# GOOD REASON FOR WRITING

A TEXT WITH READINGS
Vincent Barry

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#### Vincent Barry

Bakersfield College

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Designer: Patricia Girvin Dunbar
Copy Editor: William Waller
Cartoons: Erkii Alanen
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## Preface

In recent years the teaching of composition has increasingly focused on thinking and writing as interrelated processes. One facet of the thinking process—reasoning—has received special attention, together with the type of writing to which it most applies—argumentation. Composition instructors have responded commendably to this new focus (and, in some cases, requirement) by devising courses intended to sharpen students' argumentative skills. Such courses go by various names: Critical Thinking, Thinking for Writing, Argumentative Writing, Argument and Persuasion, and the like. Whatever the name, these courses share the purpose of trying to link sound reasoning with argumentative writing.

Instructors choosing this approach have largely had to select from among a category of texts that can be termed "informal logics," books that introduce the students to the basics of logic, giving special attention to commonplace fallacies. As good as these texts are, they are designed primarily to make the student a critical reader and thinker. Although the abilities to read and think critically are powerful aids to composing sound arguments, they are not in themselves sufficient. Students must also learn to recognize and use underlying rhetorical patterns that structure the thinking process and argumentative essay. They must learn not only how to distinguish the good argument from the bad but also how to compose sound argumentative essays. It is these assumptions that have given rise to the present text.

Good Reason for Writing is a text/reader that focuses on the most common rhetorical patterns that structure the thinking process and the argumentative essay. Specifically, this text has four main objectives: (1) to teach argumentative writing; (2) to develop and refine critical thinking and rhetorical skills, especially as they pertain to extended arguments; (3) to impart basic principles of research and offer guidelines for doing a research paper; and (4) to develop informed opinion. What distinguishes this text from others in the field, then, is that Good Reason for Writing places writing squarely in the center of things. Yes, the text introduces basic principles of correct reasoning as well as over 50 common fallacies. And yes, the text trains students to be more perceptive and searching readers and thinkers. But it gives writing the preeminent position warranted by the needs and desires of its audience.

A glance at the table of contents will reveal this book's coverage and structure. But a word is in order about certain topics that underscore the centrality of writing. Chapter 2, for example, deals with the primary ingredients of the argumentative essay: thesis, main points, and organization. It

#### **PREFACE**

also stresses the importance of audience and persona. Chapters 3–6 concern specific patterns used in developing argumentative essays. Chapter 10, although not intended to be a research primer, includes the steps involved in and guidelines for writing effective research papers. This chapter serves as a capstone to the book. It shows how all the elements of sound thinking, perceptive reading, and deliberate writing coalesce in the lengthy, argumentative essay based on organized research.

As for its structure, the text is organized to allow diverse approaches. Thus, apart from doing Chapters 1 and 2 first, instructors and students can hopscotch around, making minor adjustments as they do. Just as important, Part 3, "Troubleshooting for Fallacious Arguments," is written so that instructors can feel secure assigning it for independent study, or even omitting it.

Beyond this, Good Reason for Writing has several other features geared to make students better writers, readers, and thinkers. One is its many topical examples and illustrations. Another is its numerous in-chapter and end-of-chapter exercises, again of a contemporary character. Still another is its essay models and sample research paper, as well as suggested theme topics.

But perhaps its single most useful tool, from both an instructional and a financial view, is its reading selections. Although most texts of this kind take up the extended argument, very few offer enough of the right kind of examples to reinforce the coverage. As a result, instructors are left in the lurch, often having to increase students' costs by assigning a supplementary anthology. In contrast, Good Reason for Writing has 21 extended argumentative essays for student evaluation and classroom discussion. In format these pieces range from editorials to letters to formal essays. In content they embrace an array of important and controversial current issues: privacy and videotapes, the draft, the New Right, "whistle-blowing," abortion, teenage pregnancies, patriotism, and so on. An extensive Instructor's Manual is available on request.

The ideas and talents of many people have gone into the making of *Good Reason for Writing*. Wadsworth's English editor Kevin Howat deserves my thanks for having solicited and helped shape the work. Also of enormous assistance were the reviews of William Harlan, Diablo Valley College; George F. Hayhoe, Virginia Polytechnic Institute; Nancy W. Johnson, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale campus; Robert Keefe, University of Massachusetts at Amherst; Larry McDoniel, St. Louis Community College at Meramec; Rosemary Ortman, University of Louisville; Annette Rottenberg, University of Massachusetts at Amherst; and Stafford H. Thomas, University of Illinois at Urbana.

