HOW TO JUDGE THE QUALITY OF AN ARGUMENT

While taking college-level classes, students are often asked to read persuasive essays and then to analyze their effectiveness. Under normal circumstances, it is usually not enough to analyze a piece and to simply come to the conclusion that “the essay was good” or “I was persuaded.” We are expected to analyze, question, tear apart, and put back together the persuasive essay. We must decide if the argument is logical and persuasive, or if it is based on faulty premises and full of logical fallacies. The best way to do this is to dig into the text itself and analyze the persuasive dynamics at work. By applying the following questions, we can more effectively analyze argumentative writing and learn how to present our own arguments in a logical, fair, and well-supported manner.

AREAS TO EMPHASIZE

CONTROVERSY

Is this issue important? Is it worth our attention now? Does it have two (or multiple) sides?
Has the author clearly defined the issue?

The first thing to look for in an argument is whether it is actually an argument at all. Arguments should have two or more sides, and the argument should rest on an issue that is presently controversial—not an opinion or assertion that is already universally accepted. For example, an argument that claims that “The atom bomb is a devastating weapon” is not a very interesting one. Conversely, an argument that claims that “The atom bomb was the best thing that ever happened to Hiroshima” could raise a few eyebrows. One example of an unimportant issue might be “Biology students are serious about their studies”; a more interesting topic might focus on the idea that “The religious beliefs of BYU Biology students directly influence their academic success.” With a thesis such as this, the readers’ assumptions are immediately questioned and they want to learn more.

EVIDENCE

Are the assertions backed up by evidence? Is the evidence representative, up-to-date, and quoted correctly (grammatically and in context)? Is the evidence appropriate for the forum? Is it related to the conclusions that follow from it? Is there enough evidence provided to render the conclusions probable?

A strong persuasive essay will glean evidence from reputable sources, draw logical connections between the evidence and the proposed conclusion, and provide enough evidence to make the proposed conclusions feasible. For example, a student writes a paper claiming that a “babysitting co-op” (usually a community organization where parents cooperatively babysit for on another in a non-profit exchange) is the most trustworthy and least expensive form of day care. In order to sufficiently convince the author’s audience, the student would be expected to provide evidence supporting both parts of her claim: 1) economic and safety-related statistics comparing alternative forms of day care and 2) perhaps personal testimony by practicing co-op members supporting these claims. The author would have to collect enough statistics and personal testimonies to convince her readers that with a co-op, lowered costs and increased security are high probabilities.
PREMISES AND CONCLUSIONS
Are the stated and unstated premises true? Is the reasoning to conclusions valid?

Premises are the underlying assumptions upon which an argument is based. Metaphorically, a premise can be seen as the structural skeleton or foundation of a building; individual facts can be seen as the bricks and mortar which are used to support the building. Identifying the premises of an argument is essential because if the premises are faulty or invalid, it follows that the conclusion will also be faulty or invalid. The reader must evaluate the premises and decide if the argument has been built on logical or illogical assumptions.

In an essay, premises can be explicit and/or implicit. One example of an explicit, or straightforward and blatant premise might be found in an argument that persuades the reader to support capital punishment because, according to the author, “it is the government’s duty to protect innocent citizens from dangerous criminals.” An implicit, or underlying, premise might be found in an argument that also advocates capital punishment but does so by citing three examples of capital punishment from the Bible. In this case, the author expects the reader to draw the conclusions based on her implicit assumption that if God approves of capital punishment, we should also approve of it.

To analyze the conclusion of an argumentative piece, one should look at the reasoning that leads up to the conclusion. Let’s look at examples of solid vs. faulty reasoning. Two students write papers advocating the use of Coppertone sun block because it is “your best weapon against sunburns.” Solid reasoning might cite evidence such as the following: Coppertone is waterproof, it has the highest UVP quotient available, and, compared to other brands, 9 out of 10 customers claim that Coppertone works better. Faulty reasoning leading to the same conclusion might cite the following: Coppertone smells better than the leading brand, it doesn’t leave a sticky film, and it is tan-enhancing. It is clear that evidence such as this is not leading us to conclude that Coppertone is good for blocking out the sun. It leads us to an entirely different conclusion.

THE OPPOSITION
Does the author carefully consider the other sides of the argument? Are the other sides shown in their true light? Has the author considered all pertinent alternatives and demonstrated why her conclusion has more merit than the alternatives?

One sign of a poor argument is the tendency to ignore or overlook potential objections to the argumentative thesis. A fair and logical argument will assess the opposing claims and will spend time either entertaining or refuting those claims. When writers show that they understand the opposing points of view, they give themselves and their argument credibility; nevertheless, they must also show why their assertion is more correct than the opposition’s assertions. For example, a student writes an essay claiming that solar power is the best energy source because it is inexpensive and renewable. To effectively argue this case, the student would be expected to explain why fossil fuels and nuclear energy are not the best energy sources. To strengthen the argument, the student would do well to also treat anticipated objections to solar power, such as the following: Is solar energy a feasible alternative for cold weather climates? Can solar energy realistically provide for all of our energy needs? etc.
THE CONSEQUENCES

If the author's claims were put into practice, what could be the consequences?
Has the author seriously considered the consequences of her/his claims?

Oftentimes an author will come up with a solution to a problem which might work in one instance but would be disastrous in another. A good argument will assess the implications of its claims and will show that the implications are, in fact, beneficial. For example, an author might claim that legalizing marijuana is a good idea because the cost of marijuana will decrease, as will crime, and there will thus be more money circulating in the economy. This might sound like a persuasive idea until one considers the broader consequences of this claim. The author might not have considered how legalizing marijuana could increase drug-related accidents (on the road, on the job, etc.) which necessarily costs lives and money--two consequences which directly oppose the "positive" aspects of legalizing marijuana.

OVERALL CONSISTENCY

Do all the assumptions, reasons, conclusions, and purposes of the author cohere into a unified logical whole, or are there contradictions? Do the emotional appeals work in conjunction with the logical appeals, or in opposition? Is the author's behavior in the text consistent or inconsistent with the world view and values that underlie her/his argument?

Essays with glaring inconsistencies are generally regarded as poor arguments. If an author sends out conflicting messages about himself, his topic or conclusion, or even about you the reader, the author seems illogical or insufficiently aware of the circumstances of his case. When analyzing the consistency of an essay, identify the various supporting parts and analyze whether they work in harmony with the conclusion or whether they work against one another. For example, you have just read an essay written by a self-proclaimed feminist. The essay focuses on gender equality in the workplace, and although the essayist provides much evidence to support her thesis, you notice that she occasionally uses sexist or stereotypical language. This example shows inconsistency between the thesis and the author's ethos and perhaps even the intended audience. By identifying specific consistencies as well as inconsistencies, you can more intelligently judge the quality of an argument.

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