Inventing Arguments

What Is Argument?

Argument is the act of asserting, supporting, and defending a claim. It is an intellectual and a social process. People are surrounded by argument. It can be said that public life is argumentative—that people are vying to be heard, trying to assert their vision of the world to anyone who will hear it. But argument can work in more subtle ways in the form of advertisements, songs, billboards, posters, slogans, and stories. While our daily language may not be full of explicit debate, it is full of underlying values and unstated assumptions. When people make a point about a favorite song or an interesting class, they are hinting at an entire argument, which entails a set of values and assumptions about social worth.

American history can be seen, and is often taught, as a series of arguments. The Founding Fathers were exemplary arguers, and Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence may be one of the most politically significant arguments the world has seen. Arguments have driven American history: the evolution of its colonies and states, the development of a federal government, the drawing of borders, the accumulation of territory, the removal of Native Americans, the institution of slavery, the abolitionist movement, the South's secession from the Union, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the emergence of public education, the extension of voting rights, the Industrial Revolution, the development of unions, the rise of monopoly capitalism, the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression, the nation's role in World War I and II, the Japanese-American internment camps, the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, *Roe vs. Wade,* Watergate, the L.A. riots, the Iran-Contra scandal, the war on drugs, biotechnology, the nation's intervention in Iraq, state marriage amendments, ballot counting—the list goes on and on. All of these events and situations have been layered with fevered arguments and advocates competing to take the country in one direction instead of another. Today, we need only to turn on the television to hear argument stacked atop argument. From CNN to Comedy Central, news anchors and standup comedians alike are leading participants in collective arguments.

What Is Academic Argument?

Although history seems fraught with bold arguments among classes, religions, rulers, and countries, the vast majority of arguments are subtler: small exchanges of ideas with participants urging others to accept their positions. Most often, argument does *not* include beating an opponent, taking up arms, or preaching to an audience, but involves making a debatable position appear reasonable or acceptable. And this is the primary motive behind academic argument: *to make others see the wisdom of a position or perspective.*

Academic disciplines are arenas of argument. Many college students are surprised to discover the degree to which their fields of study have grown from internal debates. In composition studies, for instance, some scholars, called expressionists, have argued that ideas come from inside a writer's consciousness; other scholars, known as social constructionists, have argued that ideas emerge from the influence of social conditions that surround a writer; still other scholars have tried to combine these views. Or consider psychology: Sigmund Freud did not simply announce his theories on psychoanalysis to receptive audiences. He presented his theories as arguments. In fact, every major figure in a field of study, from chemistry to engineering, has been an arguer as much as anything else.

Many scholars say that academic disciplines provide their own language of argument. In other words, engineers learn how to make arguments within the framework of engineering, chemists learn how to argue using the language of chemistry, and so forth. They learn the formulas, language, and equations required to enter the ongoing arguments of their discipline. It might even be said that academic disciplines teach students how to view the world. Biologists, for instance, may come to believe that the world is knowable and that the origins of life can be discovered. Philosophers may come to believe that nothing can be known outside of a particular time and place. Psychologists may come to believe that people have control over their decisions. These beliefs and assumptions may rest quietly beneath the daily thoughts and work of biologists, philosophers, and psychologists, but they have significant impact on what gets said and done. And eventually, all those who practice within a discipline are affected by the assumptions (and the arguments) that have accumulated during their studies.

Outside the academic tradition is a popular saying: "People are entitled to their own opinions." But we should investigate this statement

because it poses a problem for those interested in the study of argument. It suggests that people's opinions are set in stone. But people do not simply keep their opinions. Instead, they trade them for others. Thus, to say that *people are entitled to their own opinions* greatly oversimplifies the human consciousness, which is actually a complex process of building, transforming, and trading opinions. It ignores how people really work in the world of ideas, and it ignores the power of language to shape our perspectives on the world around us.

