

# The Informed Argument

A Multidisciplinary Reader and Guide



*Robert K. Miller*

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*University of Wisconsin/Stevens Point*



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# Preface

Behind *The Informed Argument* is the belief that students resent being asked to write on topics that seem trivial or contrived, but welcome the opportunity to discuss serious subjects. The readings in this book are assembled into eight separate casebooks, seven of which are focused on large issues of the sort that students often want to write about, although they may lack sufficient information to do so effectively. Instructors are free to treat each section either as a self-contained unit or as a springboard to further reading. In order to facilitate class discussion, every essay has its own editorial apparatus and every section ends with a list of suggestions for writing—some of which direct students exclusively to material within the book, while others ask them to incorporate their own experience or research. This allows instructors much flexibility. They can assign readings in whatever sequence they deem appropriate. And there is plenty of material so that instructors can vary the readings they choose to assign, passing over any that seem inappropriate for a particular class.

The 71 selections are drawn from a variety of disciplines in order to help students master different types of writing and reading. Among the fields represented are biology, business, history, journalism, medicine, law, literature, philosophy, physics, political science, psychology, and sociology. In selecting these readings, I have been guided by two concerns: to include different points of view within each section and to provide students with both model arguments and adequate data for composing essays of their own.

Although I believe in the importance of writing across the curriculum, I also believe that literature should be a part of the curriculum being written across. Consequently, the book includes some poetry and a section on literary criticism as a type of argumentation. The thematically organized sections are followed by "Some Classic Arguments," a ninth section that is not focused on a particular issue. Increasing the variety of readings made available to students, this section includes such well-known essays as "A Modest Proposal," "Politics and the English Language," and "Letter from Birmingham Jail," as well as excerpts from several important works in the history of ideas.

The readings are the heart of this book. But *The Informed Argument* is more than an anthology. Because books have become so expensive, I have tried to design a text that would satisfy all the needs of students in a semester-long course and be useful to them long afterward. Part One introduces students to the rhetorical principles that they will need to understand in order to write argumentative essays of their own and profit from the readings in Part Two. I have tried to keep the explanations as simple as possible, avoiding complex terminology. Examples are provided for each of the concepts discussed, and student essays illustrate both inductive and deductive reasoning. In addition to introducing students to the fundamentals of logical reasoning, Part One also explains the nature and importance of summary and paraphrase.

Part Three, "A Guide to Research and Documentation," teaches students how to find material that has not been already gathered for them. In keeping with the book's multidisciplinary approach, I emphasize a search strategy that can be used to locate material for assignments in many different courses. All of the major documentation styles in use across the curriculum are discussed—not only the styles of the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the American Psychological Association (APA), which are discussed in detail, but also the use of documentary footnotes and of a numbered system favored in much scientific and medical writing. The 1984 MLA style is illustrated by a student essay in Part Three. The other systems, including two that are recommended by *The Chicago Manual of Style*, are all illustrated by one or more of the essays in Part Two (for a list, see page 573).

In completing this book, I have contracted many debts. I would like to thank my colleagues in the English department at the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, especially Ruth Dorgan, Steve Odden, Don Pattow, and Al Young. I would also like to thank the staff of the Albertson Learning Resource Center, especially John Gillesby, Kathleen Halsey, Mary Louise Smith, and Margaret Whalen. For generous help with word processing, I want to thank Jean Kewer, Eleanor Ligman, and Lorraine Swanson. For encouragement and support without fail, I want to thank Dr. Warren Garitano. At Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Lynn Edwards, Eleanor Garner, Barbara Girard, Ann Marie Mulkeen, Cheryl Solheid, and Ellen Wynn deserve many thanks for their expert help. Finally, I want to thank Tom Broadbent, the talented and ever-patient editor whose help was essential in every stage of finishing this book.

R.K.M.

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## PART 1

# An Introduction to Argument

Many people assume that writing arguments must be difficult—perhaps because the word *argument* can have such disagreeable connotations. It may remind us of anger, loud voices, maybe even violence. If you believe that “arguing” is the same as “quarreling”—that “having an argument” is only a polite way of saying “having a fight”—then it would be understandable if you decided that argument is something best avoided. It is important to realize that written arguments have nothing to do with slamming doors or calling names. Written arguments require that we think clearly, without letting our feelings dominate what we have to say. A good argument is both well thought out and carefully organized, making it possible for us to persuade others that our ideas deserve to be taken seriously. We may not always succeed in converting others to our point of view. But we can win their respect. This, in a way, is what argument is all about. When we argue for what we believe, we are asking others to believe in *us*. We must prove to our audience that we are worth listening to. If we succeed this far, we may have won the argument even if we lose the vote on the particular issue at hand. Argumentation is intellectual self-assertion designed to secure the consideration and respect of our peers.

