

9. Effective and Persuasive Arguments

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Introduction

Often when we think of arguments, we think of heated debates or courtrooms. However, in professional settings, we still employ techniques of persuasion when we pitch our ideas to a new client, or request a pay raise. While we may not be standing on the corner with a sandwich board shouting out rhetoric, knowing some persuasive techniques will help you in business.

An argument is defined as “the gathering and analyzing of information to offer an audience a well-reasoned, significant, and defensible interpretation of that information” (Ward, 1997). An argument could be over what television show to watch or where to eat for dinner. Current issues and long-standing societal wrongs are constantly combated in the media channels and outlets to which we have access. Persuasion is defined as “the process of trying to get others to believe and do as you would have them” (Ward, 1997).

What are some techniques on making a persuasive argument? How do you know what an effective argument is-what makes it work? Lester Faigly and Jack Selzer, in their 2001 book, *Good Reasons with Contemporary Arguments*, stated that, “Effective arguments do not make the assumption that everyone should think the same way or hold the same beliefs. They attempt to change people’s minds by convincing them of the validity of new ideas or that of a particular course of action is the best one to take.”

A key factor to keep in mind is considering your audience. Who will be reading your papers? What background do they have? What are their biases and pre-conceived notions? Annette T. Rottenberg wrote in her 1985 book, *Elements of Argument*, that “All arguments are composed with an audience in mind. In writing your own arguments, you should assume that there is a reader who may or may not agree with out.”

However, take caution to not take an assaulting approach to beat your audience in submission to condition them to your viewpoint. Faigly and Selzer (2001) advised that, “Usually listeners and readers are more willing to consider your argument seriously if you cast yourself as a respectful partner rather than as a competitor and put forth your arguments in the spirit of mutual support and negotiation - in the interest of finding the best way, not my way” (p.3).

Building an Argument

Step #1: Deciding Your Argument

The first part in building an argument is deciding what to argue about. To be effective in your argument, you need to identify what issues you are passionate or concerned about. Your arguments need to express your convictions. It would hard to argue for something that you don’t really care about. Begin by analyzing

issues and asking yourself what you believe about it (initially - this may change after research!)

- **Example:** Should America have tougher illegal immigration policies?

Whatever your answer is, you should be able to then answer the question “why?” and develop your paper or presentation with evidence, research and information. Consider choosing a topic that is fresh or take a different angle on a common topic like abortion, drug legalization or environmentalism.

Step #2: Determining Your Argument

After you’ve decided on a topic that sounds intriguing, begin fleshing out different aspects of the issue. Called many things, essentially an “idea map” or “mind map” is a brainstorming exercise where you create a visual inventory of related ideas and concepts.

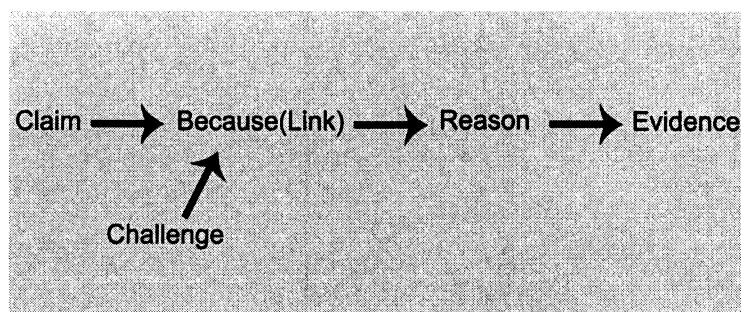
To start, you’ll put all your ideas down. You’ll refine this diagram to develop your claim and evidence later. Attached is a sample.

James Caplin, an executive coach, coined this process as a spider diagram in his 2008 book, *I Hate Presentations*. Caplin wrote, “At this stage, you want - in an easy way - to be able to look at all your ideas on a subject, to know what it is that you know about. It’s quick, so you don’t have to invest too much time into it. All you’re doing is jotting key words on a piece of paper. Changing it isn’t a big deal. You just add ideas as they occur to you.”

Step #3: Developing Your Argument

Once you’ve narrowed down some key issues from your map, you should be able to then develop a claim or thesis. From that, you will develop reasons will be backed up by hard evidence.

