

Persuasion Basics

Appealing with evidence, reason & explanation

In a culture so ready to substitute image for character, style for substance, and spin for legitimate argument, very few people know how to argue a point effectively. It's much easier to simply offer an opinion (untested or unchallenged), attack people who disagree with one (ad hominem), and/or "spin" the facts to suit one's own perspective. And it's much more convenient to simply take sides on the basis of what one prefers or finds comfortable rather than seriously examine points of disagreement and investigate where the facts lead.

Arguments require humility and hard work

Developing sound arguments requires humility and hard work: you have to be willing from the outset to go where the evidence takes you, regardless of preference; and you have to train yourself to locate and evaluate reliable evidence, then present it convincingly to audiences who don't agree with you. Unfortunately, most people recoil from the effort and humility, but in so doing, cut themselves off from valuable opportunities to learn.

Arguments play a critically important role in a free society, providing honest people who hold differing viewpoints, opportunity to evaluate and accept or reject all kinds of alternative positions and values they might not otherwise consider. And while winning the argument is important, the primary goal of a good argument is to convince an audience that one's position is reasonable and can be verified independently by the facts. So you concentrate on the wording your position/claims very carefully, and supporting them with solid evidence respected by the audience, and explanations that help the audience see that those facts apply to its situation. Both sides focus on the facts rather than any personality differences, thereby creating opportunities for significant learning. So while you enter an argument with the goal of winning that argument -- convincing your opponent to accept your position and change its thinking and/or behavior, the primary goal of the argument is to establish your claims as reasonable and true on the basis of facts that can be verified independently. That is how we will approach argument in this section of the course.

Arguments impact us everyday. In everyday life, employers motivate employees to learn new procedures, take on challenges, change unproductive behaviors, overcome weaknesses, etc. Companies routinely persuade clients and customers to select and use their products and services. Employees make the case for raises and changes in working conditions. Sports teams convince fans to part with enormous amounts of money to sit and watch handsomely paid athletes play. Politicians regularly ask you to choose their take on what is needed in government over someone else's position. Priests and pastors appeal to you to do what is right even when doing so is difficult and costly. Parents and children repeatedly attempt to change the other's mind on things like what is acceptable behavior, what constitutes a good friend, what amount of freedom is reasonable at different ages, who does the chores around the house, etc. Movies and plays stimulate you to rethink your values and behaviors as you watch actors live out the consequences of carefully selected values and behaviors. We encounter arguments every day; some of the convince us to change; others don't.

Arguments rest on assumptions and values. It is critically important to know an argument's starting points or assumptions – they may override the facts, or lead proponents to only accept specific types of evidence. For example, in the ongoing debate over abortion, both sides start with a fundamental disagreement over whether the "fetus" is a developing person throughout pregnancy, or a simply a part of the woman's body until a child is born. That fundamental difference at the starting gate makes it all but impossible to debate the issue at any other level because both sides of the debate can and do develop coherent arguments with appropriate evidence *that require hearers to accept their respective starting points*. Fail to resolve fundamental differences at the assumption or underlying value level, and debate becomes pointless.

On a less controversial level, my father was a Dodge man whereas my uncle was a Ford man. Listening to those two argue over who made the best truck was often hilarious because it was clear from the beginning that neither listened to the other's evidence. The goal was to wait for the other take a breath, and then pile on so much "evidence" (usually anecdotal) that the other wearied and looked for something else to talk about. Their starting points were set in stone, so the "debate" was simply entertainment – neither expected to convince the other. The exchanges were an enjoyable game played by two good friends who knew the rules.

So regardless of whether the differences are significant or relatively minor, it is important to know your starting point assumptions and those of your opponent. If there is no common ground there, or the differences can be debated and resolved at that level, there is little point in attempting to convince your opponent at any other level.

