Rational Argument: Detailing the Parts

A persuasive argument has four key components:

- the writer's claim
- the writer's use of logical reasoning and evidence in support of the claim
- the writer's calculated anticipation of disagreement, involving the acknowledgment and perhaps accommodation of counterpositions
- the writer's refutation of counterpositions

THE CLAIM

TYPES OF CLAIMS. Several types of claims are possible -- claims of judgment, policy, value, cause/effect, or interpretation.

Claims of Judgment
In a claim of judgment, the writer establishes criteria and carefully analyzes the facts at hand in light of these criteria.

Examples

- Marijuana, although unavailable legally even by prescription, is beneficial to people suffering with AIDS, cancer, and glaucoma.
- Hand counts should have been allowed to continue in Florida because precedent has established them as fair, accurate, and favored by law.
- The United States was justified in using nuclear force against Japan during WWII.

Claims of Policy
In a claim of policy, the writer argues that a particular problem requires a particular solution.

Examples

- We've badly wasted billions of dollars fighting a "war on drugs"; legalizing certain drugs would allow us to spend these dollars more wisely.
- Manual hand counts of ballots designed to be counted by machines are unreliable and should be abolished.
- The general education goals for students at West Chester University need to be more sharply defined.
**Claims of Value**
In a claim of value, the writer decides the relative value of the subject at hand -- good or bad, desirable or undesirable, effective or ineffective, etc.

*Examples*

- Shakespeare is one of the most remarkable playwrights the English language has ever known; he's our greatest dramatist, our best poet, and our most insightful philosopher, political observer, and psychologist, telling us more about the human condition than any writer before or since.
- Katherine Harris is too partisan in her role as Secretary of State; her bias for the Bush campaign has led her to take several unfair actions.

**Claims of Cause/Effect**
- In a claim of cause/effect, the writer argues for a certain set of reasons or circumstances surrounding events.

*Examples*

- The drug war is unsuccessful because the government agencies running operations are hopelessly corrupt.
- The controversy surrounding the 2000 Presidential Election and the corporate scandals of 2002 equally undermine Americans' faith in our democracy.

**Claims of Interpretation**
In a claim of interpretation, the writer argues that a "text" (postmodern intellectuals go beyond the traditional understanding of what constitutes a text) can be assigned a certain particular meaning, and that this meaning is preferable to other "readings."

*Example*

- Death of a Salesman is an indictment of the American Dream.
- Pro wrestling may seem like the kind of spectacle analogous to the one provided by gladiators in ancient Rome, but the differences outweigh the similarities.
- The "right to bear arms" is provided by the Constitution; gun control laws would violate our constitutional rights.

**QUALITIES OF AN EFFECTIVE CLAIM.** A successful claim has a few key qualities:

- It is arguable.
- It is precisely worded.
- It is appropriately qualified, when necessary.

A successful claim is arguable. Unless there's disagreement, there's no opportunity to be persuasive. Make sure someone really does disagree with your position.

*Ask Yourself:*

- Do reasonable people disagree?
- Is the disagreement based on personal feeling or an objective consideration of the facts at hand?
Are these examples good or bad?

- The government should establish a minimum wage so that working Americans can reasonably subsist.
- Minimum wage is really a poverty wage.
- Cats are better pets than dogs.

A successful claim is precisely worded. Don't allow yourself any "wiggle room"—no evasiveness, no weaseling, so trickery, no manipulation. Although misunderstandings can always be cleared up in the course of the essay, it's still true that the more precise you are in your claim, the more precise you're likely to be in your argument.

*Ask Yourself:*

- Is there any ambiguity in my word choice?
- Can my language be misinterpreted, or interpreted in varying ways?

Are these examples good or bad?

