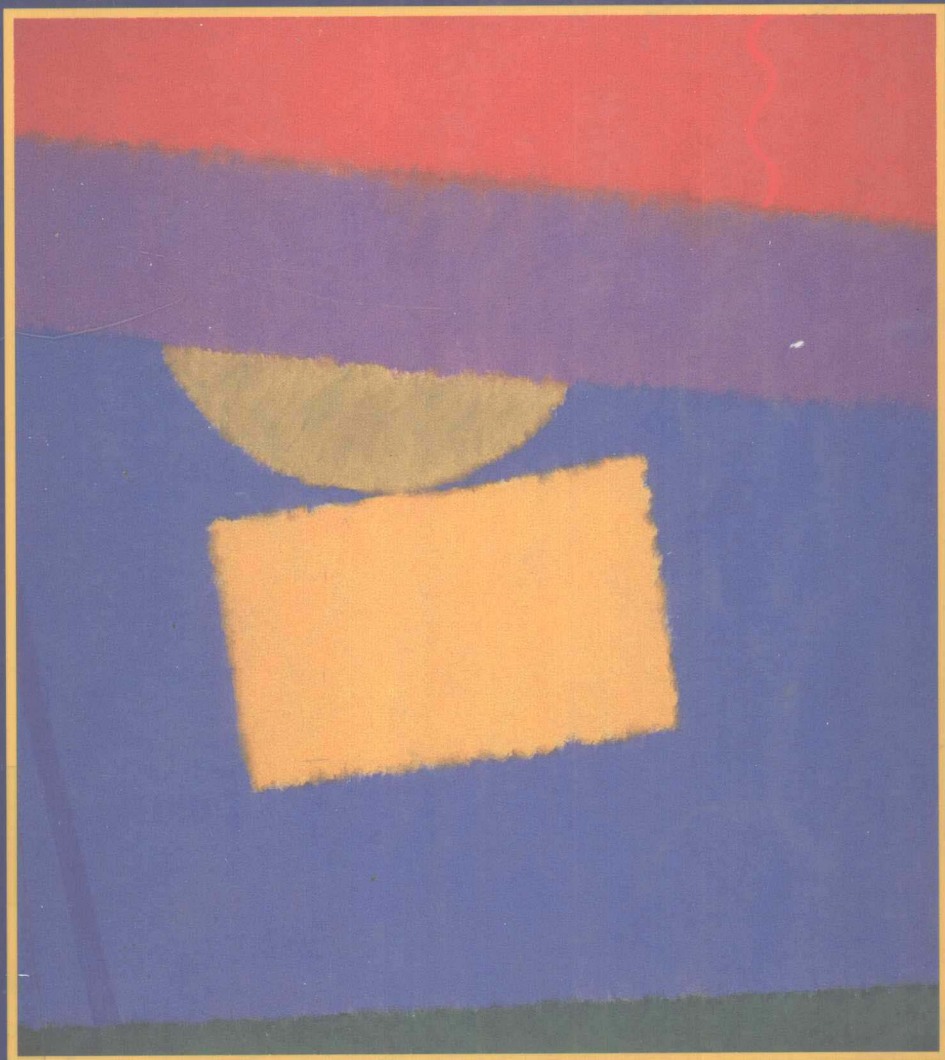


THIRD EDITION

# *The Shape of* **Reason**

*Argumentative Writing in College*



*John T. Gage*

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# *The Shape of Reason*

## Argumentative Writing in College

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THIRD EDITION

**John T. Gage**

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## A NOTE TO STUDENTS

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Argumentative writing is writing that reasons its way to a conclusion. It addresses ideas that the writer takes seriously enough to want to explore and support with good reasons. This book is about this process: writing as reasoned inquiry.

You are invited to engage in this process by responding critically to the ideas of others and by writing about your own ideas in such a way that you try to earn the understanding and assent of your audience. In this way, you are invited to use writing to enter an intellectual dialogue that should be a central part of your experience in college. This approach has some consequences in the way I have written this book.

First, I have tried to challenge you to think about ideas and about writing. I want you to make up your own minds about everything in this book.

