

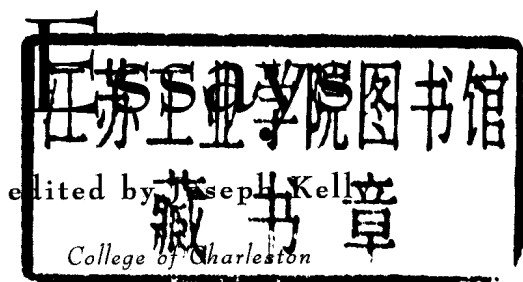
The

SEAGULL READER

ESSAYS

★ Edited by **Joseph Kelly** ★

THE SEAGULL READER



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INTRODUCTION



What Are Essays?

Some things we accept as givens: that the earth revolves around the sun, that George Washington was the first president of the United States, that it is (or is not) raining. Without argument, we accept well-established scientific principles, matters of historical fact, and things that we can observe directly. Other things—the effect of today’s public policy, the implications of past events, judgments concerning art and culture—are not yet known or are matters of opinion. To make a judgment about these things, we must listen to the testimony of other people and review the evidence they use to support their opinions. The way the evidence is presented is called **rhetoric**.

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. Its goal is to change people’s opinions and influence their actions. The Greek philosopher Aristotle codified the basic principles of rhetoric in the fifth century B.C.E., but its techniques had long been practiced by Greek lawyers and legislators. Twenty-five centuries after Aristotle, rhetoric remains the bench of judgment and the lectern of deliberative government in free societies.

Each of the essays gathered in this anthology uses rhetoric in one way or another. Some of the essays are directly political and are in-

tended to alter the course of history by persuading people to take (or refrain from taking) action. For example, Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" tried to convince moderate whites all over America that they should march arm-in-arm with African Americans against racists like Birmingham, Alabama's Bull Connor, commissioner of public safety in the early 1960s. Political essays must meet a high standard of logic and evidence if they are to persuade because it's very hard to get people to do things they are not inclined to do. People will not change how they act unless the arguments for doing so are compelling and reasonable. Political essays, then, are excellent models to use in constructing your own logical arguments.

Other essays in this book are less obviously persuasive. These might be called opinion essays because they are not concerned with influencing readers' actions so much as with influencing their opinions. They often rely less on logic and more on emotion and the reader's trust in the writer's good character. A good example is Brent Staples's "Black Men in Public Spaces." Like King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Staples's essay combats racism. But it is not really a call to action. It tries to persuade white readers, especially women, to stop stereotyping black men. Its success depends not on logical argument, but on his readers' sense of kinship to Staples and their outrage at the indignities he has suffered. Rhetoricians call these ethical and pathetic arguments: persuading by the essayist's good character and by stirring up the reader's emotions. Most writing that you will be asked to do in college frowns on ethical and pathetic arguments. The papers you will be asked to write for class will require stricter reasoning and better evidence than you will find in most opinion essays, so you should beware of using these as models for your own work. Nevertheless, studying opinion essays can hone your critical skills and help you to form your own opinions about important and provocative issues.

Still other essays, often called personal essays, seem hardly to be persuasive at all. This isn't to say that they abandon reason entirely, but instead of arguing for or against something, they tempt us into seeing a familiar issue from an unfamiliar angle, adopting the writer's perspective, or simply following the writer along a path of exploratory thought to a surprising conclusion. G. K. Chesterton's "On Running after One's Hat," for example, follows the essayist's

thoughts in response to a flood in England. He adopts the perspective of a child and tries to get readers to treat inconveniences—a stuck drawer, the delay of a train—as opportunities for the imagination. The success or failure of such essays is very difficult to gauge, since they don't try to get readers to do something or to change their minds about some issue. But we can be sure that they depend, to a large extent, on ethical arguments because the writer has to charm her readers if she expects them to adopt her perspective. To some extent, personal essays also use logical argument, at least to the degree that they dissolve traditional prejudices in the acid of common sense, but that is not their emphasis.

How to Read Essays

Rhetoric is an art, and like all arts it involves various techniques that have proven to be effective over the years. No doubt natural talent helps the great orators and writers, but even Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. had to practice their art. Lincoln honed his skills in courtrooms and in legislatures, while King practiced from the pulpit. They might not have known the names of the argument forms discussed below, for many a great artist learns not from books but by imitation. But all great persuaders, no matter the level of their formal training in rhetoric, use these argument forms.

This section is divided into three parts that correspond to each type of argument: **logical**, **ethical**, and **pathetic**. The terminology may seem fairly esoteric, but learning these terms and what they mean can help you analyze an argument—that is, break it down into its parts. And only by analyzing an argument can you evaluate it. Ultimately, evaluation should be your goal in reading not only these essays but any essay. Essays often delight us, and certainly they can be read purely for the sake of enjoyment. No doubt there is pleasure in getting swept up on the wave of emotion propelled by a good rhetorician or in succumbing to the awe inspired by a noble speaker. But reading critically means carefully and artfully evaluating an argument before surrendering to anyone's opinion or bending your actions to someone's will.

