Argumentative Essays: Reading Samples

Inquire: Argumentation in “A Message to Garcia”

Overview

Argumentative essays come in all different shapes, sizes, and styles. Elbert Hubbard’s “A Message to Garcia” has been circulating since the late 1800s as an argument claiming that the employees in his day and age were lazy ne’er-do-wells who only burdened their employers. Sound familiar? Hubbard makes his argument by using all sorts of rhetorical appeals to convince his audience that their sympathy is misplaced if they’re feeling sorrier for underemployed workers than their overworked bosses.

Big Question: How does an argumentative essay use rhetorical appeals to persuade readers?

Watch: Argumentation and the Rhetorical Situation

The rhetorical situation consists of four component parts: ethos, pathos, logos, and purpose. While the rhetorical situation can be applied to almost any written or visual text, the rhetorical situation really shines when used to analyze argumentative material. Essays like “A Message to Garcia,” written by Elbert Hubbard are great examples of how essayists use rhetorical appeals to convince their audience to buy in to their particular argument.

In Elbert Hubbard’s “A Message to Garcia,” Hubbard begins by using an anecdotal story about General Garcia and President McKinley as tensions rose between Spain and America. By beginning with an anecdote, Hubbard draws his readers in, appealing to them through the story of a man named Rowan who was ready and equipped to find Garcia in the mountains of Cuba to deliver a message from President McKinley. Without any questions or hesitations, Rowan took on the task and set about in finding Garcia. Ultimately, Hubbard uses this anecdote to introduce his readers to his argument that workers in the late 1890s were lazy and overly-reliant on their bosses.

As Hubbard makes his way throughout the rest of the essay, he takes great care to provide examples of how normal employees react to far simpler requests than “find Garcia in the mountains.” He talks, for example, about a hypothetical employee asked to look up a term in an encyclopedia. According to Hubbard, this simple request would be met with as many as ten questions, and the employee would still not complete the task correctly.

Throughout his essay, Hubbard appeals to his own ethos by talking about his experience as an employee and employer. He appeals to pathos by using charged and loaded words that elicit an emotional response from the reader, and he appeals to logos by structuring his essay in such a way that his reader is drawn to a very specific conclusion.
As you read, be sure to watch for these rhetorical appeals and reflect on how similar Hubbard’s argument feels to one that would still be made today. Do you agree with Hubbard? Are workers lazy and overly dependent on their bosses? Has anything changed over time?

Read: Reading “A Message to Garcia” by Elbert Hubbard

Overview

Elbert Hubbard wrote “A Message to Garcia” in 1899 as an argument about the importance of initiative and independence in employees. Mostly, Hubbard mourned the fact that workers rarely took initiative to complete work quickly and effectively without being a burden on their employers. As you read this essay, focus on the argument presented by Hubbard, and be sure to analyze how he employs rhetorical appeals to make that argument.

“A Message to Garcia” by Elbert Hubbard

In all this Cuban business there is one man stands out on the horizon of my memory like Mars at perihelion. When war broke out between Spain & the United States, it was very necessary to communicate quickly with the leader of the Insurgents. Garcia was somewhere in the mountain vastness of Cuba — no one knew where. No mail nor telegraph message could reach him. The President must secure his cooperation, and quickly.

What to do!

Someone said to the President, "There’s a fellow by the name of Rowan will find Garcia for you, if anybody can."

Rowan was sent for and given a letter to be delivered to Garcia. How "the fellow by the name of Rowan" took the letter, sealed it up in an oil-skin pouch, strapped it over his heart, in four days landed by night off the coast of Cuba from an open boat, disappeared into the jungle, & in three weeks came out on the other side of the Island, having traversed a hostile country on foot, and delivered his letter to Garcia, are things I have no special desire now to tell in detail.

The point I wish to make is this: McKinley gave Rowan a letter to be delivered to Garcia; Rowan took the letter and did not ask, "Where is he at?" By the Eternal! there is a man whose form should be cast in deathless bronze and the statue placed in every college of the land. It is not book-learning young men need, nor instruction about this and that, but a stiffening of the vertebrae which will cause them to be loyal to a trust, to act promptly, concentrate their energies: do the thing — "Carry a message to Garcia!"

General Garcia is dead now, but there are other Garcias.

No man, who has endeavored to carry out an enterprise where many hands were needed, but has been well nigh appalled at times by the imbecility of the average man- the inability or unwillingness to concentrate on a thing and do it. Slip-shod assistance, foolish inattention, dowdy indifference, & half-hearted work seem the rule; and no man succeeds, unless by hook or crook, or threat, he forces or bribes other men to assist him; or mayhap, God in His goodness performs a miracle, & sends him an Angel of Light for an assistant. You, reader, put this matter to a test: You are sitting now in your office- six clerks are within call.
Summon anyone and make this request: "Please look in the encyclopedia and make a brief memorandum for me concerning the life of Correggio".

Will the clerk quietly say, "Yes, sir," and go do the task? On your life, he will not. He will look at you out of a fishy eye and ask one or more of the following questions:

- Who was he?
- Which encyclopedia?
- Where is the encyclopedia?
- Was I hired for that?
- Don't you mean Bismarck?
- What's the matter with Charlie doing it?
- Is he dead?
- Is there any hurry?
- Shan't I bring you the book and let you look it up yourself?
- What do you want to know for?

And I will lay you ten to one that after you have answered the questions, and explained how to find the information, and why you want it, the clerk will go off and get one of the other clerks to help him try to find Garcia — and then come back and tell you there is no such man. Of course I may lose my bet, but according to the Law of Average, I will not.

