

4. What is the central claim? Where does the writer state it most clearly?
5. What are Pittaway's minor propositions? Which do you think is the most effective? Why?
6. What evidence does Pittaway offer to prove that SUVs are actually a danger to their drivers? Is her evidence effective?
7. What is behind Pittaway's claim that SUVs are dangerous to drivers of cars? Don't people have a right to drive cars that will be safer in case of a collision? What does Pittaway say to that argument? Do you find her retort effective?
8. Do you think that the conclusion is effective? Why or why not? Does it feel like an ad hominem attack?

Exploring the Writer's Argument

1. What is your view of the use of colloquialisms in the selection? The combative tone? Why does the writer call SUV drivers "jerks"? Does this help or hurt her argument? Explain your answer.
2. Pittaway decides in her essay not to argue against SUVs by looking at their environmental impact. Do you think this was a mistake? How could you fit environmental issues into her argument?
3. Why does the writer focus her argument so much on safety? Is this the most effective argument?

▶ Ideas for Writing Arguments

Prewriting

Write a few sentences about motorcycles, another vehicle often targeted by critics for their safety record. In what ways are they dangerous, do you think? Useful? What reasons other than safety can you think of for not allowing motorcycles on the roads? Why do people drive motorcycles? Should every state have a helmet law for motorcycle drivers?

Writing a Guided Argument

Write an essay in which you argue that motorcycles should (or should not) not be allowed on American roads.

1. Begin with a paragraph that sums up views that you do not think make the strongest argument by supporters of your position.
2. Next, explain, instead, what you think is the real issue with motorcycles.
3. Use a relaxed tone, and do not hold back from making fun of motorcycle riders or their critics, based on your position.

4. Next, explain your major proposition by arguing your first minor proposition.
5. Include some statistics as evidence for your argument.
6. Argue two more minor propositions, offering ample evidence.
7. End your essay with an ad hominem attack on motorcycle riders or their critics, on the basis that your arguments make it impossible to think of motorcycle riders or their critics as anything but "jerks" (or your own word).

Thinking, Arguing, and Writing Collaboratively

In small groups of three or four, exchange your Writing a Guided Argument papers. Offer suggestions in the form of a paragraph or two to help your classmate develop his or her essay. Offer, from your own research, anything that might add to your peer's argument.

Writing about the Text

Pittaway's essay appeared in a Canadian women's magazine. Write an essay in which you argue that Pittaway should have attempted to publish her essay in a different publication, preferably in the United States. Which publication would have been better? Why?

More Writing Ideas

1. In your journal, write about the SUV drivers you know or you have seen recently. Do they "need" their SUV? Why do they drive their SUV?
2. Do some research on the impact of SUVs on the environment and write a paragraph or two about the issue.
3. Write an essay in which you defend SUV drivers. You might need to do research to gather evidence for this position.

WOODY HOCHSWENDER

Did My Car Join Al Qaeda?

A former reporter and fashion columnist for the New York Times, Woody Hochswender has also edited for Esquire magazine. He is the author of The Buddha in Your Rearview Mirror (2007), a book that attempts to apply the lessons of Buddhism to everyday life. In this selection, Hochswender, who lives in Connecticut, defends his use of the small truck known as the SUV, or sport utility vehicle.

► Prereading: Thinking about the Essay in Advance

The SUV famously gets very low gas mileage, and thus conservationists accuse drivers of SUVs of being wasteful. What do you think about drivers of SUVs? If a friend or someone in your family has an SUV, do you agree with the purchase? Why or why not?

► Words to Watch

petrodollars (par. 2) money from oil and gasoline
transmigrate (par. 2) move
implicate (par. 3) accuse of guilt
insidious (par. 4) sinister, dangerous
propensity (par. 6) tendency
harrowing (par. 6) terrifying
voracious (par. 8) hungry

1 **I** drive a large, four-wheel-drive vehicle. Does that mean I'm a bad person?

2 You might think so, from all the sturm und drang we've heard lately from the Virtuous Ones who insist that America's fuel consumption—indeed, our very style of life—is somehow responsible for the enmity toward us in the Middle East, not to mention the rest of the world. A series of TV commercials put together by the columnist Arianna Huffington and Lawrence Bender, the Hollywood producer behind “Pulp Fiction,” have even linked SUVs with Mideast terrorism. The idea is that the petrodollars transmigrate from the Gas ‘n’ Go to the oil sheiks to the hands of mafias wielding AK-47s.

3 Leaving aside for the moment that this is trendy, illogical thinking—and leaving aside also the odd sensation of being lectured on socially responsible behavior by the producer of “Pulp Fiction”—isn't this really a backyard way of blaming America for Sept. 11 and other crimes like it? Those who implicate Americans—particularly our adventurous habits, offbeat choices and breathtaking freedoms, including the freedom to drive to a poetry reading followed by dinner at a French restaurant in the midst of a raging snowstorm—validate the terrorists as essentially right.

4 Where I live, about 100 miles north of New York City, at least half of all the vehicles you see on the road are SUVs or other light trucks. They make a great deal of sense. This is not just because we have plenty of long steep driveways and miles and miles of dirt roads. We also have had more than 70 inches of snow this winter. When the sun goes down and the melted snow re-freezes, the roads are covered with insidious stretches of black ice.