So when you read essays you must be active. Fill the margins of your book with your own reactions, observations, objections, and approvals. Enter into a dialogue with the essayist. Your marginal notes will go a long way toward revealing just what strategies the essayist is using to persuade you. If the pages of this book are clean by the end of your course, you're reading too passively.

Learning to recognize valid and true arguments, and learning to resist manipulative rhetoric, takes time and hard work. You might find yourself referring back to these pages again and again before you've mastered the art of reading essays. Logical arguments are particularly difficult to analyze, especially in the often-disguised forms in which essays present them. So do not be discouraged by fitful starts and early confusion. Keep at it.

Logical Arguments

Most logical arguments fall into one of two types, deductive or inductive. Roughly speaking, deductive arguments are top-down: They present general principles from which they draw a conclusion. Inductive arguments are bottom-up: They offer many examples and from these abstract a conclusion of general application.

Deduction

A deductive argument might look like this:

Men are tall.
Bob is a man.
Therefore, Bob is tall.

This is the simplest type of deductive argument. Notice that the argument has three parts. The first is a statement of general applicability: "Men are tall." Rhetoricians call this the **major premise**. It applies to all things within a particular category—in this case, the category "men." The second statement, "Bob is a man," is the **minor premise**. It asserts something about a particular case, not a general category. The **conclusion** follows logically: "Bob is tall." Because Bob falls into the category "men," and because all people in that category are tall, Bob must be tall. If the conclusion follows logically from the premises, the argument is **valid**.

But a valid argument is not necessarily **sound**. You might object to one of the premises. More than likely, you'll object to the major premise in our example, "Men are tall." Not all men are tall. Some men, in fact, are short. The argument might be valid, but it is unsound, because the major premise is false. In real life and in real arguments, very few major premises are absolutely true, so most arguments use a few qualifiers—"Most people consider a height of six feet or more to be tall"; "Bob is six-one"—before they draw their conclusion—"Therefore, Bob is tall."

When someone tries to persuade you with a deductive argument, you should break it down into its elements. Figure out what the premises and conclusion are. Only then can you properly evaluate the argument's **truth** and **validity**. Consider this famous example of deductive reasoning:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government. . . . The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. . . . We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress . . . solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States.

Thomas Jefferson proposes many major premises: All men are created equal; men have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; governments exist to protect these rights; governments derive their legitimacy from the people; if a government is not doing its job, the people can abolish it. These statements are categorical. The first few assert truths about men in general; the others assert truths about governments in general. Jefferson expects his audience to share his belief in these truths. He calls them "self-evident" and offers no evidence or further argument to prove them. If you

are a citizen of the United States, you probably believe these “truths.”

Jefferson’s minor premise considers a specific case: The government of Great Britain is not doing its job of securing the unalienable rights of its colonial subjects in America. To put it more succinctly: King George III is a tyrant. Here Jefferson suspects that his audience might not so easily believe the assertion, so he supplies a lot of supporting evidence. Actually, the bulk of the Declaration of Independence is taken up with a list of the grievances against King George III. The weight of this list is calculated to demonstrate to Jefferson’s audience that the minor premise is true.

If we believe that the “self-evident” major premises are true and if the list of grievances convinces us that the minor premise is true, then we must decide whether the conclusion follows logically. Here, the conclusion (that the United States is justified in abolishing its ties to Great Britain and establishing its own government) does seem to follow logically from the premises. So the argument is sound.

The hardest part of evaluating deductive arguments is breaking them down into their component parts. Conclusions are usually pretty easy to identify. Any statement that you could rephrase with “therefore” in front of it is a conclusion. It will take some practice to distinguish major and minor premises, but any statement you can rephrase with “because” in front of it is a premise:

Because “whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of [the people’s inalienable rights], it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it”, . . . and *because* King George is a tyrant; *therefore* we “solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are . . . Free and Independent States”

After you’ve broken an argument down into its parts, you can begin to evaluate it. First, decide whether or not the premises are true. Ask yourself, “Do I think people should overthrow governments that don’t secure their rights?” and “Do I think King George’s government was not doing its job?” If you agree with a premise, you consider it to be **true**; if you disagree with it, you consider it to be **false**. If you think a premise is false, look to see whether the writer has added a supporting argument to change your mind. If after considering all supporting arguments, you still regard a premise as false,

then you evaluate the argument as unsound. If you accept the premises, then the next step is to decide whether the argument is valid. Logicians have tests to evaluate an argument's validity, but they are too complicated to discuss here. You can trust your own common sense to evaluate most of the rhetorical arguments you'll encounter in this book and in life. Ask yourself, "Does the conclusion follow logically from the premises?" If you answer yes, then the argument is probably valid. If the premises are true and the logic is valid, then the argument is sound.

