

Making an Argument



A workshop designed and presented by
the Duke University Writing Studio



What is an effective academic argument?

Effective argument will be well-grounded, persuasive, and significant.

Effective argument requires us not merely to participate in an academic conversation, but also to contribute something of value to the discussion.

The Burkean Parlor Context for “Good” Argument

Imagine you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar.

Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

— Kenneth Burke

Constructing and deconstructing arguments involve the same three fundamental questions:

1. What is the question at issue?
2. What is the author's point?
3. Do the author's reasons elicit belief?

From: Rolf Norgaard. *Ideas in Action: A guide to Critical Thinking and Writing*. (Harper Collins College Publishers); 1994, p 15.

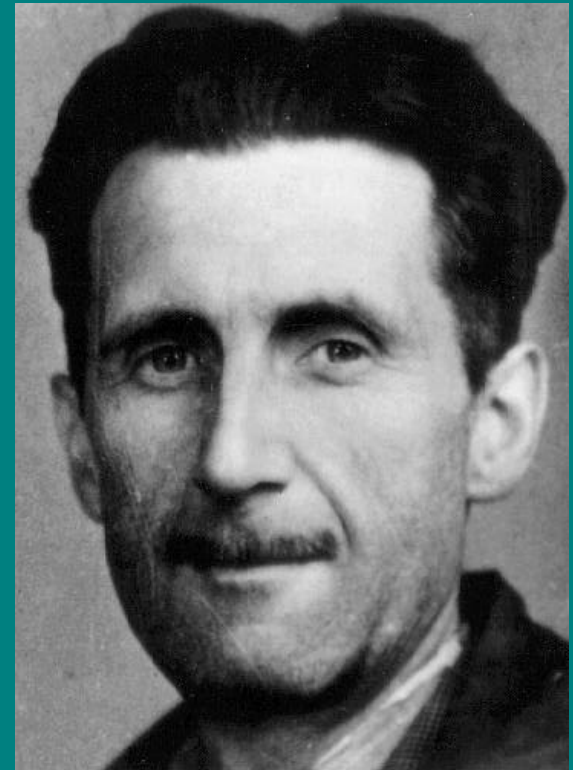
Questions to Consider in Evaluating Arguments

1. What are you claiming?
2. What reasons do you have for believing that claim?
3. On what evidence do you base these reasons?
4. What warrants (principles) make your reasons relevant to your claim?
5. What would you say to someone who said, “But what about...?”

From: “Argument in a Nutshell” in *The Craft of Argument*, concise ed., by Joseph Williams and Gregory Colomb (New York: Longman, 2003), p. 43.

George Orwell

“Politics and the English
Language” (1946)



1. What is the author claiming?

In his essay, Orwell claims:

“Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.” (157)

What qualities should a main claim have?

- **Interpretive:** does it offer to explain a reality or relationship?
- **Specific:** can we point to the question at issue and is it too general to be meaningful?
- **Contestable:** can we disagree?
- **Significant:** why should we care?
- **Reasonable:** can we follow the logic?

Is the claim interpretive?

“Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. **If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly,** and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.” (157)

Is the claim specific?

“Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.” (157)

Is the claim contestable?

“Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to **think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration**: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.” (157)

Is the claim significant?

“Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and **to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.**” (157)

Is the claim reasonable?

“Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. **If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration:** so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.” (157)

2. What reasons do you have for believing that claim?

Reasons are relationships that we **construct in our own minds** to explain something.

Reasons are what we give to **explain** something, to make something make sense.

Reasons interpret (explain) evidence for our readers and **demonstrate how** that evidence supports the claim.

What are the different kinds of reasoning?