Bearing this in mind, you should always be careful to treat your opponents with respect. Few people are likely to be converted to your point of view if you treat them as if they were fools and dismiss their beliefs with contempt. Reason is the essence of effective argumentation, and an important part of being reasonable is demonstrating that you have given consideration to beliefs that are different from your own and have recognized what makes them appealing. You should not be narrow-minded or contentious. Don't make the mistake of assuming that you have a monopoly on truth. Remember that nobody likes a know-it-all.

Similarly, you should avoid the temptation of arguing all things at all times. Most points can indeed be argued. But you won't be taken seriously if you seem to argue automatically and routinely. Argument should be the result of reflection rather than reflex. And argumentation is a skill that should be practiced selectively.

## CHOOSING A TOPIC

The first step in written argumentation, as in all forms of writing, is choosing a topic. In doing so, you should be careful to avoid subjects that could be easily settled by referring to an authority, such as a dictionary or an encyclopedia. There is no point in arguing about how to spell “separate,” or how many people live in San Diego, because questions of this sort can be settled quickly and absolutely, allowing only one correct answer. Argument assumes the possibility of more than one position on any important issue. When you disagree with someone about anything that could be settled by simply checking the facts, you would be wasting your time to argue, even if you are sure you are right.

Almost all intelligent arguments are about *opinions*. But not all opinions lead to good written arguments. There is no reason to argue an opinion with which almost no one would disagree. An essay designed to “prove” that puppies are cute, or that vacations can be fun, is unlikely to generate much excitement. Don’t belabor the obvious. Nearly everyone welcomes the arrival of spring, and you will be preaching to the converted if you set out to argue that spring is a nice time of year. If you’ve been reading T.S. Eliot, however, and want to argue that April is the cruelest month (and that you have serious reservations about May and June as well) then you may be on to something. You should not feel that you suddenly need to acquire strange and eccentric opinions. But you should choose a topic which is likely to inspire at least some controversy.

In doing so, you should be careful to distinguish between opinions that are a matter of taste, and those that are a question of judgment. Some people like broccoli, and some people don’t. You may be the world’s foremost broccoli-lover, dreaming each night of broccoli crops to come, but no matter how hard you try, you will not convince someone who hates green vegetables to head quickly to the produce department of the nearest supermarket. A gifted stylist could probably write a familiar essay on broccoli, in the manner of Charles Lamb or E.B. White, that would be a delight to read. But it is one thing to describe our tastes, and quite another to insist that others share them. We all have likes and dislikes that are so firmly entrenched that persuasion in matters of taste is usually beyond the reach of what can be accomplished through the written word—unless you happen to command the resources of a major advertising agency.

Taste is a matter of personal preference. Whether we prefer green to blue, or iris to tulips, is unlikely to affect anyone but ourselves. Questions of judgment are more substantial than matters of taste because judgment cannot be divorced from logic. Our judgments are determined by our beliefs, behind which are basic principles to which we try to remain consistent. These principles subsequently lead us to decide that some judgments are correct and others are not, so judgment has greater implications than taste. Should a university require freshmen to live in dormitories? Should men and women live together before getting married? Should parents spank their children? All these are questions of judgment.

In written argumentation, questions of judgment provide the best subjects. They can be argued because they are complex, giving you more angles to

pursue. This does not mean that you must cover every aspect of a question in a single essay. Because good subjects have so many possibilities, the essays that are written on them will take many different directions. Good writers sound like individuals, not committees or machines, and it is easier to sound like an individual when you address a subject about which many different things can be said. Moreover, in making an argument the writer always hopes to surprise his audience with information—or an ingenious interpretation of information—that is not usually considered. If your audience consists of people who know almost nothing about your subject, then you may be able to build a convincing case by simply outlining a few basic points. But an educated audience will be converted to your view only if you move beyond the obvious and reveal points that are often overlooked. And this is most likely to happen when the subject itself is complex.

It is important, therefore, to choose subjects which you are well-informed about or willing to research. This may sound like obvious advice, and yet it is possible to have an opinion with nothing behind it but a few generalizations that are impossible to support once we begin to write. We may have absorbed the opinions of others without thinking for ourselves. We may even be prejudiced, which is to say we have prejudged a particular subject without knowing much about it. Nobody is going to take us seriously if, when we are asked to explain ourselves, we can produce nothing more sophisticated than, “Well, isn’t that what everybody thinks?”

