Teaching Argumentation

Overview

Teaching students "how to write" can seem like a daunting task on top of teaching them course content. On the other hand, if you teach students how to *argue*, you can leverage writing to help students engage more deeply with course content. In Andrea Lunsford and John Ruszkiewicz's widely-adopted textbook, *Everything's An Argument*, they lay out perhaps the clearest definition of argument in the university setting we've seen, and it's worth quoting in full:

> …[A]n academic argument is simply one that is held to the standards of a professional field or discipline, such as psychology, engineering, political science, or English. It is an argument presented to knowledgeable people by writers who are striving to make an honest case that is based on the best information and research available, with all of its sources carefully documented. (15)

Thus, when you teach argument, you're teaching students how to think, and how to communicate their thinking, about the course material—the "meat" of your field—while also teaching them how to write.

Arguments take a nearly endless variety of shapes, but every argument needs claims and evidence—whether explicit or implicit—in order to work. Many rhetoricians break down the building blocks even further, including reasons as well as evidence, while some consider reasons and evidence part of the same element.

Claims: *What* you are arguing. A thesis statement, then, is the main claim of an argument. All other claims used to build up to that main claim are supporting, or sub-claims.

Reasons: *Why* you are making the claims you're making. You can see why some just break the elements in to claims and evidence; reasons, seen one way, are sub-claims.

Evidence: *How* you can support/prove your claims.
In this resource you will find information about the ways argument is typically used in academia, the most common types of claims arguments make, and strategies for teaching argument, approaching it from various angles appropriate across disciplines.

The terminology you will see in this resource may not align exactly with the terms in your discipline, but the strategies elaborated here are adaptable across fields.

General Considerations

Argument is both a process and a product
People who write about argument (and teaching argument) imagine argument as two things:
1. a process of (the *act of*) of inquiry, discovery, and/or truth-seeking, and
2. a product (an *end result)*—one that includes mature reasoning, understanding, persuasion, and/or communication.

Neither the process nor the product exists in a vacuum but instead responds to a specific rhetorical situation.

Effective arguments respond to their specific rhetorical situations.
In crafting any kind of argument, students need to understand their full rhetorical situation:
- WHO they're writing to (Who is their audience?),
- WHO the stakeholders are (Who are all the parties for whom this argument matters?),
- WHY they're writing (their purpose),
- WHAT their role is as the writer (Are they writing as students? Concerned citizens? Artists? Professionals? Something else?),
- WHAT the context of their argument is, and
- WHAT genres, mediums, and forms will best reach their ideal audience(s).

In other words, arguments are part of a larger conversation, whether in a field of study, a political arena, etc. Understanding the rhetorical situation necessitates identifying what conversation students want to enter. The "Classroom Strategies" section below has some ideas for how to help students understand and respond to rhetorical situations. [For an effective handout on the rhetorical situation, see **Supplement 1: Rhetorical Situations**.]

Arguments can lie on a spectrum from truth-seeking to persuasion, and in academic contexts, there is sometimes a distinction between "argument" and persuasion.
Much current thinking asserts that everything *is*, in some form or other, an argument. On the other hand, if you stop there, you're guaranteed to confuse your students. An argument isn't always a statement of "This is true, that's not, and here's why," or "Do this thing if you want to be [happy/successful/elected/etc.]." One way to pull together the multiple ways of seeing the world around us as full of texts communicating arguments is to imagine a spectrum: At one end of the spectrum, an argument exists to change someone's mind about something—to get them to think, feel, or do something as a result of engaging with an argument. At the other end is pure truth-seeking—an invitation to explore multiple aspects of an issue, looking for the best answer/solution/etc. Some uses for argument along the spectrum are: Truth-seeking, exploring, informing, decision-making, convincing,

Arguments can be implicit or explicit
Many humanities students think of argument in terms of the "traditional research paper," in which a writer states her thesis, provides a series of clearly stated claims that add up to that thesis, and offers direct support for each claim along the way. (In some ways, this go-to structure is the result of the formulaic five-paragraph-essay approach.) Many students in STEM fields understand argument as taking the IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, Analysis, Discussion) form. What most students—both in the humanities STEM fields, and the social sciences—often don't realize is that arguments can take a multitude of other forms, including

implicit forms such as personal narratives, songs, memes, open letters, charts and graphs, etc. It's important to help students learn to identify the unspoken claims (and their underlying assumptions or warrants), reasons, and evidence in less explicit, less familiarly "argumentative" genres.

