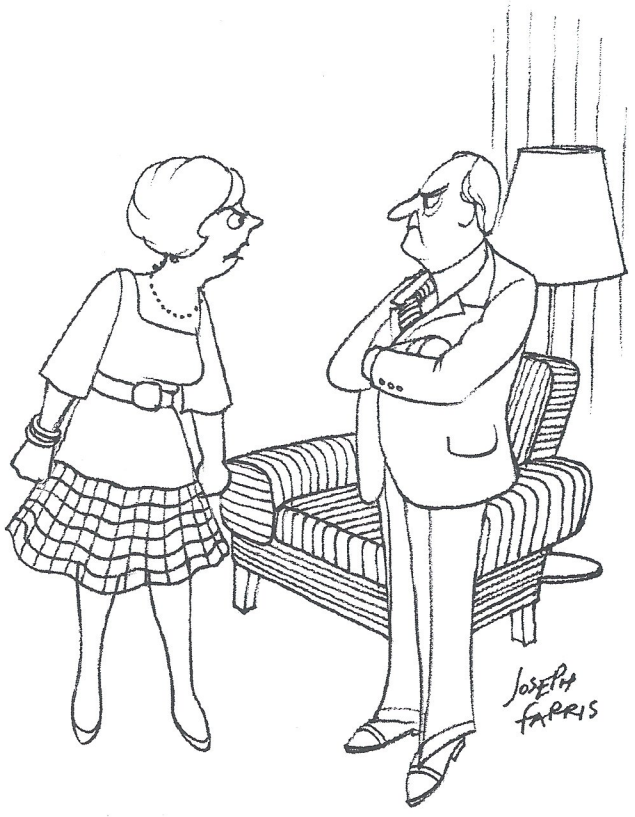
Chapter 8

Argument:
What's a Good Argument?



"What's the point of looking at your side of the argument when it's wrong?"

Farris, Joseph/CSL, CartoonStock Ltd

In each previous chapter you have been learning something more about argument fundamentals. Now is the time to integrate what's been learned into a focus on argument structure and standards. This chapter will show you the simplest way to construct, support, and analyse arguments. It will also pave the way for the argument research writing assignments described in the Appendix.

DISCOVERY EXERCISE

Reading and Judging Arguments

Read the six points of view offered here on a controversial issue. Then answer the questions that follow, in writing and/or class discussion.

1. "If you put a label on genetically engineered food you might as well put a skull and crossbones on it." (Norman Braksick, president of Asgrow Seed Co., a subsidiary of Monsanto, quoted in the *Kansas City Star*, March 7, 1994.)
2. "Individuals who make a personal decision not to consume food containing GM ingredients can easily avoid such products. In the U.S., they can purchase products that are certified as organic under the National Organic Program. They can also buy products which companies have voluntarily labeled as not containing GM ingredients. The law allows for voluntary labeling so long as the information is accurate, truthful and avoids misleading consumers about the food. Monsanto supports both options." ("What's the Problem with Labeling Genetically-Modified Foods?" *Monsanto*. Web. 16 April, 2012.)
3. ". . . there is really no statutory right to know—just consider the composition of popular foods such as Kentucky Fried Chicken™, or the composition of Coke.™" ("Labeling Genetically Modified (GM) Foods," by Alan McHughen, Biotechnology Specialist and Geneticist, University of California, Riverside. *Online pdf.* Updated 22 June, 2008.)
4. "The Achilles heel of Monsanto and the biotech industry is consumers' right to know. If GE-tainted foods are labeled in supermarkets and natural food stores, a massive rejection of chemical and GMO foods will take place, transforming the marketplace and supercharging the organic and local foods revolution . . . In the EU, there are almost no genetically engineered crops under cultivation or GE consumer food products on supermarket shelves. And why is this? Not because GE crops are automatically banned in Europe. But rather because under EU law, all foods containing genetically engineered ingredients must be labeled." (Ronnie Cummins, "Monsanto Nation: Taking Down Goliath" *organicconsumers.org*. 27 July, 2011. Web.)
5. "A majority of our food already contains GMO's, and there's little reason to think more isn't on the way. It seems our "regulators" are using us and the environment as guinea pigs, rather than demanding conclusive tests. And without labeling, we have no say in the matter whatsoever. (Mark Bittman, "Why Aren't GMO Foods Labeled?" *New York Times*. 15 February, 2011. Web.)

