

A Rulebook for Arguments

SECOND EDITION

Anthony Weston

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Second Edition

Hackett Publishing Company
Indianapolis/Cambridge

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Printed in the United States of America

Cover design by Jackie Lacy

Interior design by Dan Kirklin

For further information, please address

Hackett Publishing Company

P.O. Box 44937

Indianapolis, Indiana 46244-0937

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Weston, Anthony, 1954—

A rulebook for arguments/Anthony Weston.—2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-87220-157-0 (cloth). ISBN 0-87220-156-2 (pbk.)

1. Reasoning. 2. Logic 3. English language—Rhetoric.

I. Title.

BC177.W47 1992

168—dc20

92-26328

CIP

02 01 00

5 6 7 8 9 10

Preface

This book is a brief introduction to the art of writing and assessing arguments. It sticks to the bare essentials. I have found that students and writers often need just such a list of reminders and rules, not lengthy introductory explanations. Thus, unlike most textbooks in argumentative writing or “informal logic,” this book is organized around specific rules, illustrated and explained soundly but above all briefly. It is not a textbook but a *rulebook*.

Instructors too, I have found, often wish to assign such a rulebook, a treatment which students can consult and understand on their own and which therefore does not intrude on classtime. Here again it is important to be brief—the point is to help students get on with writing a paper or with assessing an argument—but the rules must be stated with enough explanation that an instructor can simply refer a student to “rule 13” or “rule 23” rather than writing an entire explanation in the margins of each student’s paper. Brief but self-sufficient: that is the fine line I have tried to follow.

This rulebook can also be used in a course that gives explicit attention to arguments. It will need to be supplemented with exercises and with more examples, but

there are many texts already available which consist largely or wholly of such exercises and examples. *Those* texts, however, also need to be supplemented—with what this rulebook offers: simple rules for putting good arguments together. Too many students come out of “informal logic” courses knowing only how to shoot down (or at least *at*) selected fallacies. Too often they are unable to explain what is actually wrong, or to launch an argument of their own. Informal logic can do better: this book is one attempt to suggest how.

Comments and criticisms are welcome.

Anthony Weston
August, 1986

Note to the Second Edition

The most common request among users of the first edition of this book was for a chapter on definition. Such a chapter is now included as an Appendix. A number of smaller revisions will improve, I hope, the overall clarity and usefulness of the text. I wish to thank the many users of this book who took the time to respond to the first edition with suggestions and approbation.

A.W.
March, 1992

Introduction

What's the Point of Arguing?

Some people think that arguing is simply stating their prejudices in a new form. This is why many people also think that arguments are unpleasant and pointless. One dictionary definition for "argument" is "disputation." In this sense we sometimes say that two people "*have an argument*": a verbal fistfight. It happens often enough. But it is not what arguments really are.

In this book, "to give an argument" means *to offer a set of reasons or evidence in support of a conclusion*. Here an argument is *not* simply a statement of certain views, and it is not simply a dispute. Arguments are attempts to *support* certain views with reasons. Nor are arguments in this sense pointless: in fact, they are essential.

Argument is essential, in the first place, because it is a way of trying to find out which views are better than others. Not all views are equal. Some conclusions can be supported by good reasons; others have much weaker support. But often we don't know which are which. We need to give arguments for different conclusions and then assess those arguments to see how strong they really are.

Argument in this sense is a means of *inquiry*. Some philosophers and activists have argued, for instance, that

the “factory farming” of animals for meat causes immense suffering to animals and is therefore unjustified and immoral. Are they right? You can’t tell by consulting your prejudices. Many issues are involved. Do we have moral obligations to other species, for instance, or is only human suffering really bad? How well can humans live without meat? Some vegetarians have lived to very old ages. Does this show that vegetarian diets are healthier? Or is it irrelevant when you consider that some nonvegetarians have also lived to very old ages? (You might make some progress by asking whether a higher *percentage* of vegetarians live to old age.) Or might healthier people tend to become vegetarians, rather than vice versa? All of these questions need to be considered carefully, and the answers are not clear in advance.

