

The Aims of Argument

A RHETORIC AND READER



Timothy W. Crusius / Carolyn E. Channell

The Aims of Argument

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Crusius, Timothy W.

The aims of argument : a rhetoric and reader / Timothy W. Crusius,
Carolyn E. Channell.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-55934-114-9

1. English language—Rhetoric. 2. Persuasion (Rhetoric) 3. College readers.

I. Channell, Carolyn E. II. Title.

PE1431.C78 1994

808'.0427—dc20

94-8393

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Mayfield Publishing Company

1280 Villa Street

Mountain View, California 94041

Sponsoring editor, Janet M. Beatty; production editor, April Wells-Hayes; manuscript editor, Mark Gallaher; text and cover designer, David Bullen; art editor, Susan M. Breitbard; art director, Jeanne M. Schreiber; manufacturing manager, Martha Branch. The text was set in 10½/12 Bembo by Thompson Type and printed on 45# New Era Matte by The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group.

Cover image: Kenneth Noland, *Gift of Reason*, 1986. Acrylic on canvas. 66 × 42". Collection of the artist. Photo by Steven Sloman © 1986.

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For W. Ross Winterowd

PREFACE

In 1980 an author could justify a new argumentation textbook for first-year college students simply by saying that it filled a void; now prospective authors must ask themselves, Does the profession really need yet another book on argumentation? Moreover, they had better have a good answer to a question that experienced instructors of argument will surely ask: How, specifically, is your text different from—and better than—the one I am using?

People write textbooks for many reasons, but probably the most important reason—the one that keeps authors going long after the initial enthusiasm (and advances) are spent—is the chance of satisfying a need. With over thirty years of teaching experience between us, we have tried most of the argumentation texts currently available. Some of them are quite good and we have learned from them. However, we found ourselves adopting a text not so much out of genuine enthusiasm but rather because it had fewer liabilities than any of the others under consideration. True, all textbook selection involves comparisons of the “lesser evil” sort. But we wondered why we were so lukewarm about even the best argumentation textbooks. What was it exactly that put us off?

We found many problems, both major and minor. But our dissatisfaction boiled down to a few major criticisms:

Most treatments were too formalistic and prescriptive.

Most failed to integrate class discussion and individual inquiry with written argumentation.

Apart from moving from simple concepts and assignments to more complicated ones, no book offered a learning sequence.

Despite the fact that argument, like narrative, is clearly a mode or means of development, not an end in itself, no book offered a well-developed view of the aims or purposes of argument.

We thought that these shortcomings had many undesirable results in the classroom, including the following:

The overemphasis on form confused students with too much terminology, made them doubt their best instincts, and drained away energy and interest from the process of inventing and discovering good arguments.

Informal argumentation is not cut-and-dried, but open-ended and creative.

The separation of class discussion from the process of composition created a hiatus (rather than a useful distinction) between oral and written argument so that students had difficulty seeing the relation between the two and using the insights learned from each to improve the other.

The lack of a learning sequence—of assignments that began by refining and extending what students could do without help and then built on these capacities for each subsequent assignment—meant that courses in argumentation were less coherent and less meaningful than they could be. Students did not understand why they were doing what they were doing and could not envision what might reasonably come next.

Finally, inattention to what people actually use argument to accomplish resulted in too narrow a view of the functions of argument and thus in unclear purposes for writing. Because instruction was mainly limited to what we call arguing to convince, too often students saw argument only as a monologue of advocacy. Even when their viewpoint was flexible, too often they assumed a pose of dogmatism and ignored any true spirit of inquiry.

We set out consciously to solve these problems—or at least to render them less problematical. The result is a book different in notable respects from any other argument text currently available. In Chapter 1 we define and explain four aims of argument:

Arguing to inquire, the process of questioning opinions;
Arguing to convince, the process of making cases;
Arguing to persuade, the process of appealing to the whole person; and
Arguing to negotiate, the process of mediating between or among conflicting positions.