6. "The haphazard and negligent agency regulation of biotechnology has been a disaster for consumers and the environment. Unsuspecting consumers by the tens of millions are being allowed to purchase and consume unlabeled genetically engineered foods, despite a finding by FDA scientists that these foods could pose serious risks. And new genetically engineered crops are being approved by federal agencies despite admissions that they will contaminate native and conventional plants and pose other significant new environmental threats." ("Genetically Engineered Crops." *Center for Food Safety*. 2012. Web.)

Study Questions

1. Is there one common question addressed by all these arguments?
2. How would you label or characterize each viewpoint here?
3. State the basic pro or con position taken by each one.
4. Take one viewpoint for analysis. What reasons are given in support of its position?
5. Which arguments do you find to be the most persuasive and why?

Critical Thinking Heroes: Investigative Reporters

Investigative journalists might be called critical thinking commandos. Using research in a search for truth, and publishing exposure for ammunition, many risked their lives and showed the courage and endurance of combat soldiers. At one time they were called "the muckrakers" for their willingness to "dig up dirt." And often their exposure of corruption and wrong-doing has been accompanied by the kind of sensationalism that sells papers. The following is a list of a few investigative print journalists whose colorful stories might be followed on the Internet: Julius Chambers, Nellie Bly, Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Ida M. Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, Edward R. Murrow, Seymour Hersh, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, John Pilger. (Names selected from "Investigative Journalism" *Wikipedia*. Web. 16 April, 2012.)

Writing or Class Activity

On page 243 in this chapter, there is a story of some investigative journalists. What is the connection between such journalism and argument?

Critical Reading of Arguments

Any argument first needs an objective reading or hearing. Afterwards criticism can begin with five questions.

As you will remember from the short discussion in the second chapter about critical reading, accurate comprehension must precede any criticism of the material. In reading arguments, maintaining openness is not always easy, especially when the arguments express values that differ from your own. It can require a lot of restraint to slow down those inner objections in order to make sure that you really understand what is being said. You may have found it a struggle to give a fair hearing to some of the viewpoints expressed in the opening Discovery Exercise. Yet critical analysis cannot be fair unless it is based on a careful and accurate reading of the material.

In this chapter you will be guided by some questions that will help you fairly assess the arguments you read. By using these questions, you will be able to make rapid evaluations of newspaper editorials, letters to editors, voter information pamphlets, and any other form of persuasive writing. The skills of critical analysis will also enable you to better engage in research and prepare the longer argumentative essay assignments that appear in the Appendix of this book.

What follows are five guiding questions to help you quickly analyze any argument. After completing this analysis, you will know whether to accept the argument, reject it, or simply suspend judgment for the time being.

1. What viewpoint is the source of this argument?
2. What is the issue of controversy?
3. Is it an argument? Or is it a report?
4. How is the argument structured in terms of reasons and conclusion?
5. What are the argument's strengths and weaknesses?

What Viewpoint Is the Source of This Argument?

Arguments represent the bias, interests, and objectives of a viewpoint.

This chapter's opening Discovery Exercise gave you an opportunity to apply what you learned in the previous chapter about the way viewpoint shapes content. You might have begun by first skimming through each argument, reading the names, titles, and affiliations of each speaker, then rereading

the argument in light of this information. From such clues, you might have been able to make inferences about the speaker's values, motives, and beliefs. You would have begun by examining the source of this argument.

What Is the Issue of Controversy?

To assess an argument, we first must determine the issue.