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## Argument and the Argumentative Essay

## 1. Argument

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SUMMARY
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What do you think the following

#### assertions have in common?

- 1. I'm going to study medicine, because studies indicate that there will be ample job opportunities in medical fields for the indefinite future.
- 2. Of course we're the league champions. We won the play-offs, didn't we?
- 3. The best reason for going to college is that it increases one's earning potential. That's why I'm in college and why I'm determined to graduate.
- 4. Capital punishment should be permitted, because it deters crime.
- 5. Insofar as women have the right to determine what happens to their bodies, they have a right to elective abortion.
- 6. Life probably exists someplace else in the universe. After all, it's most

#### PART ONE ARGUMENT AND THE ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

likely that life-sustaining conditions similar to those found on earth exist outside our planet.

- 7. Guns kill people; that's why handguns should be banned.
- 8. Since women are not by nature as ambitious and aggressive as men, they aren't equipped to succeed in business.
- 9. Given the evidence, it's safe to say that cancer is caused by a virus.
- 10. Many people believe that megavitamin therapy helps ward off disease. Reason enough, then, to start taking heavy doses of vitamins.
- 11. People who drink and drive imperil their own lives and those of others. That's why I don't drink and drive.
- 12. If angle A of a triangle is seventy degrees and angle B is sixty degrees, then angle C must be fifty degrees.
- 13. It's not likely to rain on the Rose Parade next year, because, as always, the parade will be held in sunny Pasadena.
- 14. Inasmuch as tension between the superpowers is increasing, we can expect military confrontations in places such as the Middle East.
- 15. Most people favor the legalization of marijuana. So it should be legalized.
- 16. Any social policy that discriminates on the basis of sex is inherently unfair. It follows that a military draft that excludes women is unfair.

Each of these utterances is an argument, a subject that will concern us throughout this book. As you can readily see from the preceding examples, arguments abound. Sometimes people formulate them, as they might in deciding which courses to take, books to read, political positions to hold, and social viewpoints to endorse. At other times people have arguments thrust on them. At school or work, for example, somebody may serve up an argument and expect us to react. Or while reading a newspaper or magazine we may confront an argument on some burning social issue. At still other times people are called on to present a rather lengthy, well-developed argument, as for a class assignment or occupational task. And then there are those times when we simply want to speak up and be heard, as in writing a letter to the editor or stating a position before a city council. Arguments abound, and our success depends in part on an ability to handle them.

This book will help you deal with arguments. It is especially designed to help you read and write longer pieces of argument, the kind that you often confront in college and afterward. In order to read or write a long argument intelligently, you first must know what an argument is. In part this knowledge includes an understanding of an argument's structure and an ability to recognize arguments and distinguish two kinds: inductive and deductive. Also essential is familiarity with the nature of generalizations.

A good way to learn about argument is to consider specimens—that is, short argumentative passages such as the sixteen above. That's what we'll be doing in this chapter—carefully inspecting specimens in order to learn about

#### CHAPTER 1 ARGUMENT

the anatomy of an argument. In subsequent chapters we will build on this foundation in order to distinguish good argument from bad and to learn how to write sound argumentative essays.

#### ARGUMENT

The word argument calls up a number of impressions. For some people an argument is a fight. For others it's a discussion. For still others an argument is something to be avoided or won. In our study we will not use argument in any of these senses. Rather, we will follow the conventions of logic and rhetoric and use this definition: an argument is a group of propositions (that is, true or false statements), one of which is held to follow from the others.

Here's a simple example of an argument:

All students in the class are members of the debate team.

Annie is a student in the class.

Therefore, Annie is a member of the debate team.

The statement "Annie is a member of the debate team" is held to follow from the other two statements; the first two statements presumably entail the third. Taken together, these three statements make up an argument. Of course, the statements could appear as a single sentence and still be an argument, as in:

Since all students in the class are members of the debate team and Annie is a student in the class, Annie is a member of the debate team.

An argument, then, can take the form of individual sentences or just a single sentence. In any event, an utterance is an argument when (1) it consists of a group of propositions and (2) one of the propositions is held to follow from the others.

#### **Propositions**

A proposition is a true or false statement, or what is commonly termed a declarative sentence. To understand this definition fully, you need a clear idea of what propositions are and how they are related in arguments.