The readings that form the core of this book were chosen to make you better informed on some of the major questions of our time. After you have read six or seven intelligent essays on the same subject, you should be able to compose an argument of your own that will consider the various views you have encountered. But you should remember that being “better informed” does not always mean being “well informed.” Well-educated men and women recognize how little they know in proportion to how much there is to be known. Don’t think that you’ve become an expert on abortion simply because you have spent a week or two reading about it. What we read should influence what we think. But as we read more, we should realize that controversial subjects are controversial because there is so much that could be said about them—much more than we may have realized at first.

In learning to write arguments, you will be mastering a skill that will be important beyond the world of the classroom. In the years ahead, you will need to argue many questions. You may very well have the occasion to argue, and argue seriously, about political and ethical concerns. Someone you love may be considering an abortion, or the school board in your own community may begin to censor books. A large corporation may try to bury its chemical wastes on the property that adjoins your own. Or you may be suddenly deprived of a benefit to which you feel entitled. Arguments are not limited to the sort of issues that are reported in newspapers and magazines. When you apply for a job, propose a marriage, or recommend any change that involves someone besides yourself, you are putting yourself in a position that requires effective argumentation. And whatever the subject, be it large or small, you should know what you are talking about.

## DEFINING YOUR AUDIENCE

Argumentation demands a clear sense of audience. Good writers remember whom they are writing for, and their audience helps shape their style. It would be a mistake, for example, to use complicated technical language when writing for a general audience. But it would be just as foolish to address an audience of experts as if they knew nothing about the subject. The writer should always be careful not to confuse people. On the other hand, he or she must also be careful not to insult the readers' intelligence. Although awareness of audience is important in all types of writing, it is especially true in written arguments. A clear sense of audience allows us to choose the points we want to emphasize in order to be persuasive. Just as importantly, it enables us to anticipate the objections our readers or listeners are most likely to raise if they disagree with us.

In written argumentation, it is usually best to envision an audience that is skeptical. Unless you are the keynote speaker at a political convention, rallying the members of your party by telling them exactly what they want to hear, there is no reason to expect people to agree with you. If your audience already agrees with you, what's the point of your argument? Whom are you trying to convince? Remember that the immediate purpose of an argument is almost always to convert people to your point of view. Of course, an audience may be entirely neutral, having no opinion at all on the subject that concerns you. But by imagining a skeptical audience, you will be able to anticipate the opposition and offer counterarguments of your own, thus building a stronger case.

Before you begin to write, you should list for yourself the reasons why you believe as you do. Realize that you may not have the space, in a short essay, to discuss all of the points you have listed. You should therefore rank them in order of their relative importance, considering, in particular, the degree to which they would probably impress the audience for whom you are writing. Once you have done this, compose another list—a list of reasons why people might disagree with you. Having considered the opposition's point of view, now ask yourself why it is that you have not been persuaded to abandon your own beliefs. You must see a flaw of some sort in the reasoning of your opponents. Amend your second list by adding to it a short rebuttal to each of your opponent's arguments.

You are likely to discover that the opposition has at least one good argument, an argument which you cannot answer. There should be nothing surprising about this. We may like to flatter ourselves by believing that Truth is on our side. In our weaker moments, we may like to pretend that anyone who disagrees with us is either ignorant or corrupt. But serious and prolonged controversies almost always mean that the opposition has at least one valid concern. Be prepared to concede a point to your opponents when it seems appropriate to do so. Nothing is to be gained by ignoring their point of view. You must consider their views and respond to them, but your responses do not always have to take the form of rebuttals. When you have no rebuttal, and recognize that your opponent's case has some merit, be honest and generous enough to say so.

By making concessions to your opposition, you demonstrate to your audience that you are trying to be fair-minded. Far from weakening your own case,

an occasional concession can help bridge the gulf between you and your opponents, making it easier for you to reach a more substantial agreement. It's hard to convince someone that your views deserve to be taken seriously when you have belligerently insisted that he or she is completely wrong and you are completely right. Life is seldom so simple. And human nature being what it is, most people will listen more readily to an argument that offers some recognition of their views.

You must be careful, of course, not to concede too much. If you find yourself utterly without counterarguments, and ready to concede a half dozen points, you had better reconsider the subject you have chosen. In a short essay, you can usually afford to make only one or two concessions. Too many concessions are likely to confuse readers who are uncertain about what they think. Why should they be persuaded by you, when you seem half-persuaded by your opponents?

Having a good sense of audience also means illustrating your case with concrete examples your audience can readily understand. It's hard to make people care about abstractions; good writers always try to make the abstract particular. Remember that it is often easy to lose the attention of your audience, so try to address its most probable concerns.