Argument: offers reasons to support a conclusion with the intent to persuade

Topic: a subject of interest

Issue: a controversial topic that arouses debate

Debate question: a neutrally formulated question that provides a focus for different positions on the issue

Arguments are based on issues or controversial topics that can generate many different perspectives. A few topics that have stirred up controversy include offshore drilling, fracking, nuclear power plants, and the marketing of junk foods to children.

One topic can generate hundreds of issues. Moreover, surrounding each issue can be many debate questions. The opening Discovery Exercise began with pro and con arguments on the topic of GM foods. You might have decided that the common issue was whether the labeling of genetically modified foods should be mandatory. Other issues raised by GM foods could include whether they should be banned outright, whether they help or harm agriculture, whether it is feasible to label them, and whether labeling should remain voluntary.

Debate questions provide a clear common focus for pro and con positions on selected issues. In the opening Discovery Exercise, the arguments might be paired or clustered according to such debate questions as follow:

- Should the labeling of genetically engineered foods be mandatory in the U.S.?
- Are GM foods harmful to human health?
- Is the campaign to label GM foods a plot to stigmatize them?

As is customary in debates, the question addressed by both sides, pro and con, is expressed in neutral language free of biased wording. The questions

begin with open-ended words such as *Does, Can,* or *Should.* Thus, a debate question, like a good polling question, does not favor one side or the other.

Debate questions can also be more specific than the three mentioned previously; they can address more specific problems:

- Given the present ubiquity of genetically modified foods, is labeling possible?
- Can the poor choose to not eat GM foods?
- Do GMO increase crop yields?
- Do GM foods require more pesticides?

Debate questions generally appear in the headings above pro and con arguments on newspaper editorial pages or in magazines such as the *Congressional Digest.* However, more often the debate questions are not made explicit, requiring that they be supplied from our own thinking. Indeed, this was what you had to do in the opening Discovery Exercise.

Class Discussion

Read each of the following condensed pro and con arguments. For each one, first state the issue and then formulate one debate question that addresses their common issue.

1. **Pro** Ex-convicts should not be denied the right to vote. Denying felons the vote assumes that they can never repay their debt to society.

   Con Felons would have to have bad judgment; otherwise they never would have committed crimes. Therefore, why should we allow people with bad judgment the right to vote?

2. **Pro** DRE or direct recording electronic voting machines are efficient, secure, and easy to use; they eliminate the need for paper ballots; and they provide instant tabulation of the results. Their touch screens or buttons make it easier for the disabled to vote.

   Con DRE voting machines are untrustworthy: they can be hacked or tampered with; and they do not provide voters with a paper trail for verification. They subvert the democratic process.

3. **Pro** The production of ethanol for fuel has many advantages. It reduces the toxic air pollutants caused by gasoline. It can be produced locally, it produces a harvest within six months, and it reduces our reliance on imported oil.

   Con The production of ethanol requires nearly as much energy as it ends up supplying as fuel. The crops made into ethanol use up vast tracts of land needed for growing food in a planet where more people are now starving.

Is It an Argument or a Report?

Arguments and reports are each structured differently and have different objectives. We cannot analyze one according to the standards of the other.

Although arguments and reports have very different objectives and forms (see Table 8.1), they can be mistaken for one another if their differences are not fully understood. Moreover, to add to the confusion, arguments can sometimes be disguised as reports while actually offering a biased perspective. (More will be explained about this hybrid later.)

The main purpose of a **report** is to offer information; this can be done by offering facts and findings or relating and explaining events. Its chief objective is not to advocate an opinion. If the situation is controversial, the reporter is expected to present arguments from all sides, but not favor one argument or another. Likewise in writing scientific reports, the author might make recommendations, but not advocate.

TABLE 8.1 Arguments and Reports: Making the Distinction

Report	Argument
Purpose: To inform in a manner that wins trust in its reliability.	*Purpose:* To persuade others to agree with an idea.
Structure: 1. Data presented and explained. 2. Offers hypotheses for interpreting the data. Tries to avoid bias. 3. Offers support to confirm data's accuracy and veracity, such as corroborating evidence, independent studies, examples, expert testimony, records, surveys, polls, investigations, statistics, analogies. 4. Summary of findings in manner that leaves final assessment up to the reader.	*Structure:* 1. Assertion of an opinion, thesis, or conclusion that has a clearly committed bias. 2. Reasons given to support this conclusion are offered just as they are in a report. However, material that supports the conclusion is emphasized, whereas material that does not can be omitted or downplayed. 3. Summary seeks agreement for own conclusion.