Argument is essential for another reason too. Once we have arrived at a conclusion that is well-supported by reasons, argument is the way in which we explain and *defend* it. A good argument doesn’t merely repeat conclusions. Instead it offers reasons and evidence, so that other people can make up their minds for themselves. If you become convinced that we should indeed change the way we raise and use animals, for example, you must use arguments to explain how you arrived at your conclusion: that is how you will convince others. Offer the reasons and evidence that convinced *you*. It is not a mistake to have strong views. The mistake is to have nothing else.

Understanding Argumentative Essays

The rules of argument, then, are not arbitrary: they have a specific purpose. But students (as well as other writers) do not always understand that purpose when first assigned argumentative essays—and if you don’t understand an assignment, you are unlikely to do well on it. Many students, asked to argue for their views on some

issue, write out elaborate *statements* of their views but do not offer any real *reasons* to think that their views are correct. They write an essay, but not an argumentative one.

This is a natural misunderstanding. In high school, the emphasis is on learning subjects which are fairly clearcut and uncontroversial. You need not *argue* that the United States Constitution provides for three branches of government, or that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*. These are facts that you only need to master, and that your papers only need to report.

Students come to college expecting more of the same. But many college courses—especially those that assign writing—have a different aim. These courses are concerned with the *basis* of our beliefs; they require students to question their beliefs and to work out and defend their own views. The issues discussed in college courses are often those issues that are not so clearcut and certain. Yes, the Constitution provides for three branches of government, but should the Supreme Court really have veto power over the other two? Yes, Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, but what is the play's meaning? Reasons and evidence can be given for different answers. Students in these courses are asked to learn to think for themselves, to form their own views in a responsible way. The ability to defend your views is a measure of that skill, and that is why argumentative essays are so important.

In fact, as Chapters VII–IX will explain, to write a good argumentative essay you must use arguments *both* as a means of inquiry *and* as a way of explaining and defending your conclusions. You must prepare for the paper by exploring the arguments on the opposing sides; then you must write the essay itself as an argument, defending your conclusions with arguments and critically assessing some of the arguments on the opposing sides.

Outline of This Book

This book begins by discussing fairly simple arguments and moves to argumentative essays at the end.

Chapters I–VI are about composing and assessing *short* arguments. A “short” argument simply offers its reasons and evidence briefly, usually in a few sentences or a paragraph. We begin with short arguments for several reasons. First, they are common. In fact they are so common that they are part of every day’s conversation. Second, long arguments are often elaborations of short arguments, and/or a series of short arguments linked together. Learn to write and assess short arguments first; then you will be able to extend your skills to argumentative essays.

A third reason for beginning with short arguments is that they are the best illustrations both of the common argument forms and of the typical mistakes in arguments. In long arguments it is harder to pick out the main points—and the main problems. Therefore, although some of the rules may seem obvious when first stated, remember that you have the benefit of a simple example. Other rules are hard enough to appreciate even in short arguments.

Chapters VII, VIII, and IX turn to argumentative essays. Chapter VII is about the first step: exploring the issue. Chapter VIII outlines the main points of an argumentative essay; Chapter IX adds rules specifically about writing it. All of these chapters depend on Chapters I–VI, since an argumentative essay essentially combines and elaborates the kinds of short arguments that Chapters I–VI discuss. Don’t skip ahead to the argumentative essay chapters, then, even if you come to this book primarily for help writing an essay. The book is short enough to read through to Chapters VII, VIII, and IX, and when you arrive there you will have the tools you need to use those chapters well. Instructors might

wish to assign Chapters I–VI early in the term and Chapters VII–IX at essay-writing time.

Chapter X concerns fallacies, *mistakes* in arguments. It summarizes the general mistakes discussed in the rest of this book, and ends with a directory of the many mistakes in reasoning which are so tempting and common that they even have their own names. The Appendix offers some rules for constructing and evaluating definitions.

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Composing a Short Argument

Some General Rules

Chapter I offers some general rules for composing short arguments. Chapters II through VI discuss specific *kinds* of short arguments.

