

WRITING ABOUT THE THEME

Understanding Businesses and Consumers

1. Most of the writers in this chapter examine the unintended consequences of actions taken by companies and consumers. Stephanie Alaimo and Mark Koester's warning against self-service checkout (p. 287) and Dana Thomas's exposé on counterfeiting (p. 292) are most notable in this respect, but even Barbara Ehrenreich's analysis of high rents (p. 279) suggests how difficult it is to predict the social effects of a purchase, and Charlie LeDuff's look at the effects of a GM factory closing (p. 300) shows how business decisions can haunt a community. Think of a contemporary product or service that you believe holds the potential to do unexpected harm—or that could bring unanticipated benefits—and write an essay predicting its consequences. (Be sure to review the cause-and-effect guidelines on pp. 281–86 before beginning your analysis.)
2. Pico Iyer (p. 280), Dana Thomas, Stephanie Alaimo and Mark Koester, and Charlie LeDuff all consider the stigma attached to a particular consumer option: Iyer suggests that reducing consumption is the key to happiness; Alaimo and Koester attempt to persuade readers that self-checkout machines are morally wrong; Thomas stresses that we should not buy fake luxury goods because doing so hurts people thousands of miles away; and LeDuff, writing about a GM factory town, mentions that "Nobody . . . dared drive anything but a Chevy or a GMC." Write an essay in which you consider the power of negative publicity. Can regular people influence the behavior of large corporations by boycotting what they have to offer? To what extent does big business control the marketplace regardless of how customers might object? Center your discussion on a particular business or practice that concerns you. Perhaps you'd like to propose a boycott of your own. Just be sure that your essay has a clear, limited thesis and plenty of details to support it.
3. Although the writers represented in this chapter all touch on problems of poverty or underemployment, their tones vary widely, from objective to moralistic to resigned. Choose the two authors who seem most different in tone, and analyze how their tones help clarify their points. Is one author's tone more effective than the other's? If so, why? (For more on tone, see pp. 41–43.)

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ARGUMENT AND PERSUASION Debating Law and Order

Since we argue all the time—with relatives, with friends, with the auto mechanic or the shop clerk—a chapter devoted to argument and persuasion may at first seem unnecessary. But arguing with an auto mechanic over the cost of repairs is quite a different process from arguing with readers over a complex issue. In both cases we are trying to find common ground with our audience, perhaps to change its views or even to compel it to act as we wish. But the mechanic is in front of us; we can shift our tactics in response to his or her gestures, expressions, and words. The reader, in contrast, is "out there"; we have to anticipate those gestures, expressions, and words in the way we structure the argument, the kinds of evidence we use to support it, even the way we conceive of the subject.

A great many assertions that are worth making are debatable at some level—whether over the facts on which the assertions are based or over the values they imply. Two witnesses to an accident cannot agree on what they saw; two scientists cannot agree on what an experiment shows; two economists cannot agree on what measures will reduce unemployment; two doctors cannot agree on what constitutes life or death. We see such disagreements play out in writing all the time, whether we're reading an accident report, a magazine article claiming the benefits of unemployment rates, or an editorial responding to a Supreme Court decision.

Reading Argument and Persuasion

Technically, argument and persuasion are two different processes:

- **Argument** appeals mainly to an audience's sense of reason in order to negotiate a common understanding or to win agreement with a claim. It is the method of a columnist who defends a president's foreign policy on the grounds of economics and defense strategy.
- **Persuasion** appeals mainly to an audience's feelings and values in order to compel some action, or at least to win support for an action. It is the method of a mayoral candidate who urges voters to support her because she is sensitive to the poor.

But argument and persuasion so often mingle that we will use the one term *argument* to mean a deliberate appeal to an audience's reason and emotions in order to create compromise, win agreement, or compel action. Making an effective case for an opinion requires upholding certain responsibilities and attending to several established techniques of argumentation, most of them dating back to ancient Greece.

The Elements of Argument

All arguments share certain elements.

