GAGE

The Shape of Reason

Argumentative Writing in College

SECOND EDITION

◆ THE SHAPE OF REASON ◆

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Macmillan Publishing Company
New York

Collier Macmillan Canada
Toronto

Editor: Eben W. Ludlow
Production Supervisor: Charlotte Hyland
Production Manager: Valerie Sawyer
Text and Cover Designer: Jane Edelstein
This book was set in Berkeley Old Style by Carlisle Communications, Ltd., and was printed and bound by Book Press.
The cover was printed by The Lehigh Press, Inc.

Macmillan Publishing Company
866 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10022

Collier Macmillan Canada, Inc.
1200 Eglinton Avenue East
Suite 200
Don Mills, Ontario M3C 3N1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gage, John T.
The shape of reason : argumentative writing in college / John T. Gage.—2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0–02–340041–2
1. English language—Rhetoric. 2. Reasoning. I. Title.
PE1431.G34 1991
808′.042—dc20 90–45549
CIP

Printing: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Year: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Acknowledgments appear on page 286, which constitutes a continuation of the copyright page.

This book is dedicated
to the memory of
Sally Gage

◆ A NOTE TO STUDENTS ◆

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 of 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 and "enthymemes" (see Chapter 4 for a definition of this term) 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 and research. Critical reading and research underlie 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

finding and presenting the best possible reasons you can for 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. Research involves finding out anything 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.

◆ A NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS ◆

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. This helps to remove logic from the sometimes scary realm of 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 *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. I have written some narrative examples of a student thinking about ideas, coming up with a thesis and reasons, and structuring an essay, not as a model to be copied, but as an illustration of the process. I have tried to connect all the issues to the research process rather than to isolate that process from writing.

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

1. I have added reading selections after each chapter, to be read and analyzed according to the concepts being discussed in that chapter. The selections are also meant to generate discussion of ideas for students to write about.

Three provocative and challenging readings, on themes found in the chapter readings, form a new appendix. With this change, the book may now be used with or without a supplementary reader.

2. I have shortened individual chapters in response to many helpful comments from students and teachers.
3. In Chapter 3, on the thesis, I have made explicit use of "stasis" theory, grouping stasis questions according to the nature of the question at issue and showing how they affect reasoning.
4. Chapter 4 on reasoning has been changed considerably, primarily to bring the idea of the enthymeme forward to frame the entire discussion so that the enthymeme is not presented merely as a kind of syllogism. Informal reasoning is discussed in advance of formal logic, which is presented as one way to think about the enthymeme. Stephen Toulmin's terminology is introduced as a complementary way to describe informal reasoning.
5. Chapter 5 on structure now begins with the concept of using a structural enthymeme as a guide to thinking about form as a consequence of reasoning. Several examples of structural enthymemes are illustrated, each with different potential structures as possibilities for development.
6. In place of a separate chapter on research, new "Implications for Research" sections have been added to appropriate chapters, so that the issue of research is linked more directly to the reasoning and writing processes.

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. I have written the *Instructor's Manual* for the book in such a way that it can provide a basis for such discussions as well as specific advice about teaching the book. In the second edition of the *Instructor's Manual,* I have benefitted greatly from Kathleen O'Fallon's coauthorship. She provides a different perspective from mine, having taught this approach in different settings and with the interests of different colleagues to negotiate, and our collaboration has led to a more useful guide to teaching argumentative writing than I could have produced on my own.

In the first edition of this book, I acknowledged my debt to my own teachers and friends and to sources for ideas from Aristotle to Wayne Booth. Since then, many teachers and many students have told me about their experience with that edition, and I am grateful to all of them. I am especially indebted to the following people for specific suggestions or other forms of help with this edition: Frederick J. Antczak, Paul Armstrong, Douglas Babington,

Margaret Bayless, Walter H. Beale, Linda Bensel-Meyers, Grant Boswell, Nancy Bradbury, Michael Bybee, Keith Comer, Mary Coté, Jim Crosswhite, Elizabeth Deis, Ann Dobyns, Carol Faulkner, Rick Filloy, Lowell Frye, Richard Fulkerson, John Garvin, Carolyn Hill, Martin Jacobi, Monica C. Johnstone, Ann Kemmy, Don Kraemer, Cindy La Com, Anne Laskaya, Nancy M. Lowe, Michael G. Moran, Kathleen O'Fallon, William Petty, Bart Queary, Arthur Quinn, Marilyn Reid, Diana Rhoads, Patricia Roberts, Jeannie Thomas, Victor J. Vitanza, and Jeffrey Walker.

Once again, as ever, Robin and Molly Gage are those without whom nothing.

J. T. G.

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WRITING AND THE COLLEGE COMMUNITY

DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

All of us are individuals, but we coexist with other individuals in communities. We belong to, or interact with, a variety of communities, each of which makes different demands on us, and which we, in turn, affect in different ways. As a member of your generation you are part of one kind of community, as a college student you are part of another, as a family member you belong to another sort of community, and as a person who holds certain political beliefs you are part of another sort of community. Such a list of examples could go on practically indefinitely: different communities for different aspects of our lives. Each of us belongs to a large number of overlapping communities.