- A teacher who is mad really can't teach effectively. [What, precisely, do we mean by mad—angry or insane?]
- Insanity interferes with teaching effectiveness. [Would anyone disagree with this?]
- Anger can keep a teacher from handling difficult situations effectively. [Does this fix the problem?]
- Polluting the environment is wrong. [Is there too much wiggle room? What kind of polluting? What's standard can we agree on for determining right and wrong? An argument against polluting in general may wind up weak because no one may really disagree with it.]
- Ocean dumping may be cost effective in the short term but its long term environmental consequences make it the wrong choice. [Is this as good as it sounds?]

A successful claim is appropriately qualified, if necessary. Qualification involves "softening" your claim so that it doesn't attempt to prove or defend absolutes. Remember that verbal arguments rarely are able to achieve the absolute certainty of mathematical statements; instead they aspire to prove or defend positions "beyond reasonable doubt" (the legal standard) or they arrive at "reasonable certainty."

*Ask Yourself:*

- Can I prove my claim "beyond a reasonable doubt"?
- Am I stating my claim more forcefully than I can actually prove with the reasoning and evidence I plan to present?

Are these examples good or bad?

- Stricter gun laws may save lives.
- The death penalty may serve as a deterrent to criminals in Texas.
LOGICAL REASONING AND EVIDENCE

IN SUPPORT OF THE CLAIM

LOGICAL REASONING

The foundation of any argument is the reasoning you use in support of your claim. Reasons can be thought of as the main points supporting a claim. They answer the question: "Why do you make that claim?" For example, a movie critic might argue that a particular film has merit. In support of this claim he presents the following reasons: the themes are provocative and reverberate long after the film is over; excellent direction gives the audience an intimate view of the characters through innovative camera work and unforgettable acting. Another example: A candidate for student government might oppose restrictions on free speech because (1) restrictions would make students reluctant to enter into frank debates on important issues, (2) offensive speech is hard to define, and (3) restrictions violate the free-speech clause of the First Amendment.

Once you've generated your reasons in support of your claim, it's a good idea to see if they bear examination. Will they hold up to readers' objections? Are your reasons logical? As we'll see, there are two kinds of logical argument: inductive and deductive.

For both kinds of argument, it should be noted, that we are talking about proof not beyond all conceivable doubt, but proof beyond all reasonable doubt; recognizing that the complexity of life and the ambiguities of language prevent us from achieving the kinds of absolute proof in verbal arguments that we may desire in mathematical arguments.

INDUCTIVE REASONING

An inductive line of reasoning makes inferences based on observations or specific evidence. From this evidence writers attempts to draw conclusions, or statements of truth, that they hope readers will accept. There are two ways of representing an inductive argument. One model is suggested by Stephen Toulmin, the other by Aristotle.

The Toulmin Model

The feeling that logical theory was becoming too far removed from actual verbal arguments as they really took place among ordinary people caused British philosopher Stephen Toulmin to propose a new system of logic. Toulmin aimed, not at the absolute truth of mathematical operations, but at the kind of truth produced within the legal system of English-speaking countries. In such legal argument a preponderance of evidence suggests a conclusion to a jury, and guilt needs to be proved, not beyond all conceivable doubt, but beyond a reasonable doubt. Legal argument, therefore, is close to the kind of argument used elsewhere in life. It depends for its persuasiveness on convincing an audience of the general strength of a case rather than on the rigorous but narrow standards of absolute proof used in mathematics or other formally constructed logic systems.

Toulmin names the different parts of a logical argument as follows:

**Claim:** what you believe your whole argument proves
**Data:** what prompts you to make that claim; that is, the facts that lead you to believe your claim is true
**Qualifier:** the part of the argument that measures the strength or force of the claim. Is the claim always true? True in the United States? True in modern times?
**Warrant:** an assumption that you expect your audience will share. The warrant supports the claim by connecting it to the data.
**Backing:** any facts that give substance to the warrant. Not all arguments make use of explicit backing.
**Rebuttal:** the part of an argument that allows for exceptions without having to give up the claim as generally true. The rebuttal does not so much refute your point as anticipate and answer attempts by someone else to refute it. For example, you could claim that most geese fly south for the winter, while admitting that a few are still found in the north. The very fact that few are found helps to prove your general point that most migrate.

