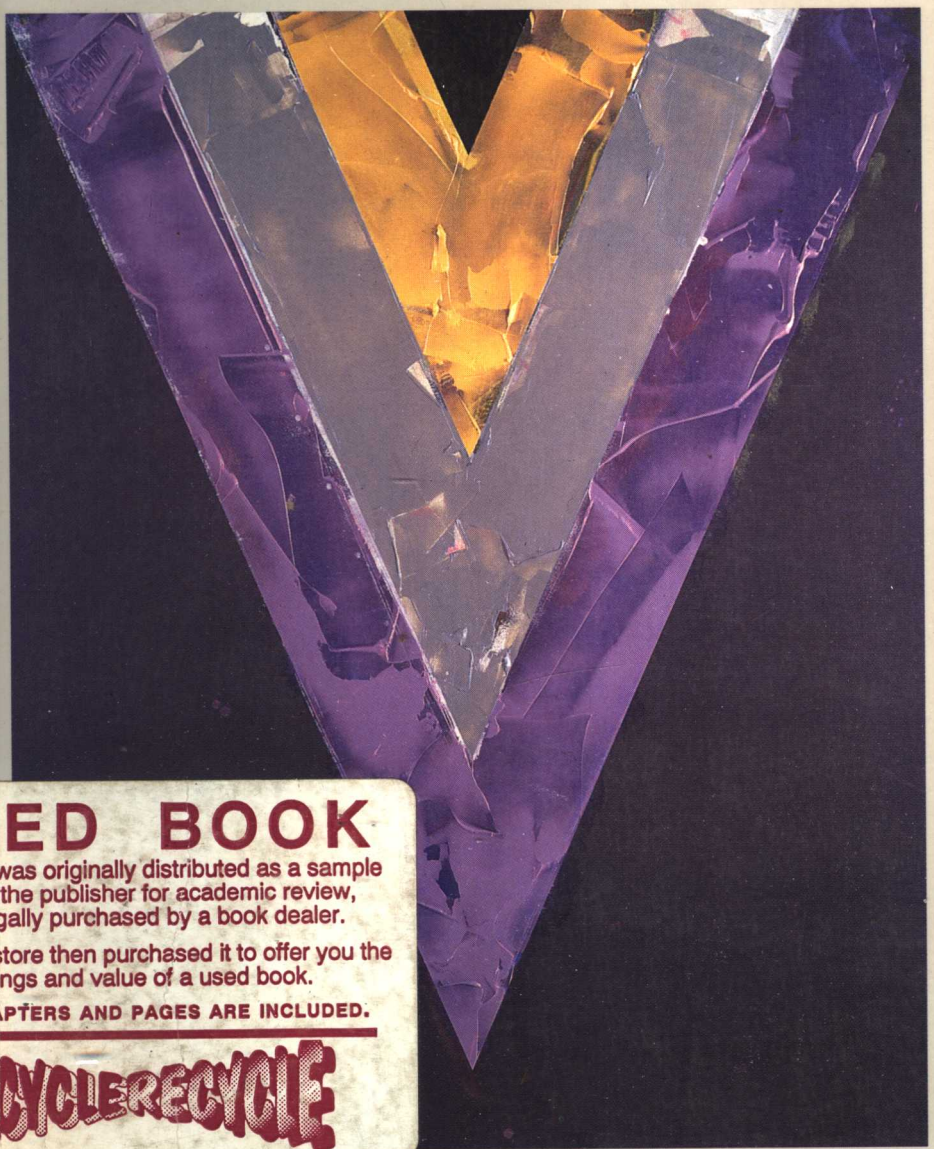
THE AIMS OF ARGUMENT

A Brief Rhetoric



TIMOTHY W. CRUSIUS / CAROLYN E. CHANNELL

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A BRIEF RHETORIC

Timothy W. Crusius / Carolyn E. Channell

Southern Methodist University

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PREFACE

In 1980 an author could justify a new argumentation textbook for first-year college students simply by saying that it filled a void; now prospective authors must ask themselves, Does the profession really need yet another book on argumentation? Moreover, they had better have a good answer to a question that experienced instructors of argument will surely ask: How, specifically, is your text different from—and better than—the one I am using?

People write textbooks for many reasons, but probably the most important reason—the one that keeps authors going long after the initial enthusiasm (and advances) are spent—is the chance of satisfying a need. With over thirty years of teaching experience between us, we have tried most of the argumentation texts currently available. Some of them are quite good and we have learned from them. However, we found ourselves adopting a text not so much out of genuine enthusiasm but rather because it had fewer liabilities than any of the others under consideration. True, all textbook selection involves comparisons of the "lesser evil" sort. But we wondered why we were so lukewarm about even the best argumentation textbooks. What was it exactly that put us off?

