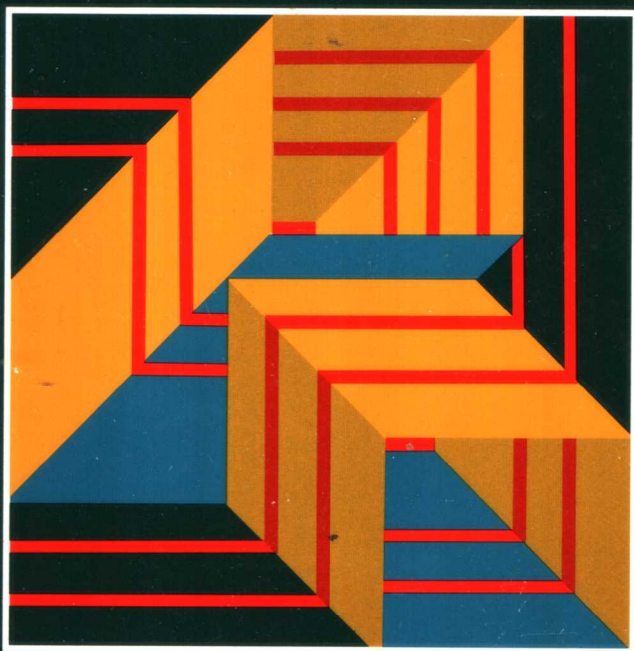


JEANNE FAHNESTOCK / MARIE SECOR

A Rhetoric of Argument



SECOND EDITION

A Rhetoric of Argument

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This book was developed by STEVE PENSINGER, Inc.

A Rhetoric of Argument

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5 6 7 8 9 0 DOC DOC 9 9 8 7

ISBN 0-07-557734-8

This book was set in Palatino by ComCom, Inc.
The editors were Steven Pensinger and Tom Holton;
the designer was Wanda Siedlecka;
the production supervisor was Valerie A. Sawyer.
R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company was printer and binder.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fahnestock, Jeanne, (date).

A rhetoric of argument / Jeanne Fahnestock, Marie Secor—2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-07-557734-8

1. English language—Rhetoric. 2. Logic. I. Secor, Marie, (date).

II. Title.

PE1431.F3 1990

808'.042—dc20

89-6305

<http://www.mhhe.com>

Foreword

Argument has been recognized as a kind of discourse ever since Aristotle lectured and Cicero wrote. For centuries teachers have offered guidance to speakers and writers in composing various kinds of argument: One well-known division of arguments recognizes “forensic” arguments, designed to establish the truth or falsity of allegations about people’s conduct and the rightness of judgments about their behavior; “deliberative” arguments, designed to establish the desirability of taking or not taking particular actions; and “epideictic” arguments, designed to demonstrate that someone deserves honor and praise. All of these forms of argument have in common the desire to induce belief, change attitudes, and bring about action by means of discourse.

In some sense, all discourse (oral and written) is argument. When we speak or write (even to ourselves in diaries and journals), we seek to draw attention to what we say. Since attention usually is paid only to discourse that listeners or readers find worth heeding, we try to lead our audience to believe that what we say is justifiable—that there are data to support it or good reasons for saying it, and that we are reliable people who can be trusted to locate the data and the reasons and to set them forth fairly. For example, a friendly letter to our relatives, whether about the most mundane details of our life or about a frightening emergency, asks them to believe in the accuracy of what is being reported and, presumably, in the continued sanity and affection of the writer. In asking readers or

listeners to pay attention, *any* writer or speaker implicitly promises discourse that will not only be credible but will also offer some benefit to the audience: In short, he or she is engaged in argument.

