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Part 1: Section 1.0

Introduction to Essays and Arguments

One of the single most important intellectual skills in an undergraduate education is learning to write an essay that clearly and convincingly presents a point of view. In order to do this, you must learn the art of constructing and dealing with arguments.

Essayist Aldous Huxley identifies three "poles of reference" for essays: personal/autobiographical, objective/factual, and abstract/universal. These might also be thought of as "who," "what," or "why" essays. You have probably written many "who" and "what" papers in the lower grades, so it's now time to build your skills even further by mastering the art of answering "why" in a logical and compelling way. This handbook focuses on what are probably the most important written assignments in English and the Humanities, the argumentative (or persuasive) essay and research paper. However, most of the material applies equally well to other subjects and to spoken presentations.

The following sections introduce some of the more important elements in the analysis and construction of arguments in written form. Each section is structured to encourage you to develop skills that will make your arguments, especially written presentations in essays or reports, more persuasive and will also improve your ability to analyze the arguments of others.

Arguments: Some Simple First Principles

2.1 Initial Comments

Put most simply, an argument is an attempt to persuade someone of something. It is prompted usually by a disagreement, confusion, or ignorance about something which the arguers wish to resolve or illuminate in a convincing way. In the most general sense, arguments go on all the time; they are a staple ingredient of many conversations, as well as the heart of any enquiry into the truth or probability of something (as in, for example, the judicial process, a scientific research project, a policy analysis, a business plan, and so forth).

Arguments can also, of course, be internal, as, for example, when we are faced with making a difficult choice (Should I marry this man? Is it right for me to oppose capital punishment? Why do I need to purchase a new home? Which candidate should I vote for? And so on).

The final goal of an argument is usually to reach a conclusion which is sufficiently persuasive to convince someone of something (a course of action, the reasons for an event, the responsibility for certain acts, the probable truth of an analysis, or the validity of an interpretation). Arguments may also often have an important negative purpose: to convince someone that something is not the case.

2.2 Trivial Arguments over Matters of Established Fact

Some arguments are relatively trivial and easy to resolve. For example, if I argue that I am taller than you and if you disagree, then we may argue about the fact. However, this argument immediately suggests a quick resolution: we stand back to back and let one or more third parties observe the difference. Similarly, if I argue that Berlin is the capital of Germany and you argue that I am wrong, because Bonn is the capital, then we can resolve that argument quickly by referring to an acceptable authority on the subject.

Arguments like the ones above are easy to deal with so long as two conditions hold: first, that there is a quick authoritative way of resolving the difference (e.g., by standing back to back or by consulting a book) and, second, that all the disputants agree to acknowledge the authority referred to. In the above cases, if I do not trust the testimony of the third parties who are observing our height difference or if I do not trust the book we consult, then the argument is not resolved (because I refuse to be persuaded), and it will continue to be unresolved until the disputants agree or are forced to agree to a suitable authority.

Such arguments are, as mentioned, usually relatively trivial. Their resolution is easy and quick because there is an immediate authority to establish the facts (i.e., what is true), and there is general agreement about that authority (like a dictionary or encyclopedia). Thus, once that authority rules on the question, then the argument is over. This example seems like an obvious point (and it is), but, as we shall see, it is really important that, if you are seeking to set up an argument (especially about literature), you should not base it on a trivial claim about which it is impossible to construct a significant argument because your claim can be resolved by a quick appeal to the agreed authorities.

Many student essays, for example, in which an argument is called for set the essay up as asserting something very obvious (a matter of fact). When that occurs, the essay ceases to be an argument of any consequence (and therefore the essay is a poor one) because the writer is defending the obvious. An essay with a central claim like one of the following, for example, is asserting something trivial or obvious (or both):

1. *Hamlet is the prince of Denmark, and he dies at the end of the play.*
2. *The French Revolution which started in 1789 brought about many changes.*
3. *Socrates's argument in the* Apology *does not persuade a sufficient number of jurors to bring about an acquittal.*

4. Functional illiteracy is surprisingly common in modern industrial society.

5. There is much discussion in Canada today about aboriginal rights.

These are statements of established fact. We could dispute them (I suppose), but a prolonged argument would be very fruitless, since we simply have to check an authority (like the text of *Hamlet* or the *Apology* or the pages of the newspaper) to resolve the debate.

An important initial warning in your essay writing classes is going to urge you to avoid thesis statements like those above (more about this later).

2.3 More Complex and Interesting Arguments

Arguments become more complex when we are not immediately certain about how to resolve them. For example, if I argue that I am a faster runner than you and if you disagree, we have an argument. It might seem that this difference of opinion could be easily resolved by having a race. But we will first have to agree on what form the race should take. In other words, we will have to reach agreement on what the phrase faster runner means (are we talking about a sprint, a middle distance, a long distance, or some combination of races?). Until we find some agreement on what constitutes a proper measurement of the key term in the argument, we will not be able to resolve the issue. And obviously if I make a claim that I am a better athlete or more intelligent than you, the definition of the key term (better athlete or more intelligent) is going to be considerably more difficult to define.