Here's an example using the Toulmin Model of inductive reasoning:

**DATA:** Children have access to guns.  
**CLAIM:** Stricter gun laws would reduce children's access to guns.  
**WARRANT:** Stricter gun laws reduce access to guns.  
**QUALIFIER:** Laws may reduce access in some cases but not in all cases.  
**BACKING:** In the town of X, reported accidents involving handguns decreased by 1% after X enacted laws to restrict certain types of handguns. A few other towns in the U.S. report similar decreases.

To test the relative strength or weakness of this line of reasoning, we look at any underlying assumptions we can identify. In the Toulmin model, these assumptions are always found in the warrant, which may or may not be stated by the writer arguing this claim. Writers who have backing for their warrants are more likely to state them; but if a writer wants you to accept the warrant without proving it, he/she may just neglect to state it entirely, and leave the reader to figure it out. In the example above, the warrant can be challenged; however, if the writer produces the backing, it may become more convincing. Without the backing, readers may be tempted to argue that stricter laws will not necessarily reduce access, citing the prevalence of black markets (mafia), as well as our strict drug laws and their failure to reduce drug abuse.

**The Aristotelian Model**

Aristotle's model makes use of major and minor premises to help the reader reach a conclusion. These statements, when considered together, comprise a "syllogism." The premises present specific evidence in the major premise, an assumption in the minor premise (about which readers must once again determine truth or falsity).

**MAJOR PREMISE:** Children have access to guns.  
**MINOR PREMISE:** Stricter gun laws would reduce access to guns.  
**CONCLUSION:** Therefore, stricter gun laws will reduce children's access to guns.

**DEDUCTIVE REASONING**

Once again, major and minor premises lead to a conclusion. However, deductive reasoning begins with an assumption of truth—a statement that writers hope readers will accept as true—and then fits specific observations (the data) to this assumption. Here's a famous example:

**MAJOR PREMISE:** All humans are mortal. (Assumption of truth.)  
**MINOR PREMISE:** Socrates is human. (Specific observation.)  
**CONCLUSION:** Socrates is mortal. (Conclusion.)

Or

**MAJOR PREMISE:** All ADHD cases present difficult problems for teachers. (Assumption of truth.)  
**MINOR PREMISE:** William has ADHD. (Specific observation.)  
**CONCLUSION:** William presents difficult problems for his teachers. (Conclusion.)
Although this is probably considered sound reasoning by most people, it does present a potential problem. Its assumption that kids with ADHD will pose problems may unfairly prejudice teachers against kids with ADHD! Maybe most children with ADHD do pose problems for classroom teachers, but maybe William isn't one of them. Is it fair to agree, then, with the major premise? If we don't agree, then the line of reasoning is invalid.

**EVIDENCE**

Reasons without evidence to support them are usually weak or unconvincing. Evidence is what your readers will look for when they decide whether or not you have a substantial case or not.

Evidence is often classified as "hard" or "soft." Both types can be persuasive. It's helpful to be aware of their differences so that you can use them effectively in combination.

**HARD EVIDENCE:** This is the type of evidence considered most "weighty" or convincing; this evidence will be disputed only with great difficulty—it may even be impossible to dispute.

- Facts you're aware of or have researched (cite your source, formally or informally)
- Expert opinion/authority you're aware of or have researched (cite your source, formally or informally)
- Statistics (cite your source, formally or informally)

**SOFT EVIDENCE:** This type of evidence is persuasive but doesn't carry as much weight as hard evidence. Readers may object that, although compelling, it is subjective or limited in that broad generalizations can't be defended by examining individual cases. Yet this type of evidence is effective if the writer maintains a high degree of personal credibility and is able to make a case that individual cases are sufficient to support broader assertions. It is especially effective at personalizing abstract issues or concepts. Readers can relate to the human face this type of evidence supplies.