But when we speak of argument as a form of writing, we usually are not thinking of letters to relatives. Rather we are thinking of a kind of discourse in which the writer is making an outright claim on readers' judgment or belief—and may also be making a request for action. We are thinking of discourse in which the writer alleges that specific events took place, that those events had particular causes or consequences, that the events are open to certain judgments or evaluations, that specific generalizations are tenable, and/or that definite actions should be taken—in circumstances where readers may be in doubt or may be unwilling to believe what the writer claims. In short, a situation calls for *argument* if what the writer will assert is *in doubt*. If readers are neutral and cannot be expected to believe immediately, unquestioningly, what is said, or if they may well disagree with—that is, disbelieve—what the writer says, then argument is called for. It is about argument in this sense, the sense in which Aristotle and Cicero conceived it, that Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor are writing in *A Rhetoric of Argument*.

Argument in this sense pervades our lives. We are asked to buy products, to give money, to participate in campaigns, to cast votes. Because success in inducing readers or listeners to believe, and act upon, an argument often brings benefits to the arguer, it is clearly in the arguer's interest to argue as imaginatively and as cogently as circumstances permit. But because, as we know, the benefit to be gained from successful argument is sometimes great enough to lead an arguer to be overly zealous in making the case, readers have to be on guard against possible distortion. Furthermore, on many questions inviting judgment or action, the data permit reasonable people to reach different conclusions; therefore, a liberal education in a democratic society, many teachers assert, should equip people to recognize how an argument is built. We must be on guard against acting upon arguments that, in benefiting the arguer, may bring discomfort to us. We must be wary of believing too easily, judging too hastily, acting too quickly on problematic issues.

Perhaps for these reasons, most chapters about argument in texts on writing, and large parts of many textbooks on argument alone, emphasize warnings about where arguments *fail*. They guide their users in searching for what may reduce the credibility of arguments. They list by name large numbers of fallacies, illustrating each and showing how each affects the argument it enters. They point out how to locate hidden premises, or assumptions, underlying the argument, so that readers can see the implications of denying the premises or of adopting others. They offer rudimentary introductions to propositional logic, sometimes with diagrams showing interlocking circles to illustrate which propositions are, and which

are not, valid. Sometimes they explore the distinctions between “contraries” and “contradictories” in an effort to help students recognize the impact on an argument of its author’s failure to differentiate the two. They provide guidelines for the *deconstruction* of arguments, so that readers can maintain the upper hand and avoid being taken in. In this approach, indeed, many texts on writing seem internally inconsistent: When discussing most kinds of writing, the texts tell writers how to address readers, while in discussing argument, they show writers—considered for the moment as readers—how to test, and resist, others’ writing. Despite the importance to students, professional people, and citizens of being able to build arguments that avoid fallacious appeals, many such books about writing offer at best sketchy advice on *constructing* an argument.

In *A Rhetoric of Argument*, Fahnestock and Secor go a long way toward filling the large vacuum left by these other books. While continuing to offer help for readers in identifying the weakness of others’ arguments and in constructing refutations of those arguments, they focus attention principally on the task that a writer faces in building an argument. They recognize and demonstrate that many subjects are not matters for argument in the narrower sense in which we use the term here. They recognize that effective argument requires an urgent occasion—a reason why the writer/speaker is moved to come before the reader/listener. They contend that the construction of an argument begins with determining the issue—the question about which readers may not immediately believe what the writer asserts—and continues with the identification of the kind of proposition being argued. While recognizing that the writer’s characterization of self and the role or stance he/she takes in addressing the reader will affect the audience’s response, Fahnestock and Secor assert that the writer’s first responsibility is to define the issue and to recognize the kind of proposition that must be discussed to advance the argument successfully.