Example: This model is adapted from Faigly and Selzer’s book, *Good Reasons with Contemporary Arguments*. Faigly and Selzer’s model of argumentation works this way:



Salesperson:	“This vitamin supplement will help you lose weight.”	(CLAIM)
You:	(Probably internally) “So what?” or “Yeah right”	(CHALLENGE)
Salesperson:	“The mix of vitamins in this product is known to be effective in weight loss.”	(REASON/BECAUSE)
Salesperson:	“In 2009 FDA trials, 86% of people saw an increase in weight loss than without this supplement.”	(EVIDENCE)

Rule #1: Develop a specific, realistic claim

Saying that “everybody should have health care” is too broad. It doesn’t take into account what how to accomplish that goal or why things would be better. Make sure your claim is arguable. An argument that “student athletes should not get special academic concessions,” is a good topic because you can argue it and provide reasons why this practice is harmful. Other type of claims might be weak as well because they are impossible such as “We should abolish winter,” or assert personal preference like tall men are better husbands.

As you develop your paper’s road map, give your thesis or claim high priority at the start of your paper. Don’t leave your audience guessing or left to muddle through pages and pages of meandering ideas before you get around to stating the purpose of the whole mess.

Ward (1997) wrote, “Your paper’s primary claim of course, is your thesis (your principal stance on your topic.) As your primary claim, the thesis merits a good deal of attention to its clarity, acceptability, and strength. Your research paper will consist of a good number of interlocking claims, which support or are supported by others. The strength of your arguments then rests on how clearly you have demonstrated the connections among all these claims and how reasonably they all lend power to your thesis.”

Ward(1997) listed out the following qualities of a good thesis statement:

Qualities of a Good Thesis Statement
• Stated as an assertion not as question
• Not just a simple statement of fact but represent an informed opinion
• Represents exactly what your paper argues. Your thesis and arguments should match each other.
• Direct, not wishy-washy
• Does not use empty or wordy language

Rule #2: Develop good reasons

Remember as a kid how irritating it was when your parents said “because I said so?” The same is true today. We want good reasons to believe or consider your claims. We are inundated with claims everyday with no solid reasons or evidence. Think how many of those chain emails you get a week and how many are just plain wrong?

“It is not hard to think of reasons, what is difficult is to convince your audience that your reasons are good reasons. A good reason will work because it includes a link to your claim that your readers will find valid. Your readers are almost like a jury that passes judgment on your good reasons. If they accept them and cannot think of other more compelling reasons that oppose your position, you will convince them. (Faigly and Selzer, pp. 33, 37).

Rule #3: Develop credible, relevant and sufficient evidence

“An argumentative paper requires you to support an informed opinion.(Ward, 26). You need to have a clear roadmap of your intention for your paper.

Make sure each claim is backed up with hard evidence like statistics, reports, journal articles, studies and facts. Make sure the source is credible. Wikipedia is great for many things but is not credible sources of research. It is a starting point to look at the topic's cited sources, as a springboard - but don't list a wiki page as a direct source. Also, evaluate the quality of your sources you discover in your research phase. Be wary of blogs as primary sources-often these are just opinions. Ward (1997) cautioned writers with this warning, “Since not every source of information you discover will be credible and pertinent, you must read and think critically to decide what evidence from each sources seems valuable to your investigation” (p. 43).

Rottenberg (1985), similarly agreed, by stating that, “Not all those who pronounce themselves experts are trustworthy” (p.27).

Faigly and Selzer (2001) explained that:

“evidence consists of hard data or examples, or narratives or episodes that are seen as relevant to the good reasons you are putting forward. A writer of arguments puts forward not only claims and good reasons but also evidence that those good reasons are true. And that evidence consists of examples, personal experiences, comparisons, statistics, calculations, quotations and other kinds of data that a reader will find relevant and compelling” (pp. 44-45).

Have relevant evidence. Statistics about fast-food consumption in women isn't relevant to an argument against sweatshops. Also, certain types of evidence aren't as credible in certain industries. A personal experience of somebody triumphantly overcoming a life obstacle is great for non-profit fundraisers, but perhaps not as legitimate in technical industries.

Have sufficient evidence. Most people will require more than scant evidence, especially if the claims and reasons are controversial. It depends on the argument and your audience on what and how much evidence you will use. Generally, having a mix of evidence is a good idea to give a more robust and engaging approaches to your point of view. Rottenberg (1985) suggested, “the more controversial the subject, the more facts and testimony you will need to supply” (p.26).

