Susan B. Anthony: “On Women’s Right to Vote”

Inquire

Overview

Whether in published writing, speeches, or art, history is rich with examples of great argumentative essays. Many people have relied on the essay to make their voices heard to the public, hoping to sway the course of history in their favor. One such person was the great American women’s rights activist, Susan B. Anthony, who delivered her arguments in the form of a speech, “On Women’s Right to Vote.” By presenting her arguments in a structure that used America’s foundational principles to support her point, Anthony made women’s suffrage a major cause in the country during her lifetime. Her work eventually helped win American women the right to vote.

Big Question: Was Susan B. Anthony’s “On Women’s Right to Vote” a successful example of an argumentative essay?

Watch: Susan B. Anthony and the Argumentative Essay

Despite having a variety of styles, each with their own unique purpose, most people think of the argumentative essay when they hear the word essay. The argumentative essay requires the writer to make a strong argument for or against a specific topic, almost always by incorporating some form of outside, empirical evidence to support the writer’s claims. The rigor through which a strong argumentative essay is composed tends to make it something that is looked on with dread. However, there are many examples of argumentative essays that use simple, but still effective, means to achieve their goals.

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Part of what makes Anthony’s speech such an effective piece of writing is that it is written in what was at the time a simple, straight-forward way. It also uses documents that most Americans would be able to recognize immediately for its supporting evidence. In this way, Anthony was able to keep her audience’s attention and get her points across in an accessible way.

What other examples of argumentative essays from history are you familiar with? What do you think makes them so effective or enduring?
Read: On Women’s Right to Vote

Susan B. Anthony was an American women’s rights activist and a major figure in the Women’s Suffrage Movement throughout the 19th century. In 1872, she was arrested for voting in the presidential election, which at the time was illegal as women did not have the right to vote. Before her trial, Anthony delivered a speech to audiences throughout her home county and the county where her trial took place, arguing for the right of women’s suffrage. Though she was convicted, her efforts both in this event and throughout her life eventually culminated in the passage of the 19th Amendment, also known as the Anthony Amendment, 14 years after her death.

The following is an excerpt from the beginning of Anthony’s speech. Here, she uses the U.S. Constitution Preamble as evidence in support of her argument.

Friends and fellow citizens:

I stand before you to-night, under indictment for the alleged crime of having voted at the last Presidential election, without having a lawful right to vote. It shall be my work this evening to prove to you that in thus voting, I not only committed no crime, but, instead, simply exercised my citizen’s right, guaranteed to me and all United States citizens by the National Constitution, beyond the power of any State to deny.

Our democratic-republican government is based on the idea of the natural right of every individual member thereof to a voice and a vote in making and executing the laws. We assert the province of government to be to secure the people in the enjoyment of their unalienable rights. We throw to the winds the old dogma that governments can give rights. Before governments were organized, no one denies that each individual possessed the right to protect his own life liberty and property. And when 100 or 1,000,000 people enter into a free government, they do not barter away their natural rights; they simply pledge themselves to protect each other in the enjoyment of them, through prescribed judicial and legislative tribunals. They agree to abandon the methods of brute force in the adjustment of their differences, and adopt those of civilization.

Nor can you find a word in any of the grand documents left us by the fathers that assumes for government the power to create or to confer rights. The Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, the constitutions of the several states and the organic laws of the territories, all alike propose to protect the people in the exercise of their God-given rights. Not one of them pretends to bestow rights.

“All men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

Here is no shadow of government authority over rights, nor exclusion of any from their full and equal enjoyment. Here is pronounced the right of all men, and “consequently,” as the Quaker preacher said, “of all women,” to a voice in the government. And here, in this very first paragraph of the declaration, is the assertion of the natural right of all to the ballot; for, how can “the consent of the governed” be given, if the right to vote be denied. Again:

“That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundations on such
principles, and organizing its powers in such forms as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

Surely, the right of the whole people to vote is here clearly implied. For however destructive in their happiness this government might become, a disfranchised class could neither alter nor abolish it, nor institute a new one, except by the old brute force method of insurrection and rebellion. One-half of the people of this nation to-day are utterly powerless to blot from the statute books an unjust law, or to write there a new and a just one. The women, dissatisfied as they are with this form of government, that enforces taxation without representation,—that compels them to obey laws to which they have never given their consent,—that imprisons and hangs them without a trial by a jury of their peers, that robs them, in marriage, of the custody of their own persons, wages and children,—are this half of the people left wholly at the mercy of the other half, in direct violation of the spirit and letter of the declarations of the framers of this government, every one of which was based on the immutable principle of equal rights to all. By those declarations, kings, priests, popes, aristocrats, were all alike dethroned, and placed on a common level politically, with the lowliest born subject or serf. By them, too, me, as such, were deprived of their divine right to rule, and placed on a political level with women. By the practice of those declarations all class and caste distinction will be abolished; and slave, serf, plebeian, wife, woman, all alike, bound from their subject position to the proud platform of equality.