Secor and Fahnestock’s division of arguments into classes is lucid, neat, and elegant. An argument, they contend, may take the form of claiming that an object or event belongs to a specific “class” (and has the perties of members of that class), or that an object or event has particular features. Or it may take the form of a *statement about causes or effects*. Other apparently distinct kinds of argument are in effect versions or combinations of these two kinds, they believe. An *evaluation* is either a claim that its subject must meet specific standards in order to be said to belong to its group, or it is a statement about the effects of that subject, about whether it produces “desired” or undesirable results. Or an evaluation can be both. A *proposal*, an assertion that some action should be taken, is a special form of causal statement—one which predicts that certain recommended actions will improve the current state of affairs. Almost alone among texts on argument, *A Rhetoric of Argument* focuses on the importance of such prediction and connects it to causal analysis. (A prediction differs from an analysis of the

causes of ongoing or completed events, of course, in being about *probable* future events.) For each kind of argument, Fahnestock and Secor tell what sorts of support are required, what the writer must demonstrate in order to provide that support, what data writers can offer to accomplish those demonstrations, and how writers can overcome difficulties in the construction of their arguments. Fahnestock and Secor also guide writers in anticipating the objections and points of disagreement that readers may bring forward, and suggest how writers may respond, as they argue, to those possible objections. The authors illustrate various kinds of argument, and tactics for arguing, by analyzing representative passages of academic and popular discourse, and by offering readers an abundance of passages that readers can study on their own. Finally, the authors help their students to experience, through numerous exercises drawn from a variety of fields, the wide-ranging applicability of their teaching about argument.

It is by teaching the invention of arguments and the construction of written argument, in fact, that Fahnestock and Secor offer their best advice about reading and assessing arguments. By demonstrating what is needed for effective argument, the authors help their students to recognize when argument is not effective. By highlighting how words work—how they may act upon a reader—the authors invite students to recognize where vagueness, ambiguity, obscurity, and evasiveness in words and syntax can weaken the credibility of argument. In so doing, they help their students toward alert *evaluative thinking* (a term I would offer as a replacement for “critical” thinking) about the arguments of others—and about their own. They help students learn to pay thoughtful attention to what other writers, and they themselves, say.

Probably at least half of the assignments in most writing courses invite argument. Intuitively we recognize, in designing such assignments, the importance of helping students learn to argue successfully—to win the assent, or at least the respect, of their readers for the assertions and recommendations they advance. Such teaching prepares students not only for writing in academic disciplines, but for their participation in civic and professional worlds beyond the campus, where, in diverse settings, they will need to use words to encourage beliefs and to bring about desired actions. That is why all students—all readers—can profit from *A Rhetoric of Argument*: it can help us become well-informed, fair-minded, attentive, perceptive, and thus skillful participants in the dialogues by which defensible beliefs are reached and wise actions are decided upon.

—RICHARD L. LARSON

Acknowledgments

We wish to express our gratitude to those colleagues who have helped and encouraged us during the years of thought and work on this book. For the stimulation of her knowledge, conversation, and company, Wilma R. Ebbitt, who brought the course in written argument into being at Penn State, deserves special thanks. Betsy Brown gave us the support of her expertise and humor, and readings of the manuscript by Douglas Park, John Harwood, and Paul Klemp at different stages of progress proved very helpful.

For his advice and criticism we wish to thank in particular Richard L. Larson of Lehman College, City University of New York, who helped us shape and refine the book and gave us confidence in our approach. We also benefited greatly from the comments of John Auchard, University of Maryland; Robert Connors, Louisiana State University; Lester Faigley, University of Texas; Donovan Ochs, University of Iowa; Richard Hootman, University of Iowa; Robert Esch, University of Texas at El Paso; Donald McQuade, Queen's College, City University of New York; and George Yoos, St. Cloud University.

We owe a debt as well to Richard Garretson for his professional friendship, support, and guidance in the development of this book, and to David C. Follmer, Irene Pavitt, Christine Pellicano, Elaine Romano, and Susan Israel of Random House for seeing it through to completion. Donna Williams and Nancy Royer also aided us materially with their patient typing and preparation of drafts.