Arguments employ appeals rather than force

A good argument, then, is a carefully thought-out, audience-sensitive *appeal* to accept a fact, value or course of action. And that appeal is based on sound reasons, solid evidence and clear explanations. The goal is not to defeat an opponent, but rather to convince that opponent of the merits of a position so that one’s opponent comes to share the same position as his/her own. Far from severing relationships, a good argument is designed to establish relationships by focusing both sides on the facts...and letting the truth win out for the benefit of both sides.

Thus, a good argument requires a thorough Win-Win and SMART analysis: first try to find common ground with the other side, and then determine what facts, evidence, reasons and explanations will motivate your audience to adopt your position. It’s simply not possible to figure out how to convince your audience to change positions, if you don’t take the time and effort to study closely the audience and its situation. Only then is it possible to determine a realistic response from that audience.

ARGUMENT BASICS

General Claim. What is the overall point or position you want your audience to adopt? State that position clearly as an overall claim that you prove is true with evidence and explanation. But limit the *general* claim to what can be proved – don’t overreach.

Table 1: Limit general claims

Unlimited	Limited
Community colleges are better for students than universities.	Colleges provide a better learning environment than do universities for students just out of high school.
Post secondary tuition should be increased	A 10% tuition increase next year is reasonable for BC students
Foreign aid makes problems worse	Foreign aid typically makes problems worse in third world countries by undermining local economies

In each case, the unlimited claims can be challenged easily:

- For highly motivated students needing the extensive resources (including program choice) of a major university, going to a community college would prove unsatisfactory.
- Would you defend unlimited tuition increases for everyone, over an indefinite period?
- There many examples of targeted foreign aid helping countries and individuals immensely.

On the other hand, the limited claims can be defended and supported as reasonable when targeted to specific audiences and their situations.

Supporting claims. Effective arguments often employ an *argument-within-an-argument* approach that wins the audience over in stages. Rather than barrage the audience with piles of evidence and application/explanation under one main point, the communicator develops a series of clearly stated supporting claims for that general claim so that the audience can digest the material in steps. Then the communicator provides evidence and explanation for *each* supporting claim, one-by-one, to win audience acceptance of each supporting claim, individually. By the time most reasonable audiences reach the final claim in the series, they are much more ready to accept the overall or general claim that started the process. You win your opponent over, claim-by-claim until your main point has so much support behind it, that a reasonable person is hard pressed to resist it.

Think in terms of firmly establishing as fact, each important point you want your audience to accept. List and explain several supporting claims with evidence that proves each is true or probable. If your audience finds each supporting claim believable, it will usually be ready to accept your starting general claim as reliable.

Basic Pattern

1. Start by establishing your credibility and that of your sources—*what makes you believable*

2. Refute opposing position(s) fairly and factually but briefly—*just enough to let your audience know you are familiar with other positions, but not so much that attention is diverted from your position.*
3. State the general claim (point to be proved) clearly, precisely & concisely
4. Provide a series of claims (each supported with evidence & explanation) that support your general claim—*no one claim prove the point by itself, but together they make a strong case.*
5. Reaffirm general claim precisely & concisely once each claim has been presented clearly.

Win-Win – all parties have reasons for positions

It's always important to understand where your audience is coming from, but in an argument, it is *essential*. Because a change of heart/perspective is central to an effective argument, you must know what your audience *wants* and *needs*, plus all the *influences* in its life that will directly and indirectly affect the audience's ability to change.

SMART expanded—more at stake, thus much tougher analysis

- **Situation:** why argument necessary; urgency...
- **Message:** details/evidence/explanations/reasons that will be convincing to audience...
- **Audience:** relationship (voluntary or captive/dependent); familiarity with subject; disposition toward general claim;
- **Response:** degree of change required...reasonableness of request; one step or multiple steps...
- **Tool(s):** what is best for the audience, situation & content; sequence for multiple steps...