- Case studies you're aware of or have researched (cite your source, formally or informally)
- Personal observation and experience, or your awareness of the experience of people you know
- Scenarios you create based on your understanding of appropriate data
- Interpretations you present based on your reading of a text or understanding of a situation

**ANTICIPATING DISAGREEMENT and NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCES**

The fact that you've made an arguable claim presupposes that there will be disagreement, that some readers will oppose you. In the spirit of truth-seeking, however, you shouldn't feel threatened by this disagreement. You should be ready and willing to examine those opposing views to see if they have any merit. If they do you should be willing to accommodate them. However, if you want to "win" the argument, you'll have to be prepared to refute them.

It's in this anticipation—the acknowledgment, accommodation, and refutation of opposing views that persuasive writing distinguishes itself from expository (or objective) writing.

**ACKNOWLEDGING DISAGREEMENT**

Let readers know you're aware of their differing views, their alternative perspectives, their objections, their challenges, their questions. Discuss them directly at whatever length you feel is appropriate to communicate your understanding—a sentence, a paragraph, or several paragraphs or sentences sprinkled strategically throughout the essay.
ACCOMMODATING DISAGREEMENT
Be willing to recognize your opponent's strong points and concede points you think your opponent has "won." Sometimes only a partial concession is in order. This shows that you are more eager to seek truth than you are eager to "be right." You prove yourself to be credible and rational when you demonstrate that it's more appropriate to find the truth in the matter than it is to be right. Your willingness to concede will disarm your opponent, who may be more willing to entertain whether there's more agreement in store.

REFUTING DISAGREEMENT
Winning an argument involves explicitly opposing your opponent's objections by proving them weak or wrong. You do this by uncovering false premises (faulty assumptions), pointing out logical fallacies in your opponent's reasoning, or by presenting evidence contrary to what your opponent has presented.

REFUTING READERS' OBJECTIONS
Readers' objections and views cannot always be accommodated. Sometimes they must be refuted. When you refute objections, you assert that they are wrong and you argue against them. Refutation doesn't have to be delivered arrogantly or dismissively, however. You can refute your readers' objections in a spirit of shared inquiry and problem-solving. To be convincing, refutations must be supported with the same kinds of reasoning and evidence you've been using all along. Two ways to refute opponents' arguments are to disprove their lines of reasoning or to point out the logical fallacies inherent in their statements.

USING LOGICAL REASONING TO DISPROVE YOUR OPPONENT'S CASE
As we've already seen when we discussed logical reasoning, any argument, if it is going to be convincing, must be grounded in logic. A logical line of reasoning in support of a claim is more convincing to a reader than mere opinion. Just as you use logical reasoning to support your own claim, your opponents have reasoned their own positions. One of the best ways to refute an opponent's position is to show that the reasoning used to arrive at that position is faulty or flawed. There are a couple of ways to achieve this. You can:

- challenge the premises that lead to a conclusion; prove one or more of these premises wrong by demonstrating its falseness
- challenge the underlying assumptions (warrants) that allow writers to move from data to claim; prove the assumption unfounded by demonstrating its falseness, unfairness, or ambiguity
- point out when your opponent has used a logical fallacy

SPOTTING LOGICAL FALLACIES
Fallacies are errors or flaws in reasoning. Although essentially unsound, fallacious arguments usually seem superficially plausible and often have great persuasive power.

Fallacies are not necessarily deliberate efforts to deceive readers. They may be accidental, resulting from a failure to:

- examine underlying assumptions critically
- establish a solid ground to support a claim
- choose words that are clear and unambiguous.

Whatever the cause, they contribute to a weak argument. Your ability to spot logical fallacies in your opponents' positions will help you refute those positions effectively. Here are some common logical fallacies.
BEGGING THE QUESTION. Arguing that a claim is true by repeating the claim in different words. Sometimes called "circular reasoning." Users of the fallacy of begging the question try to take for granted the issues that are to be proved. They often use overly compensatory words and phrases like "obviously," "of course," and "simply" or "certainly" to mask the fact that they are making unproved assertions.

