Making Arguments

Inquire: Types of Arguments

Overview

Argument. What an ugly word. In the English language, it’s closely associated with harsh conversations between two or more people. Usually these conversations end in hurt feelings, bruised egos, and overwhelming frustration and anger. In writing, however, an argument is a very different thing.

Usually, we see two different forms of written arguments: Rogerian and Toulmin. Especially in Rogerian arguments, there is a focus in written arguments on considering your opponent’s side. Consider how much better our discourse would be if we were just as thoughtful in our spoken arguments.

Big Question: What are some major types of written arguments?

Watch: Rogerian and Toulmin Arguments

Red faces. Pointing fingers. Raised voices. These are the images our minds might conjure if we spend time thinking about what an argument is. When we consider the word “argument,” we often go first to the kind we see most often: verbal ones.

These combative arguments appear every time we turn on the TV to see talking heads hotly debating a topic on a news channel, spend too long on social media, or scroll down to the comments section of a controversial article.

In formal, academic writing, however, the word “argument” means something much different. Written arguments focus primarily on the act of persuasion through rhetorical appeals.

This means constructing an ethos that is warm, credible, and willing to listen to the opposition. It also means appealing to the emotions, needs, and values of the essay’s audience.

In order to make this kind of appeal, however, you have to know a bit about your audience and what they think and feel.

The simple fact that written arguments require such consideration shows how different written arguments are from the ones we encounter in our daily lives.

Written arguments primarily fall within two different types of arguments: Rogerian arguments and Toulmin arguments.
Rogerian arguments are named after psychologist Carl Rogers, who believed that all conflict was best resolved when both parties could fully understand and clearly state the position of their opponent.

The general philosophy behind this form of argument is that the opposition will be more likely to entertain your position if they feel you have fairly entertained theirs.

Toulmin arguments are named for Stephen Toulmin, a British philosopher who wrote the book *The Uses of Argument*.

Toulmin’s system of argument is more focused on the fact that an argument is never completely airtight, but instead requires careful consideration of the claims, conditions, reasons, warrants, and backings that make up the argument.

How would spoken arguments change if we were as thoughtful about them as we are with written arguments? Do you think society would change or improve?

**Read: What is an Argument?**

**Overview**

As we work to define arguments, our minds usually jump to images of confrontational conversations, albeit sometimes one-sided, in which one or more people passionately — and often angrily — argue for their side. This may be true of spoken arguments, but written arguments are very different. When we discuss the concept of arguments in the field of composition, we’re simply referring to a rational **claim** supported by evidence. Written arguments will be unsuccessful if they resort to the same one-sided angry tactics we often see in spoken arguments.

**Common Types of Arguments**

If you’ve written essays for classes before, you probably know that almost every genre of writing is actually an argument, even if it’s only a subtle, low-stakes argument. All of the following genres of writing can be considered forms of argument:

- Definition Essays
- Classification Essays
- Compare/Contrast Essays
- Cause and Effect Essays
- Evaluation Essays
- Proposal Essays

Within these genres, there are several commonly accepted forms of argument. The two that follow are the most commonly employed forms.

**Rogerian Arguments**

**Rogerian arguments** are named after psychologist Carl Rogers, who espoused non-confrontational principles of argument. Mostly, Rogers believed that all conflict was best resolved when both parties could fully understand and clearly state the position of their opponent. One common adage that illustrates this principle is the phrase, “it’s not enough to understand the other side; you have to be able to stand under
it." The general philosophy behind this form of argument is that the opposition will be more likely to entertain your position if they feel you have fairly entertained their stance.

Rogerian Structure

Rogerian arguments all follow the same general structure:

1. Introduction: Describe the issue at hand. Be sure to illustrate that you understand and appreciate all valid alternative positions.
2. Opposition’s Position: Take the time to outline the ways in which the opposition’s positions are valid and worthwhile.
3. Your Position: Here, state your own position on the issue. Take the same care to explain why your position is valid as you did in the above section.
4. Benefits to Opposition: Finally, conclude your essay by discussing the ways in which the opposition would benefit by adopting your position. Why should they take on your position?

The crux of all Rogerian arguments is your willingness to consider the validity of the other side. It can be a great personal exercise to write an essay using the Rogerian model of argument, especially in our contentious social climate. The goal is to make your audience feel heard and valued through your content and through neutral and complimentary language.