- The core of any argument is an assertion or proposition, a debatable claim about the subject. Generally, this assertion is expressed as a thesis statement. It may defend or attack a position, suggest a solution to a problem, recommend a change in policy, or challenge a value or belief. Here are a few examples:

The college should give first priority for on-campus jobs to students who need financial aid.

School prayer has been rightly declared unconstitutional and should not be reinstated in any form.

Smokers who wish to poison themselves should be allowed to do so, but not in any place where their smoke will poison others.

- The central assertion is broken down into subclaims, each one supported by evidence.

- Significant opposing arguments are raised and dispensed with, again with the support of evidence.

- The parts of the argument are organized into a clear, logical structure that pushes steadily toward the conclusion.

A writer may draw on classification, comparison, or any other rhetorical method to develop the entire argument or to introduce evidence or strengthen the conclusion. For instance, in a proposal arguing for raising a college's standards of admission, a dean might contrast the existing standards with the proposed standards, analyze a process for raising the standards over a period of years, and predict the effects of the new standards on future students' preparedness for college work.

Appeals to Readers

Effective arguments appeal to readers: they ask others to listen to what someone has to say, judge the words fairly, and, as much as possible, agree with the writer. Most arguments combine three kinds of appeals to readers: ethical, emotional, and rational.

Ethical Appeal

The ethical-appeal is often not explicit in an argument, yet it pervades the whole. It is the sense a writer conveys of his or her expertise and character, projected by the reasonableness of the argument, by the use of evidence, and by tone. A rational argument shows readers that the writer is thinking logically and fairly (see pp. 315–17). Strong evidence establishes credibility (see pp. 315–17 and 321–22). And a sincere, reasonable tone demonstrates balance and goodwill (see pg. 325).

Emotional Appeal

The emotional appeal in an argument aims directly for the readers' hearts—for the complex of beliefs, values, and feelings deeply embedded in all of us. We are just as often motivated by these ingrained ideas and emotions as by our intellects. Even scientists, who stress the rational interpretation of facts above all else, are sometimes influenced in their interpretations by emotions deriving from, say, competition with other scientists. And the willingness of a nation's citizens to go to war may result more from their fear and pride than from their reasoned considerations of risks and gains. An emotional appeal in an argument attempts to tap such feelings for any of several reasons:

- To heighten the responsiveness of readers
- To inspire readers to new beliefs

- To compel readers to act
- To assure readers that their values remain unchallenged

An emotional appeal may be explicit, as when an argument against capital punishment appeals to readers' religious values by citing the Bible's Sixth Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." But an emotional appeal may also be less obvious, because individual words may have connotations that elicit emotional responses from readers. For instance, one writer may characterize an environmental group as "a well-organized team representing diverse interests," while another may call the same group "a hodgepodge of nature lovers and irresponsible businesspeople." The first appeals to readers' preference for order and balance, the second to readers' fear of extremism and disdain for unsound business practices. (See pp. 55–56 for more on connotation.)

The use of emotional appeals requires care:

- The appeal must be directed at the audience's actual beliefs and feelings.
- The appeal must be presented dispassionately enough so that readers have no reason to doubt the fairness in the rest of the argument.
- The appeal must be appropriate to the subject and to the argument. For instance, in arguing against a pay raise for city councilors, a legislator might be tempted to appeal to voters' resentment and distrust of wealthy people by pointing out that two of the councilors are rich enough to work for nothing. But such an appeal would divert attention from the issue of whether the pay raise is justified for all councilors on the basis of the work they do and the city's ability to pay the extra cost.

Carefully used, emotional appeals have great force, particularly when they contribute to an argument based largely on sound reasoning and evidence. The appropriate mix of emotion and reason in a given essay is entirely dependent on the subject, the writer's purpose, and the audience. Emotional appeals are out of place in most arguments in the natural and social sciences, where rational interpretations of factual evidence are all that will convince readers of the truth of an assertion. But emotional appeals may be essential to persuade an audience to support or take an action, for emotion is a stronger motivator than reason.