Although we share some characteristics with the other members of each community we belong to, as individuals we are also unlike those members in other ways. A community is defined by some characteristic that unites its members, but diversity among people is present in every community. Diversity may be set aside to one degree or another for the good of the community, or it may become an obstacle to cooperation. Communities are dynamic things in which the members are always seeking cooperation but not at the expense of loss of individuality.

Some communities may be called **discourse communities**. A discourse community is any kind of community in which the members attempt to achieve cooperation and assert their individuality through the use of language. We are all members of a variety of discourse communities, each of which uses language in different ways. Family communities have their own ways of using

language, some of which you use only when you are among family members (and some of which you may try to avoid). Political communities have their own ways of using language. Communities of natural scientists use language in some ways unique to them, as do communities of artists, athletes, businesspeople, farmers, and others. Language, since it is adaptable to any purpose, takes on characteristics that help the community to achieve its ends. Communities define themselves to a greater or lesser degree by the way in which they use language.

The uses of language in any discourse community go beyond specialized vocabularies. Yes, certain communities may have words that only members of those communities know or use. Such words are called jargon—words that you know by virtue of being part of some discourse community, words that nonmembers of that community do not know. But, more importantly, each community differs (more or less) in other ways in its use of language: Different forms of language (such as oral or written, spoken or sung, formal or informal, letters or essays, and so on) may predominate in the discourse of a group; language may be valued differently (language has a different value in the discourse of visual artists, say, than it does in the discourse of newspaper journalists); the purposes of language may vary (such as selling merchandise, persuading voters, praying, reporting information, telling jokes, telling stories, or telling lies). Such differences also overlap from community to community.

As a college student, you are a part of several discourse communities, each of which values language differently and uses it for different purposes. The language used in your biology and math classes will differ from the language used in your history and English classes. It will differ in vocabulary as well as in style. Short answers, lab reports, and factual questions may be more appropriate to some kinds of disciplines, whereas whole essays, speculative questions, and discussions may be favored in others.

Despite such differences, these discourse communities are also part of a larger discourse community: the college community itself. Like any other community, the scholarly community of the college or university has goals that in part determine how it uses language.

The purpose of the scholarly community is to inquire and to share with others the products of inquiry—understanding and knowledge. This is the central purpose that unites its members and that motivates them to cooperate with each other, despite differences among individuals. **Inquiry**, seen as the active search for answers to questions, suggests certain values and uses that language has in such a community. If language is used in such a community to inquire and to share knowledge, it will be used in certain ways, not ways that are necessarily better or worse than other ways but that are more suited to these goals. Language is valued in such a community for its ability to aid inquiry and to share understanding and knowledge honestly and precisely.

Diversity of point of view is not only respected in a college community, then, but it is actively sought. A community in which all members think alike on the most important questions is unlikely to inquire into those questions,

since there will be no alternative points of view. Diversity of opinion is a prerequisite to inquiry and should be valued as such. This is why a scholarly community is one that seeks to open issues of any kind to further questioning by seeking other points of view, rather than to close off questioning by failing to listen to the challenging ideas of others who differ.

As college students, you are invited to join a community of inquiring minds. As learners, you are expected to do more than receive information passively. Like all other members of this discourse community, you are expected to participate actively in the open questioning of that information, listen to all sides, make judgments, and present those judgments to others coherently. The activities you are asked to go through in college—reading, discussion, writing, research, experiments, and so on—have a purpose beyond the acquisition of information in each class. They are meant to help you become better able to cope with the intellectual demands of a complex world, a world in which you will frequently be called upon to make independent decisions among competing ideas in the interest of one or another community to which you belong. Such decisions have to be made on the basis of reasoned thought, not by flipping a coin or following the crowd or a charismatic leader. An education prepares you to exercise judgment.

JUDGMENT AND WRITING

Judgment applies to all those occasions when we must decide what to do with information in its raw form. Do we accept it or deny it? How do we measure its significance or value? How should we use it? How does it relate to other bits of information? If people did not exercise judgment, their knowledge would be a useless hodgepodge of unrelated and equally significant bits of information. No educated person can do without the quality of judgment that enables her or him to make sense of all those bits. Yet there are no rules or procedures that can be followed to learn to exercise it. Judgment is learned only by practicing it. It is the act of judiciously appraising, discriminating, sorting, adapting, transforming, and applying ideas. Inasmuch as all of these actions require choice, judgment is learned best when one is faced with alternative answers.