Although the saying "People are entitled to their own opinions" seems open-minded, the statement most often means, "What other people think doesn't matter to me." This statement is often used to dismiss others' opinions; it is used to stop exploration and cut people off from others' arguments. But in a democratic society, in which everyday citizens help constitute policy, vote for political agendas, and conclude verdicts, other people's opinions do matter. What people think about labor, war, abortion, human rights, water pollution, corporate power, and so forth impacts the civilization that we all inhabit. More than anything else (more than money, weapons, or even good looks), other people's opinions influence how we live. Because most of us do not live on our own islands, cut off from the influence of culture, law, and policy, others' opinions directly filter into our everyday behaviors and thoughts. And that is why argument is so important.

Activities

1. With several others, debate the following: *Why do opinions change?* Share your initial thinking, and then explore other possibilities. Consider particular opinions you once held but that changed.

2. In a small group, make a list of careers that people prepare for in college, such as doctor, accountant, marketing specialist, nutritionist, and so on. Then discuss how a college education teaches students in each field to view the world in a particular way.

3. What arguments make up the national debate about the war in Afghanistan?

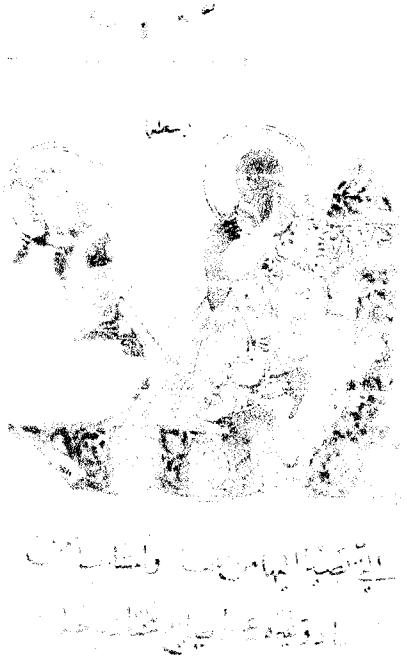
4. What arguments are put forth in the preamble of the Declaration of Independence?

What Is Rhetoric?

Rhetoric is a process of recognizing and using the most effective strategies for influencing thought. The Greek philosopher Aristotle defined rhetoric as the ability to see the available means of persuasion for each particular case. In other words, rhetoric is more than a tool for changing people's minds; it is also the study of how people are persuaded into their beliefs. People who study rhetoric and writing are interested in how opinions form and change. They study the relationship between language and belief, and they examine the cultural conditions around people and their everyday use of language.

In its classical Greek origins (circa fifth-century BCE), rhetoric was a primary field of study. In many ways, it was the glue between various academic pursuits because it focused on how ideas (regardless of content) are used, shared, communicated, implemented, and manipulated. The study of rhetoric was the study of social and intellectual activity. Today, in popular use, rhetoric has a significantly smaller domain and is sometimes narrowly associated with empty or dishonest language.

Greek philosopher Aristotle.



The cartoon on page 9 may point to a truth about politics, but *rhetoric is not about dishonesty.* Rhetoric is most often used honestly to communicate ideas and to bring others into one's own perspective. In this sense, everyone uses rhetoric. A child learns that adding "please" to his request for a cookie gets better results than screaming, "Cookie!" A teenager knows that asking for the family car should involve some mention of her intentions to be home early. Imagine the following exchange between an employee and his boss:

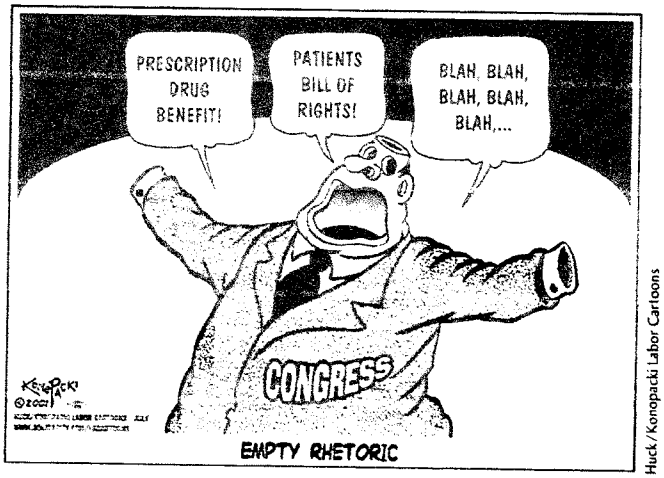
"Hey, I need to leave early today."