ARGUMENT TYPES

Factual arguments – 4 types – establish degree of certainty

1. Common knowledge—so widely accepted, no challenge (e.g. *men cannot bear children*)
2. Personally experienced—events, observations, conditions
3. Reported by others—primary & secondary sources
4. Generalizations—assertions accepted as true for a large number of subjects over a long period of time; generally pulled together from a combination of 1-3 (e.g. *hockey is Canada's national sport*)

Examples

- Notebook computers are roughly twice as expensive as desktop computers of the same capabilities
- Toronto is the business hub of Canada

Causal arguments – establish relationship between cause and effect

Causal arguments demonstrate/prove the link between cause & effect. They demonstrate that one thing causes another, either to explain what happened, or predict what will happen. Causal arguments must meet two tests:

1. The cause & effect must occur together—*A rash appears every time you eat oranges, and never appears when you do not eat oranges*
2. The cause & effect must vary together—*One slice of orange results in a small rash; eating several oranges results in a huge rash*

Analogous arguments – establish essential similarities between apparently unlike things

Similarity must be true in all relevant and important respects—those aspects relevant to the point being proved (e.g. John got an A- on his assignment; mine is virtually identical, yet you gave me a B)

Evaluative arguments – value judgment(s)

Appeal based on underlying values or beliefs—carefully explained and applied to particular case(s) (e.g. negative campaigning by all parties in the last federal election was wrong)

Recommending arguments – judgment about present / concerned with future

Two basic approaches:

1. Focus on present conditions in order to prove that change is necessary without getting into precisely what must be done (e.g. *Education must be more practical if it is to adequately prepare one for employment*)
2. Focus on the future with a plan for change, demonstrating that it is realistic/feasible and effective (e.g. *a new emphasis on employability skills will much better equip students for the workplace.*)
3. Focus equally on present and future to prove both the seriousness of the current problems and the predictable effects of the proposed change.

GENERAL COMMENTS

The reasons and evidence you provide must stand up to independent scrutiny, and be acceptable to your audience—hence *the importance of thoroughly analyzing your audience and context before settling on your purpose and the message detail*. How do you determine whether to develop an argument of fact, value or policy? SMART!

Most arguments fail because they simply state the fact/value/action by itself and fail to back up those claims with

- factual evidence that is convincing to the target audience (different audiences require different facts)
- adequate explanations and examples that help the audience understand the importance of the claim(s) and show how they relate to and solve the problem facing the audience
- solid citation — correct footnoting & documentation that directs the reader to reliable sources

Successful arguments come down to thorough communication-problem analysis (*SMART*) leading to convincing claims, explanations, proofs, etc. that show you fully understand and know how to fix the problem it is facing.

EXERCISE

Is the internet good for social interaction and interpersonal skills development, or does it undermine one or both? Some might argue that it in fact enhances social interaction by making instant communication possible worldwide regardless of one’s geographical isolation, but others would ask at what cost—how can “faceless” interaction be called interpersonal? True, it is very convenient to be able to sit in your underwear and relate to the world via your keyboard, but what social skills are being eroded by such behaviour? There’s also the matter of verbal skills and appropriate body language—both learned through interaction with real people. Is instant, convenient, textual communication worth it? What do you think?

Table 2: Starting Point Questions

▪ What do I mean by “internet use/social interaction”?	▪ Where is the disagreement? (situation)
▪ Which topic do I focus on (I can’t cover both in a single argument): social interaction or interpersonal skills development?	
▪ What is my position? (message–general claim)	▪ Who doesn’t agree with me? (audience)
▪ What do I want the audience to <u>do</u> after hearing my argument? (response)	

Instructions: Start with a *WIN-WIN* assessment to establish common ground with the audience and determine a realistic response. Then draft a *SMART statement* to link all 5 communication components in one sentence in your thinking and approach. Now complete the *SMART analysis* the determine the essential details needed by the audience. Next create a *GENERAL CLAIM* (your overall position), followed by at least three *SUPPORTING CLAIMS* (reasons) that establish the validity of that general claim. Make sure you limit each claim to what you can prove. Finally, for each supporting claim, provide *EVIDENCE* that is appropriate to the audience and situation, and *EXPLANATIONS* that apply the evidence to the audience’s needs and situation.