Arguments, on the other hand, do advocate opinions; information may be used to explain an idea, to justify it, or to persuade others to accept that idea. Arguments are not supposed to be neutral but express a position.

Let's review these differences by means of some condensed examples on this question: **Should concealed guns be allowed on college campuses?**

Argument

Pro Students should be allowed to carry concealed guns on any college campus. This right would protect them from more mass shooting episodes. They would not even have to fire the guns; just knowing that others were armed would deter any maniac from going on a shooting spree.

Con If students were allowed to carry concealed guns, life on college campuses would turn into the Wild West. Fear, distrust, and mayhem would prevail. Moreover, since mass shooters are usually suicidal, they would hardly be deterred. The idea of legislating to allow all students to arm themselves is a misguided solution.

Report

In 2008, fifteen states were considering legislation to allow people (students, faculty, and staff) to carry concealed guns on college campuses. Proponents of such legislation claim that no one would go on a shooting spree if they knew that their victims would be armed and could return fire. They say that in past incidents, the police have not been able to arrive in time to prevent massacres. If students were armed, they might be able to hold off a shooter until the police arrive. Opponents of such legislation claim that arming the campus would not deter shooters, who are suicidal anyway, and would only create a climate of fear and possibly more shooting incidents. A third view claims that this debate only distracts us from the core problem: the failure of U.S. gun control laws. They point to countries such as Australia, Britain, France, China, and Sweden that maintain low homicide rates through strict gun control laws. Meanwhile, licensed individuals can now carry concealed handguns at such state universities as Utah, Colorado State University, and Blue Ridge College in West Virginia.

A report can tell a story, it can present findings, interview supporters and detractors, summarize arguments, and offer theories. Nevertheless, a report in the pure sense of the word leaves the final conclusions up to the reader.

Another difficulty we face in separating arguments from reports is that arguments may sometimes take on the appearance of reports. This practice is particularly prevalent in many of the so-called news magazines,

which offer news reports that are actually opinion pieces because of their slanted language, selection of information, and emphasis. Here is an example of an argument that could be mistaken for a report.

> "During the week of April 21–25, 2008, thousands of college students throughout the United States, organized under the banner of Students for Concealed Carry on Campus (SCCC), will attend classes wearing empty holsters, in protest of state laws and school policies that stack the odds in favor of dangerous criminals and armed killers by disarming law abiding citizens licensed to carry concealed handguns virtually everywhere else." (*Concealed Campus.com*)

Discussion Break Question

Working in small groups, or with a partner, explain how the first report differs from the pro and con arguments on this issue. Then discuss how the first report differs from the second one.

Class Discussion

Identify the following as either reports or arguments:

1. Don't buy water in plastic bottles. For one thing, you don't know whether you are paying for city tap water. Secondly, the plastic can leach cancer-causing chemicals into the ground water, and thirdly, our landfills are already choking with the billions of plastic bottles.
2. "Nuclear power, apart from nuclear war, is the greatest threat to life on this planet. In fact, 95% of the total nuclear waste in the United States has been generated by nuclear power plants. Nuclear waste will last for 500,000 years, and there is no safe means to prevent these radioactive elements from entering and concentrating in the food chain." (Helen Caldicott, 2004)
3. U.S. railroads, after being in decline for decades, are now part of a booming business. They are being rediscovered as the answer to congested highways and rising fuel prices. Moreover, they are being marketed as eco-friendly and low in fuel consumption.
4. Stonehenge has remained a mystery for centuries. This circular monument of stones, built around 4,500 years ago in southwest England, was thought to be mainly a temple to the sun and an astrological calendar. In 2008 archeological research came up with a new theory: that it served primarily as a royal burial ground. But will this be the final explanation?