"Well, Vick, you can't."

Then notice the added layers of rhetoric in the following:

"Excuse me, Kim. My daughter has an important doctor's appointment, and I was wondering if I could leave early today to be with her."

"Sure, Vick. Can you come in early tomorrow to make up for the lost time?"



Huck/Konopacki Labor Cartoons

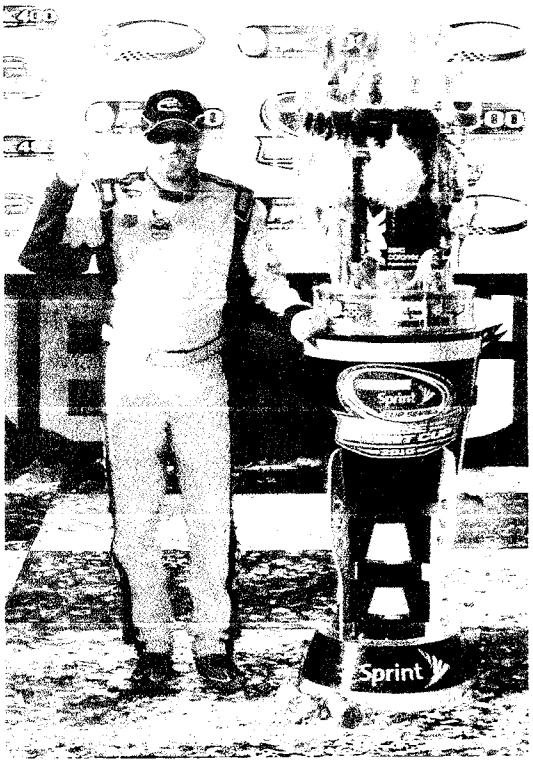
We might call the second exchange more polite or more respectful. But the layer of respect is also a layer of rhetoric, a strategy for inviting the audience (Kim) into the speaker's perspective. Vick is not being dishonest in the second example—at least, we cannot assume he is. He merely gives some information that helps make his request seem valid. In fact, anytime someone offers information, describes something a particular way, or arranges information in a particular way so that someone else will accept a claim, he or she is making rhetorical decisions.

But the preceding examples are rather basic. The child who says "please" and the worker who nuances his request are not *studying* rhetoric. They are simply using the available means of persuasion. The student of rhetoric explores the ways in which different uses of language impact people in various situations. That is, students of rhetoric ask questions about particular situations:

- What is happening? Why should someone speak out?
- Who is present? Who is the audience?
- What are the audience's values and beliefs?
- What kind of language would best appeal to those beliefs?

When we try to make a point seem reasonable, ethical, or emotional for a particular audience, we are involved in a rhetorical effort. That effort can be dramatic, such as when a lawyer is trying to persuade a jury to see facts in a particular way or when a politician gives an impassioned speech. Sometimes, the rhetorical effort can be subtle. For instance, when scientists arrange information on a laboratory report, they present their findings so that their work appears coherent and logical. The scientists may not make a dramatic point about their own thinking, but the report may still have a rhetorical dimension:

> Results: Overall, beavers showed a preference for certain species of trees, and their preference was based on distance from the central place. Measurements taken at the study site show that beavers avoided oaks and musclewood . . . and show a significant food preference ($x_{-} = 447.26$, d.f. = 9, $P < .05$). No avoidance or particular preference was observed for the other tree species. (http://www.ncsu.edu/labwrite/res/labreport/res-sample-labrep.html)



Jason Smith/Getty Images for NASCAR/Getty Images Sport

Driver Tony Stewart in victory lane after winning the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series Pepsi Max 400.

