Writing Arguments: An Overview

What is an argument? Think about attorneys arguing a criminal "Who dunnit?" The prosecutor claims the gardener did it: The gardener's attorney says, "Prove it!" The burden falls on the prosecutor arguing the case to supply the damning evidence. The defense need only counter the claim with an argument casting doubt on the prosecution.

Facing the same audience, each attorney will try to persuade the jury. The judge sees to it that the arguments are presented in an orderly fashion. One will inevitably hold more water than the other. After considering the merits of each, the jury will return. The bailiff will hand the judge a folded piece of paper. The verdict will either be: "Guilty-the evidence is overwhelming-the gardener did it" or, "Not-it's doubtful the gardener did it-the evidence was insufficient."

An argument is a formal presentation of evidence that supports a particular claim or position regarding an issue of interest to a specific audience. Its persuasive strength rests on the rhetorical skills of the author-the art of
wielding the rational, emotional and stylistic tools of language in a skillful and conscious effort to persuade. Its logic is built upon rational premises and follows to a conclusion reasonable people are willing to accept.

Formal vs. Informal Arguments

The difference between a formal and an informal argument is in the burden of proof. A formal argument clearly states the claim or position it argues and presents a well-developed chain of evidence leading to a reasonable conclusion supporting the claim. The chain of evidence itself may include a wide variety of elements ranging from personal experience to statistical data and expert testimony.

Informal arguments contain little or no supportive evidence. "I did the dishes last night" may be all that's necessary to encourage your roommate to do them tonight but it's hardly an argument designed to convince or persuade. Its primary purpose is merely to assert, or point something out, nothing more.

Informal arguments are the stock-in-trade of radio and TV talk-shows, op-ed pages and letters to the editor. Generally speaking, they're used to instigate discussion among individuals holding different opinions. Quite often they are used to provoke a confrontation between those who flat-out disagree with each other (e.g., *The O'Reilly Factor* and *The Jerry Springer Show*). Seldom do they end in a consensus of opinion or a reasonable conclusion.

Academic Arguments

An academic argument is a formal argument constructed according to the specific conventions of the academic discipline in which it is presented. A literature argument, for instance, will typically include evidence from the
literary text in question; a biology argument will include data from field or laboratory research.

Before beginning your argument, ask your instructor what academic conventions you will be expected to follow. Though many elements will remain the same, the norms for stating a claim or position, organizing the argument's evidence, structuring and styling its presentation and citing its sources will differ from one discipline to the next and from context to context.

Common to all academic arguments, however, are the following:

- **The claim must be arguable:** A disagreement or a number of legitimate points of view must exist regarding the claim. If everyone in the audience is in agreement there really isn't anything to argue over.

- **The argument must be rational:** An argument must be based in fact not emotion. The claim must be meticulously considered, the evidence thoroughly researched and carefully selected; the audience correctly assessed.

- **The logic must be cohesive:** A claim must be argued linearly, step-by-step, with appropriate transitions revealing the logic that ties one point to the next. If a minor point doesn't add to the main point, it doesn't belong.

**Credit must be given where credit is due:** All outside sources must be documented (e.g., footnotes, endnotes, and in-text citations) using a citation format approved by the academic discipline into which the argument falls.

**Citation Information**

Copyright Information

Copyright © 1994-2020 Colorado State University and/or this site's authors, developers, and contributors. Some material displayed on this site is used with permission.