Have opposing evidence. Related to having enough evidence is to also present evidence on the other side of the fence. Without addressing some of the claims of the “other side,” you run the risk of looking uninformed and ill prepared to demonstrate why your viewpoint or solution is the best. Ward(1997) wrote, “The goal of argument is to reach reasonable conclusions from fair and logical study. If you are not fair, people will not trust you...you cannot claim to have reviewed the issue fairly until you have studied both sides” (p. 85). Ward (1997) continued, “do you have plans to study the opposing side to your argument? What weaknesses in your argument might such a study point out? Are your current opinions truly the result of fair and reasonable thinking and research? OR do you lean toward certain subjectivist claims?” (p.86).

Faigly and Selzer (2001) stated, “If you can imagine how your audience might counter or respond to your argument, you will probably include in your argument precisely the points that will address your readers' particular needs and objections. You can impress your audience your readers that you've thought about why anyone would oppose your position and exactly how the opposition would be expressed” (p. 42).

Step #4: Decide on your persuasive approach

There can't be a discussion about persuasion and argumentation without mentioning the world's three most favorite friends: ethos, pathos and logos. Developed by Aristotle, over 2,000 years ago, the ideas of credibility, emotion and logic are still woven through successful argumentation. By employing these techniques in your arguments, you can make a more affective presentation. To be most effective, considering using all three approaches in your arguments. This will give your paper or presentation a well-rounded persuasive punch to appeal to the different members of your audience. Ward(1997) wrote, "in most cases, you will select a combination of appeals to your own credibility, to the emotions of your readers, and to the logic that you think best fits the audience and purpose of the argument" (p.82).

1.Logos: Defined as logic and reasoning. Logos (Greek for 'word') refers to the internal consistency of the message--the clarity of the claim, the logic of its reasons, and the effectiveness of its supporting evidence. The impact of logos on an audience is sometimes called the argument's logical appeal. This should be the crux of your arguments. However, you should also incorporate, when appropriate, a sense of humor, and assuredly, develop distinct voice. Faigly and Selzer (2001) wrote, "many textbooks emphasize using a reasonable voice. But a reasonable voice doesn't have to be a dull one." (p. 3).

2. Pathos: Defined as an emotional appeals to the human being (Whalen,1996). Often times, pathos gets a bad rap--we genuflect in front of the pantheon of rationality, logic and reason. Emotion is tied to being "irrational." However, using pathos as a persuasive technique can add an extra element to your overall argument. Consider your topic and claims.

Ward (1997) argued that,

"Unfortunately when some people hear the terms argument or logic or rational thinking, they immediately envision some form of quarrel or a solemn debate by solemn people. This myth suggests that to be rational one must remain dispassionate, unaffected by the emotional outpourings of others. Such a view, of course, sells short the impact of thinking and the power of feelings. Actually, many of your arguable topics may spring from an emotional response to a problems-sort of a 'righteous indignation' that sparks your desire to research and debate. Such passion gives your paper purpose" (p.78).

Dr. D. Joel Whalen, in his 1996 book, *I See What You Mean: Persuasive Business Communication*, stated, "Facts are essential, but not sufficient. By themselves, facts do not move people, do not change people. You have to use emotion to change people, to get them off center, to take risks - or to buy into a new plan."

However, Ward (1997), cautioned writers to avoid making unethical appeals to emotions. He wrote, "Emotions possess power. In supporting an argument, though, you must take care not to appeal to your audience's emotions in an unethical or suspicious manner. Preying upon the feelings of others often is unfair and unjust" (p.89). He gives the following examples:

Appropriate Emotional Appeal:

- Yelling at somebody to step away from an oncoming bus

Inappropriate Emotional Appeal:

- Trying to convince an elderly person to purchase additional health insurance, through only providing as evidence, frightening stories of other seniors who lost everything because of medical bills.

(Ward, 1997, p.89).

3. Ethos: Defined as the writer or speaker's credibility. Aristotle named "intelligence, character and good will as the attributes that produce credibility" (Rottenberg, 1985,14).