One of the most obvious uses of rhetoric is in advertising. Television, radio, magazine, Internet, and even restroom advertisements use language and graphics to persuade us to buy things. It works. Americans are profoundly influenced by advertising rhetoric—so much so that it has become an art form. Companies spend billions of dollars each year in a rhetorical race for our attention. They shape every sentence and carefully select every image so each ad will have the most dramatic effect on its audience. Rhetoric is a powerful aspect of language, perhaps the most powerful. When used for positive purposes, it can help people share ideas, values, and visions. When used for negative purposes, it can prompt people to waste money on useless trinkets or lead them into treachery.

Rhetoric is more than the selection and arrangement of words. It also is a deeper exploration of thought and language. Students and scholars of rhetoric can ask theoretical questions:

- What is the relationship between thought and language?
- How does a particular type of language influence consciousness?
- How do particular values or beliefs stay in place over time?
- How do some values or beliefs get dismissed or overrun?

The study of rhetoric is still at the heart of writing classes today. Students learn not just about correct grammar but also about the relationship between language and thought, the processes of analyzing and creating *discourse* (language in use). The goal of studying rhetoric is to examine the nuances of persuasive language as they appear in essays, reports, literature, slogans, advertisements, speeches, memos, policies, art, entertainment, and even actions. Rhetoric is key to the study of argument. In a sense, there can be no argument without rhetoric.

The ancient Greek lessons on rhetoric still apply today. In writing, debate, communication, and speech courses, students study the five categories, or canons, of rhetoric passed down from the ancient Greeks:

- **Invention:** the discovery and development of ideas
- **Arrangement:** the organization of ideas in a coherent and engaging fashion

- **Style or voice:** the personal or individualized use of language conventions, with attention to appropriateness, situation, and audience
- **Memory:** the recollection of prepared points
- **Delivery:** the presentation of ideas

These canons are used as intellectual tools for developing, extending, and shaping ideas. Because discovering and developing ideas is so important to academic writing, invention is an extensive part of the process, and it has a primary place in this book. As you will see in Chapters 7–12, arrangement and voice are also important components.

Rhetorical situation refers to an opportunity to address a particular audience about a disputed or disputable issue. Looking back at the definition of *rhetoric*, we might say that the rhetorical situation is an opportunity to gather and use the available means of persuasion. A rhetorical situation involves an *exigence*—an occasion when something happens or does not happen that results in some uncertainty. The rhetorical situation also involves a speaker/writer, an audience, a method of communication, and the rules of communication (whether directly stated or implied), as well as the text, or message. All elements of the rhetorical situation exist in time and place, which impact what can and should be said. Good rhetoricians (good writers) know how to seize upon all the particular elements of time and place. They build points out of the raw social materials around them.

Academic essays have their own rhetorical situation. The student is the speaker/writer; the audience is usually defined by a group of peers and an instructor; the rules of communication are explicitly defined (and even evaluated) on a syllabus and assignment prompt; and the assignment itself is the exigence—the opportunity to address the audience, to assert a way of thinking about a topic. (Imagine seeing an

The rhetorical situation includes the

- tension or "exigence"
- arguer (speaker/writer)
- audience
- method of communication
- rules of communication
- text or message

assignment as a rhetorical opportunity!) In academic settings, writers should assume that their audiences are attentive, informed, and tuned in to all the layers of an argument. Academic readers are constantly thinking about the messages being sent and the way the ideas can be received. As a result, they expect rhetorical moves that are not common in many popular culture arguments:

- **Revelatory rather than familiar points:** While popular culture attempts to make audiences comfortable by repeating familiar phrases and announcing widely held opinions, academic argument attempts to give the audience a new way of seeing the topic. Academic argument attempts to reveal previously unseen layers of ideas.
- **Appeals to logic rather than emotion:** While the goal of much popular culture, from news programs to MTV, is to engage our emotions (such as fear or desire), academic argument appeals more to the audience's ability to reason and think through difficult or complex issues. This is not to say that academic argument avoids emotional appeals, but it uses them sparingly.
- **Analysis rather than packaging:** While popular culture packages ideas into slogans, academic argument seeks to *unpack* ideas, breaking open familiar phrases and concepts.
- **Inclusion rather than exclusion:** Many arguments in popular culture exclude groups of people. Some political talk show hosts, for example, will deride liberals or conservatives, thereby confirming their audience's beliefs. But academic arguments attempt to place less focus on people's individual qualities and instead invite the audience into a way of thinking.