We found many problems, both major and minor. But our dissatisfaction boiled down to a few major criticisms:

Most treatments were too formalistic and prescriptive.

Most failed to integrate class discussion and individual inquiry with written argumentation.

Apart from moving from simple concepts and assignments to more complicated ones, no book offered a learning sequence.

Despite the fact that argument, like narrative, is clearly a mode or means of development, not an end in itself, no book offered a well-developed view of the aims or purposes of argument.

We thought that these shortcomings had many undesirable results in the classroom, including the following:

The overemphasis on form confused students with too much terminology, made them doubt their best instincts, and drained away energy and interest from the process of inventing and discovering good arguments.

Informal argumentation is not cut-and-dried, but open-ended and creative.

The separation of class discussion from the process of composition created a hiatus (rather than a useful distinction) between oral and written argument so that students had difficulty seeing the relation between the two and using the insights learned from each to improve the other.

The lack of a learning sequence—of assignments that began by refining and extending what students could do without help and then built on these capacities for each subsequent assignment—meant that courses in argumentation were less coherent and less meaningful than they could be. Students did not understand why they were doing what they were doing and could not envision what might reasonably come next.

Finally, inattention to what people actually use argument to accomplish resulted in too narrow a view of the functions of argument and thus in unclear purposes for writing. Because instruction was mainly limited to what we call arguing to convince, too often students saw argument only as a monologue of advocacy. Even when their viewpoint was flexible, too often they assumed a pose of dogmaticism and ignored any true spirit of inquiry.

We set out consciously to solve these problems—or at least to render them less problematical. The result is a book different in notable respects from any other argument text currently available. In Chapter 1 we define and explain four aims of argument:

Arguing to inquire, the process of questioning opinions;
Arguing to convince, the process of making cases;
Arguing to persuade, the process of appealing to the whole person; and
Arguing to negotiate, the process of mediating between or among conflicting positions.

We have found that instructors have certain questions about these aims, especially in terms of how they relate to one another. No doubt we have yet to hear all the questions that will be asked but hope that by answering the ones we have heard, we can clarify some of the implications of our approach.

1. *What is the relative value of the four aims? Since negotiation comes last, is it the best or most valued?* Our answer is that no aim is "better" than any other aim. Given certain needs or demands for writing and certain audiences, one aim can be more appropriate than another for the task at hand. We treat negotiation last because it involves inquiry, convincing, and persuading and thus comes last in the learning sequence.
2. *Must inquiry be taught as a separate aim?* Not at all. We have designed the text so that it may be taught as a separate aim (the use of argument Plato and Aristotle called dialectic), but we certainly do not intend this "may" to be interpreted as a "must." We do think that teaching inquiry as a distinct aim has certain advantages. Students need to learn how to engage in constructive dialogue,

which is more disciplined and more focused than class discussion usually is. Once they see how it is done, students seem to enjoy dialogue with one another and with texts. Dialogue helps students to think through their arguments and to imagine reader reaction to what they say, both of which are crucial to convincing and persuading. Finally, as with the option of teaching negotiation, teaching inquiry offers instructors the option to make assignments in addition to the standard argumentative essay.

3. *Should inquiry come first?* For a number of reasons, inquiry has a certain priority over the other aims. Most teachers are likely to approach inquiry as a prewriting task, preparatory to convincing or persuading. And very commonly we return to inquiry when we find something wrong with a case we are trying to construct, so the relation between inquiry and the other aims is as much recursive as it is matter of before and after.

   However, we think inquiry also has psychological, moral, and practical claims to priority. When we are unfamiliar with an issue, inquiry comes first psychologically, often as a felt need to explore existing opinion. Regardless of what happens in the "real world," convincing or persuading without an open, honest, and earnest search for the truth is, in our view, immoral. Finally, inquiry goes hand-in-hand with research, which, of course, normally precedes writing in the other aims of argument.

   In sum, we would not defend Plato's concept of the truth. Truth is not simply "out there" in some wordless place waiting to be discovered; rather, our opinion is what we discover or uncover as we grapple with a controversial issue and results largely from how we interpret ourselves and our world. We agree, therefore, with Wayne Booth that truth claims ought to be provisional and subject to revision, held for good reasons until better ones change our minds. Moreover, we agree with Plato that rhetoric divorced from inquiry is dangerous and morally suspect. The truth (if always provisional—some person's, some group's, or some culture's version of the truth) must count for more than sheer technical skill in argumentation.