The preamble of the federal constitution says:

"We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and established this constitution for the United States of America."

It was we, the people, not we, the white male citizens, nor yet we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed this Union. And we formed it, not to give the blessings or liberty, but to secure them; not to the half of ourselves and the half of our posterity, but to the whole people—women as well as men. And it is downright mockery to talk to women of their enjoyment of the blessings of liberty while they are denied the use of the only means of securing them provided by this democratic-republican government—the ballot.

Reflect: Your Voice is Heard

Poll

If you were fighting for your fundamental right to something, what do you think would be the best way to express your opinions?

- Argumentative essay
- Protesting
- Public speaking
- Art

Expand: “On Women’s Right to Vote,” as an Argumentative Essay

Susan B. Anthony’s role in the Women’s Suffrage Movement cannot be overstated; that the 19th Amendment is named after her is a testament to her role. Although she was convicted, Anthony never
denied having voted illegally, but rather denied that the act itself was criminal. The speech Anthony wrote in her defense has gone down in history as one of the great American rhetorical documents. So what makes this such an effective argument? Today, it may seem obvious that women have just as much of a right to vote as men, but without the benefit of history to draw on, what could Anthony use to make her point?

Anthony begins her speech with a short introduction explaining why she is giving it and what she is arguing for. By argumentative standards, this is a short but strong introduction, since it makes clear both the argument’s purpose and the relevance to the audience.

The next paragraph introduces the main supporting argument of Anthony’s speech, using the U.S. foundational creed to show that denying women the right to vote violates the principles of the Constitution, the very values the country was founded on. Specifically, Anthony argues that governments do not grant the right to vote to their citizens, but rather exist to protect them. As evidence to support this argument, she cites the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the constitutions of the states.

She goes on to quote the Declaration, broadening the use of “men” in “all men are created equal” to include women. She adds, “as the Quaker preacher says,” a reference to the religious beliefs Anthony was raised with, as well as an appeal to the religious beliefs of like-minded audience members.

This broadening of a term on its own would normally weaken Anthony’s argument, but she then follows up by quoting further, using “the people,” both from the Declaration and the Constitution, to show that the inalienable rights referred to in both documents apply to people as a whole, and not simply men.

Using the country’s foundational documents as evidence, which are used as the basis for the formation and defense of all United States law, Anthony is able build a strong argument for the injustice of male-only suffrage, and to show that declaring women’s suffrage a crime goes against the country’s foundational values.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

(1867) Frederick Douglass, “Appeal to Congress for Impartial Suffrage"
- A similar essay, written by Frederick Douglass, arguing for the passage of the 15th amendment, which prohibited the federal and state governments from denying the right to vote to any citizen of the United States based on race

The Nineteenth Amendment
- The 19th Amendment, as well as a history of the amendment and the women’s suffrage movement
- https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendments/amendment-xix

Elizabeth Cady Stanton: The Destructive Male
- A speech about the, then current, state of women’s rights by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony’s contemporary and close friend
Schoolhouse Rock - Women's Suffrage movement
- A Schoolhouse Rock video and song about the Women’s Suffrage Movement
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFOieRHRzh8

Lesson Glossary

19th Amendment: (aka. the Anthony Amendment); amendment to the U.S. Constitution that granted American women's suffrage; ratified on August 18, 1920

argumentative essay: an essay that requires the writer to make a strong argument for or against a specific topic, almost always by incorporating some form of outside, empirical evidence to support the writer’s claims

Susan B. Anthony: an American women’s rights activist and a major figure in the Women’s Suffrage Movement throughout the 19th century

women's suffrage: the right of women to vote in elections

Check Your Knowledge

1. Susan B. Anthony’s work for women’s suffrage eventually helped win American women the right to vote.
   A. True
   B. False

2. Which of the following is not true of an argumentative essay?
   A. It requires a writer to make a strong argument for or against a specific topic.
   B. It is the most practical form of essay when it comes to public speaking.
   C. It can be simple and still be effective.
   D. It almost always uses some form of outside, empirical evidence.

3. Anthony’s speech, “On Women’s Right to Vote,” has gone down in history as one of the great American oratorical documents.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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