Activities

1. Think of a recent college class. Make a list of all the rhetorical strategies of the instructor and the students. Consider all the subtle and explicit ways that instructors work to bring students into a way of thinking—about the class, the rules, the rewards, the penalties. And consider how students work to persuade instructors of their abilities, their dedication, or even their apathy about the course. Consider particular language, phrasing, words, suggestions.

2. Make a list of situations from history or current events in which rhetoric has been used for good or bad purposes.

3. Describe a situation in the past twenty-four hours in which you made a rhetorical decision.

What Is Invention?

Invention is the discovery and development of ideas. It is the engine of argument: It moves everyone involved (arguer and audience) away from worn-out statements and toward new territory and vital ideas. Without it, arguers end up reasserting tired statements, going around in circles, or simply projecting their initial opinions on a given topic. Invention allows arguers to discover, for themselves and their audiences, something worthy of their attention.

Beginning writers sometimes assume that invention means merely brainstorming for a topic—tricks such as clustering or free writing. Once they have a topic that seems like it might generate lots of ideas, they stop inventing and start drafting. But this strategy is flawed in two important ways. First, invention is not necessarily a chaotic storm in the brain, a mysterious and random array of lightning strikes. (If that's all it were, writing would be a complete disaster.) Invention can be a deliberate process, a challenging journey driven by probing questions and strategic intellectual moves. Second, invention is not something that ends once someone finds a topic and takes a stand. In fact, the real thinking and the most intensive intellectual probing begin once a topic is found: a writer must develop support (evidence, examples, and appeals) that adds dimension and substance to a position.

A common misconception about argument, and about academic writing in general, is that opinions must be proven with facts based on some form of research. According to this view, the best arguments must be those that have lots of statistics and data to support claims. Because of this, writers may feel inclined to depend on others' words and ideas, and they might have difficulty developing points on their own. But those who know key invention strategies can use research more strategically than those who rely on it to make every point for them. And those who know how to invent can get beyond their initial opinions about a topic and develop thoughts that shed new light on hidden layers. Notice how the following discussion goes from an initial opinion to a more complex insight:

Jack: Old people should stay off the roads.

Linda: Just because they drive slowly?

Jack: No, because they drive slowly and they hold up other people. And because everyone else is in a hurry, the older drivers make driving hazardous.

Diana: So the people in a hurry aren't the hazards?

Jack: Well, of course they are, but the slower drivers just frustrate everyone who wants to go the speed limit.

Diana: Or faster?

Jack: Yes . . . or faster.

Linda: If everyone on the roads had no obstacles and they could speed to where they needed to be, would the roads be safer? Would people drive any better?

Jack: Well, maybe not.

Linda: So is the problem really "old people"?

Jack: The problem is that everyone—those people in a hurry and those who aren't—have to share the roads.

Diana: And most people aren't very good at sharing space.

Jack: In general, people have their own cars, their own homes, their own lawnmowers, their own . . . everything. But suddenly, they pull out into the street, and they're in shared space.

Linda: So you're saying that the problem isn't with only one group of drivers—it's with an attitude that might include all groups?

The conversation develops into something more insightful than Jack's first personal opinion. As the three writers talk, they invent increasingly layered ideas. They ask questions about their own claims and thereby open up intellectual possibilities that they could not previously have imagined. They do not merely express opinions or give answers. Instead, they assert an idea and then interrogate it. In this way, inventive writers learn to see the lurking arguments:

- The real danger on the highways is speed and the belief that speed is an inherent good.
- American roadways are plagued not so much by particular groups of drivers but by the pace of everyday life.
- Americans' prejudices against one another are dramatized on the highway.
- Americans' strong sense of individuality (which centers on their own homes, their own cars, their own lawnmowers, etc.) makes it difficult for them to share anything—even the highways.