(1) Distinguish premises and conclusion

The first step in making an argument is to ask: what are you trying to prove? What is your conclusion? Remember that the conclusion is the statement *for* which you are giving reasons. The statements which give your reasons are called “premises.”

Consider this quip of Winston Churchill's:

Be an optimist. There is not much use being anything else.

This is an argument because Churchill is giving a *reason* to be an optimist: his premise is that "there is not much use being anything else."

Churchill's premise and conclusion are obvious enough, but the conclusions of some arguments may not be obvious until they are pointed out. Sherlock Holmes has to explain one of his key conclusions in "The Adventure of Silver Blaze":

A dog was kept in the stalls, and yet, though someone had been in and fetched out a horse, the dog had not barked . . . Obviously the visitor was someone whom the dog knew well . . .

Holmes has two premises. One is explicit: the dog did not bark at the visitor. The other is a general fact about dogs which he assumes we know: dogs bark at strangers. Together these premises imply that the visitor was not a stranger.

When you are using arguments as a means of *inquiry*, as described in the Introduction, you may sometimes start with no more than the conclusion you wish to defend. State it clearly, first of all. If you want to take Churchill at his word and argue that we should indeed be optimists, say so explicitly. Then ask yourself what reasons you have for drawing that conclusion. What reasons can you give to prove that we should be optimists?

You *could* appeal to Churchill's authority: if Churchill says we should be optimists, who are you and I to quibble? This appeal will not get you very far, however, since probably an equal number of famous people have recommended pessimism. You need to think about it on

your own. Again: what is *your* reason for thinking that we should be optimists?

Maybe your idea is that being an optimist gives you more energy to work for success, whereas pessimists feel defeated in advance, and therefore never even try. Thus you have one main premise: optimists are more likely to succeed, to achieve their goals. (Maybe this is what Churchill meant as well.) If this is your premise, say so explicitly.

Once you have finished this book, you will have a convenient list of many of the different forms that arguments can take. Use them to develop your premises. To defend a generalization, for instance, check Chapter II; it will remind you that you need to give a series of examples as premises, and it will tell you what sorts of examples to look for. If your conclusion requires a “deductive” argument like those explained in Chapter VI, the rules discussed in that chapter will tell you what premises you need. You may have to try several different arguments before you find one which works well.

(2) Present your ideas in a natural order

Short arguments are usually written in one or two paragraphs. Put the conclusion first, followed by your reasons, or set out your premises first and draw the conclusion at the end. In any case, set out your ideas in an order that unfolds your line of thought most naturally for the reader. Consider this short argument by Bertrand Russell:

The evils of the world are due to moral defects quite as much as to lack of intelligence. But the human race has not hitherto discovered any method of eradicating moral defects . . . Intelligence, on the contrary, is easily improved by methods known to every competent educator. Therefore,

until some method of teaching virtue has been discovered, progress will have to be sought by improvement of intelligence rather than of morals.*

Each claim in this passage leads naturally to the next. Russell begins by pointing out the two sources of evil in the world: “moral defects,” as he puts it, and lack of intelligence. He then claims that we do not know how to correct “moral defects,” but that we do know how to correct lack of intelligence. Therefore—notice that the word “therefore” clearly marks his conclusion—progress will have to come by improving intelligence.

Each sentence in this argument is in just the right place. Plenty of wrong places were available. Suppose that Russell instead wrote it like this:

The evils of the world are due to moral defects quite as much as lack of intelligence. Until some method of teaching virtue has been discovered, progress will have to be sought by improvement of intelligence rather than of morals. Intelligence is easily improved by methods known to every competent educator. But the human race has not hitherto discovered any means of eradicating moral defects.

These are exactly the same premises and conclusion, but they are in a different order, and the word “therefore” has been omitted before the conclusion. Now the argument is *much* harder to understand: the premises do not fit together naturally, and you have to read the passage twice just to figure out what the conclusion is. Don’t count on your readers to be so patient.

Expect to rearrange your argument several times to find the most natural order. The rules discussed in this book should help: you can use them not only to tell

**Skeptical Essays* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977), p. 127.