Rational Appeal

A **rational appeal** is one that, as the name implies, addresses the rational faculties of readers—their capacity to reason logically about a problem. It establishes the truth of a proposition or claim by moving through a series of related subclaims, each supported by evidence. In doing so, rational appeals follow processes of reasoning that are natural to all of us. These processes are induction and deduction.

Inductive reasoning moves from the particular to the general, from evidence to a generalization or conclusion about the evidence. It is a process we begin learning in infancy and use daily throughout our lives: a child burns herself the three times she touches a stove, so she concludes that stoves burn; a moviegoer has liked four movies directed by Clint Eastwood, so he forms the generalization that Clint Eastwood makes good movies. Inductive reasoning is also very common in argument: a nurse administrator might offer facts showing that chronic patients in the state's mental hospitals receive only drugs as treatment and then conclude that the state's hospitals rely exclusively on drugs to treat chronic patients.

The movement from particular to general is called an **inductive leap** because we must make something of a jump to conclude that what is true of some instances (the chronic patients whose records were available) is also true of all other instances in the class (the rest of the chronic patients). In an ideal world we could perhaps avoid the inductive leap by pinning down every conceivable instance, but in the real world such thoroughness is usually impractical and often impossible. Instead, we gather enough evidence to make our generalizations probable. The evidence for induction may be of several kinds:

- Facts: statistics or other hard data that are verifiable or, failing that, attested to by reliable sources (for instance, the number of drug doses per chronic patient, derived from hospital records).
- The opinions of recognized experts on the subject, opinions that are themselves conclusions based on research and observation (for instance, the testimony of an experienced hospital doctor).
- Examples illustrating the evidence (for instance, the treatment history of one patient).

A sound inductive generalization can form the basis for the second reasoning process, **deductive reasoning**. Working from the general to the particular, we start with such a generalization and apply it to a new situation in order to draw a conclusion about that situation. Like induction,

deduction is a process we use constantly to order our experience. The child who learns from three experiences that all stoves burn then sees a new stove and concludes that this stove also will burn. The child's thought process can be written in the form of a **syllogism**, a three-step outline of deductive reasoning:

All stoves burn me.

This is a stove.

Therefore, this stove will burn me.

The first statement, the generalization derived from induction, is called the **major premise**. The second statement, a more specific assertion about some element of the major premise, is called the **minor premise**. And the third statement, an assertion of the logical connection between the premises, is called the **conclusion**. The following syllogism takes the earlier example about mental hospitals one step further:

MAJOR PREMISE The state hospitals' treatment of chronic patients relies exclusively on drugs.

MINOR PREMISE Drugs do not cure chronic patients.

CONCLUSION Therefore, the state hospitals' treatment of chronic patients will not cure them.

Unlike an inductive conclusion, which requires a leap, the deductive conclusion derives necessarily from the premises: as long as the reasoning process is valid and the premises are accepted as true, then the conclusion must also be true. To be valid, the reasoning must conform to the process outlined earlier. The following syllogism is *not* valid, even though the premises are true:

All radicals want to change the system.

Georgia Allport wants to change the system.

Therefore, Georgia Allport is a radical.

The flaw in this syllogism is that not *only* radicals want to change the system, so Allport does not *necessarily* fall within the class of radicals just because she wants to change the system. The conclusion, then, is invalid.

A syllogism can be valid without being true if either of the premises is untrue. For example:

All people who want political change are radicals.

Georgia Allport wants political change.

Therefore, Georgia Allport is a radical.

The conclusion here is valid because Allport falls within the class of people who want political change. But the conclusion is untrue because the major premise is untrue. As commonly defined, a radical seeks extreme change, often by revolutionary means. But other forms and means of change are also possible; Allport, for instance, may be interested in improving the delivery of services to the poor and in achieving passage of tougher environmental-protection laws—both political changes, to be sure, but neither radical.