Sometimes writers leave one of their premises out. This is a common and accepted rhetorical practice, and such arguments are called **enthymemes**. For example, a few paragraphs above I reasoned that if you are a citizen of the United States, you probably believe the "self-evident" truths that Jefferson listed in the Declaration of Independence. My reasoning is a deductive argument. The minor premise is this: *You are a citizen of the United States*. (If you are not a U.S. citizen, then the premise is obviously false, but let's suppose that the minor premise is true.)

The conclusion is: *You probably believe in the self-evident "truths" espoused by the Declaration of Independence*.

I left it to you to figure out that the major premise is something like this: *Either you were raised in the United States and attended schools in which you were taught to believe that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights," etc. or you decided to become a U.S. citizen and so must be assumed to have embraced these basic tenets*.

Once you've stated that suppressed premise for yourself, you can decide whether you think it is reasonable or not, and then you can decide whether the conclusion follows logically. But you need to state the suppressed premise before you can assess the argument.

Induction

Induction, bottom-up reasoning, is easier to grasp than deduction. It is based on this idea: If you look at a lot of specific cases, you can reasonably infer the general principle that governs them all. Rather than starting with a categorical statement, as in deduction, you use particular examples to lead you to a statement of general applicability. For example, an inductive argument might go like this:

Kobe is tall. Scotty is tall. Hakeem is tall. Tim is tall. Grant is tall.
Therefore, all men are tall.

The first thing you might notice is that this argument is not very **strong**. While Kobe, Scotty, Hakeem, Tim, and Grant might all be tall (let's suppose that we agree they are), that does not mean that *all* men are tall.

Usually you can't look at every case within a category, so a generalization is almost always an estimate. The conclusion is not going to be *definitely* true or false, but *probably* true or false. For example, proving the conclusion "Men are tall" by looking at every case is impossible. That would mean determining the height of every man on the planet. But we can take a sample of those men and draw a reasonable conclusion. Before you accept the reasonableness of any conclusion, however, you should be sure that the sample is **sufficiently large, accurate, and representative**.

In the inductive argument above, the sample is accurate: All the men I named are tall. But the sample is neither sufficiently large nor representative. (These two criteria often go together.) I took my sample from the National Basketball Association—clearly not representative—and I only included five men. My sample is far too narrow and small to represent men in general. A better sample would include many men selected randomly from the total population rather than the select groups you might find on basketball courts.

The Declaration of Independence is a good example of an inductive argument. Jefferson's minor premise was, to paraphrase, "King George III is a tyrant." Jefferson thought that his audience might not take this statement as self-evident, so he listed twenty-six examples of George's tyranny, from "He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good" to "He has excited domestic insurrections among us . . ." Let's see whether we are justified in inferring George III's tyranny from this sample.

Is the list accurate? If Jefferson had invented some grievances, we could dismiss the argument for being inaccurate. But they seem to be accurate enough. Is it sufficiently large? If he had listed only three or four, we might conclude that such examples constituted mistakes by the government rather than tyranny. But Jefferson has listed enough to impress most readers. Is the sample representative?

If all twenty-six grievances dealt with abuses of one part of the government's powers—say, the impeding of immigration to America—they would not be representative. But the grievances touch on so many aspects of government—taxation, the support and control of the army, the judiciary, trade, immigration, etc.—that the sample's scope seems sufficiently wide. This long list of grievances, then, offers pretty persuasive support for his inductive argument. We describe such arguments as strong.

Note that Jefferson concludes with an assertion that is the minor premise of his deductive argument. You will find that writers commonly mix their arguments in this way. Very rarely do you find a single argument without other arguments supporting it somehow. Real-life arguments can get pretty confusing and complex. Actually, I chose the Declaration of Independence as an example because it's fairly straightforward. Jefferson was trained in rhetoric, and he laid out his argument quite clearly. Most arguments, even those you'll find in this book, are less carefully and skillfully constructed. Your task as a difficult-to-persuade, skeptical reader is to unravel those complexities and lay them out clearly so you can evaluate them.

Logical Fallacies

Just as the right ways of constructing an argument have been around for millennia, so have the wrong ways. Often these mistakes result from a lack of training. Sometimes they are deliberate attempts to obscure illogical arguments. Either way, learning to identify common mistakes will help you detect bad arguments.

Deductive Fallacies

In a deductive argument, a logical fallacy makes the argument **invalid**—the conclusion does not follow logically from the premises.