Examples: (1) Arguing that the bible is the divine word of God because it says so in the bible is circular reasoning. If people want to believe in the divinity of the Bible, they will have to base their belief on faith, not logical reasoning. (2) If you want to argue, for instance, that women are capable of combat, then it won't prove anything to assert that women should be allowed in combat because they are capable. That is "begging the question" or using circular reasoning. You are taking for granted that women are capable rather than offering proof, and your reasoning goes in a circle-women are capable of serving in combat because they are capable.

POST HOC ERGO PROPTER HOC: CONFUSING CHRONOLOGY WITH CAUSALITY. Assuming that because one thing preceded another, the former cause the latter. The Latin phrase post hoc ergo propter hoc means roughly "after this, therefore because of this." This fallacy is a mainstay of superstitious reasoning. It claims causal connection between events that merely succeed one another in time.

Example: (1) Reasoning that your misfortune is the direct result of having crossed paths with a black cat creates a logical fallacy. (2) Teens who liked Nirvana committed suicide following news of Cobain's suicide. Concluding that Cobain's suicide caused those teens' suicide is an example of this logical fallacy.

EITHER/OR REASONING. Assuming that there are only two sides to a complex issue, and representing yours as the only correct one.

Examples: (1) Addressing the issue of drug legalization, you may hear someone may attempt to argue that we can either legalize all drugs or no drugs, and since legalizing all drugs would be completely disastrous, the only thing to do is to keep all drugs illegal. (2) Here's a textbook (Allyn and Bacon) example: "Assume someone is trying to persuade you that the United States ought to intervene militarily in a certain conflict many thousands of miles from U.S. territory. At one point in the argument you hear this-'Either we demonstrate through force that the United States continues to be a world power or we take a backseat, passive role in world affairs. The choice is clear.' Actually the choice is not at all clear. The person arguing has presented two options and has argued for one. But many possibilities for conducting U.S. foreign policy exist besides going to war or becoming passive. An argument will be flawed when its author pre-selects two possibilities from among many and then attempts to force a choice.

EQUIVOCATING. Misleading or hedging with intentionally ambiguous or vague word choices. To equivocate is to misuse language in an attempt to deceive. Usually you find that the person making the argument is using the same term to mean two different things.

Examples: (1) An abortion protester argues that *)It is wrong to kill innocent human beings. *)Fetuses are innocent human beings. Therefore it is wrong to kill fetuses. In this example, "innocent human beings" means something different in each premise, invalidating the conclusion. In the first premise, "innocence" refers to an individual who, aware of moral choice, has been judged not guilty of committing or choosing an immoral act; whereas in the second premise, "innocence" refers to a being who is innocent because incapable of moral intentions or choice.
FAILING TO ACCEPT THE BURDEN OF PROOF. Making a direct assertion without presenting a reasoned argument to support it.

Examples: (1) In an argument against capital punishment, a writer asserts that capital punishment should remain legal because it is a deterrent against murder. However, no logical line of reasoning or evidence-no proof-of this punishment's actual effectiveness as a deterrent is offered. (In fact, there is none.)

FALSE ANALOGY. Assuming that because one thing resembles another, conclusions drawn from one can be applied to the other. Analogies are helpful in arguments, but some writers take them too far, drawing unwarranted conclusions.

Examples: (1) You may assert that the drug war today is analogous to Prohibition in the 1930s, but it doesn't necessarily follow that if we decided to legalize marijuana or cocaine today that the black market for these drugs would disappear, as the black market for alcohol disappeared after Prohibition was repealed.

OVERRELIANCE ON AUTHORITY. Assuming that something is true simply because an expert says so and ignoring evidence to the contrary.