We have found that instructors have certain questions about these aims, especially in terms of how they relate to one another. No doubt we have yet to hear all the questions that will be asked but hope that by answering the ones we have heard, we can clarify some of the implications of our approach.

1. *What is the relative value of the four aims? Since negotiation comes last, is it the best or most valued?* Our answer is that no aim is “better” than any other aim. Given certain needs or demands for writing and certain audiences, one aim can be more appropriate than another for the task at hand. We treat negotiation last because it involves inquiry, convincing, and persuading and thus comes last in the learning sequence.
2. *Must inquiry be taught as a separate aim?* Not at all. We have designed the text so that it may be taught as a separate aim (the use of argument Plato and Aristotle called dialectic), but we certainly do not intend this “may” to be interpreted as a “must.” We do think that teaching inquiry as a distinct aim has certain advantages. Students need to learn how to engage in constructive dialogue,

which is more disciplined and more focused than class discussion usually is. Once they see how it is done, students seem to enjoy dialogue with one another and with texts. Dialogue helps students to think through their arguments and to imagine reader reaction to what they say, both of which are crucial to convincing and persuading. Finally, as with the option of teaching negotiation, teaching inquiry offers instructors the option to make assignments in addition to the standard argumentative essay.

3. *Should inquiry come first?* For a number of reasons, inquiry has a certain priority over the other aims. Most teachers are likely to approach inquiry as a pre-writing task, preparatory to convincing or persuading. And very commonly we return to inquiry when we find something wrong with a case we are trying to construct, so the relation between inquiry and the other aims is as much recursive as it is matter of before and after.

However, we think inquiry also has psychological, moral, and practical claims to priority. When we are unfamiliar with an issue, inquiry comes first psychologically, often as a felt need to explore existing opinion. Regardless of what happens in the “real world,” convincing or persuading without an open, honest, and earnest search for the truth is, in our view, immoral. Finally, inquiry goes hand-in-hand with research, which, of course, normally precedes writing in the other aims of argument.

In sum, we would not defend Plato’s concept of the truth. Truth is not simply “out there” in some wordless place waiting to be discovered; rather, our opinion is what we discover or uncover as we grapple with a controversial issue and results largely from how we interpret ourselves and our world. We agree, therefore, with Wayne Booth that truth claims ought to be provisional and subject to revision, held for good reasons until better ones change our minds. Moreover, we agree with Plato that rhetoric divorced from inquiry is dangerous and morally suspect. The truth (if always provisional—some person’s, some group’s, or some culture’s version of the truth) must count for more than sheer technical skill in argumentation.

4. *Isn’t the difference between convincing and persuading more a matter of degree than of kind?* Fairly sharp distinctions can be drawn between inquiry and negotiation and between either of these two aims and the monologues of advocacy, convincing and persuading. But convincing and persuading do shade into one another, so that the difference is only clear at the extremes, with carefully chosen examples. Furthermore, the “purest” appeal to reason—a lawyer’s brief, a philosophical or scientific argument—appeals in ways beyond the sheer cogency of the case being made. Persuasive techniques are typically submerged but not absent in arguing to convince.

Our motivation for separating convincing from persuading is not so much theoretical as pedagogical. Students usually have so much difficulty with case-making that individual attention to the logical appeal by itself is justified. Making students focally conscious of the appeals of character, emotion, and style while they are struggling to cope with case-making is too much to ask and can overburden them to the point of paralysis.

Regardless, then, of how sound the traditional distinction between convincing and persuading may be, we think it best to take up convincing first and then persuasion, especially since what students learn in the former can be carried over more or less intact into the latter. And, of course, it is not only case-making that carries over from convincing into persuading. Since one cannot make a case without unconscious appeal to character, emotional commitments (such as values), and style, teaching persuasion is really a matter of exposing and developing what is already there in arguing to convince.

