

# Constructing an Argument

Student Learning Advisory Service

# What is an Argument?

- In popular usage, an argument means:
  - an angry dispute between 2 or more people
  - a row, bust up, etc.
- Argument can thus have an *emotional* charge
- In academic usage, an argument is..
  - from the Latin *arguere* (to **prove**)
  - a reason for or against an idea, theory, thesis, etc.
  - a **reason** given for making a decision
  - a summary of the **theme** or subject of a book, etc.

(Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> Century English Dictionary)

# What is an Argument?

Arguments are everywhere....

- An argument is the difference between
  - 'don't do it' (instruction)
  - 'don't do it *because* (giving a reason)
- Arguments are designed to be **persuasive**
  - Can I borrow the car, please? If I take the car, I won't have to walk home alone through the dark streets
  - No, you can't – a) because you are not insured, b) because you will probably want to drink, and c) because I haven't put any petrol in the car
  - End of argument..??!?!?

# What is an Argument?

Can you think of other examples of arguments from everyday life?

What makes an argument convincing?

# What is an Argument?

Arguments are *logical*:

- **Deductive logic** is a form of reasoning that starts from a given principle & moves to a logical conclusion:
  - All humans are mortal (general)
  - The Queen is human
  - Therefore, the Queen is mortal (specific)
- **Inductive logic** moves in the other direction; it starts with the specific and works back to the general
  - These people eat fish on Fridays (specific observation)
  - So, it may be reasonably assumed that all people *in this category* eat fish on Fridays (generalisation)

# What is an Argument?

According to *Toulmin* (1958) argument consists of:

1. A claim – the key point being made
2. Evidence to support the claim
  - Empirical data, published work, studies, etc.
3. The warrant – making the logical connections
  - the reasoning drawing our the evidence
4. Qualifications: conditions limiting main claim
  - This argument only works within these limits....

# What is a Flawed Argument?

- A flawed argument is one where the evidence does *not* support the claim
  - Factually or logically
- Example:
  - Claim: if I attend lectures I will get a degree
  - Evidence: statistics show students who attend lectures always pass their final exams
  - Warrant: the correlation of exam results to attendance records shows the claim is valid
  - Qualification: Only relevant lectures count
- Flaw: mere attendance is not enough.....

# What is an Argument?

- In academic writing, an argument generally is the **main thesis** or **claim** in the article/book
  - this book, article, essay, report, etc. is about ....*this*
  - the thesis statement should ALWAYS be clearly stated
    - usually in the introduction
- The main argument is ALWAYS supported by:
  - information, empirical data, authoritative sources, etc.
  - REASONS: why do you think this....?
- Supporting evidence is itself **argued**:
  - state the sub-thesis point
  - link it to the main thesis (show how it fits)
  - give supporting evidence



# What is an Argument?

Example:

**Thesis** statement (or claim):

“Protons are positively charged particles  
Electrons are negatively charged particles”

**Argument** (or *proof*):

Thompson’s study of cathode rays (1897)

Further empirical research

Testing of hypothesis

Demonstration of principle

(electrical circuits, static electricity, etc.)

**Conclusion:** it has been **shown** that the thesis is correct

# What is an Argument?

- Almost *everything* in academic life is debatable
  - statistics, 'facts', theories, data, etc
- Ideas and theories are progressed by argument
  - evidence, reasons, authorities, ideas to back up claim
- Absolute 'proof' is virtually impossible
- Many so-called 'facts' actually appeal to emotion
- Many contentious arguments also arouse emotion
  - especially moral issues: war, abortion, death penalty, etc.
- An effective argument has to address these emotional issues by offering *persuasive* evidence

# What is an Argument?

An (academic) argument typically has 2 components:

1. **Convincing** evidence (information, reasons)
2. **Persuasive** force (emotional steer)

Persuasion means convincing others....

1. By producing powerful **reasons** for opinion
2. BUT persuasion has strong emotional element  
(more likely to persuade friends than enemies..)  
- uses of **rhetoric** & good **communication skills**

# Rhetoric

- Rhetoric is the gentle art of **persuasion**
  - Constructing a *convincing* argument
- Much studied in the ancient world: what works?
- Considered sign of good education
- Existed in three formats
  - Judicial (language of law courts)
  - Deliberative (language of politics)
  - Epideitic (eulogy or condemnation of a person)

# Rhetoric

- Cicero (106-43 BCE): effective argument has...
  - inventio: presentation of *convincing* arguments
  - dispositio: effective *organisation* of writing
  - elocutio: style, eloquence
  - memoria: memorable content
  - pronuncio: effective *delivery*
- Effective rhetoric uses:
  - Logic (appeal to *reason*)
  - Ethos (appeal to *morality*)
  - Pathos (appeal to *feelings*)

# Rhetoric

Main steps in an argument:

1. **Thesis:** key idea, theory, concept
2. **Proof:** (convincing) evidence to support thesis: reasons, appeal to authority, empirical data, etc.
3. **Evaluation:** testing of evidence
4. **Counter-arguments:** on the other hand
5. **Examples:** (positive and negative)
6. **Conclusion:** therefore, this shows that.....

# Exercise

Consider the following thesis:

Electricity pylons are a blot on the landscape

Use good rhetoric to construct a *persuasive* argument for or against this proposition

# Arguments in Academic Writing

One way into this whilst writing assignments is simply to ask: what am I trying to **prove**?

This will help avoid making the essay an  
'information dump' -  
everything I know about this subject....

It will also show that you:

1. Understand the topic
2. Can apply this understanding to new contexts



# Examples: Theology of Barth

Thesis: Karl Barth is a great theologian

Evidence: (multiple and layered approach – step-by-step)

1. Historical background to Barth's work
  - personal background
  - social background (WW1 in Germany/Swit.)
2. *Critical Analysis* of Barth's major works
  - Epistle to the Romans (1920)
  - Church Dogmatics (1932-68)
3. Critical review of scholarly opinion on Barth
4. Examination of potential weaknesses in Barth's work
5. Comparison with other great theologians
6. Conclusion: Barth is a great theologian

# Essay Example

- **ESSAY TOPIC:**

Discuss the argument that it makes financial sense for employers to make the workplace safer so they can reduce the cost of accidents in terms of reduced productivity and compensation to victims.

# Essay Example: Exercise

- Topic Claim:
  - Employers are primarily concerned about costs
- Construct an argument.....
  - Empirical evidence – company ‘stories’
  - Key theorists: what motivates company action?
  - Contrary views: alternative scholarship
- Evaluation and discussion of the evidence
- Conclusion

# Essay Example

This argument relies on the idea that companies use profit exclusively to guide decisions about the work environment. However, companies look at other factors as well, such as the negative social impact of a poor health and safety record. For example, Toyota spends large sums of money on improving its factories and offices because it holds high employee morale and a safe work environment to be as important as good profitability (Matsuki & Fewick 2002). Toyota does not see these priorities as mutually exclusive: they argue that attention to workplace health and relationships produces a highly motivated workforce, which in turn guarantees greater efficiency and higher profits (Grieves et al. 2004).

# Arguments: Summary

- An argument is **making a claim**
- Any claim has to be **backed-up**
  - Supported by evidence
    - Can be empirical, reported (authority) logical
- **ALL** evidence must be carefully assessed
  - Check and test factual information, theories....
- Counter-arguments **MUST** be considered
- Tailor the argument to ‘fit the audience’