4. *Isn't the difference between convincing and persuading more a matter of degree than of kind?* Fairly sharp distinctions can be drawn between inquiry and negotiation and between either of these two aims and the monologues of advocacy, convincing and persuading. But convincing and persuading do shade into one another, so that the difference is only clear at the extremes, with carefully chosen examples. Furthermore, the "purest" appeal to reason—a lawyer's brief, a philosophical or scientific argument—appeals in ways beyond the sheer cogency of the case being made. Persuasive techniques are typically submerged but not absent in arguing to convince.

   Our motivation for separating convincing from persuading is not so much theoretical as pedagogical. Students usually have so much difficulty with case-making that individual attention to the logical appeal by itself is justified. Making students focally conscious of the appeals of character, emotion, and style while they are struggling to cope with case-making is too much to ask and can overburden them to the point of paralysis.

Regardless, then, of how sound the traditional distinction between convincing and persuading may be, we think it best to take up convincing first and then persuasion, especially since what students learn in the former can be carried over more or less intact into the latter. And, of course, it is not only case-making that carries over from convincing into persuading. Since one cannot make a case without unconscious appeal to character, emotional commitments (such as values), and style, teaching persuasion is really a matter of exposing and developing what is already there in arguing to convince.

The central tenets of an approach based on aims of argument may be summarized as follows:

Argumentation is a mode or means of discourse, not an aim or purpose of discourse; consequently,
Our task is to teach the aims of argument.
The aims of argument are linked in a learning sequence, so that convincing builds on inquiry, persuasion on convincing, and all three contribute to negotiating; consequently,
We offer this learning sequence as an aid to conceiving a course or courses in argumentation.

We believe in the learning sequence as much as we do in the aims of argument. We think that anyone giving it an honest chance will come to prefer this way of teaching argument over any other ordering currently available.

At the same time, we recognize that textbooks are used selectively, as teachers and programs need them for help in achieving their own goals. As with any other text, this one can be used selectively, ignoring some parts, playing up others, designing other sequences, and so on. If you want to work with our learning sequence, it is there for creative adaptation. If not, the text certainly does not have to be taught as a whole and in sequence to be useful and effective.

Some reviewers and users have called our approach innovative. But is it better? Will students learn more? Will instructors find the book more satisfying and more helpful than what they currently use? Our experience, both in using the book ourselves and in listening to the responses of those who have read it or tested it in the classroom for us, is that they will. Students complain less about having to read the book than they do with others used in our program. They do seem to learn more. Teachers claim to enjoy the text and find it stimulating, something to work with rather than around. We hope your experience is as positive as ours has been. We invite your comments and will use them in the process of perpetual revision that constitutes the life of a text and of our lives as writing teachers.

In closing, we would like to thank the following reviewers: Betty Bamberg, University of Southern California; Michael C. Flanigan, University of Oklahoma; Nancy L. Joseph, York College; Kate Massey, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; Michael G. Moran, University of Georgia; Hephzibah C. Roskelly, University of North Carolina, Greensboro; Carol Sev-

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NOTE TO STUDENTS

Our goal in this book is not just to show you how to construct an argument, but to make you more aware of why people argue, and the purposes that argument serves in our society. Consequently, Part One of this book introduces four specific aims that people may have in mind when they make arguments. Before these chapters on the aims of argument, however, we have placed four relatively short chapters that offer an overview of the four aims and prepare you for working with assignments in the aims.

Chapter 1 explains the aims and how they fit into the larger concept of rhetoric—the persuasive use of language.
Chapter 2 explains what a writer's notebook is and how it can help you cope with writing assignments in any college course;
Chapter 3 offers an approach to reading any argument; and
Chapter 4 shows you, step-by-step, how to analyze the logic of any argument.

Because critical reading and analysis prepare you for the first aim, arguing to inquire, Chapters 3 and 4 lead directly into Chapter 5, and each subsequent chapter on the aims assumes and builds on the previous one.

This book concludes with two appendices, each a reference that you will want to refer to repeatedly as you work through the assignments in the main parts of the text. Appendix A offers advice about how to do library and field research and how to handle formal documentation. We see such research as a vital component of preparing to write convincingly on any topic, unless you take an extremely personal approach and have had first-hand experiences to draw upon for support. We encourage you to discard the notion of a "research paper" and think instead of how even a brief argument can gain strength from facts or opinions taken from one or two well-selected sources. Appendix B focuses on editing, the art of polishing and refining prose, and on proofreading for some common errors.

Arguing well is difficult for anyone. For many college students it is especially challenging because they have had little experience writing arguments. We have tried to write a text that is no more complicated than it has to be, and we welcome

your comments so that we may improve future editions. Please write us at the following address:

The Rhetoric Program
#14 McFarlin
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, Texas 75275

You may also E-mail your comments via the following: ccharlnel @ sun.cis.smu.edu.

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