In short, invention gets writers past their initial ideas and propels them beyond their personal opinions. It is the genesis of good writing and powerful argumentation. Because the goal of argument is to reveal a new way of seeing a topic (hence persuading people to rethink their positions and beliefs), good invention strategies are the key to success. Invention is such a key part of good writing and good arguing that Chapters 7–12 in this textbook devote several sections to it. These Invention sections offer series of questions that lead writers to increasingly complex and revelatory ideas.

Activities

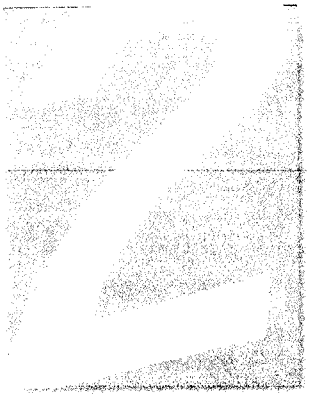
1. Closely examine the discussion among Jack, Linda, and Diana. Describe the specific points in the conversation that take the ideas beyond Jack's initial opinion. Describe, in specific terms, how Diana and Linda help Jack go from his initial opinion to a more complex insight.

2. With a small group of peers (in class or online), develop an idea from an initial opinion to a more complex insight (as Jack, Linda, and Diana do on page 14). Keep a running record of the conversation. Try to trace the progression of thought. After the discussion, answer the following:
   a. What new ideas (new ways of thinking about the topic) emerged?
   b. What prompted the new way of thinking—a probing question, a provocative statement, a debate about some particular word or phrase?

3. At the beginning of the chapter, we claim that "American history can be seen, and is often taught, as a series of arguments." Consider the following recruitment ad from World War II. How does it, as an artifact of history, make an argument about America, women, gender, or war?

Library of Congress/LC-USZC4-1856

Claims



What Is a Claim?

All arguments have two major parts: claim and support. A **claim** is the main argumentative position (or thesis) being put forward. It is the assertion being made. The **support** gives substance and legitimacy to the claim and comes in various forms, such as facts, statistics, scenarios, appeals to logic, and appeals to emotions. The support is what allows, or convinces, the audience to accept the claim. (Support is discussed in Chapter 3.)

Complex arguments, like the ones expressed in essays, have more than one claim: they have a main claim and supporting claims. These arguments are actually one argument made up of smaller arguments.

Basic Argument	**Complex Argument**
Claim	Main Claim
Support	*Supporting Claim* *Support*
	Supporting Claim *Support*
	Supporting Claim *Support*
	Supporting Claim *Support*

A main claim can have any number of supporting claims (not just four, as shown in the preceding illustration). For example, in a discussion about where to take a week's vacation, someone might claim, *We should go to Myrtle Beach.* To support this claim, the person would make other claims,

such as *Myrtle Beach has one of the finest beaches on the east coast, Myrtle Beach has over 250 golf courses,* and so on.

Just like main claims can be developed with supporting claims, those supporting claims can be developed with additional supporting claims. For example, to support *Myrtle Beach has one of the finest beaches on the East Coast,* one might claim that *The Myrtle Beach area includes sixty miles of diverse beaches* or that *The beach includes a new boardwalk with amusements, food, and lots of great people-watching.*

Types of Claims

Main claims, which are sometimes called thesis statements, are the primary assertions made about a given topic. Main claims do not merely state what the argument is about; they reveal the arguer's particular stance on a given topic. Some theorists split argumentative claims into three types: fact, value, and policy.

Claims of fact argue that a condition exists, has existed, or will exist. This type of claim may be confusing because we often associate fact with truth (and therefore think it's beyond dispute), but facts themselves are always in dispute. They must be proven.

The Roman Empire influenced all of Europe.

CO_2 emissions are impacting temperatures globally.

The Packers will win the Super Bowl this year.

Claims of value argue that something possesses or reflects a particular quality (good, bad, just, unreasonable, practical, unfair, etc.). They may assert approval or disapproval. Any claim that argues worth is a claim of value. An adjective, or what is called a predicate of value, usually can be found in the claim. For instance, *good, underhanded,* and *wrong* are all predicates of value in the following:

The Packers are not a very good team this year.

The governor's strategies for getting elected are underhanded.

Abortion is wrong.