- **Inductive:** from specific to general, arguing from specific observations
- **Deductive:** from general to specific, drawing conclusions from previously known facts

Examples of Inductive Reasoning:

“Each of these passages has faults of its own, but quite apart from avoidable ugliness, two qualities are common to all of them. The first is staleness of imagery; the other is a lack of precision. The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not. The mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing.”
(158-9)

Examples of Deductive Reasoning:

“The sole aim of a metaphor is to call up a visual image. When these images clash—as in “the fascist octopus has sung its swan song, the jackboot is thrown into the melting pot— it can be taken as certain that the writer is not seeing a mental image of the objects he is naming, in other words he is not really thinking.” (164-5)

3. What evidence do you base these reasons on?

Evidence (or more accurately, reports of evidence) are things outside of our own mind (facts, figures, reports, books, etc) that support the reasons we present to make our claim.

Distinguishing between Reasons and Evidence

We need to **think up reasons** to support our claims.

We need to **find evidence** to support our claims.

Reasons are our own internal constructions explaining reality; evidence is external to us. **Both support claims.**

From Williams and Colomb, p 122.

What counts as evidence?

- Evidence is either:
 - extrinsic** (data, facts, testimony, authority)
 - intrinsic** (invented)
- Strong evidence is:
 - sufficient**
 - precise**
 - accurate**
 - representative**
 - authoritative**

Examples of Extrinsic Evidence:

In this case, Orwell cites various passages of bad English prose as evidence:

“Meanwhile, here are five specimens of the English language as it is now habitually written. These five passages have not been picked out because they are especially bad – I could have quoted far worse if I had chose – but because they illustrate various of the mental vices from which we now suffer.” (157)

Examples of Intrinsic Evidence:

“Now that I have made this catalogue of swindles and perversions, let me give another example of the kind and writing that they lead to. This time it must of its nature be an imaginary one. I am going to translate a passage of good English into modern English of the worst sort.” (163)

How can we judge the quality of our evidence?

Strong evidence is:

sufficient

precise

accurate

representative

authoritative

Note how Orwell explicitly judges the quality of his own evidence:

“These five passages have not been picked out because they are especially bad—I could have quoted far worse if I had chosen—but because they illustrate various of the mental vices from which we now suffer. They are a little below the average, but they are fairly representative samples.” (157)

4. What warrants make your reasons relevant to your claim?

Warrants state a general principle of reasoning.

They relate the evidence to the claim it supports; they are the extended reasons that explain why we find the evidence convincing. Structurally, they connect the evidence to the claim.

CLAIM

~WARRANT

EVIDENCE

But, those are reasons!

Warrants are more general than reasons. They extend beyond just reasons.

Reasons are specific statements of a particular relationship, while warrants are more general constructs. Warrants cover not just your particular reason, but also an “infinite number of other reasons and claims, most of which have not yet been thought of..”

From Williams and Colomb, p 175.

Warrants:

Generally fall into two categories:

1. **Commonly held beliefs or principles**, based on assumptions or empirical evidence

(Where there's smoke, there's fire.)

2. **Appeals to authority**

(When X says Y, Y must be so.)

Example of a Warrant :

Here, the warrant is based on a **generally held belief**:

“It is almost universally held felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to any one meaning.” (162)

Another example of a warrant:

Here, the warrant is based on an **appeal to authority**:

“I am going to translate a passage of good English into modern English of the worst sort. Here is a well-known verse from Ecclesiastes:” (163)

5. Counterarguments

Counterarguments ask you to consider how you would answer someone who asked, “But what about...?”

It is important to acknowledge and respond to questions and objections to your argument. Consider using phrases such as “to be sure,” “admittedly,” and “some have claimed,” etc., followed with “although,” “but,” “however,” “on the other hand,” etc.

Example of counterargument:

“I said earlier that the decadence of our language is probably curable. Those who deny this would argue, if they produced an argument at all, that language merely reflects social conditions, and that we cannot influence its development by any direct tinkering with words and constructions. So far as the general tone or spirit of a language goes, this may be true, but it is not true in detail.” (168)

Other Considerations for Evaluating Effective Argument

- Definition
- Qualification
- Common Ground
- Acknowledgement of Sources

How important is defining terms in constructing an effective argument?

Definition of key terms is crucial.

Identify and then precisely define your key terms.

Stipulate definitions that will, in turn, support your claim.