Explicit arguments can benefit from acknowledging and incorporating counterarguments.
A counterargument is a type of rebuttal. One way to build credibility in crafting persuasive arguments is to make use of possible counterarguments.
Rebuttals are your way of acknowledging and dealing with objections to your argument, and they can take two different forms:

1. Refutations: Refutations are an often more confrontational form of rebuttal that work by targeting the weaknesses in a possible objection to your argument. Think of refutations as the more sophisticated and mature older sibling of, "that's not true!" Generally, they work by pointing out weaknesses with the solidity or rationale of the objection's claim itself (what the objector says about the argument) or of its evidence (the support offered for the claim).
2. Counterarguments: Counterarguments are a more cooperative form of rebuttal. In counterarguments, a writer acknowledges the strengths or validity of someone else's argument, but then makes a case for why their approach is still the best/most effective/most viable

Structurally, incorporating counterarguments can be done in a few ways: either you can include a paragraph or section that explicitly addresses possible counterarguments (see Classical and Rogerian structures below), you can include a counterargument and response with each claim, or you can even structure an entire argument as a rebuttal to someone else's argument.

Students can strengthen their argumentative skills by reading and reverse-engineering model arguments effectively.
Because argument takes different forms and follows different conventions across curricula and disciplines, two skills you can teach your students that will transfer to any context are close reading and analyzing models. You can best help your students by exposing them to common genres in your field, helping them identify the goals, conventions, and modes of these genres. You can help them understand, in other words, how people in your discipline make arguments—what kinds of claims (explicit and/or implicit) your field values, what kinds of evidence counts as reliable, how arguments in the genres are organized, etc. You should show students how to read in your field, in other words, so that they can identify, and then emulate, the conventions of the field themselves. The "Classroom Strategies" section below has some ideas for how you can help students practice reverse-engineering.

Academics across curricula work with argument, but the genres, types, and purposes of argument vary according to discipline.
In the arts and humanities, argument tends to be "text-centered," or based in what many know as close reading and/or theoretical analysis. Common genres under this mantle include literary and rhetorical criticism, comparison/contrast essays, interpretive thesis-driven essays, etc. Evaluative genres, such as performance, art, or music reviews, tend to be popular in the arts and humanities. Data-driven empirical arguments tend to show up more frequently in the social sciences and STEM fields. Some examples of common argumentative genres here include

posters, lab reports, etc. Finally, decision-based arguments (closely related to, and often combined with, proposal arguments) show up in various contexts across the board, but are popular in fields like public policy, business, law, etc. Some examples are policy statements, business plans, position papers, etc.

Six Common Types of Claim·

The six most common types of claim are: **fact, definition, value, cause, comparison,** and **policy**. Being able to identify these types of claim in other people's arguments can help students better craft their own. The types of claim can also be used to brainstorm possible arguments students might make about an issue they have decided to examine.

- A **claim of fact** takes a position on questions like: What happened? Is it true? Does it exist? Example: "Though student demonstrations may be less evident than they were in the 1960s, students are more politically active than ever."
- A **claim of definition** takes a position on questions like: What is it? How should it be classified or interpreted? How does its usual meaning change in a particular context? Example: "By examining what it means to 'network,' it's clear that social networking sites encourage not networking but something else entirely."
- A **claim of value** takes a position on questions like: Is it good or bad? Of what worth is it? Is it moral or immoral? Who thinks so? What do those people value? What values or criteria should I use to determine how good or bad? Example: "Video games are a valuable addition to modern education."
- A **claim of cause** takes a position on questions like: What caused it? Why did it happen? Where did it come from? What are the effects? What probably will be the results on a short-term and long-term basis? Example: "By seeking to replicate the experience of reading physical books, new hardware and software actually will lead to an appreciation of printed and bound texts for years to come."
- A **claim of comparison** takes a position on questions like: What can be learned by comparing one subject to another? What is the worth of one thing compared to another? How can we better understand one thing by looking at another? Example: "The varied policies of the US and British education systems reveal a difference in values."
- A **claim of policy** takes a position on questions like: What should we do? How should we act? What should be future policy? How can we solve this problem? What course of action should we pursue? Example: "Sex education should be part of the public school curriculum."

