides of the issue. Furthermore, the professor should offer his own opinion as an opinion, not as a fact, and encourage students to form their own opinions.

5 Unfortunately, professors who want to convert students don't want students to form their own opinions but rather believe what the professor thinks. In my ethics class last year, my teacher told us she was a lesbian. In one of our discussions we spoke about gay rights, and whether or not marriage should be legal for homosexuals. She believed strongly in the right of homosexuals to marry. Some of the students, including me, did not agree with her. Yet, when we tried to discuss our side of the issue, she cut us off. Fryman neglects to discuss such instances when a teacher's opinions infringe on the students' right to open debate. I believe that if teachers can express their opinions openly in class, the students should be able to express theirs.

6 Finally, Fryman fails to deal with the negative impact when teachers stray from the subject matter of the course. In my ethics class, the teacher was always returning to the issue of gay rights, even when the topic of discussion didn't relate to it. She wanted to convert students to her point of view more than teach us ethics. Because she lacked restraint, the class spent too much class time on one issue.

7 I agree that professors should share their opinions with the class and students should listen and learn from them. But opinions must be distinguished from facts. Students should hear about other opinions besides the professor's. There should be open discussion, and students who have opinions different from the professor's should feel free to express them. Professors should stay on topic and not allow themselves to talk about just whatever happens to be on their mind. Most of all, education shouldn't be conversion. A professor is not a preacher and shouldn't take that role.

Responding to the Revised Student Draft

It is remarkable how much a paper can improve if genuine effort goes into revising. Note especially in Solomon's revised draft that

- He stated clearly in the introduction his main point about the weakness of Fryman's reasoning.

- He brought out his key critical point, that education should not be a process of conversion.
- He pulled his whole view together well at the end.

Edit Your Paper

Edit your own draft to eliminate errors.

It is easy to overlook small-scale editing problems. Someone else's eyes and ears can be a big help. Exchange your edited paper with another student. Help each other find and correct any remaining errors.

Make a list of the editing problems. List words you misspelled. If you did not punctuate a sentence correctly, write the sentence down and circle or underline the correct mark of punctuation. Add to this list when you get the marked paper back from your instructor.

Always check your next paper for the problems listed first. In this way you can gradually reduce error. Continue this practice with everything you write. It will improve your grades and make you a better writer.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

For nearly everything people do, there is a natural way to go about it and an educated way. The natural way to approach disagreement is to "have at it" in a free-for-all kind of way. People want to be heard, but too often they do not want to listen; hardly anything receives careful thought or discussion. The natural way is open, democratic, often exciting, and even therapeutic. But too often the point of it all—finding the truth insofar as we can hope to discover it—gets lost.

The educated way of critique works by listening, taking in what other people say, and probing it through questions, testing it thoughtfully for both logical cogency and for its adequacy in coping with reality. It enables thought and discussion rather than merely an exchange of opinion.