There is, however, a great difference between responding to the interests of your audience by discussing what it most wants to know, and twisting what you say in order to please an audience with whatever it wants to hear. You should remember that the foremost responsibility of any writer is to tell the truth as he or she sees it. What we mean by "truth" often has many dimensions, and when limited space forces us to be selective, it is only common sense to focus on those facets of our subject that will be the most effective with the audience we are attempting to sway. But it is one thing to edit, and quite another to mislead. Never write anything for one audience that you would be compelled to deny before another. Hypocrites are seldom persuasive, and no amount of verbal agility can compensate for a public loss of confidence in a writer's character.

## **ORGANIZING YOUR ARGUMENT**

If you have chosen your subject carefully and given sufficient thought to your audience and its concerns (paying particular attention to any objections that could be raised against whatever you wish to advocate), then it should not be difficult to organize an argumentative essay. The lists discussed in the previous section will provide you with what amounts to a rough outline, but you must now consider two additional questions: "Where and how should I begin my argument?" and "How can I most efficiently include in my argument the various counterarguments that I have anticipated and responded to?" The answers to these questions will vary from one essay to another. But while arguments can take many forms, formal arguments usually employ logic, of which there are two widely accepted types: inductive and deductive reasoning.

## Inductive Reasoning

When we use *induction*, we are drawing a conclusion based upon specific evidence. Our argument rests upon a foundation of details that we have accumulated for its support. This is the type of reasoning that we use most frequently in daily life. We look at the sky outside our window, check the thermometer, and may even listen to a weather forecast before dressing to face the day. If the sun is shining, the temperature high, and the forecast favorable, we would be making a reasonable conclusion if we decided to dress lightly and leave our umbrellas at home. We haven't *proved* that the day will be warm and pleasant, we have only *concluded* that it will be. And this is all we can usually do in an inductive argument: arrive at a conclusion which seems likely to be true. Ultimate and positive proof is usually beyond the writer's reach, and the writer who recognizes this, and proceeds accordingly, will usually arrive at conclusions that are both moderate and thoughtful. He or she recognizes the possibility of an unanticipated factor undermining even the best of arguments. A lovely morning can yield to a miserable afternoon, and we may be drenched in a downpour as we hurry home on the day that began so pleasantly.

Inductive reasoning is especially important in scientific experimentation. A research scientist may have a theory which he or she hopes to prove. But in order to work towards proving this theory, hundreds, thousands, and even tens of thousands of experiments may have to be conducted in order to eliminate variables and gather enough data to justify a generally applicable conclusion. Well-researched scientific conclusions sometimes reach a point where they seem uncontestable. It's been many years since Congress required the manufacturers of cigarettes to put a warning on every package stating that smoking can be harmful to your health. Since then, additional research has supported the conclusion that smoking can indeed be dangerous, especially to the lungs and the heart. That "smoking can be harmful to your health" now seems to have entered the realm of established fact. But biologists, chemists, physicists, and physicians are usually aware that the history of science, and the history of medicine in particular, is an argumentative history, full of debate. Methods and beliefs established over many generations can be overthrown by a new discovery. Within a few years, that "new discovery" can also come under challenge. So the serious researcher goes back to the lab, and keeps on working—ever mindful that truth is hard to find.

Induction is also essential in law enforcement. The police are supposed to have evidence against someone before making an arrest. Consider, for example, the way a detective works. A good detective does not arrive at the scene of a crime with his or her mind already made up about what happened. If the crime seems to be part of a pattern, the detective may already have a suspicion about who is responsible. But a good investigator will want to make a careful study of every piece of evidence that can be gathered. A room may be dusted for fingerprints, a murder victim photographed as found, and if the body is lying on the floor, a chalk outline may be drawn around it for future study. Every item within the room will be catalogued. Neighbors, relatives, employers, or employees will be questioned. The best detective is usually the detective with the best eye for detail, and the greatest determination to keep searching for the details that will

be strong enough to bring a case to court. Similarly, a first-rate detective will also be honest enough never to overlook a fact that does not fit in with the rest of the evidence. The significance of every loose end must be examined in order to avoid the possibility of an unfair arrest and prosecution.

In making an inductive argument, you will reach a point at which you decide that you have offered enough evidence to support the thesis of your essay. When you are writing a college paper, you will probably decide that you have reached this point sooner than a scientist or a detective might. But whether you are writing a short essay, or conducting an investigation, the process is essentially the same. When you stop citing evidence and move on to your conclusion, you have made what is known as an *inductive leap*. In an inductive essay, you must always offer interpretation or analysis of the evidence you have introduced; there will always be at least a slight gap between your evidence and your conclusion. It is over this gap that the writer must leap; the trick is to do it agilely. Good writers know that their evidence must be in proportion to their conclusion: The bolder your conclusion, the more evidence you will need to back it up. Remember the old adage about “jumping to conclusions,” and realize that you’ll need the momentum of a running start to make more than a moderate leap at any one time.