In arguments, syllogisms are rarely spelled out as neatly as in these examples. Sometimes the order of the statements is reversed, as in this sentence paraphrasing a Supreme Court decision:

The state may not imprison a man just because he is too poor to pay a fine; the only justification for imprisonment is a certain danger to society, and poverty does not constitute certain danger.

The buried syllogism can be stated thus:

MAJOR PREMISE The state may imprison only those who are a certain danger to society.

MINOR PREMISE A man who is too poor to pay a fine is not a certain danger to society.

CONCLUSION Therefore, the state cannot imprison a man just because he is too poor to pay a fine.

Often, one of a syllogism's premises or even its conclusion is implied but not expressed. Each of the following sentences omits one part of the same syllogism:

All five students cheated, so they should be expelled. [Implied major premise: cheaters should be expelled.]

Cheaters should be punished by expulsion, so all five students should be expelled. [Implied minor premise: all five students cheated.]

Cheaters should be punished by expulsion, and all five students cheated. [Implied conclusion: all five students should be expelled.]

Fallacies

Inappropriate emotional appeals and flaws in reasoning—called **fallacies**—can trap writers as they construct arguments. Writers must watch out for the following:

- **Hasty generalization:** an inductive conclusion that leaps to include *all* instances when at best only *some* instances provide any evidence. Hasty generalizations form some of our worst stereotypes:
 - Physically challenged people are mentally challenged, too.
 - African Americans are good athletes.
 - Italian Americans are volatile.
- **Oversimplification:** an inductive conclusion that ignores complexities in the evidence that, if heeded, would weaken the conclusion or suggest an entirely different one. For example:
 - The newspaper folded because it couldn't compete with television.
- Although television may have taken some business from the newspaper, hundreds of other newspapers continue to thrive; thus television could not be the only cause of the newspaper's failure.
- **Begging the question:** assuming a conclusion in the statement of a premise, and thus begging readers to accept the conclusion—the question—before it is proved. For example:

We can trust the president not to neglect the needy because he is a compassionate man.

This sentence asserts in a circular fashion that the president is not uncompassionate because he is compassionate. He may indeed be compassionate, but the question that needs addressing is what will he do for the needy.

- **Ignoring the question:** introducing an issue or consideration that shifts the argument away from the real issue. Offering an emotional appeal as a premise in a logical argument is a form of ignoring the question. The following sentence, for instance, appeals to pity, not to logic:
 - The mayor was badly used by people he loved and trusted, so we should not blame him for the corruption in his administration.
- **Ad hominem** (Latin for “to the man”): a form of ignoring the question by attacking the opponents instead of the opponents’ arguments. For example:
 - O’Brien is married to a convict, so her proposals for prison reform should not be taken seriously.

- **Either-or:** requiring that readers choose between two interpretations or actions when in fact the choices are more numerous.

Either we imprison all drug users, or we will become their prisoners. The factors contributing to drug addiction, and the choices for dealing with it, are obviously more complex than this statement suggests. Not all either-or arguments are invalid, for sometimes the alternatives encompass all the possibilities. But when they do not, the argument is false.

- **Non sequitur** (Latin for “it does not follow”): a conclusion derived illogically or erroneously from stated or implied premises. For instance:

Young children are too immature to engage in sex, so they should not be taught about it.

This sentence implies one of two meanings, both of them questionable: only the sexually active can learn anything about sex, or teaching young children about sex will cause them to engage in it.

- **Post hoc** (from the Latin *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, “after this, therefore because of this”): assuming that because one thing preceded another, it must have caused the other. For example:

After the town banned smoking in closed public places, the incidence of vandalism went up.

Many things may have caused the rise in vandalism, including improved weather and a climbing unemployment rate. It does not follow that the ban on smoking, and that alone, caused the rise.

Analyzing Argument and Persuasion in Paragraphs

Jenny Price (born 1960) is an environmental historian and freelance writer. The following paragraph is from “Gun Violence at UC Irvine,” an article she wrote for the *Los Angeles Times* in response to readers’ shock that a woman was shot to death in a neighborhood generally considered safe. The paragraph offers an inductive argument.