5. "First Lady Michelle Obama said that a world record for jumping jacks has been broken. Obama led 464 students on the South Lawn of the White House to break the Guinness World Record for the most people doing jumping jacks in a 24-hour period in October. She said that overall, 300,265 participated from around the world as part of her initiative, which shattered the old record of 20,000 people." (*Epoch Times*, December 15, 2011.)

How Is the Argument Structured in Terms of Reasons and Conclusions?

A quick method for analyzing an argument is to disassemble its structure, first identifying its conclusion and then separating that statement from the reasons offered to support it.

Conclusion: A clear statement of what an argument intends to prove. This statement serves as the argument's thesis, final opinion, or judgment. It clearly shows the author's position on an issue.

Reason: Statements offered to explain, justify, or support the conclusion of an argument. Reasons can take the form of statements of facts, statistics, evidence, or reasoning. Any number of reasons can be offered to support one conclusion.

In the chapters that follow, you will be learning more about standards and forms for inductive and deductive reasoning. You will learn that with induction, arguments are structured in this manner:

- Data
- Data
- Data
- Data

Conclusion

In deduction we use the syllogism:

- Major Premise
- Minor Premise

Conclusion

Arguments use both inductive and deductive reasoning. Simplified models such as these reveal their structure. We will learn more about how these models help us understand the rules of reasoning in the next chapters. For now we only want to review the two essential aspects of an argument: (1) what point is being made, and (2) how this point is supported. If we can identify these two elements quickly in an argument, we can size up its structure. Thus, when reading the chapter's opening arguments, you may have sensed that some of them were better reasoned than others, but you may not have been really sure how to explain why or why not. Seeing arguments in terms of their structure can help us begin to do that. It also helps us write better arguments.

The next few pages offer a rapid method for recognizing these two elements in arguments; this method explains arguments as structures consisting of *reasons* and *conclusions*. Both inductive and deductive arguments consist of both conclusions and reasons. As you will discover in the following chapters, the term *reasons* can be used to include both the premises of deduction and the factual evidence of induction, and the term *conclusion* includes inductive hypotheses as well as deductive conclusions. In both cases, separating conclusions from their reasons is not always easy. Yet we have to make this separation in order to determine what conclusion we are being asked to accept, and whether or not sufficient and adequate reasons are given in its support. This portion of the chapter will offer exercises for practice in identifying and analyzing arguments in terms of their reasons and conclusions.

Identifying the Conclusion of an Argument

The key to understanding any written argument is to first search for its conclusion. Although the word *conclusion* is generally understood as a final summary statement in an argument, the conclusion functions more like the thesis of a composition, which sometimes appears first. In the formal reasoning of induction and deduction, a conclusion is the *last step* in a reasoning process:

Inductive

Yesterday I was happy singing.
Last week I was happy singing.
Every time in my life I sing, I feel happy.

Conclusion: Singing makes me happy.

Deductive

Singing makes me happy.

I am singing.

Conclusion: I am happy.

In an argument, a conclusion is the bottom line of a decision, while the reasons are the evidence and thoughts that support this decision. Yet the problem remains that although we know our own conclusions, it is not always that easy to find them in the written arguments of others, especially because statements of reasons can look very much like conclusions.

Consider this argument on illegal immigration. Here the conclusion is clearly separate from the reasons although each reason could serve as a conclusion in a different context.

> Illegal immigration is good for America. (conclusion) It provides U.S. businesses with eager low-wage workers. (reason) Employers do not have to provide them with benefits. (reason) Their low wages and lack of benefits are offset through social services provided by U.S. taxpayers. (reason) Finally, all U.S. consumers enjoy the lower prices for goods and services allowed by their low cost labor. (reason)

Sometimes it is not that easy to separate the conclusion from the reasons. Consider this example:

> Illegal immigrants from Mexico living in the U.S. are poor although usually not as poor as they were in Mexico. They are blamed for burdening U.S. social services and for taking jobs away from legal residents. They have no rights when arrested and incarcerated. All these stress factors leave illegal immigrants more susceptible to exploitation.