This form of argument is extremely common in science and in social science, where the issue is often the adequacy of a particular research model or method which has come up with certain conclusions (for example, any argument about poverty in Canada will have to find a persuasive way to define that term). The central issue then is often whether or not the test or definition which has been devised to resolve an argument is adequate (just as I might argue that a sprint is not an adequate test of running ability).

This point is even more obvious if we move to a really complex argument like the guilt or innocence of an accused person. Here we cannot simply stand the disputants back to back; nor can we devise a series of physical tests or consult a special book to resolve the question. To obtain a conclusion, we have to set up an agreed-upon process in which the different possibilities are presented, explored, challenged, in short, argued, and then finally adjudicated by a disinterested third party (a judge or a jury), all within the context of some acknowledged rules of what counts as evidence or acceptable presentation of a case and what does

not. The entire complex process requires from the participants a shared agreement about the appropriateness of the means undertaken to resolve it and a long process of argument.

This example brings out once again the essential point that arguments cannot proceed to any sort of satisfactory conclusion unless the parties to the disagreement have a common understanding of the rule-governed process by which the argument can proceed to a resolution. At different times and in different cultures, the processes by which disagreements have been dealt with have varied enormously, from trials by combat (to judge the guilt or innocence of someone accused of treason), to inspections of animal entrails (to decide on the right course of military action), to casting the stones and bones or various sacred objects, to consulting scripture, oracles, designated holy persons, or the astrological signs, to flipping coins, and so on.

Any of these above methods will effectively resolve the argument provided all parties to it concur that the process (whose rules they understand and agree to) is the appropriate way to proceed. One of the major problems when different cultures collide is often that the different peoples do not understand each other's methods for dealing with arguments.

It is, of course, essential for any continuing peaceful order in society and in one's personal life that agreed-upon methods for resolving arguments be in place. Without them, certain decisions might be impossible to make with any hope of securing agreement, and at times the argument may degenerate into active hostility and physical violence (resolving the dispute by brute force, without any rules). The latter is generally a sign that whatever is supposed to be working to resolve disagreements is no longer effective. And when such violence takes over an entire society, its culture has broken down in the most serious way possible (i.e., in civil war).

For that reason, we insist that judicial arguments, legislative debates, industrial disputes, divorce mediation, and so on take place in specially designated places and according to agreed upon processes and rules, rather than in the back streets. And for the same reason we agree to abide by the processes we have set up to resolve the argument, even if the result is not always what we had hoped for.

Thus, for example, in Canada we agree that the winner in an election will be the leader of all the people and that the verdict of the jury will decide the matter once and for all in a murder trial, even if we have strong objections to the result. In any situation where we begin to abandon our agreement that such decisions will resolve the issue (for example, by taking

the law into our own hands if the result does not satisfy us), the fabric of society starts to experience important and dangerous tensions.

2.4 The Importance of Reason

In our society, for causes too complex to discuss here, we long ago determined that the appropriate way in which arguments must be conducted and adjudicated is through proper reasoning. We will be looking more closely at what this means in later sections, but for the moment it is important to note that in making this decision we, in effect, rejected various other traditional ways in which arguments had been dealt with (e.g., by appeals to scriptural authority or to traditional rituals based on hereditary power and privilege or to variously irrational methods, like astrology, augury, the *I Ching*, spiritual revelation, dunking, and so on).

Thus, to construct effective arguments in the modern western world, one must, first and foremost, have an understanding of the rules of reasoning. The major aim of an undergraduate education in all disciplines is to develop such an understanding in students.

Of course, we are a liberal society, and we still allow people in their private lives to resolve their arguments or make their private decisions (which often amounts to much the same thing) in any manner they wish, short of inflicting physical harm on others. So it is quite permissible in one's private affairs to consult scripture, toss coins, use numerology, consult spirit mediums, or sit around a Ouija board in order to resolve private arguments (once again, however, all participants have to agree if the resolution is to be persuasive and thus secure agreement among a group of people).

In the public world of work, politics, education, and the media, however, the primary requirement of an effective argument in our modern pluralistic society is that it must be rational (that is, follow the rules of reason). Of course, in this public world there is often a great deal of irrationality (e.g., in political speeches and in advertising). An important part of being an educated citizen is possessing the skill to recognize this irrationality, especially when it is posing as a reasonable argument, since manipulating citizens through misleading arguments is a major feature of modern life.

What are these rules of reason? Well, that is what this section of the handbook is largely concerned with, at least on a fairly basic level. The sections which follow offer some specific guidelines about the nature of a reasonable argument, about how to produce one in an essay