The "Classroom Strategies" section below offers some ideas for how to help students imagine using different types of claims.

[For a hard copy of the most common types of claim to provide your students, see Supplement 2: Six Common Types of Claim.]

Common Argumentative Structures

· The text of "Six Common Types of Claim" comes from a student-directed writing guide created by Paul Barron and Jennifer Metsker, and is available in Sweetland's Writing Guide for students, "How Do I Decide What to Argue?" as a pdf. Since the guide is addressed to students, this is a resource you could share with them directly.

Many arguments, particularly political and academic ones, draw on one or more of the three most common structures: Classical, Toulmin, and Rogerian. We mention these not so that you feel you need to master (or ask your students to master) the ins and outs of each, but rather because each of these offers recognizable patterns in wide use today.

Classical (derived from ancient Greek and Roman oratory practice): Arguments structured like classical orations are still widely common, particularly in academic essays, in part because a classical oration was designed to "win" a case. It was comprised of six different rhetorical moves, typically done in the same order, opening with an appeal to common interest and closing with an emotional flourish appealing to deeply held shared values or beliefs. The Latin terms for these moves aren't important for the purposes of this resource, but their descendants still appear in many typical academic essays: Introduction (a hook, a stated claim), Background (context, stakeholders, etc.), Lines of Argument (sub-claims and supporting evidence), Alternative Arguments (counterarguments), and Conclusion. Teaching students about this structure and where it came from may help them move *away* from the five-paragraph theme, since the original six moves of classical oration are its ancestors.

Toulmin: The most commonly used argumentative structure—and the one we use in this resource—is the Toulmin structure (named after British philosopher Stephen Toulmin). It is a logical structure comprised of claims, reasons, and evidence. Toulmin argumentation also reminds us to pay attention to the underlying assumptions or premises for arguments, known as warrants, which may or may not be explicitly stated. Also, Toulmin argumentation encourages the use of qualifiers (such as "most," "few," "under these conditions," "in general," "some might argue," etc.), which can make claims more precise.

Rogerian (derived from psychology): A Rogerian argumentative structure can provide a sense of collaboration and mutual respect. It takes its name from psychologist Carl Rogers, whose therapeutic approach urged people in conflict to attempt not just to tolerate one another's perspectives, but to fully understand and respect them. This drew the attention of rhetoricians who were looking for a more balanced and considered form of argumentation that favored truth-seeking, rather than one intended simply to win. A Rogerian argument typically includes four parts: an introduction that includes the full argumentative landscape, with all positions fairly represented in such a way that the writer demonstrates understanding of and respect for the range of perspectives involved; a rehearsal of situations in which the writer can honestly concede that the opposing solutions or views might be preferable; the writer's own position— including reasoning for why this position is valuable; and a discussion of this position's value to *all* stakeholders, including opponents.

Strategies for the Classroom:

Unpack the Rhetorical Situation. Often students think they understand the concept of the rhetorical situation, but when they encounter an argument "in the wild," they lose site of it. Helping students unpack the specific rhetorical situations of arguments they encounter in your class moves them toward a deeper understanding of how they work—and thus helps them plan their own arguments. One strategy is to ask students to make notes for each argument they read in your class (whether in a journal, on a blog, etc.) that articulates the following:

1. Who is the author of the piece? What is their role? What stake do they have in making this argument?
2. What are they arguing? (Is this piece merely informative? Exploring new terrain? Truth-seeking? Aiming to convince? Proposing a solution to a problem? Etc.)
3. Who are they writing for? What stake(s) does their audience have in the conversation? Why does it matter?
4. What is the piece responding to? (What's the larger conversation into which it enters?)

You might even consider beginning any discussion of a new piece—whether a lab report, policy proposal, theoretical analysis, review, etc.—with a report out of how people understood the rhetorical situation. Right away, then, your classroom conversation is focused on the larger conversation to which the work you're studying responds.

Reverse Outline of 2-3 Models. We often tell students that one of their best strategies for understanding good writing is locating models of what people have done before. Even when we explicitly tell them to find models that they can use as guides, though, often the resulting papers are perplexingly unlike the models. This happens when students "look" at models but don't *see how they work*. Creating a "reverse outline" helps students to understand the piece's characteristics, structure, language conventions, etc. Here is a basic approach to creating a reverse outline:
- Number each paragraph of the model source.
- In a separate document, type the number of each paragraph, and then
- Write a sentence that explains what that paragraph's purpose is (for instance, "this paragraph is providing context for the author's argument") and paraphrase its main idea. Now, laid out in a document in front of you, you have the structure and main points of the model piece.
- Finally, write a paragraph or two in which you note:
    o the kinds of language the piece uses (jargon? everyday speech?) and what the tone is like,
    o what types of claim(s) it makes (fact? definition? value? cause? comparison? policy?)
    o what kinds of evidence it employs (scholarly work? new media? interviews? anecdotes? Statistics? something else?),
    o how evidence is integrated (direct quotes? paraphrases? summaries? hyperlinks? graphs/charts?), and
    o how the evidence is applied (used as a model? used to establish context, fact, etc.? analyzed and taken further?)

Try Making Arguments with Different Kinds of Claims. As students are tasked with creating their own arguments, they are often uncertain of how to decide what to argue in the first place. One way for them to make decisions about the best approaches to take is to have them try to generate as many claims of each type (fact, definition, cause, value, comparison, policy) as they can for their chosen topic or issue. When they've generated claims, you can tell them to identify what reasons and evidence supports each claim. Taking a look at which types of claims they have been able to say the most about will provide an indication for students of a) what their most viable claims are, and b) what they already know (which they will be able to articulate in some fashion, even if it's fairly rudimentary) and what they still need to find out in order to make their argument.

Role-Play: Entering the Conversation. Many times students feel they lack the authority to join a conversation about their subject. They tend to think, "What could I possibly have to add that these published writers haven't already said?" (And of course they feel nervous: the imperative to contribute "new knowledge" can seem daunting to all of us, not just students!) Modernist scholar and rhetorician Mark Gaipa has laid out—in humorous and accessible form—several strategies for young scholars to use in his article "Breaking into the Conversation: How Students Can Acquire Authority for their Writing." We recommend having your students read the article (bibliographic information below in "Further Reading") along with a text or two that you're discussing in class. Students will use Gaipa's strategies to engage with these texts. For added learning power, tell them that other course readings/figures are fair game for incorporation into this activity. Here we've adapted his strategies into a classroom role-playing activity that both familiarizes students with the rhetorical moves he advocates while giving them practice brainstorming how to enact them.

Step 1. Break students into eight groups (one for each strategy):

Step 2. Privately assign each group a strategy to take on (so that the others don't know which groups have been given which strategies).
1. Picking a fight,
2. Ass kissing,
3. Piggybacking,
4. Leapfrogging,
5. Playing peacemaker,
6. Acting paranoid,
7. Dropping out,
8. Crossbreeding the conversation with something new

Step 3. Give each group a few minutes to devise an approach to entering a conversation with the assigned course material using their assigned strategy.

Step 4. Instead of typical "reporting out" (going around the room and asking each group to describe what they came up with), ask each group to "perform" their approach. For example, they could write out exactly what someone would "say" (and who they would address), even employing tone of voice, in order to join the conversation using their strategy.

Step 5. The others in the room try to identify which strategy the group is enacting.

Step 6. As a class, discuss how their approach is likely to be received, and why. Are there slight alterations they might make to improve their chances of being accepted? Should they combine their strategy with another? Why? If there classmates had trouble identifying the strategy, why was that the case? Was there an element missing? The answers to these questions have everything to do with the specific rhetorical situation in your classroom and your field of study.

Choose a Structure. As we note in the General Considerations above, arguments take on a variety of forms, genres, and structures across disciplines and curricula. One way to help move students toward a draft, or even toward an outline, of an argument is to have them consider the common argumentative structures carefully and make a conscious decision about which one (or combination) best fits their rhetorical situation. For instance, you might have them sketch out what they would include for each element of a classical, Toulmin, or Rogerian argument about their topic, choose which one they think would be most effective, and make a case for why they've chosen that approach. Depending on what they choose, you can have a conversation about why different structures are more favorable in your field (though two different structures might work equally well just based on topic alone).

Further Reading

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