For help in producing the second edition of *A Rhetoric of Argument* we wish to thank the following people at Random House/McGraw-Hill: Steven Pensinger, Tom Holton, our copy editor Debra Manette, our front matter editor Caroline Izzo, and our permissions editor Barbara Hale. In addition, we would like to thank our colleagues, who provided helpful suggestions for improving the first edition: Dorothy Bankston, Louisiana State University; Kate Begnal, Utah State University; Robert E. Land, University of California—Irvine, and Jeanette Morgan, University of Houston.

Finally, we wish to thank our husbands, Stephen Fahnestock and Robert Secor, who have done so much over the years to strengthen our skills of argument.

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Instructor's Introduction: What Kind of Argument Text Is This?

This book represents an approach to teaching written argument that we learned the hard way, after making many mistakes. If you look through it, you will find little of the usual paraphernalia of logic—no square of opposition, no Venn diagrams, no classification of syllogisms, no chapters on induction and deduction. The absence of this material is deliberate, but it is not missing because we reject it as a legitimate area of study. Rather, we left it out because the more we taught argument to composition classes, the less we used these materials in logic text form. When we began teaching argument, we spent days on syllogisms, fallacies, and the rules for validity; but eventually we found the bridge between formal analysis and the actual structuring of written arguments shaky. A student who was a whiz at detecting an undistributed middle could not necessarily construct an extended persuasive argument. So instead we have allowed the formal material of logic to sink below the surface and to inform the advice we give here about constructing sound arguments.

In our composition course in argument, we worked from an assumption about topic choice: From the beginning, we were reluctant to assign students specific topics for three reasons. First, we distrusted our ability to think of topics that would interest students. Second, we found that their work improved when they wrote on subjects that interested them rather than on subjects we thought they would find interesting. Third, we feared

that students assigned specific topics would simply try to second-guess the instructor's opinion on the issue instead of thinking through their own.

We found, despite our initial misgivings, that students had little trouble coming up with arguable topics from their own experiences, their reading, their other courses, even their favorite sports, pastimes, and people. With only the prodding of a few examples, students came to the next class meeting with a list of things they were individually ready to argue for. Their statements of position spontaneously took the form of single sentences: "Campus police should not carry guns." "The math department's multiple-choice tests are ridiculous." "The university should give students free textbooks." "The dorm reservation system is unfair." "Fast food is stomach pollution." "My roommate is the cause of my being on academic probation this year." We found, in fact, that students can easily generate the one-sentence thesis, the seed crystal of argument. Of course, this preliminary thesis is not sacrosanct. Students modify, qualify, and complicate as they develop their arguments and discover what they can actually support, and much of our class time is spent working through tentative theses to show how they might be developed and adapted for potentially interested audiences.

However, not all our students' preliminary theses were arguable in the first place. We found, in the beginning of the course, that we had to back up and teach an awareness of what an audience will view as an arguable statement or an inarguable one that asserts a fact or matter of taste. Distinguishing the arguable from the inarguable makes good theoretical sense as well, for students must learn to use facts and reject unsupportable opinion in their arguments. Therefore, this book begins with an extended discussion of what is and is not arguable, a more complex problem than most of us start out realizing.

For a while we allowed our students to write on their miscellaneous theses, directing them only with general advice about inference, inductive and deductive structures, fallacies to avoid, and pro and con analyses of issues. We soon grew dissatisfied, however, as we realized that this general advice failed to give students the kind of specific guidance they needed. When we took a closer look at the theses they wanted to argue for, we saw the need to classify them. We sifted through hundreds of thesis statements from students, from published writing, and from our own imaginations, expressed in all the untidy phrasings of everyday language. We kept asking these questions: "How would you support such a statement?" "What would an argument for this thesis look like?"

The answers grouped themselves into piles and the piles into heaps under four headings, each representing a question that the thesis statement answers: "What is it?" "How did it get that way?" "Is it good or bad?" "What should we do about it?" Students were quick to grasp the simplicity and completeness of this four-part division, and, of course, it is not com-