The central tenets of an approach based on aims of argument may be summarized as follows:

Argumentation is a mode or means of discourse, not an aim or purpose of discourse; consequently,
Our task is to teach the aims of argument.
The aims of argument are linked in a learning sequence, so that convincing builds on inquiry, persuasion on convincing, and all three contribute to negotiating; consequently,
We offer this learning sequence as an aid to conceiving a course or courses in argumentation.

We believe in the learning sequence as much as we do in the aims of argument. We think that anyone giving it an honest chance will come to prefer this way of teaching argument over any other ordering currently available.

At the same time, we recognize that textbooks are used selectively, as teachers and programs need them for help in achieving their own goals. As with any other text, this one can be used selectively, ignoring some parts, playing up others, designing other sequences, and so on. If you want to work with our learning sequence, it is there for creative adaptation. If not, the text certainly does not have to be taught as a whole and in sequence to be useful and effective.

We conclude with some notes on the readings. You will discover that many of the issues around which these essays are organized unavoidably involve students in issues of race, class, and gender difference. This slant is not intended to be political, nor does it reflect a hidden agenda on our part. Rather, we think students can come to feel more deeply about issues of this sort than they do about others we have tried. Class debates are more lively, maybe because such issues hit closer to home—the home and community they came from, the campus they live on now. Whatever the case, we have found that the issues work, both for students and for us.

They work, we think, because such issues help to expose something obvious and basic about argumentation: People differ because they are different, and not just on the basis of race, class, and gender. Without some confrontation with difference, students may miss the deep social and cultural roots of argument and fail to understand why people think in such varied ways about multiculturalism, sexual harassment, homelessness, abortion, and other issues that turn on difference, as well as issues such as the environment, which may seem at first to have nothing to do with difference.

We have consciously avoided the “great authors, classic essays” approach. We have tried instead to find bright, contemporary people arguing well from diverse viewpoints—articles and chapters similar to those that can be found in our better journals and trade books, the sort of publications students will read most in doing research on the issues. We have also tried to bring students into the argument as it currently stands, recognizing that the terms of the debate are necessarily always changing. Finally, we have not presented any issue in a simple pro and con fashion, as if there were only two sides to a question. We want the readings to provide models for writing not too far removed from what students can reasonably aspire to, as well as stimulation toward thinking through and rethinking positions on the issues in question.

Some reviewers and users have called our approach innovative. But is it better? Will students learn more? Will instructors find the book more satisfying and more helpful than what they currently use? Our experience, both in using the book ourselves and in listening to the responses of those who have read it or tested it in the classroom for us, is that they will. Students complain less about having to read the book than they do with others used in our program. They do seem to learn more. Teachers claim to enjoy the text and find it stimulating, something to work with rather than around. We hope your experience is as positive as ours has been. We invite your comments and will use them in the process of perpetual revision that constitutes the life of a text and of our lives as writing teachers.

Included in this range of approaches are arguments made not only with words but with images. Part Two therefore includes some examples of editorial cartoons, advertisements, and photographs; students may want to experiment with making their own nonverbal arguments.

We would like to thank the following reviewers: Betty Bamberg, University of Southern California; Michael C. Flanigan, University of Oklahoma; Nancy L. Joseph, York College; Kate Massey, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; Michael G. Moran, University of Georgia; Hephzibah C. Roskelly, University of North Carolina, Greensboro; Carol Severino, University of Iowa; Linda K. Shamoon, University of Rhode Island; and especially Doug Hesse, Illinois State University.

We are grateful for all the help given to us by our editors: Jan Beatty, sponsoring editor, who gave enthusiastic support and guidance from the project’s beginnings; Mark Gallaher, whose copyediting greatly improved both the style and the content of the text; and April Wells-Hayes, production editor, who gently kept us on time and on track. We also want to thank Pamela Trainer and Julianna Scott for their work on permissions and art.