Example of defining terms to advance argument

“DYING METAPHORS. A newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image, while on the other hand a metaphor which is technically “dead” (e.g. iron resolution) has in effect reverted to being an ordinary word and can generally be used without loss of vividness. But in between these two classes there is a huge dump of worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves. Examples are...” (159)

What is the value of qualification?

- Qualifying an argument allows room for reflection and interpretation and is crucial to creating a strong ethos.
- Categories of qualification:
 - **Quantity:** many, most, some
 - **Frequency:** often, usually, frequently
 - **Probability:** probably, unlikely
 - **Proof:** suggests, indicates, points to

Examples of Qualification

“I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought.” (170)

Here, Orwell gives us a quantity qualification – these, not those

Examples of Qualification

Or:

“I do not want to exaggerate. This kind of writing is not yet universal, and outcrops of simplicity will occur here and there in the worst-written page. Still, if you or I were told to write a few lines on the uncertainty of human fortunes, we should probably come much nearer to my imaginary sentence than to the one from Ecclesiastes.” (164)

How can you establish common ground between yourself and your readers?

- One way to establish common ground is to provide background information your readers need to know.
- Based on that foundation, you can then lead your reader to the problem or issue you will consider. In other words, present a stable context, in terms of a shared information or belief, followed by a disruption, in the form of your claim. Your readers think they know something, but it is incomplete or flawed.

From: *Craft of Research* by Booth, Colomb, and Williams.

Examples of Establishing Common Ground

- “Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it.” (156)

What do I cite?

In the **humanities**, quote only what is “language worthy,” and quote only when the original words are especially memorable.

In the **sciences**, quote sparingly. Use your own words to paraphrase or summarize the idea you want to discuss, emphasizing the points relevant to your argument.

In all cases, be sure to name sources even when you are not using the exact original words.

How do I acknowledge sources?

Quotations, paraphrases, or summaries:

If you use the author's exact words, enclose them in quotation marks or indent passages of more than four lines.

Adapted from Margaret Procter, Coordinator of Writing Support, University of Toronto, 2001.

Examples of Acknowledging Sources

- **Example:** As Morris puts it in *The Human Zoo* (1983), "We can always be sure that today's daring innovation will be tomorrow's respectability" (p. 189). [[APA system](#)]
- **Example:** Northrop Frye discusses comedy in terms of the spring spirit, which he defines as the infusion of new life and hope into human awareness of universal problems (*Anatomy* 163). The ending of *The Tempest* fits this pattern. [[MLA system](#)—*short title to distinguish among different works by same author*].

Specific facts used as evidence for your argument or interpretation:

- First consider whether the facts you're mentioning are “common knowledge.” If so, you may not need to give a reference.
- But when you're relying on facts that might be disputed within your discipline, establish that they're trustworthy by showing you are using an authoritative source.
- Cite facts so that readers can track them down to judge them in their own context.

For example...

- **Example:** In September 1914, more than 1300 skirmishes were recorded on the Western Front.⁸ [traditional endnote/footnote system]
- **Example:** Other recent researchers (4,11,12) confirm the findings that drug treatment has little effect in the treatment of pancreatic pseudocysts. [numbered-note system for biomedical sciences]

Distinctive or authoritative ideas

- **Whether you agree with them or not:**
Frame your sources carefully to guide your reader in understanding your point of view.

Examples

- **Example:** Writing in 1966, Ramsay Cook asserted that Canada was in a period of critical instability (174). That period is not yet over, judging by the same criteria of electoral changeability, economic uncertainty, and confusion in policy decisions. [[*MLA system*](#)]
- **Example:** One writer (Von Daniken, 1970) even argues that the Great Pyramid was built for the practical purpose of guiding navigation. [[*APA system*](#)]

Additional Resources:

- *The Craft of Research* by Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, and Joseph Williams.
- *The Craft of Argument* by Joseph Williams and Gregory Colomb.
- *Ideas in Action: A Guide to Critical Thinking and Writing* by Rolf Norgaard.

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