Second, this book treats the writing process as moving from a sense of the whole argument to the discovery of specific parts, rather than building separate “skills” in isolation from complete writing intentions. This means that you will not be asked to produce writing merely for the sake of practicing some part of a whole composition (such as sentences or paragraphs), although you will be asked to write thesis statements that represent the whole intention of an essay and the line of reasoning that it will develop.

Third, this book treats the form of an essay as something that is *generated* by the writer rather than as something *imposed* on the writer. I want you to generate the structures that give your essays their own unique shape based on your ideas, rather than try to fill up “empty forms” imposed from outside. Form follows function. Ideas come first.

Fourth, I have placed the process of reasoning through an argument and generating the structure of an essay within the context of critical reading. Critical reading underlies the process of inquiry, which requires some kind of response to others’ ideas and some basis of knowledge from which to respond. So, I have treated argumentation here as a matter of inventing and shaping the best possible reasons to earn your reader’s understanding and assent, and not as a matter of trying to “win” your case by overpowering the “opposition.” I have tried to underplay persuasion, as your aim, in favor of inquiry. Critical reading is a kind of prerequisite to inquiry, because it challenges us with ideas we may not have thought about, and provides us with whatever we need to know to be sure we are responding and inquiring responsibly.

Finally, I have tried to be honest with you about why I think argumentative writing matters. Thinking and writing are not processes that you can ever

expect to “master.” By doing them you learn the rewards of intellectual accomplishment as well as experience the limits of human understanding. Thinking is an adventure that requires risks. It always balances certainties with uncertainties. By facing both, we learn to live with our own uncertainties and to be more tolerant of the beliefs of others.

So, I urge you to treat this book and the writing that it invites you to do as an adventure in thinking. We are all in this together. The possibilities are endless.

In *The Shape of Reason*, I have presented argumentative writing as a large enough category to contain the kinds of intellectual and compositional skills that students should be practicing in college. Argumentative writing, for me, does not focus on one mode of developing ideas to the exclusion of another. The process of coming to conclusions may engage the writer in every possible kind of compositional pattern, depending on the nature of the issue and the writer's situation. I have presented argumentation as a process of inquiry into questions at issue that is best pursued if guided by principles but not governed by rules. Consequently, I have adapted the classical rhetorical concept of the enthymeme as the central basis for the invention and structuring of arguments, an approach that blends classical insights about rhetorical reasoning with contemporary understandings of the composing process as generative and organic, situated within discourse communities. This helps to remove logic from the sometimes rigid realm of disabling rules and formulas by treating reasoning as a natural and informal process.

I have included other features in the book that I hope will make the approach more effective. Extended discussions of important terms, such as *dialectic*, *structure*, *thesis*, *enthymeme*, and *style*, show how these concepts are flexible and shaped by the purposes to which we, as writers, put them. Each chapter ends with "Questions for Thought, Discussion, and Writing" that call for independent evaluation of the ideas in the chapter, often in relation to readings collected at the end of the text.

Instructors familiar with the second edition might be interested in the most significant changes that I have made in this third edition.

1. In order to emphasize the generative and collaborative nature of the enthymeme as an informal guide to reasoning, I have removed discussions of formal logic. Formal logical categories can be useful in this approach to teaching writing, at times, to enable students to see the dynamics of the enthymeme more clearly, yet they can also suggest a more prescriptive and formulaic model for reasoning than I think is necessary to engage students in serious, practical reasoning. Teachers interested in including formal logic in connection with their teaching of informal, practical reasoning will find this discussion moved to the new *Instructor's Manual* for this edition prepared by Margaret Johnson.
2. Similarly, a comparison between the enthymematic approach to invention and the "Toulmin model" for analyzing arguments has been deleted,



but made available in the *Instructor's Manual* to those teachers who wish to make such a comparison.