These are propositions: "Sacramento is the capital of California." "Bees make honey." "Humans are not vertebrates." "Ronald Reagan was not elected president in 1980." "Life exists outside our solar system." "Vitamin C helps prevent the common cold." They are statements that are either true or false. In some cases their truth is not in question (for example, "Sacramento is the capital of California"); in others their falsehood is not in question (for example, "Sacramento");

ple, "Humans are not vertebrates"); and in other cases their truth is uncertain (for example, "Life exists outside our solar system"). But all are statements that are either true or false. Such statements are termed propositions.

Clearly, not every sentence is a declarative sentence—that is, a proposition. Often we ask questions, express exclamations, or give orders. "Where are you going?" "Good grief!" and "Close the door after you" are not true or false statements. When an utterance functions strictly in a nondeclarative way, it is not a proposition and thus cannot be considered part of an argument.

But a question, exclamation, or command may serve a multiple function in a sentence. In addition to its usual function of asking, exclaiming, or commanding, it may also be expressing a statement. Take the example "When did William Faulkner, the great American writer, live?" Besides asking a question, this utterance says that Faulkner was a great writer. Similarly, "You let the cat out!" may be implying that letting the cat out was not a good idea. And "Attend every class if you want to pass" not only expresses a command but asserts a condition for passing the class: You are required to attend every class in order to pass. When nondeclarative utterances make a statement, they can be part of an argument.

To illustrate, suppose that Fred and Fran are discussing government control of advertising. Fred argues that there should be considerably more control, or else consumers will be increasingly victimized. In response, Fran says: "But don't you realize that such intervention is an insult to the whole concept of free enterprise? And that's precisely why we should have less, not more, government control." Embedded in Fran's question is the statement "Intervention is an insult to the whole concept of free enterprise." In her view this proposition is part of her argument for less government control. Fran is arguing, and her question functions as a statement used to support her contention.

#### **Relating Propositions**

An argument, as noted, not only consists of propositions but also relates them in such a way that one is held to follow from the others. *Follow from* is the key phrase.

Often we assert things without maintaining that one assertion follows from the others. "Washington is the capital of the United States," "The Golden Gate Bridge is in San Francisco," and "Denver is 'The Mile-High City'" are mere assertions; they are not internally connected. No one of these statements is held to follow from the others. Taken together they do not constitute an argument.

Besides making mere assertions, we often offer explanatory information in propositional form. Here are two such statements: "The child was amused by the kitten's play" and "We moved the 'jazzercise' class to another room to

#### CHAPTER 1 ARGUMENT

accommodate the large enrollment." Such explanatory assertions often appear in a group of statements, as in this paragraph:

The joints of our bodies are particularly susceptible to mechanical wear and tear. The ends of the long bones must rub against each other without destroying themselves and must bear the weight of the body. The joints are surrounded by tough connecting tissues, ligaments and muscles which bind the bones together in a tough but flexible unit while permitting movement often against great force. When any of the tissue in and around the joints fails, arthritis is said to be present.<sup>1</sup>

Like all explanatory assertions, this one helps explain some phenomenon, in this case arthritis.

The difference between explanations and arguments lies primarily in the purpose of the discourse. If writers and speakers want to prove a contention, then they are arguing. But if they regard the truth of a contention as unproblematic and wish to show why or how it is the case (rather than that it is, in fact, the case), they are explaining. Accordingly, in "Susan looks better since her vacation," the speaker is not trying to establish that Susan looks better but rather explaining why Susan does in fact look better. In contrast, in "Susan ought to get a raise, since she has worked so hard," the speaker is trying to establish the contention that Susan in fact deserves a raise. Again, if writers intend to establish the truth of a proposition, they are arguing; if they are trying to show why or how something is the case, they are explaining.

There are occasions, of course, when a series of statements is both argumentative and explanatory. In the following passage from a Sherlock Holmes classic, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the master detective not only demonstrates to Watson the truth of a contention but also explains how he arrived at it:

Holmes: You have been at your club all day, I presume.

Watson: My dear Holmes!

Holmes: Am I right?

Watson: Certainly, but how—

**Holmes:** ... A gentleman sets forth on a showery and miry day. He returns immaculate in the evening with the gloss still on his hat and his boots. He has been a fixture, therefore, all day. He is not a man with intimate friends. Where, then, would he have been? Is it not obvious?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Abraham Hoffer. "Good Nutrition + Supplements + Minerals: Three Way Attack on Arthritis." The Health Quarterly, vol. 4., 1981, p. 30.