Now if you are wise you will not bother to explain to your "assistant" that Correggio is indexed under the C's, not in the K's, but you will smile sweetly and say, "Never mind," and go look it up yourself.

And this incapacity for independent action, this moral stupidity, this infirmity of the will, this unwillingness to cheerfully catch hold and lift, are the things that put pure Socialism so far into the future. If men will not act for themselves, what will they do when the benefit of their effort is for all? A first-mate with knotted club seems necessary; and the dread of getting "the bounce" Saturday night, holds many a worker to his place.

[ ... ]

We have recently been hearing much maudlin sympathy expressed for the "downtrodden denizen of the sweat-shop" and the "homeless wanderer searching for honest employment," & with it all often go many hard words for the men in power.

Nothing is said about the employer who grows old before his time in a vain attempt to get frowsy ne'er-do-wells to do intelligent work; and his long patient striving with "help" that does nothing but loaf when his back is turned. In every store and factory there is a constant weeding-out process going on. The employer is constantly sending away "help" that have shown their incapacity to further the interests of the business, and others are being taken on. No matter how good times are, this sorting continues, only if times are hard and work is scarce, the sorting is done finer- but out and forever out, the incompetent and unworthy go.

It is the survival of the fittest. Self-interest prompts every employer to keep the best — those who can carry a message to Garcia.

[ ... ]
Have I put the matter too strongly? Possibly I have; but when all the world has gone a-slumming I wish to speak a word of sympathy for the man who succeeds the man who, against great odds has directed the efforts of others, and having succeeded, finds there’s nothing in it: nothing but bare board and clothes.

I have carried a dinner pail & worked for day’s wages, and I have also been an employer of labor, and I know there is something to be said on both sides. There is no excellence, per se, in poverty; rags are no recommendation; & all employers are not rapacious and high-handed, any more than all poor men are virtuous.

My heart goes out to the man who does his work when the "boss" is away, as well as when he is at home. And the man who, when given a letter for Garcia, quietly take the missive, without asking any idiotic questions, and with no lurking intention of chucking it into the nearest sewer, or of doing aught else but deliver it, never gets "laid off," nor has to go on a strike for higher wages. Civilization is one long anxious search for just such individuals. Anything such a man asks shall be granted; his kind is so rare that no employer can afford to let him go. He is wanted in every city, town and village- in every office, shop, store and factory. The world cries out for such: he is needed, & needed badly- the man who can carry a message to Garcia.

Reflect Poll: Rhetorical Appeals

What kind of appeal is most likely to convince you to keep reading an essay?

- ethos
- pathos
- logos

Expand: Rhetorically Analyzing “A Message to Garcia”

Ethos

Hubbard uses appeals to ethos throughout his essay, namely by reminding his readers of the fact that he has experience as both an employee and an employer: "I have carried a dinner pail & worked for day’s wages, and I have also been an employer of labor, and I know there is something to be said on both sides." By reminding his audience of this fact, he is subtly reminding his readers that he has the authority to speak on this subject. He also takes care to explain that he is understanding of both sides of the issue.

Pathos

Additionally, Hubbard appeals to his audience’s emotions by using charged and loaded language that elicits the sympathy of the readers: “We have recently been hearing much maudlin sympathy expressed for the ‘downtrodden denizen of the sweat-shop’ and the ‘homeless wanderer searching for honest employment,’ & with it all often go many hard words for the men in power. Nothing is said about the employer who grows old before his time in a vain attempt to get frowsy ne’er-do-wells to do intelligent work; and his long patient striving with ‘help’ that does nothing but loaf when his back is turned.” His tone in the first part of the passage feels a bit sarcastic, through the use of the quotation marks and words like “maudlin sympathy.” By contrast, when talking about the employers, he uses phrases like “grows old before his time” to show the impact bad work has on employers.
Logos

Since Hubbard mostly uses anecdotal evidence, he does not rely much on logical forms of evidence to support his points. He does, however, structure his essay in such a way that calls the anecdotes to mind throughout the course of the essay, frequently repeating the phrase “carry a message to Garcia.” “It is the survival of the fittest. Self-interest prompts every employer to keep the best — those who can carry a message to Garcia.” This repetition reminds the readers to bear in mind the overall point: Hubbard wants workers to be those who are worthy of carrying important messages that have a global impact.

Purpose

Overall, Hubbard is focused on arguing that contemporary workers rarely take initiative and lack self-sufficiency. Ultimately, he connects this to current events, arguing that those who want socialism will never see their dreams come true if workers continue in this pattern: “And this incapacity for independent action, this moral stupidity, this infirmity of the will, this unwillingness to cheerfully catch hold and lift, are the things that put pure Socialism so far into the future. If men will not act for themselves, what will they do when the benefit of their effort is for all?” Ultimately, Hubbard concludes that the bad worker is also a selfish worker, harming those around them more than they harm themselves.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Colonel Rowan’s side of the anecdote included at the beginning of Hubbard’s essay
   ● Link to resource: http://www.foundationsmag.com/rowan.html

Sample student argumentative essays
   ● Link to resource: https://www.mesacc.edu/~paoih30491/ArgumentSampleEssays.html

An informational guide on argumentative writing
   ● Link to resource: https://www.roanestate.edu/owl/argument.html

Lesson Glossary

None

Check Your Knowledge

1. Hubbard uses all three kinds of rhetorical appeals in his essay.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Hubbard wrote this essay in 2015.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Rowan’s story is used as an example of a bad employee.
   a. True
   b. False