Claims of policy argue that some action should be taken or some change made. Claims of policy call for a particular change in behavior, policy, approach, or even attitude.

The Confederate flag should not be flown above government buildings.

Voluntary prayer should be allowed in public schools.

We should get out of class early today.

Each type of claim can occur in any situation. Notice, for instance, how different types of claims can work in an argument about the past:

Claim of Fact: The failed school levy of 2000 changed the operations of the public schools for the entire decade.

Claim of Value: The voting public was misguided in its decision to vote down the 2000 school levy.

Claim of Policy: The voting public should not have voted against the school levy in 2000, and the community should work to repair the negative impact of that significant year.

The claims correspond to the purpose of an argument and to the intended reaction of the audience. Will the audience be persuaded into taking action, into seeing value, or into understanding a condition? These categories help readers (and writers) to know the nature of the argument and may help you to understand an argument's purpose.

Activity

As a class, consider the following topic: the blurring between news and entertainment. In small groups, develop three argumentative claims (fact, value, and policy) about this topic.

Understanding different claims is vital to good argument. In fact, in our everyday lives, we sometimes work hard to manage the way others hear us. We use a standard formula for dispelling any confusion: I'm not saying _____; I'm saying _____. Often, this move is to make sure others understand the nature of our point:

- *I'm not saying we should do anything; I'm just saying that the guy is a fake!*
- *I'm not saying that Martha's parties are boring; I'm saying that I don't want to go tonight.*
- *I'm not saying that we shouldn't get a dog; I'm saying that it will be hard work.*
- *I'm not arguing whether or not they won; I'm arguing that they didn't win fairly.*

CARLO ALLEGRI/Reuters/Corbis

Jerry Seinfeld.

In each case the speaker is clarifying the nature of the claim—saying, in effect, "I am making this type of claim, not one of the others." For *Seinfeld* fans, this potential confusion was played out in an episode in which the main character, Jerry, found himself insisting that he wasn't gay. He said repeatedly, "I'm not gay" (a claim of fact), and then followed each time with "not that there's anything wrong with that" (a claim of value). In other words, he didn't want people to think he was making a value judgment about sexual orientation. He was, instead, making a claim of fact about his own orientation.

Sometimes, the types of claims work in tandem. For instance, a claim of fact may help to launch a claim of policy or value. In Charles Nelson's essay "Investing in Futures" (Chapter 12), he makes a claim of fact about college tuition (that it will likely grow past the worth of some degrees) and then suggests a claim of value about the cultural effects:

> Students are paying the same tuition for different degrees, and some of those degrees will eventually be boxed out of college because students graduating with the degree won't be able to pay back the loans. Unless something gives, when the cost of a college degree hits two or three hundred thousand dollars, colleges may be void of students studying art, poetry, or (in some states) education. If college tuition continues to increase at its present rate (and there's nothing to suggest it will not), higher education might price itself out of teaching literature, humanities, anthropology, sociology, philosophy . . . all the disciplines that explore what it means to be human. From there, it doesn't take a science fiction writer to imagine the ill effects on our little civilization.

Nelson does not make a claim of policy: he does not argue that students shouldn't major in literature and humanities. But imagine if someone were to read this passage and claim, "Nelson thinks people shouldn't major in philosophy!" Such a characterization would distort Nelson's argument beyond the point of recognition.

In sound argument, we should work to understand what people are arguing—not only the topic but the type of claim. Sometimes, people intentionally distort the nature of someone else's claim. For example, notice how the following exchange veers away from Senator Green's original claim:

> Senator Green: "Our state spends twenty million dollars on employee health care."

Senator Gray: "This seems like the right amount to me. We cannot simply go cutting employee health care every time someone mentions the word."

Senator Green originally made a claim of fact. But Senator Gray changed the terms of engagement by pulling the issue into a claim of value (the amount is appropriate) and then a claim of policy (the state should not cut employee health care). When people like Senator Gray thrust the conversation too quickly away from the claim of fact—and into a claim of value or policy—they move the argument prematurely to the realm of judgments and solutions before the audience has a good grasp of the situation.

