

Before: Preparing Students to Argue

As you introduce students to the concept of argument, it's important to discuss the related but not synonymous term *persuade*. Keep in mind that an argument is always an attempt to persuade, but a piece of persuasive writing may not be an academic argument; it may simply be an opinion and an attempt to win.

Argue

An argument relies on the careful examination of evidence. It takes all points of view and perspectives into account and assumes a scholarly audience.

Example lead sentence: While some might argue that students should be expelled for the complaints they make about their teachers online, the law supports their freedom of speech in the digital arena as well as the real world.

Persuade

Persuasive essays or speeches attempt to win the audience over. They may appeal to emotions as much as to logic or the weight of evidence.

Example lead sentences: Should schools allow students to post negative comments about their teachers online? Absolutely not; recognizing the potential damage of posts to real human beings is a vital component of any student's education.

We include both of these terms in this section, but students need to learn to recognize them in assignments and prompts and answer accordingly.

Before you teach students to analyze a text, issue, situation, or work, try these four things:

- **Model:** Gather several articles from a local newspaper, including those from the front page and the editorial section. Ask students to discuss which present an argument and which merely report information. Then, for any articles that argue, analyze the components of that argument. To whom do they appeal and how?
- **Define Expectations:** You may wish to develop a rubric and discuss it with students before they write or speak. Are you requiring a **claim and counterclaim**? How much and what kinds of evidence must be used?
- **Build Content Knowledge:** As you will with other terms in this book, discuss the nature and conventions of *evidence* in your subject area. What type of details might a student use to support an argument in a history class, a science discussion, or a literary analysis?

Mental Moves

Argue

- **Practice Mental Moves:** As students prepare to construct academic arguments, have them research ideas and then discuss those ideas in small groups or pairs by answering the questions listed in the Mental Moves feature in the sidebar. Post these questions on the wall and keep circling back to them so that students internalize them and can transfer them to new learning situations.

Obstacles to the Moves

When teaching students to argue, watch out for these areas of difficulty:

- **Faulty Logic.** Basing an argument on a mistaken assumption (such as a misunderstanding of a plot point, for instance) can undermine a strong argument. Help students avoid such missteps by asking them to research carefully.
- **Lack of Clarity.** Academic arguments often reside in formal papers. Sometimes, students will be so convinced that their audience wants a certain level of formality in writing that they overdo it and lose clarity and precision.
- **Hasty Assumptions.** As with faulty logic, overgeneralizing (say, about a historical era) can lead to a weak argument. Help students be precise.

1. Make a Claim

What is my position?

2. Support the Claim

What evidence best supports this position?

3. Anticipate Opposition

What might an opponent of my position claim?

4. Consider Your Audience

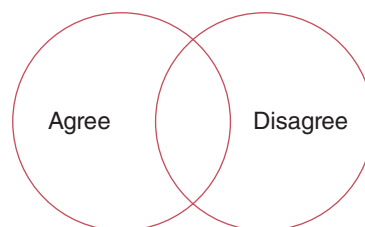
What type of appeal will best convince my audience?

5. Integrate

How will I structure my discussion of claim and counterclaims?

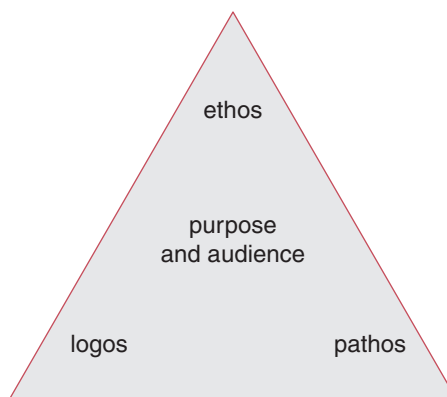
***During:* Practicing Argumentation**

For younger students, use a modified Venn diagram to introduce the concept of argument, using the labels below (“agree” and “disagree”) or similar labels such as “pro” and “con” for the two sides:



You might try using hula hoops on the floor and allowing students to present oral claims and counterclaims while standing inside one; then ask what someone in the overlapping section might say. Alternatively, you could use the middle section as an “undecided” section in which students can stand until they are forced to make a choice and explain why (see the “get off the fence” activity in the section on discussion that follows).

For older students, you may wish to discuss the importance of audience and Aristotle’s triangle of persuasive appeals, including *ethos* (trust and authority), *logos* (reason and logic), and *pathos* (emotion and values). Make it clear to students that *pathos* is a tool more often reserved for persuasive argumentation, while academic arguments generally rest on *ethos* (e.g., quotes from a text) or *logos* (e.g., a reasoned line of thinking).



ELL Focus: Do This One Thing to Help

Ferlazzo and Hull-Sypniewski (2014) suggest having ELL students translate key words, such as *problem*, *cause*, *effect*, *solution*, and *reason*, into their native languages. Then ask the students to find key details or evidence related to each of those concepts. They also used sentence starters—in English—to help the students get going: “The main problem is that . . .” Once students have begun in this way, structuring an argument may be a less overwhelming task.

Discussion, Presentation, Technology, and Multimedia

- **Discuss.** To get students thinking about claims and counterclaims, try a get-off-the-fence discussion.
 - First, come up with a series of arguable statements or questions about a text or topic. *Example: Romeo and Juliet are not truly in love; they're infatuated only with one another.*
 - Have students who agree with the statement move to one side of the room and students who disagree move to the other. Balance discussion by calling on each side in turn.
 - Students who are undecided may stand in the middle of the room but may not speak. At the end of the discussion, have these students choose a side and explain why.
 - After you've discussed several statements, have students write down their thoughts, including noting any convincing arguments made by other students, places they changed their minds, or new ideas about the topic. Use these notes to come up with a claim and counterclaim as a class.
- **Track.** Once students have practiced identifying claims and counterclaims, teach them to create a table in Microsoft (MS) Word or to use columns in MS Excel in order to create **T charts**. This use of technology not only allows students to catalog pros and cons, for instance, but also provides them a tool for organizing and reorganizing that material to find the most effective argument.
- **Present.** When students share material with the class, ask them to include a counterclaim as part of the presentation, perhaps devoting one slide to this task. Encourage them to use this moment in a presentation as a chance to involve the audience by asking for feedback or discussion on a point.

YouTube Moment: The online world is robust with argumentation, from political speeches on YouTube to blogs to posts and comments in online forums. Students need to learn to navigate these arguments. Choose a video with user comments (you will probably wish to screen the comments for appropriate content before using them with students) and ask students to look at those user comments for appeals to logos, pathos, and ethos and to evaluate the effectiveness of each. Ask if each is an argument or a persuasive/opinion piece. How do they know? Present their findings to the class.