Writing argumentative essays in college—a community of inquiring minds—is an opportunity to practice and improve this kind of judgment. If you choose ideas for your essays that are worth writing about, in response to problems that require careful reasoning to solve, you will be challenging yourself on many levels to exercise your best judgment. Writing is not simply an act of finding the right words; it involves looking at issues from different points of view, examining different positions and potential reasons for holding them, and thinking about potential structures and ways of presenting ideas to a reader. In performing such mental acts, you will be enhancing your understanding of the ideas you write about and your ability to reason while you improve as a writer.

It is important to remember that no writing class by itself can teach you to write at your best. All writers, even if they seem to write effortlessly, learn to write better each time they take on and complete a new writing challenge. Each new writing task is a challenge of its own, and the best a writing class can do is to create situations that will allow you, or invite you, to meet the challenge. You will become a better writer, but the rate will be imperceptible, just as the rate at which you learn to think better is imperceptible. Both changes happen slowly, in small increments, as a result of the challenges you face in more than one class and outside of class as well.

If you are thinking about these challenges, you may not always feel your writing is improving when in fact it is. As you improve as a writer, you will naturally take on slightly more challenging writing tasks and find yourself writing about somewhat more difficult issues. As you respond to new writing situations, you may feel inadequate, simply because they will require you to go beyond what you already know how to do. A feeling of inadequacy (which you share with all writers, whether they will admit it or not) is therefore nothing to worry about. It is the way you should feel if you are learning.

Writing, as this book stresses, is a process of finding and structuring reasons. When we face a writing task, and when that task emerges from our attempts to find cooperation in a community of diverse opinions, writing becomes more than an attempt to put the right words in the right order. It becomes a search for reasons. It is in this way that the serious attempt to compose your thoughts in writing will often lead you to the very important discovery of what you think and why you think it.

Thus, writing is at the very center of what you do as you participate actively in a discourse community of inquirers. Any college student in any class can read, listen, take notes, pass objective tests, and even think deliberately about what it all means. But writing about the information with which you are presented in college has an effect that none of these other activities alone can produce. Writing causes you to clarify the information and the problems that come with it, to work out positions for yourself and to explore reasons for holding those positions. Writing, because it is undertaken to communicate, must be clear, and thus forces clarity upon us. But if writing is also undertaken to influence the discourse community's thinking, that is, to be understood and believed, then it forces more than clarity upon us. It also forces us to find the best reasons we can. Any act of writing that does not stop with the mere assertion of unrelated bits of information will force the writer to search for good reasons, and in that process the writer's judgment is being exercised as well as the writer's composing skills. Judgment and skills grow together.

THIS BOOK AND YOU

The assumptions I have made about the importance of writing in college have led me to approach reason and structure as the central elements of good

writing. This book is intended to guide you through a process of thinking and composing that will result in thoughtful, well-structured essays about ideas that matter to you.

The chapters are organized to focus on aspects of this process, but you will find as you compose essays that these aspects are not as separate as the parts of the book suggest. Books about writing must inevitably make distinctions among principles and stages of composing that are arbitrary and artificial in order to spread them out into a sequence of chapters. Ideas and choices that may occur to a writer in any order or all at once must be taken apart and given the appearance of a necessary order. In this book, the order will be as follows.

Chapter 1 will go on from the previous discussion of writing in a college community to look at how the specific purpose of a piece of writing gives it structure. Chapter 2 will explore the process of reading and responding critically, and Chapter 3 will give you some advice for finding something to say in your writing that represents a meaningful idea in relation to a question at issue. Chapter 4 will discuss the process of finding adequate support in the form of reasons, and Chapter 5 will discuss the process of using that support as the basis for structuring your writing. Chapter 6 will help you revise your writing and make decisions about style. As you can already see, these matters are not separate from each other; the book will address significant issues repeatedly, but not, I hope, redundantly. I have tried to take you, as my reader, through a process of thinking at several levels of sophistication. By the time I get around to putting a technical term of any kind to a concept, for instance, you will have become familiar with that concept in a nontechnical way. The closing sections in Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 will discuss the implications of the ideas in those chapters for the research writer.

Although abstract, this arrangement is meant to represent a process that is intuitively followed by every writer: being confronted with the conflicting ideas of others, responding with ideas of one's own, and developing one's reasons into a form and into language that will enable them to be understood and believed by others. As you give each stage your conscious attention, you can experience a process of thinking from which to draw as you compose, even though your actual acts of composing will never be completely self-conscious or divided into stages.

Each chapter ends with examples of argumentative writing that you are invited to read and discuss from the point of view of the concepts in the chapter. Further readings are found at the end of the book in the Appendix. These readings are not meant to serve as models for you to imitate as you compose essays. There are no ideal models for a well-reasoned, well-structured essay, because no two pieces of writing arise from the same situations or need to satisfy the same conditions. In fact, if you read them carefully, you will probably find certain things about each of the essays that you would not want to imitate. They are meant instead to have two other functions. The first is to help you to investigate and assess how other writers have faced the challenge of inquiry, reasoning, and writing that the chapters discuss. As you analyze them, you can see more deeply into the process of thinking and writing that