Examples: (1) Suppose, for instance, you just finished reading an article by Dr. Jones who asserts that TV violence causes toddlers to become violent in their play. In the day care where you work, however, you've discovered evidence to the contrary. You notice that after movie-time (the children were treated to The Lion King, perhaps) two children immediately start play fighting, but a third goes off quietly and draws a picture of lions with some crayons, while a fourth comes over to you and asks you to read her a story. Ignoring this evidence to the contrary, you assume that TV violence always produces actual violence in toddlers, instead of qualifying the assertion: TV violence may cause actual violence.

HASTY OR FAULTY GENERALIZATION. Offering only weak or limited evidence to support a conclusion. The error of faulty generalization comes from treating all members of a class or category as if they were defined by criteria that apply only to some members.

Examples: (1) In an editorial about the problem of homelessness, you may come across a writer who argues against using the taxpayer's money for extended services for the homeless. During the course of his argument you notice that his he tends to overgeneralize, lumping together homeless families and homeless individuals and failing to note the very important distinctions between these two subgroups. Do homeless families tend to be "mentally ill"? Did children who are homeless choose their lifestyle? Are they empowered to change their lot?

OVERSIMPLIFYING. Giving easy, smug, or pat answers to complicated questions, sometimes by appealing to emotion rather than logic.

Examples: "Guns don't kill-people do" is an overly simple but popular argument against gun control. It sounds good but it doesn't address the complex problem that the availability of guns poses in our society.
**PERSONAL OR AD HOMINEM ATTACK.** The person presenting an argument is attacked instead of the argument itself. This takes many forms. For example, the person's character, nationality or religion may be attacked. Alternatively, it may be pointed out that a person stands to gain from a favorable outcome. Or, finally, a person may be attacked by association, or by the company he keeps. In fact, a person's character or circumstance has nothing to do with the proposition being argued.

Examples: (1) We should discount what Senator John says about taxation because he won't be hurt by the increase. (2) We should disregard Share B.C.'s argument because they are being funded by the logging industry. (3) You say I shouldn't drink, but you haven't been sober for more than a year.

**RED HERRING.** Attempting to misdirect the discussion by raising an essentially unrelated point. The figure of speech that describes this fallacy comes from the fact that a red herring has a strong odor and can be dragged across the scent trail left by humans or animals to confuse pursuing dogs.

Examples: (1) In an essay about hate speech, a writer implies that the issue of free speech has been used as a red herring in the debates at Brown over a disciplinary case that centered on drunkenness and loutish behavior rather than on political dissent or free speech. The writer argues that to get drunk and yell off-color epithets out your window in the name of "free speech" is to throw a rather smelly red herring across your trail, hoping the thinking person's will lose your scent.

**SLANTING.** Selecting or emphasizing the evidence that supports your claim and suppressing or playing down other evidence.

Examples: You may decide, for instance, that you are against the legalization of marijuana for any use, but as you make your case you fail to acknowledge medical evidence that proves marijuana beneficial to treating glaucoma.

**SLIPPERY SLOPE.** Pretending that one thing inevitably leads to another. Sometimes called the "domino effect" or the "domino theory."

Examples: (1) Someone might try to argue that if we legalize marijuana by prescription, then pretty soon it'll be available recreationally, and then what's to stop us from legalizing cocaine, or speed, or heroin; pretty soon all drugs will be legalized and everyone in the nation will be high on drugs.

**SOB STORY.** Manipulating readers' emotions in order to lead them to draw unjustified conclusions. The reader is told to agree to the proposition because of the pitiful state of the author, but the pitiful state of the author has nothing to do with the truth or falsity of the proposition.

Examples: (1) Senator Bob wants you to accept his proposal for cutting taxes because he and his staff spent seven years working hard at it.

**STRAW MAN.** Directing the argument against a claim that nobody actually holds, that everyone agrees is very weak, or is one of your opponent's weaker points.

Examples: (1) We should bring back the draft. People don't want to enter the military because they find it an inconvenience. But they should realize that there are more important things than convenience.