Think which source is more credible in a debate about school curriculum - a parent in the school district or a retiree that just moved into the area and never had children. Also, once a speaker or writer has betrayed an audience's trust, it is that much harder to garner trust and respect from them, no matter how much data or figures one has. Determine if establishing your credibility on a topic will help your claims.

Example: If you were writing that the World Bank should be abolished, it would strengthen your claim if you established your qualifications to suggest this topic, such as working in a financial services industry or international business. However, this should not limit your topic choice. It simply is a technique to assist you in persuading your audience towards considering your claims. But take it into consideration because if you don't have a lot of ethos in the subject area, you'll need to demonstrate a solid understanding of the issues with good evidence.

Rottenberg (1985) wrote, "Providing abundant evidence and making logical connections between the parts of an argument may not be enough to win agreement from an audience. In fact, success in convincing an audience is almost always inseparable from the writer's credibility, or the audience's belief in the writer's trustworthiness" (p.14).

Cicero wrote, "We give no credit to a liar, even when he speaks the truth" (Rottenberg, 1985, p.14).

Step #4: Types of Arguments

Another key choice you'll need to make in framing your argument is to decide what argumentative framework you'll use to most effectively showcase your claim, reasons, and evidence, while employing solid persuasive techniques. There are many different approaches to an argumentative paper, and there are more than are listed here; however, these are a few more common approaches:

1. Position:

A position paper is the most common type of argumentative paper. Its purpose is to make a claim about an issue. Faigly and Selzer (2001) wrote, "the writer has to define the issue, take a clear position right away, make a convincing argument and acknowledge opposing views" (p.17).

2. Proposal:

In a proposal paper, Faigly and Selzer (2001) said "a writer proposes a course of action in responsible to a recognizable problem. The proposal says what can be done to change or improve the situation. First, the author needs to define the problem, propose a solution that is feasible and workable" (pp. 17-18).

3. Definition:

Rottenberg (1985) wrote that "definition in argument can be used in two ways: to clarify the meanings of vague or ambiguous terms...or as a method of development for the whole essay. Arguments often revolve around definitions of crucial terms" (p.154).

Avoiding Argument Logical Fallacies

There is a vast myriad of logical fallacies, enough for a whole book. However, listed below are two very common problems to argumentative papers that you should avoid:

1. Subjectivism:

Believing a conclusion to be true simply because it's convenient to do so or you want it to be true. Ward (1997) defined subjectivism as "your personal belief in some proposition as the sole reason

for its truth” (p.88). Just because you believe Fords are the best-made cars in the world because you’ve always driven them, without evidence of quality, safety and sales, you can’t make an effective argument for your claim.

2. Ad-hominem

This logical fallacy translates as “against the man,” and refers to an attack on the person rather than on the argument or the issue” (Rottenberg, 1985, p.183).

Political pundits use this rhetorical logical fallacy and attack the political leader or president as a person instead of the issues or legislation. Faigly and Selzer (2001) wrote, “try to think of yourself as engaged not so much in winning over your audience as in courting your audience’s cooperation” (p.3). Remember to argue against a position, not a person.

3. Slippery Slope

“If an arguer predicts that taking a first step will lead inevitably to a second, usually a undesirable step, he or she must provide evidence that this will happen. Otherwise, the arguer is guilty of a slippery slope fallacy.” (Rottenberg, 1985, p.185). Rottenberg (1985), gave the following examples, when she wrote, “predictions based on the danger inherent in taking the first step are commonplace:

1. If we ban handguns, we will end up banning rifles and other hunting weapons.
2. The Connecticut law allowing sixteen-year-olds and their parents divorce each other will mean the death to the family.

She (1985), continues, “ distinguishing between probably and improbable predications- that is, recognizing the slippery slope fallacy- poses special problems because only future developments can verify or refute predictions. Slippery slope predictions are simplistic. They ignore not only the dissimilarities between first and last steps but also the complexity of the developments in any long chain of events” (p.185)

Resources

- Ward R. (1997). *Logical Argument in the Research Paper*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace College Publishers
- Faigley, L. and Selzer, J. (2001). *Good Reasons with Contemporary Arguments*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon
- Rottenberg A. (1985). *Elements of Argument*. New York, New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc.
- Whalen, D. (1996). *I See What You Mean: Persuasive Business Communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc