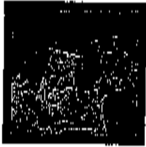
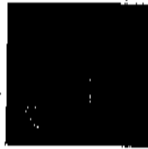
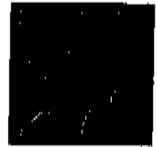
chapter one

Everything Is an Argument



"Best Ribs in Texas!" a sign in front of a restaurant promises.

A professor interrupts a lecture to urge her students to spend less time on the Internet and more in the company of thick, old books.

Claiming to have been a good boy for most of the year, a youngster asks Santa Claus for a bicycle with lots of gears.

A senator argues with a C-SPAN caller that members of Congress need a raise because most political perks have disappeared and it is expensive to maintain a home in Washington, D.C.

A nurse assures a patient eyeing an approaching needle, "This won't hurt one bit."

A sports columnist blasts a football coach for passing on fourth down and two in a close game—even though the play produces a touchdown.

A traffic sign orders drivers to STOP.

"Please let me make it through exams!" a student silently prays.

■ ■ ■

An argument can be any text—whether written, spoken, or visual—that expresses a point of view. When you write an argument, you try to influence the opinions of readers—or of yourself. Sometimes arguments can be aggressive, composed deliberately to change what readers believe, think, or do. At other times your goals may be more subtle, and your writing may be designed to convince yourself or others that specific facts are reliable or that certain views should be considered or at least tolerated.

In fact, some theorists claim that *every* text is an argument, designed to influence readers. For example, a poem that observes what little girls do in church may indirectly critique the role religion plays in women's lives, for good or ill:

> **I worry for the girls.**
> **I once had braids,**
> **and wore lace that made me suffer.**
> **I had not yet done the things**
> **that would need forgiving.**
> **—Kathleen Norris, "Little Girls in Church"**

To take another example, observations about family life among the poor in India may suddenly illuminate the writer's life and the reader's experience, forcing comparisons that quietly argue for change:

> **I have learned from Jagat and his family a kind of commitment, a form of friendship that is not always available in the West, where we have become cynical and instrumental in so many of our relationships to others.**
>
> **—Jeremy Seabrook, "Family Values"**

Even humor makes an argument when it causes readers to become aware—through bursts of laughter or just a faint smile—of the way things are and how they might be different:

There is a serious question in my mind about whether guys actually have deep innermost feelings, unless you count, for example, loyalty to the Detroit Tigers, or fear of bridal showers.

–Dave Barry, "Guys vs. Men"

More obvious as arguments are pieces that make a claim and present evidence to support it. Such writing often moves readers to recognize problems and to consider solutions. Suasion of this kind is usually easy to recognize:

Discrimination against Hispanics, or any other group, should be fought and there are laws and a massive apparatus to do so. But the way to eliminate such discrimination is not to classify all Hispanics as victims.

–Linda Chavez, "Towards a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation"

The real cultural fear is not that women are becoming too Victorian but that they are becoming too damn aggressive—in and out of bed.

–Susan Faludi, "Whose Hype?"

Resistance to science is born of fear. Fear, in turn, is bred by ignorance. And it is ignorance that is our deepest malady.

–J. Michael Bishop, "Enemies of Promise"

ARGUMENT ISN'T JUST ABOUT WINNING

If in some ways all language has an "argumentative edge" that aims to make a point (after all, even saying "good morning" acknowledges that someone deserves a greeting and asks that you be acknowledged in return), not all language use aims to win out over others. In contrast to the traditional concept of "agonistic" or combative argument, communication theorists such as Sonja Foss and Josina Makau describe an invitational argument, which aims not to win over another person or group but to invite others to enter a space of mutual regard and exploration. In fact, as you'll see, writers and speakers have as many purposes for arguing as for using language, including—in addition to winning—to inform, to convince, to explore, to make decisions, even to meditate or pray.

Of course, many arguments *are* aimed at winning. Such is the traditional purpose of much writing and speaking in the political arena, in the business world, and in the law courts. Two candidates for office, for example, try to win out over each other in appealing for votes; the makers of

In a graduation speech at Wake Forest University, Cardinal Francis Arinze made an invitational argument, asking his listeners to explore the meaning and ramifications of what he terms "interreligious collaboration" and the extent to which it is possible for believers to "Join Hands Across the Divide of Faith."

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one soft drink try to outsell their competitors by appealing to public tastes; and two lawyers try to defeat each other in pleading to a judge and jury. In your college writing, you may be also called on to make an argument that appeals to a "judge" and/or "jury" (your teacher and classmates). You might, for instance, argue that doctor-assisted suicide is a moral and legal right. In doing so, you may need to defeat your unseen opponents—those who oppose doctor-assisted suicide.

At this point, it may be helpful to acknowledge a common academic distinction between argument and persuasion. In this view, the point of argument is to discover some version of the truth, using evidence and reasons. Argument of this sort leads audiences toward conviction, an agreement that a claim is true or reasonable, or that a course of action is desirable. The aim of persuasion is to change a point of view, or to move others from conviction to action. In other words, writers or speakers argue to find some truth; they persuade when they think they already know it.

Argument (discover a truth) ——➤ conviction

Persuasion (know a truth) ——➤ action

In practice, this distinction between argument and persuasion can be hard to sustain. It is unnatural for writers or readers to imagine their minds divided between a part that pursues truth and a part that seeks to persuade. It is not surprising that people tend to admire those public figures whose lives embody the very principles they reasonably advocate; for example, Gandhi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr., Margaret Thatcher. They move others to pursue the truths they have arrived at themselves.

And yet, you may want to reserve the term *persuasion* for writing that is aggressively designed to change opinions through the use of both reason and other appropriate techniques. For writing that sets out to persuade at all costs, abandoning reason, fairness, and truth altogether, the term *propaganda*, with all its negative connotations, seems to fit. Some would suggest that *advertising* often works just as well.

But, as we have already suggested, arguing isn't always about winning or even about changing others' views. In addition to invitational argument, another school of argument—called Rogerian argument, after the psychotherapist Carl Rogers—is based on finding common ground and establishing trust among those who disagree about issues, and on approaching audiences in nonthreatening ways. Writers who follow Rogerian approaches seek to understand the perspectives of those with

whom they disagree, looking for "both/and" or "win/win" solutions (rather than "either/or" or "win/lose" ones) whenever possible. Much successful argument today follows such principles, consciously or not.

Some other purposes or goals of argument are worth considering in more detail.

Arguments to Inform

You may want or need to argue with friends or colleagues over the merits of different academic majors. But your purpose in doing so may well be to inform and to be informed, for only in such detailed arguments can you come to the best choice. Consider how Joan Didion uses argument to inform readers about the artist Georgia O'Keeffe:

> **This is a woman who in 1939 could advise her admirers that they were missing her point, that their appreciation of her famous flowers was merely sentimental. "When I paint a red hill," she observed coolly in the catalogue for an exhibition that year, "you say it is too bad that I don't always paint flowers. A flower touches almost everyone's heart. A red hill doesn't touch everyone's heart."**
>
> **–Joan Didion, "Georgia O'Keeffe"**

By giving specific information about O'Keeffe and her own ideas about her art, this passage argues that readers should pay close attention to the work of this artist.

Less subtle and more common as informative arguments are political posters featuring the smiling faces of candidates and the offices they are seeking: "Paretti 2000; Slattery for County Judge." Of course, these visual texts are usually also aimed at winning out over an unmentioned opponent. But on the surface at least, they announce who is running for a specific office.

Arguments to Convince

If you are writing a report that attempts to identify the causes of changes in global temperatures, you would likely be trying not to conquer opponents but to satisfy readers that you've thoroughly examined those causes and that they merit serious attention. As a form of writing, reports typically aim to persuade readers rather than win out over opponents. Yet the presence of those who might disagree is always implied, and it shapes a

writer's strategies. In the following passage, for example, Paul Osterman argues to convince readers of the urgency surrounding jobs for all citizens:

> **Among employed 29- to 31-year-old high school graduates who did not go to college, more than 30 percent had not been in their position for even a year. Another 12 percent had only one year of tenure. The pattern was much the same for women who had remained in the labor force for the four years prior to the survey. These are adults who, for a variety of reasons—a lack of skills, training, or disposition—have not managed to secure "adult" jobs.**
>
> **–Paul Osterman, "Getting Started"**

Osterman uses facts to report a seemingly objective conclusion about the stability of employment among certain groups, but he is also arguing against those who find that the current job situation is tolerable and not worthy of concern or action.

Arguments to Explore

Many important subjects call for arguments that take the form of exploration, either on your own or with others. If there's an "opponent" in such a situation at all (often there is *not*), it is likely the status quo or a current trend that—for one reason or another—is puzzling. Exploratory arguments may be deeply personal, such as E. B. White's often-reprinted essay "Once More to the Lake." Or the exploration may be aimed at solving serious problems in society. William F. Buckley Jr. opens just such an argument with a frank description of a situation he finds troubling:

> **This is an exploratory column, its purpose to encourage thought on a question that badly needs thinking about.**
>
> ***The Problem:* The birth every year of one million babies to unwed mothers.**
>
> ***The Consequence:* One million children who, on reaching the age of 13, tend to run into difficulties. The statistics tell us that a child raised by a single parent is likelier by a factor of 600 per cent to commit crimes, consume drugs, quit school, and bear, or sire, children out of wedlock. Assume—if only to be hopeful—that the problems diminish after age 19; we are still left with six million teenagers who are a heavy social burden, as also, of course, a burden to themselves.**
>
> **–William F. Buckley Jr., "Should There Be a Law?"**

Perhaps the essential argument in any such piece is the writer's assertion that a problem exists and that the writer or reader needs to solve it. Some exploratory pieces present and defend solutions. Others remain open-ended, as is the case with Buckley's column, which concludes with an unusually direct appeal to readers:

> All these are designed as open questions, to flush out thought. Although commentary can't be acknowledged, I'd welcome having it, directed to me at *National Review.*

Arguments to Make Decisions

Closely allied to argument that explores is that which aims at making good, sound decisions. In fact, the result of your exploratory arguments may be to argue for a particular decision, whether that decision relates to the best computer for you to buy or to the "right" person for you to choose as your life partner. In the following paragraph from a novel, a minister's young daughter uses argument as a way to make her own personal decision not to undergo baptism:

Charles C. Mann challenges us to explore the definition of intellectual property and its consequences in our daily lives in his essay "Who Will Own Your Next Good Idea?"

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> I bit my fingernails whenever I thought about baptism; the subject brought out a deep-rooted balkiness in me. Ever since I could remember, Matthew and I had made a game of dispelling the mysteries of worship with a gleeful secular eye: we knew how the bread and wine were prepared for Communion, and where Daddy bought his robes (Ekhardt Brothers, in North Philadelphia, makers also of robes for choirs, academicians, and judges). Yet there was an unassailable magic about an act as public and dramatic as baptism. I felt toward it the slightly exasperated awe a stagehand might feel on realizing that although he can identify with professional exactitude the minutest components of a show, there is still something indefinable in the power that makes it a cohesive whole. Though I could not have put it into words, I believed that the decision to make a frightening and embarrassing backward plunge into a pool of sanctified water meant that one had received a summons to Christianity as unmistakable as the blare of an automobile horn. I believed this with the same fervor with which, already, I believed in the power of romance, especially in the miraculous efficacy of a lover's first kiss. I had never been kissed by a lover, nor had I heard the call to baptism.
>
> —Andrea Lee, *Sarah Phillips*

Arguments to Meditate or Pray

Sometimes arguments can take the form of intense meditations on a theme, or of prayer. In such cases, the writer or speaker is most often hoping to transform something in him- or herself or to reach a state of equilibrium or peace of mind. If you know a familiar prayer or mantra, think for a moment of what it "argues" for and of how it uses quiet meditation to accomplish that goal. However, such meditations do not have to be formal prayers. Look, for example, at the ways in which Michael Lassell's poetry uses a kind of meditative language to reach understanding for himself and to evoke meditative thought in others:

> **Feel how it feels to**
> **hold a man in your arms**
> **whose arms are used to holding men.**
> **Offer God anything to bring your brother back.**
> **Know you have nothing God could possibly want.**
> **Curse God, but do not**
> **abandon Him.**
> **–Michael Lassell, "How to Watch Your Brother Die"**

Another sort of meditative argument can be found in the stained-glass windows of churches and other public buildings. Dazzled by a spectacle of light, people pause to consider a window's message longer than they might were the same idea conveyed on paper. The window engages viewers with a power not unlike that of poetry.

As all these examples suggest, the effectiveness of argument depends not only on the purposes of the writer but also on the context surrounding the plea and the people it seeks most directly to reach. Though we'll examine arguments of all types in this book, we'll focus chiefly on the kinds made in professional and academic situations.

Alicia Shepard's "The Long Goodbye," which chronicles her mother's death at home with hospice care, encourages readers to meditate on the consequences of hospice care for the meaning of life.

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OCCASIONS FOR ARGUMENT

Another way of thinking about arguments is to consider the public occasions that call for them. In an ancient textbook of rhetoric, or the art of persuasion, the philosopher Aristotle provides an elegant scheme for classifying the purposes of arguments, one based on issues of time—past, future, and present. His formula is easy to remember and helpful in suggesting strategies for making convincing cases. But since all classifications overlap with others to a certain extent, don't be surprised to

encounter many arguments that span more than one category—arguments about the past with implications for the future, arguments about the future with bearings on the present, and so on.

Arguments about the Past

Debates about what has happened in the past are called forensic arguments; such controversies are common in business, government, and academia. For example, in many criminal and civil cases, lawyers interrogate witnesses to establish exactly what happened at an earlier time: *Did the defendant sexually harass her employee? Did the company deliberately ignore evidence that its product was deficient? Was the contract properly enforced?*

The contentious nature of some forensic arguments is evident in this brief exchange between a defender of modern technology (Kevin Kelly) and an opponent (Kirkpatrick Sale):

> **KK: OK, then you tell me. What was the effect of printing technology? Did the invention of printing just allow us to make more books? Or did it allow new and different kinds of books to be written? What did it do? It did both.**
>
> **KS: That wasn't mass society back then, but what it eventually achieved was a vast increase in the number of books produced; and it vastly decreased forests in Europe so as to produce them.**
>
> **KK: I don't think so. The forests of Europe were not cut down to create books for Europe.**
>
> **–Kevin Kelly, "Interview with the Luddite"**

You can probably imagine how these claims and counterclaims will blossom, each speaker looking for evidence in the past to justify his conclusion. Obviously, then, forensic arguments rely on evidence and testimony to re-create what can be known about events that have already occurred.

Forensic arguments also rely heavily on precedents—actions or decisions in the past that influence policies or decisions in the present—and on analyses of cause and effect. Consider the ongoing controversy over Christopher Columbus: Are his expeditions to the Americas events worth celebrating, or are they unhappy chapters in human history? No simple exchange of evidence will suffice to still this debate; the effects of Columbus's actions beginning in 1492 may be studied and debated for the next five hundred years. As you might suspect from this case, arguments about history are typically forensic.

Martin Luther King Jr. uses a forensic argument when he invokes Abraham Lincoln and Lincoln's era in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech: "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice."

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Forensic cases may also be arguments about character, such as when someone's reputation is studied in a historical context to enrich current perspectives on the person. Allusions to the past can make present arguments more vivid, as in the following text about Ward Connerly, head of an organization that aims to dismantle affirmative action programs:

> **Despite the fact that Connerly's message seems clearly opposed to the Civil Rights Movement, some people are fond of pointing out that the man is black. But as far as politics goes, that is irrelevant. Before black suffrage, there were African Americans who publicly argued against their own right to vote.**
>
> **–Carl Villarreal, "Connerly Is an Enemy of Civil Rights"**

Such writing can be exploratory and open-ended, the point of argument being to enhance and sharpen knowledge, not just to generate heat or score points.

Arguments about the Future

Debates about the future are a form of deliberative argument. Legislatures, congresses, and parliaments are called deliberative bodies because they establish policies for the future: *Should Social Security be privatized? Should the United States build a defense against ballistic missiles?*

Because what has happened in the past influences the future, deliberative judgments often rely on prior forensic arguments. Thus, deliberative arguments often draw on evidence and testimony, as in this passage:

> **The labor market is sending a clear signal. While the American way of moving youngsters from high school to the labor market may be imperfect, the chief problem is that, for many, even getting a job no longer guarantees a decent standard of living. More than ever, getting ahead, or even keeping up, means staying in school longer.**
>
> **–Paul Osterman, "Getting Started"**

But since no one has a blueprint for what is to come, deliberative arguments also advance by means of projections, extrapolations, and reasoned guesses—*if X is true, Y may be true; if X happens, so may Y; if X continues, then Y may occur:*

> **If we liberate entrepreneurs and make it relatively easy for them to discover and invent our new world, we will be rearing a generation that increases our wealth and improves our lives to a degree that we can now barely imagine.**
>
> **–Newt Gingrich, "America and the Third Wave Information Age"**

Arguments about the Present

Arguments about the present are often arguments about contemporary values—the ethical premises and assumptions that are widely held (or contested) within a society. Sometimes called epideictic arguments or ceremonial arguments because they tend to be heard at public occasions, they include inaugural addresses, sermons, eulogies, graduation speeches, and civic remarks of all kinds. Ceremonial arguments can be passionate and eloquent, rich in anecdotes and examples. Martin Luther King Jr. was a master of ceremonial discourse, and he was particularly adept at finding affirmation in the depths of despair:

> **Three nights later, our home was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My experience with God had given me a new strength and trust. I know now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life.**
>
> **—Martin Luther King Jr., "Our God Is Able"**

King argues here that the arbiter of good and evil in society is, ultimately, God. But not all ceremonial arguments reach quite so far.

More typical are values arguments that explore contemporary culture, praising what is admirable and blaming what is not. Sven Birkerts, for example, indirectly frames an argument against the current fascination with computers by posing some questions about contemporary values:

> **[W]e may choose to become the technicians of our auxiliary brains, mastering not the information but the retrieval and referencing functions. At a certain point, then, we could become the evolutionary opposites of our forebears, who, lacking external technology, committed everything to memory. If this were to happen, what would be the status of knowing, of being educated? The leader of the electronic tribe would not be the person who knew the most, but the one who could exercise the widest range of technological functions. What, I hesitate to ask, would become of the already antiquated notion of wisdom?**
>
> **–Sven Birkerts, "Perseus Unbound"**

By establishing and reinforcing common values in this way, ceremonial arguments can even be the means by which groups and coalitions form.

KINDS OF ARGUMENT

Yet another way of categorizing arguments is to consider their status or stasis—that is, the kinds of issues they address. This categorization system is called stasis theory. In ancient Greek and Roman civilizations,

rhetoricians defined a series of questions by which to examine legal cases. The questions would be posed in sequence, since each depended on the question(s) preceding it. Together, the questions helped determine the point of contention in an argument, the place where disputants could focus their energy. A modern version of those questions might look like the following:

- Did something happen?
- What is its nature?
- What is its quality?
- What actions should be taken?

Here's how the questions might be used to explore a "crime."

Did Something Happen?

Yes. A young man kissed a young woman against her will. The act was witnessed by a teacher and friends and acquaintances of both parties. The facts suggest clearly that something happened.

What Is Its Nature?

The act might be construed as "sexual harassment," defined as the imposition of unwanted or unsolicited sexual attention or activity on a person. The young man kissed the young woman on the lips. Kissing people who aren't relatives on the lips is generally considered a sexual activity. The young woman did not want to be kissed and complained to her teacher. The young man's act meets the definition of "sexual harassment."

Is Ebonics a separate language, a dialect of English, or something else? James Hill's "Say What? Watch Your Language" and John Rickford's "Suite for Ebony and Phonics" offer slightly different answers, basing their claims on different kinds of evidence.

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What Is Its Quality?

Both the young man and young woman involved in the action are six years old. They were playing in a schoolyard. The boy didn't realize that kissing girls against their will was a violation of school policy; school sexual harassment policies had not in the past been enforced against first-graders. Most people don't regard six-year-olds as sexually culpable. Moreover, the girl wants to play with the boy again and apparently doesn't resent his action.

What Actions Should Be Taken?

The case has raised a ruckus among parents, the general public, and some feminists and anti-feminists. The consensus seems to be that the school overreached in seeking to brand the boy a sexual harasser. Yet it is important that the issue of sexual harassment not be dismissed as trivial. Consequently, the boy should probably be warned not to kiss little girls against their will. The teachers should be warned not to make federal cases out of schoolyard spats.

As you can see, each of the stasis questions explores different aspects of a problem and uses different evidence or techniques to reach conclusions. Stasis theory can be used to understand some common types of arguments.

Arguments of Fact — Did Something Happen?

An argument of fact usually involves a statement that can be proved or disproved with specific evidence or testimony. Although relatively simple to define, such arguments are often quite subtle, involving layers of complexity not apparent when the question is initially posed.

For example, the question of global warming—*Is it really occurring?*—would seem relatively easy to settle. Either scientific data prove that global temperatures are increasing as a result of human activity, or they don't. But to settle the matter, writers and readers would first have to agree on a number of points, each of which would have to be examined and debated: *What constitutes warming? How will global warming be measured? Over what period of time? Are any current temperature deviations unprecedented? How can one be certain that deviations are attributable to human action?*

Nevertheless, questions of this sort can be disputed primarily on the facts, complicated and contentious as they may be. (For more on arguments based on facts, see Chapter 7.)

Arguments of Definition — What Is the Nature of the Thing?

Just as contentious as arguments based on facts are questions of definition. An argument of definition often involves determining whether one known object or action belongs in a second—and more highly contested—category. One of the most hotly debated issues in American life today involves a question of definition: *Is a human fetus a human being?* If one argues that it is, then a second issue of definition arises: *Is abortion murder?*

As you can see, issues of definition can have mighty consequences—and decades of debate may leave the matter unresolved.

Consider Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur's famous response to the definitional question he posed to himself: *What is an American?* Today, his extended, idealized, and noticeably gendered reply would likely prompt disputes and objections among the many groups that bristle at the prospect of their assimilation into an American mainstream:

> **He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.**
>
> **–Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, "What Is an American?"**

Bob Costas, eulogizing Mickey Mantle, a great baseball player who had many human faults, advances his assessment by means of an important definitional distinction:

> **In the last year, Mickey Mantle, always so hard upon himself, finally came to accept and appreciate the distinction between a role model and a hero. The first he often was not, the second he always will be.**
>
> **–Bob Costas, "Eulogy for Mickey Mantle"**

But arguments of definition can be less weighty than these, though still hotly contested: *Is bowling a sport? Is Madonna an artist? Is ketchup a vegetable?* To argue such cases, one would first have to put forth definitions, and then those definitions would have to become the foci of debates themselves. (For more about arguments of definition, see Chapter 9.)

Arguments of Evaluation — What Is the Quality of the Thing?

Arguments of definition lead naturally into arguments of quality—that is, to questions about quality. Most auto enthusiasts, for example, would not be content merely to inquire whether the Corvette is a sports car. They'd prefer to argue whether it is a *good* sports car or a *better* sports car than, say, the Viper. Or they might wish to assert that it is the *best* sports car in the world, perhaps qualifying their claim with the caveat *for the price*. Arguments of evaluation are so common that writers sometimes take them for granted, ignoring their complexity and importance in establishing people's values and priorities.

Consider how Rosa Parks assesses Martin Luther King Jr. in the following passage. Though she seems to be defining the concept of "leader," she

is measuring King against criteria she has set for "*true* leader," an important distinction:

> **Dr. King was a true leader. I never sensed fear in him. I just felt he knew what had to be done and took the leading role without regard to consequences. I knew he was destined to do great things. He had an elegance about him and a speaking style that let you know where you stood and inspired you to do the best you could. He truly is a role model for us all. The sacrifice of his life should never be forgotten, and his dream must live on.**
>
> **–Rosa Parks, "Role Models"**

Parks's comments represent a type of informal evaluation that is common in ceremonial arguments; because King is so well known, she doesn't have to burnish every claim with specific evidence. (See p. 13 for more on ceremonial arguments.) In contrast, Peggy Noonan in praising Ronald Reagan makes quite explicit the connections between her claim and the evidence:

> ***He was right.* He said the Soviet Union was an evil empire, and it was; he said history would consign it to the ash heap, and it did. Thirty-one years ago . . . he said: high taxes are bad, heavy regulation is bad, bureaucracies cause more ills than they cure and government is not necessarily your friend. It could have been said by half the congressional candidates of 1994—and was.**

An argument of evaluation advances by presenting criteria and then measuring individual people, ideas, or things against those standards. Both the standards and the measurement can be explored argumentatively. And that's an important way to think of arguments—as ways to expand what is known, not just to settle differences. (For more about arguments of evaluation, see Chapter 10.)

Pondering the prospect of cosmetic surgery for her husband, Angela Neustatter writes an evaluative argument: "Yet I couldn't and wouldn't condemn it or him because no way do I want to join the band of puritans who deify their wrinkles and castigate, for their failure to age naturally, anyone who so much as has a collagen implant, because puritanism is a far nastier vice than narcissism."

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Proposal Arguments — What Actions Should Be Taken?

Arguments may lead to proposals for action when writers have succeeded in presenting problems in such a compelling way that readers ask: *What can we do?* A proposal argument often begins with the presentation of research to document existing conditions. Knowing and explaining the status quo enable writers to explore appropriate and viable alternatives and then to recommend one preferable course of action. David Thomas, for example, in arguing that reform is needed in the education of young

boys, cites evidence that leads him to diagnose what he regards as a significant problem:

> **Do we, however, make the best of what nature has provided when the time comes to educate our young? Over the last few years, nationwide exam results have shown an increasing gap between the performances of girls and boys, in the girls' favor. Many more boys than girls leave school without any form of qualification.**
>
> **–David Thomas, "The Mind of Man"**

CULTURAL CONTEXTS FOR ARGUMENT

If you want to communicate effectively with people across cultures, then you need to try to learn something about the norms in those cultures—and to be aware of the norms guiding your own behavior.

- Be aware of the assumptions that guide your own customary ways of arguing a point. Remember that most of us tend to see our own way as the "normal" or "right" way to do things. Such assumptions guide your thinking and your judgments about what counts—and what "works"—in an argument.
- Keep in mind that if your own ways seem inherently right, then even without thinking about it you may assume that other ways are somehow less than right. Such thinking makes it hard to communicate effectively across cultures.
- Remember that ways of arguing are influenced by cultural contexts and that they differ widely across cultures. Pay attention to the ways people from cultures other than your own argue, and be flexible and open to the many ways of thinking you will no doubt encounter.
- Respect the differences among individuals within a given culture; don't expect that every member of a community behaves—or argues—in just the same way.

The best advice, then, might be *don't assume*. Just because you think a navy blazer and a knee-length skirt "argues" that you should be taken seriously as a job candidate at a multinational corporation, such dress may be perceived differently in other settings. And if in an interview a candidate does not look you in the eye, don't assume that this reflects any lack of confidence or respect; he or she may intend it as a sign of politeness.

Where a need for change is already obvious, writers may spend most of their energies describing and defending the solution. John Henry Newman, for example, in proposing a new form of liberal education in the nineteenth century, enumerates the benefits it will bring to society:

> **[A] university education is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life.**
>
> **—John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University***

Americans in particular tend to see the world in terms of problems and solutions; indeed, Americans expect that any difficulty can be overcome by the proper infusion of technology and money. So proposal arguments seem especially appealing, even when quick-fix attitudes may themselves constitute a problem. (For more about proposal arguments, see Chapter 12.)

IS EVERYTHING AN ARGUMENT?

In a world where argument is as abundant as fast food, everyone has a role to play in shaping and responding to arguments. Debate and discussion are, after all, key components of the never-ending conversation about our lives and the world that is sometimes called academic inquiry. Its standards are rigorous: take no claim at face value, examine all evidence thoroughly, and study the implications of your own and others' beliefs. Developing an inquiring turn of mind like this can serve you well now and into the future. It might even lead you to wonder, with healthy suspicion, whether *everything* really is an argument.

RESPOND •

1. Can an argument really be any text that expresses a point of view? What kinds of arguments—if any—might be made about the following items?

   the embossed leather cover of a prayer book

   a newspaper masthead

a New York Yankees hat
the label on a best-selling rap CD
the health warning on a bag of no-fat potato chips
a belated birthday card
the nutrition label on a tub of margarine
the cover of a romance novel
a peace emblem worn on a chain
a Rolex watch

2. Decide whether each of the following items is an example of *argument*, *persuasion*, or *propaganda*. Be prepared to explain your categorization. Some of the items might be difficult to classify.

   a proof in a geometry textbook
   a flag burned at a protest rally
   a U.S. president's State of the Union address
   a sermon on the biblical Book of Job
   a lawyer's opening statement at a jury trial
   a movie by American film director Oliver Stone
   the ABC television show *Politically Incorrect*
   a lecture on race in an anthropology class
   a marriage proposal
   an environmental ad by a chemical company

3. Write short paragraphs describing times in the recent past when you've used language to inform, to convince, to explore, to make decisions, and to meditate or pray (write a paragraph for each of these purposes). Then decide whether each paragraph describes an act of argument, persuasion, or both, and offer some reasons in defense of your decisions.

   In class, trade paragraphs with a partner, and decide whether his or her descriptions accurately fit the categories to which they've been assigned. If they do not, work with your partner to figure out why. Is the problem with the descriptions? The categories? Both? Neither?

4. In a recent newspaper or periodical, find three editorials—one that makes a ceremonial argument, one a deliberative argument, and one a forensic argument. Analyze the arguments by asking these questions: Who is arguing? What purposes are the writers trying to achieve? To whom are they directing their arguments?

Then consider whether the arguments' purposes have been achieved in each case. If they have, offer some reasons for the arguments' success.

5. If everything really is an argument, then one should be able to read poetry through the same lens, and with the same methods, as one reads more obviously argumentative writing. This means considering the occasions, purposes, and stasis of the poem—a process that may seem odd but that might reveal some interesting results.

   Find a poem that you like and that seems completely *nonargumentative* (you might even pick one that you have written). Then read it as a rhetorician, paying attention to the issues in this chapter, searching for claims, thinking about audience, and imagining occasions and purposes. Write a few paragraphs explaining why the poem is an argument.

   Next, for balance (and to make this a good argument), write a paragraph or two explaining why the poem is *not* an argument. Make sure you give good reasons for your position. Which of the two positions is more persuasive? Is there a middle ground—that is, a way of thinking about the poem that enables it both to be an argument and *not to be* an argument?