Here at Southern Methodist University, the Rhetoric Program contributed in many ways. Our thanks go to all the faculty who classroom-tested the text from its earliest stages. For their constructive criticism, we are particularly indebted to Rebecca Innocent and Marilyn Wagner. We are also grateful to the SMU librarians, especially Margaret Bailey, who heads bibliographic instruction here; she made an enormous contribution to the appendix on researching arguments. Our colleagues Ann Shattles, Jo Goyne, and Wendy DeOre deserve

special thanks as well, not just for testing our book but for helping us find student essays to include. We want to thank not just the students whose essays appear here, but all of our students who used the text in its draft stages. We learned a great deal from their honest responses. And to the Rhetoric Program's administrative assistant, Linda Graves Lofton, a thousand thank-yous for all the ways you contributed to the project.

Finally, we want to thank Elizabeth Crusius and David Channell for their love, encouragement, and patience.

NOTE TO STUDENTS

Our goal in this book is not just to show you how to construct an argument, but to make you more aware of why people argue, and the purposes that argument serves in our society. Consequently, Part One of this book introduces four specific aims that people may have in mind when they make arguments. Before these chapters on the aims of argument, however, we have placed four relatively short chapters that offer an overview of the four aims and prepare you for working with assignments in the aims.

Chapter 1 explains the aims and how they fit into the larger concept of rhetoric—the persuasive use of language.

Chapter 2 explains what a writer's notebook is and how it can help you cope with writing assignments in any college course;

Chapter 3 offers an approach to reading any argument; and

Chapter 4 shows you, step-by-step, how to analyze the logic of any argument.

Because critical reading and analysis prepare you for the first aim, arguing to inquire, Chapters 3 and 4 lead directly into Chapter 5, and each subsequent chapter on the aims assumes and builds on the previous one.

Part Two of this book consists of readings, most by professional writers. As examples of the aims of argument, they offer something for you to emulate. All writers learn from studying the strategies of other writers. The object is not so much to imitate what some older, more experienced writer does as it is to understand the range of approaches and tactics you might use in your own way and for your own purposes.

Included in this range of approaches are arguments made not only with words but also with images. Part Two therefore includes some examples of editorial cartoons, advertisements, and photographs; you may want to experiment with making your own nonverbal arguments.

The readings serve another function as well. To learn about argument, we have to argue; to argue, we have to have something to argue about. So we have grouped essays around some central issues of current public discussion. We selected these particular issues rather than other widely debated ones for two main reasons. One is that they have worked well in our own classes, better than others

we tried and rejected. The other is that most of these issues deal centrally with society and more or less require us to think about difference, about what leads people to disagree with one another in the first place.

Basically, people argue with one another because they do not see the world the same way, and they do not see the world the same way because of different backgrounds. Therefore, in dealing with how people differ, a book about argument must deal with what makes people different, with the sources of disagreement itself—including gender, race, ethnicity, class, and religion. Rather than ignoring or glossing over difference, we hope the readings in Part Two will help you better understand difference—as well as provide interesting and significant subjects to argue about.

This book concludes with two appendixes, each a reference that you will want to refer to repeatedly as you work through the assignments in the main parts of the text. Appendix A offers advice about how to do library and field research and how to handle formal documentation. We see such research as a vital component of preparing to write convincingly on any topic, unless you take an extremely personal approach and have had first-hand experiences to draw upon for support. We encourage you to discard the notion of a “research paper” and think instead of how even a brief argument can gain strength from facts or opinions taken from one or two well-selected sources. Appendix B focuses on editing, the art of polishing and refining prose, and on proofreading for some common errors.

Arguing well is difficult for anyone. For many college students it is especially challenging because they have had little experience writing arguments. We have tried to write a text that is no more complicated than it has to be, and we welcome your comments so that we may improve future editions. Please write us at the following address:

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You may also e-mail your comments to the following address:

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