Toulmin Arguments

This form of argument is named for Stephen Toulmin, a British philosopher who wrote a book called The Uses of Argument. Toulmin’s system of argument is more focused on the fact that arguments are never completely airtight.

Toulmin Structure

Here is a quick look at the basic structure of a Toulmin argument:

1. Claim: Here, state what you want to prove.
2. Conditions: Establish the limits you impose on your claim.
3. Reasons/Evidence: Provide support for your claim.
4. Warrants: Address the underlying assumptions that support your claim.
5. Backing: Finally, provide evidence that supports your warrant(s).

This new terminology and new categories can be a lot to take in. However, you’re probably more familiar with the concepts themselves than with the terminology.

Your claim, for example, is basically your underlying argument. It will be a very bold claim, as the other elements of the Toulmin schema will help make it a more swallowable argument.

Your reasons are what make your claim worth pursuing. Say your claim is that Congress should establish a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Adding a reason will make this claim worth considering: “Congress should establish a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, because doing so will stimulate the American economy and reduce crime.” In this example, two reasons are provided as support for the claim.
A **warrant** is an underlying assumption in your reasoning that supports your claim. Your warrants are often where resistant readers will take issue with your argument. In the above example, you have a few warrants:

1. That creating a path to citizenship will stimulate the American economy
2. That creating a path to citizenship will reduce crime

For these warrants, especially if you know your audience disagrees with them, you will need to provide **backing**, which is evidence that supports the warrants that are present in your essay.

**Reflect Poll: Effective Arguments**

Which type of argument would be most likely to persuade you?
- Rogerian
- Toulmin

**Expand: Making and Supporting Claims**

**Overview**

Now that you know what an argument is and have seen a few examples of different argument forms, you might be wondering how to make and support claims in your essay. It can be helpful to further break down these two processes to better prepare you for writing an argument essay.

**Making Claims**

Claims are statements that can be considered debatable or arguable. You will find it impossible, for example, to write an effective paper if your claim is that men are mortal. This is already a universally accepted truth; it does not require an argument. Instead, consider a claim to be something that can answer questions like “where do you stand on ____?” or “how do you feel about ____?”

It may feel uncomfortable to take a hard stance on an issue, but that’s the whole point of argumentative writing. Also, you will eventually soften your claim with conditions and counterarguments, so it’s appropriate to start a bit boldly.

Try to find a claim that you have personal ties to or about which you are passionate. It is almost universally easier to write about issues that are personal to you, as your passion will help you push through the harder parts of the writing process.

**Supporting Claims**

Once you have a claim, how do you go about supporting it? The best and first place to start is by identifying supporting reasons. This is the point at which your own personal connection to an issue can help you get a jump-start on your topic. Consider why you think your claim is true. What would be the benefits? What personal experience do you have with the issue? What is the urgency that requires attention be paid to the issue now?

Once you have answered some of these questions and generated a list of reasons to support your claim, you are ready to create what is called an **enthymeme**. This is a word that describes a specific type of
thesis statement that is unique to arguments, specifically Toulmin arguments. An enthymeme is when you combine your supporting reasons together with your claim to create a single statement that summarizes your argument.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
A link providing an overview on writing arguments
- Link to resource:
  https://courses.lumenlearning.com/englishcomp1v2xmaster/chapter/writing-for-success-argument/

A guide to the structure of Toulmin arguments
- Link to resource:
  https://owl.exelsior.edu/argument-and-critical-thinking/organizing-your-argument/organizing-your-argument-toulmin/

A guide to writing Rogerian arguments
- Link to resource:
  https://writingcommons.org/open-text/genres/academic-writing/arguments/318-rogerian-argument

Lesson Glossary

claim: the underlying argument
Rogerian arguments: a type of argument that focuses on acknowledging the validity of the opposition's position
Toulmin argument: a type of argument that focuses on the assumptions that underlie a given argument
warrant: an underlying assumption in reasoning that supports a claim
backing: the evidence that supports the warrants that are present in an essay
enthymeme: when supporting reasons are combined to create a single statement that summarizes an argument

Check Your Knowledge

1. Your reader will probably share the assumptions that make up your warrants.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Toulmin arguments include sections devoted only to acknowledging the validity of the opposition.
   a. True
   b. False

3. It can be helpful to consider personal issues when developing a claim.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:
1. B 2. B 3. A
Citations

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