Characteristics of Claims

Powerful arguments develop *focused, arguable,* and *revelatory* main claims or thesis statements.

Focused claims guide the reader's and writer's attention to a particular aspect of an issue. When a claim is focused, the argument gains depth, while a broad claim generates a shallow or incoherent argument. To check for focus, writers examine the main parts of a sentence, the subject and predicate, to see if they can be more specific. Notice the following unfocused claim:

Today's popular music is bad for children.

The subject is only slightly focused. While *popular music* is more focused than *music, today's popular music* includes a wide variety of genres and styles, from hip-hop to country. The writer would do well to focus on a particular aspect of popular music—a genre, a particular style, a particular medium, or a particular element of the music world:

fashion trends packaged with today's pop music

lyrics about inflated egos in today's hip-hop music

marketing strategies of today's country music

lack of genuine storytelling in today's rock music

The predicate of the sentence is vague as well. The fact that something *is bad* does not give us any particular insight. The adjective *bad* can be attributed to anything from pneumonia to cookies. Part of the problem stems from the verb *is*, which is a linking verb rather than an action verb. When linking verbs are used as the main verbs in sentences, they work like equal signs:

today's popular music = bad for children

Linking verbs prompt writers to think in vague terms and to use unfocused adjectives such as *bad*. Action verbs can help focus ideas:

deteriorates children's ability to think critically

directs children to trivial issues

oversimplifies the complexities of urban life

conjures up delusions of self-importance in children

Notice how the verbs *(deteriorates, directs, oversimplifies, conjures)* create focus.

Arguable claims make assertions that could be challenged on various grounds. In other words, they invite or directly address opposition. Some common problems can keep thesis statements from being arguable.

The Question Problem:

A question is not a claim because it offers no stance. People sometimes use questions to imply a stance: *Isn't that the point of democracy? Why can't you be more like your sister?* But this is generally an informal strategy, something done in everyday communication. A formal argumentative stance usually suggests a particular position amid a realm of many others, something that a question does not do.

The Obvious Fact Problem:

Good arguments often attempt to overturn common beliefs or ideas that people presume to be true. For instance, in opposition to the beliefs of his day, the medieval astronomer Copernicus argued that the Earth was not the center of the universe. In contrast, an argument that simply announces a commonly known condition or a widely held belief is no argument at all. Imagine someone arguing: *Many people go to college for their futures; Americans love cars; space exploration is expensive.* Because they express common beliefs instead of overturning them, such statements function as observations but not argumentative claims.

The Personal Response Problem:

Argument depends upon the presence of multiple perspectives peering at the same topic. When writers proclaim a personal response about their tastes, likes, dislikes, or desires, they merely make public their own state of mind. "I really liked the first *Pirates of the Caribbean*" is not an argumentative stance; it is a statement about a person's tastes. But the statement "Johnny Depp's portrayal of a wayward pirate illustrates his

superior range as an actor" invites opposition. It goes beyond a personal response, and other positions can then engage the point critically.

Revelatory claims reveal an unfamiliar topic or a new layer of a familiar one. They challenge something that previously seemed entirely agreeable, or they show a hidden side to an issue. Revelatory claims do more than simply take a stand on an issue; they imply "You may already have an opinion, but . . . have you seen *this* side of the issue?" They tear down the curtains and show who is hiding behind them; they clear away the dirt and reveal the roots.

Notice the difference between the following claims:

- Home schooling is good for families.
- Home schooling reconnects home life and formal learning.
- Home schooling reestablishes a key concept that disappeared throughout the twentieth century: that the home is the center of learning, development, and intellectual growth.

While the first claim celebrates home schooling, it does not offer a particular insight about its worth. It is an opinion, but nothing more. The second claim goes further and suggests a particular aspect about home schooling. The third claim goes further still by situating the point in history. The reader of the last two claims, especially the third, has been given a novel insight about home schooling. And the reader is bound to encounter a fresh way of thinking about the topic in the argument that develops. Revelatory claims are more than personal opinion; they are particular and persuasive insights. Revelatory argument depends on fresh perspectives that make an audience reconsider topics.