Non sequitur is Latin for “it does not follow.” All mistakes in deductive logic are, strictly speaking, **non sequiturs**, because the conclusion does not follow logically from the premises. But in common practice *non sequitur* usually describes enthymemes in which the stated premise(s), although apparently related to the conclusion, is (are) really irrelevant. Take this example:

John wears glasses, so he must be smart.

This is a non sequitur because wearing glasses has no bearing on intelligence. People are not awarded glasses for, say, getting a high score on an IQ test. People wear glasses because they are near-sighted, far-sighted, or have an astigmatism. Some wear glasses to filter sunlight. If we supplied these premises, the argument would look like this:

Major premises: People wear glasses because they are near-sighted, far-sighted, or have an astigmatism. Some wear glasses to filter sunlight.

Minor premise: John wears glasses.

Conclusion: John is smart.

Clearly, the conclusion does not follow logically from the premises, and so the argument is unsound. The logical conclusion would be “John is near-sighted, far-sighted, has an astigmatism, or wants to filter sunlight.”

Another, perhaps easier, way to test the enthymeme is to supply a premise that would make the argument valid and then determine whether the added premise is true. If we add the premise “People who wear glasses are smart,” then our argument would look like this:

Major premise: People who wear glasses are smart.

Minor premise: John wears glasses.

Conclusion: John is smart.

This argument is valid: The conclusion follows logically from the premises. But anyone who has met someone of average intelligence wearing glasses (and who has not?) would disagree with the categorical statement, “People who wear glasses are smart.” Since one of the premises is false, the argument is unsound. If the only premises you can think of to make an argument valid are false, then the enthymeme is unsound.

The **red herring** is similar to the non sequitur—its premise(s) is (are) irrelevant to the conclusion. But in a red herring, the writer purposely introduces unrelated premises to distract the reader from what should be the real issue. Take the following argument:

The CEO of our company ought to be fired. The chief executive officer has to oversee the entire body of personnel, execute current policy, and plan future strategy. Every one of those tasks is beyond the capacity of a figurehead.

Broken down into its parts, the argument might read this way:

Minor premises: The chief executive officer has to oversee the entire body of personnel, execute current policy, and plan future strategy.

Major premise: Every one of those tasks is beyond the capacity of a figurehead.

Conclusion: The CEO of our company ought to be fired.

Logically, the premises lead to this conclusion: *CEOs should not be figureheads*. But that's not what the writer is arguing. So the major and minor premises distract us from the real issue.

The **false-cause fallacy** (often called by its Latin name—*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, which means “after this, therefore because of this”) presumes a causal link between two consecutive events: Because A happened *before* B, A must have *caused* B. But in fact, the two events might have nothing to do with each other. You might consider this fallacy a non sequitur of events.

Take an argument that incumbent presidents often use to get re-elected:

If you're better off now than you were four years ago, you should vote for me.

Broken down into its parts, the argument would look like this:

Major premises: Presidential policies determine the prosperity of ordinary citizens. Ordinary citizens should vote for those politicians who have increased their prosperity.

Minor premise: Your prosperity increased during the incumbent's administration.

Conclusion: You should vote for the incumbent.

This argument commits the false-cause fallacy. Although presidential policies might influence your prosperity, many other things influence it as well (for example, many people earn more as they get older, so they would be richer now than they were four years ago,

no matter who was president). Just because one event or a series of events (“presidential policies”) precedes another (“prosperity”) does not mean the first *caused* the second.

Begging the question occurs when a writer uses the conclusion as one of the premises. You might think that no one would ever beg the question because the mistake would be too obvious. But usually the premise is stated in a disguised form, using synonyms to throw the reader off the track.

Take the following example:

New York City should pay for a new Yankee Stadium, because its citizens deserve a first-class ball park.

At first glance you might not notice that “New York City” and “its citizens” are synonymous here, but as soon as you realize that New York City would raise the money to pay for a new stadium from its taxpayers, the citizens of New York, you realize that the premise and the conclusion make the same assertion in disguised form.

The **either-or fallacy** (often called the false dilemma or false alternative fallacy) unreasonably limits the choices available, usually to two diametrically opposed options. For example, a popular slogan in the 1960s was “America: love it or leave it.” Put less succinctly, this meant that you must either accept all U.S. policies or emigrate. You might break this argument down as follows:

Major premises: Loyal Americans do not challenge governmental policies. Only loyal Americans deserve to remain in the United States.

Minor premise: These protestors are not loyal Americans.

Conclusion: These protestors do not deserve to live in the United States.

By putting the argument into its deductive form, we can see that the first premise unreasonably limits the definition of “loyal.” Most Americans—liberal and conservative alike—would probably agree that citizens have a right and a duty to challenge policies they disagree with. The definition of “loyal” in the first major premise unreasonably excludes other ways of being loyal. Thus, the admonition