If you listen closely to the conversation of the people around you, the chances are good that you’ll hear examples of faulty inductive reasoning. When someone says, “I don’t like Chinese food,” and reveals, under questioning, that his only experience with Chinese food was something called “hamburger chow mein” in a high school cafeteria, we cannot take the opinion seriously. A sweeping conclusion has been drawn from flimsy evidence. People who claim to know “all about” complex subjects often reveal that they actually know very little. Only a sexist claims to know all about men and women, and only a racist is foolish enough to generalize about the various racial groups that make up our society. Good writers are careful not to overgeneralize.

When you begin an inductive essay, you might cite one particular piece of evidence that strikes you as especially important. You might even begin with a short anecdote. A well-structured inductive essay would then gradually expand as the evidence accumulates, so that the conclusion is supported by numerous details. Here is an example of an inductive essay written by a student.

### In Defense of Hunting

I killed my first buck when I was fourteen. I’d gone deer hunting with my father 1  
and two of my uncles. I was cold and wet and anxious to get home, but I knew  
what I had to do when I sighted the eight-point buck. Taking careful aim, I fired at  
his chest, killing him quickly with a single shot.

I don’t want to romanticize this experience, turning it into a noble rite of 2  
passage. I did feel that I had proved myself somehow. It was important for me to  
win my father’s respect, and I welcomed the admiration I saw in his eyes. But I’ve  
been hunting regularly for many years now, and earning the approval of others no  
longer seems very important to me. I’d prefer to emphasize the facts about hunt-  
ing, facts that must be acknowledged even by people who are opposed to hunting.



It is a fact that hunters help to keep the deer population in balance with the environment. Since so many of their natural predators have almost died out in this state, the deer population could quickly grow much larger than the land can support. Without hunting, thousands of deer would die slowly of starvation in the leafless winter woods. This may sound like a self-serving argument (like the words of a parent who beats a child and insists, "This hurts me more than it does you; I'm only doing it for your own good"). But it is a fact that cannot be denied. 3

It is also a fact that hunters provide a valuable source of revenue for the state. The registration and licensing fees we pay are used by the Department of Natural Resources to reforest barren land, preserve wetlands, and protect endangered species. Also there are many counties in this state that depend upon the money that hunters spend on food, gas, and lodging. "Tourism" is our third largest industry, and all of this money isn't being spent at luxurious lakeside resorts. Opponents of hunting should realize that hunting is the most active in some of our poorest, rural counties—and realize what hunting means to the people who live in these areas. 4

It is also a fact that we have one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. There are hundreds of men and women for whom hunting is an economic necessity and not a sport. Properly preserved, the meat that comes from a deer can help a family survive a long winter. There probably are hunters who think of hunting as a recreation. But all the hunters I know—and I know at least twenty—dress their own deer and use every pound of the venison they salt, smoke, or freeze. There may be a lot of people who don't have to worry about spending \$3.00 a pound for steak, but I'm not one of them. My family needs the meat we earn by hunting. 5

I have to admit that there are hunters who act irresponsibly by trespassing where they are not wanted and, much worse, by abandoning animals that they have wounded. But there are many different kinds of irresponsibility. Look around and you will see many irresponsible drivers, but we don't respond to them by banning driving altogether. An irresponsible minority is no reason to attack a responsible majority. 6

I've listened to many arguments against hunting, and it seems to me that what really bothers most of the people who are opposed to hunting is the idea that hunters *enjoy* killing. I can't speak for all hunters, but I can speak for myself and the many hunters I personally know. I myself have never found pleasure in killing a deer. I think that deer are beautiful and incredibly graceful, especially when in movement. I don't "enjoy" putting an end to a beautiful animal's life. If I find any pleasure in the act of hunting, it comes from the knowledge that I am trying to be at least partially self-sufficient. I don't expect other people to do all my dirty work for me, and give me my meat neatly butchered and conveniently wrapped in plastic. I take responsibility for what I eat. 7

So the next time that you hear someone complaining about hunters, try to be fair-minded before going along with the usual stereotypes. The men and women who hunt are no worse than anyone else. Lumping us all together as insensitive beer-drinking thugs is an example of the mindless stereotyping that logic should teach us to avoid. 8

This writer has drawn upon his own experience in order to make an articulate defense of hunting. He begins with an anecdote that helps to establish that he