5 Four-wheel-drive vehicles allow workers to get to and from their jobs, and parents to transport their children safely to school, sporting events, ballet classes and the rest. Yes, there is something vaguely obscene about driving solo to the supermarket in Beverly Hills to pick up a carton of milk in your two-ton Navigator. But not so much in Portland or Green Bay or Chicago.

6 The well-publicized notion that SUVs are actually unsafe, based on their propensity to roll over, does not take into account personal responsibility. Rollover accidents tend to be something the driver has a substantial degree of control over. I choose not to whip around corners or to follow others so closely and at such high speeds that I have to make harrowing emergency stops. I drive so as not to roll over.

7 However, if some drunken driver veers across the center divider—a situation I have no control over—I would prefer that my 9-year-old and I not be inside a Corolla. From the standpoint of a reasoned individualism, SUVs are safer in many situations than cars. I think a lot of intelligent people realize that.

8 Of course, SUVs use a lot of gas. This goes for my wife's all-wheel-drive Volvo as well as for my voracious mistress, my 1989 GMC. But a car's miles-per-gallon rating is only one measure of fuel efficiency. Miles driven is another. People who drive light trucks quickly learn not to drive around aimlessly. We tend to combine trips and to keep engines finely tuned and tires properly inflated. It all comes down to home economics. What are we supposed to do now, turn our SUVs in? En masse? Only the independently wealthy can treat their cars purely as fashion items.

9 The SUV-bashers' argument also falls apart on macro-economic grounds. Were we to somehow cut our national fuel consumption by 20 percent, would that deprive the terrorism sponsors of cash? Unfortunately, the world oil market is, well, a market. Even if America were energy independent, there is no guarantee that Exxon, Texaco, and Getty—or, for that matter, France, the Netherlands, and Japan—would cease buying oil from Middle Eastern states.

10 My guess is that this campaign has less to do with politics and economics than with an American tendency to mind everybody else's business. So busybodies, let me ask you a question. How big is your house? Ms. Huffington's is reported to be 9,000 square feet. We all know what it costs to heat and air-condition a joint like that. A couple of years ago I replaced the aging oil furnace in my 3,000-square-foot house with a new fuel-injected system. It saves me about 800 gallons of oil a year. Hey, that's almost precisely the yearly fuel consumption of my GMC. I think of that as progress for me, as a world citizen. Maybe I'm not such a bad person after all.

► Building Vocabulary

Hochswender uses some common phrases and idioms to enrich his essay. Below are some that he uses. Explain what each phrase or idiom means, and use each in a sentence:

1. sturm und drang (par. 2)
2. whip around corners (par. 6)
3. home economics (par. 8)
4. en masse (par. 9)
5. macro-economic (par. 10)
6. energy independent (par. 10)
7. busybodies (par. 11)
8. a joint (par. 11)

► Thinking Critically about the Argument

Understanding the Writer's Argument

1. What is the major objection against driving SUVs, according to the writer? What is he being accused of?
2. What does the writer mean when he says, "Those who implicate Americans . . . validate the terrorists as essentially right"? (par. 3)
3. How does the SUV make life easier for the writer?
4. Why is the SUV safer than a smaller car?
5. The writer admits in paragraph 8 that the SUV uses a great deal of gasoline. How does he defend himself against the accusation of being wasteful?
6. The writer says that "the SUV-bashers' argument also falls apart on macro-economic grounds." (par. 10) What does he mean by this? How does the argument fall apart, according to him?

Understanding the Writer's Techniques

1. What do you think about the opening? Is it effective?
2. Who is the audience? How does that affect the tone of this essay?
3. Where does the writer express his major proposition most clearly and fully?
4. Hochswender has several minor propositions, and they are essentially of two kinds: propositions that are positive reasons to own SUVs and propositions that are rebuttals to perceived oppositions. Make an outline of the propositions offered in the body of his essay.
5. In paragraph 7, the writer mentions his 9-year-old child. Why does he do that? What is the effect of bringing a child into the argument?

6. In paragraph 7, the writer states, "I think a lot of intelligent people realize that." To what is he referring, and what argumentative purpose does this serve?
7. Which minor proposition do you find most effective? Why?
8. What do you think of the conclusion?
9. Why does the writer echo his statement from the beginning of the essay?

Exploring the Writer's Argument

1. One of the writer's arguments is that he drives "so as not to roll over." (par. 6) Why is this proposition weak? Could you strengthen his argument in this section?
2. One objection that some people have to SUVs that the writer doesn't mention is that although they might be safer for those driving them, they can be dangerous to those in smaller cars in the event of an accident. What might the author say to defend against this charge?
3. Paragraph 9 is short, but it includes an interesting idea. Paraphrase the idea, and think of a rebuttal to the point.

► Ideas for Writing Arguments

Prewriting

Make a list of lifestyle choices that you have made, actions that you perform often, or decisions that still have an impact on your life now (smoking, piercing), that people might have objections to, and try to come up with answers to objections.

Writing a Guided Argument

Woody Hochswender saw an aspect of his lifestyle that the media and people around him were attacking, and he wrote an essay defending himself. Write an essay in which you identify an aspect of *your* lifestyle that someone conceivably could object to on moral grounds, and defend yourself against the charges. For example, you might smoke cigarettes or cigars; you might consume alcohol; you might like loud music.

1. Begin by explaining your lifestyle choice to your reader, appealing to the reader's compassion.
2. Continue by describing the person or people who accuse you of acting poorly because of your lifestyle choice.
3. Next, offer a minor proposition that explains a positive side of your choice.