Here you would have to decide where the conclusion lies. What statement encompasses all the rest of the sentences? Is it the first or the last?

One method for recognizing conclusions is to look for the so-called inference indicator words that precede conclusions. Here are examples of the ways in which these words signal the conclusions of arguments:

1. *The truth of the matter is* that illegal immigration is not good for the United States.
2. *In my opinion,* illegal immigration is good for the United States.
3. *It all goes to show that* illegal immigration is not good for the United States.
4. *Therefore* illegal immigration is good for the United States.

Identifying Reasons

Reasons are statements offered to explain, justify, or support conclusions.

1. I am not in favor of completing the border wall between the United States and Mexico. (conclusion) First of all, it is costing billions of dollars. (reason) Second, it is damaging the environment in many locations. (reason) Third, determined refugees will find their way over or around it. (reason)
2. I am in favor of completing the border wall between the United States and Mexico. (conclusion) Good fences make good neighbors. (reason) A secure wall could save the lives of immigrants who would otherwise die in the desert on its other side. (reason) Its success would force Mexico to do more to help its poor and unemployed, and thus stem its flood of mass emigration. (reason)

As is the case with conclusions, reasons are easier to identify when we supply them ourselves than when we read or hear them in someone else's argument. Yet, we need to identify the reasons in an argument we hear or read in order to decide if they provide adequate and sufficient support for the conclusion. In both arguments given in the previous example, if only one reason had been offered, the support would have been insufficient. Both reasons together make for stronger arguments, although both will need more expansion and development to be convincing, as would occur in a longer, complete argument.

The task of analysis then begins by flushing out the reasons, which means looking for the conclusion first. In a short argument, once we identify the conclusion the reasons are simply what remain.

Another technique for identifying reasons is to look for the so-called inference indicator words that often introduce reasons. In the first example given previously, you may have noticed the use of the words *first, second*, and *third*, which signaled that you were being given reasons in support of the conclusion stated in the first sentence. Other reason indicator words include *because, for one thing, in view of the fact that, for the reason that, is supported by, also*, and *for example*.

1. I am in favor of amnesty for illegal immigrants *because* it is not good to have a country full of second-class citizens.
2. I am opposed to the idea of amnesty. *For one thing*, it gives a signal that it is OK to break this country's laws.
3. I favor amnesty *in view of the fact* that we could never track down and deport all the illegals living in this country.

Conclusion indicator words include *therefore, so, in fact, the truth of the matter is, in short, it follows that, shows that, indicates that, suggests that, proves that, we may deduce that, points to the conclusion that, in my opinion,* and *the most obvious explanation is.*

Reason indicator words include *because, first . . . second, since, for, for one thing, in view of the fact that, for the reason that, is supported by, for example, also.*

EXERCISE

Identifying Reasons and Conclusions

In the following statements, underline the conclusions and number the reasons. Notice that some of these may be arguments and some may be reports since both have reasons and conclusions.

1. I opened these fresh blueberries as soon as I got home from your store and found they were moldy on the bottom. You owe me a refund. personal experience
2. He said he didn't want to interrupt his studies to cook dinner and wash the dishes. I said we couldn't afford a restaurant. I ended up cooking the dinner.
3. You can save on gas in a lot of ways. Ride your bike to school and work. Live in a neighborhood where you can walk to buy food and use a collapsible cart to push the groceries home.
4. It is possible to get your garbage down to one full can a month. Almost everything can go into compost or recycling bins. Do your part to reduce landfill waste.
5. Selling commercial real estate can be more difficult than selling homes. Home buyers fall in love with the homes they buy. Commercial buyers are more interested in the statistics.
6. Some people don't like dogs but I do. Their affection is constant, as is their loyalty, and their needs are simple.
7. "Always acknowledge a fault. This will throw those in authority off their guard and give you an opportunity to commit more." (Mark Twain)