3. I have added a new chapter on dialectic in order to deepen our students' understanding of the linguistic and communal origins of the very human act of argumentation, and to develop further the crucial difference between argument as an intellectual journey into the realm of ideas and argument as verbal aggression.
4. Based on the responses of many teachers and students, I have chosen a number of new readings for this edition, while keeping those that have proven most successful in teaching this book. The readings are now arranged at the end of the book in a sort of mini-anthology, organized around a range of questions at issue. As before, *The Shape of Reason* may be taught as a stand-alone text or together with a separate anthology. I hope by this new arrangement of readings to illustrate the dynamic nature of responses to questions at issue, which do not fit neatly into "pro" and "con" positions, and to further this idea the readings now include three different forums, or selections of texts that were specifically written in response to each other, including a short Internet colloquy. To further illustrate the dynamics of informal reasoning, I have included works of fiction and personal narrative among the readings. A new section on arguments in and about fiction has been added to Chapter 4.
5. Instead of modeling at great length the processes of thought and revision that lead to a reasoned thesis and from that thesis to a fully conceptualized structure, I have offered only general advice on these processes to students and included in the new *Instructor's Manual* more explicit advice to teachers on how to conduct workshops in class in which students can engage directly in revising enthymemes and developing structures. I hope this change streamlines students' reading of the text and allows my advice to be related more directly to their own ideas for writing.
6. Discussions formerly found in several chapters dealing with the research process have for this edition been consolidated into a new Chapter 8 in order to focus more direct attention on research methods. The chapter does not provide a complete guide to research writing, but is intended to draw out and apply the implications for research of the specific approach to argumentative writing taken in *The Shape of Reason*.
7. Finally, I have sought, without in any way reducing the challenge to students that I hope this book presents, to revise the text in those places where it needed to be made more accessible. Everything I say in this book as advice to students applies to my own writing, and that includes always being open to the possibility of making it better, knowing that perfection is probably unattainable.

The approach to writing taken in *The Shape of Reason* will work best if students discuss ideas freely and write essays that respond honestly to the issues

and arguments that develop during such a discussion. It invites and enables you to respond to students' ideas and writing as a critical thinker and writing consultant. It is in this way that I hope the book serves to enliven teaching as well as learning. This process is one from which both instructors and students never cease to learn.

I urge you to discuss your discoveries and questions about this approach with your colleagues, and thereby to form a discourse community of your own about your mutual insights and concerns. The *Instructor's Manual* for the book can provide a basis for such discussions as well as specific advice about teaching the book.

The third edition of the *Instructor's Manual* has been prepared by Margaret Johnson, based on Kathleen O'Fallon's revisions for the second edition of my original version. These experienced teachers of the book have provided different perspectives from mine, and our collaborations have led to a more useful guide to teaching argumentative writing than I could have produced on my own.





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I have been assisted in preparing this edition of *The Shape of Reason* by a group of contributing editors whose outstanding knowledge of the book and the theory behind it, and whose extraordinary talents as teachers and editors, have been invaluable to me. I consulted this group collectively about changes that would improve the book, and many of the ideas for this edition came out of these discussions. Each also helped me with specific revising tasks, contributing new material and rewriting when it was needed: Carolyn Bergquist contributed to the revising of Chapters 5 and 6; Brad Hawley drafted material on the teaching of argument using fiction and helped with the selection of appropriate works of fiction for the readings; Julia Major researched and selected new readings and contributed to the revision of Chapter 7; Mary Peters helped me to revise Chapter 4 and collaborated on the new Chapter 8; David Sumner helped me to revise Chapter 2 and also collaborated on the new Chapter 8; and Kenneth Wright researched and selected new readings and contributed to the revision of Chapter 8. For some who have taught *The Shape of Reason* in the past, this new edition has been a long time coming; without the assistance of these six expert teachers, it would have been much longer. Our work was made easier and better by the excellent advice of the following consultants who provided extensive suggestions for the third edition and commented helpfully on our proposed changes: Victoria Aarons, Trinity University; Suzanne Bordelon, University of Alaska–Fairbanks; Julie M. Farrar, Fontbonne College; Martin J. Jacobi, Clemson University; and Charles Paine, The University of New Mexico.

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JTG

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## *The Shape of Reason*

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