

## After: Producing Arguments

### Student Example 1: Argumentative Writing



#### The Task

*Does an individual have the right to violate an unjust law? If so, under what circumstances? Write an essay in which you argue that individuals do or do not have this right. Use examples from history or from our reading to support your argument.*

The ninth grade reading list at Anton’s school included a number of canonical texts with a common motif: Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, and Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons*. At the same time, Anton’s social studies class discussed the civil rights movement and, specifically, Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter From a Birmingham Jail.” Because the idea of resisting laws cut across their disciplines, Anton’s English and American History teachers decided to assign a cross disciplinary assignment focused on an argumentative task. The assignment unfolded in three steps.

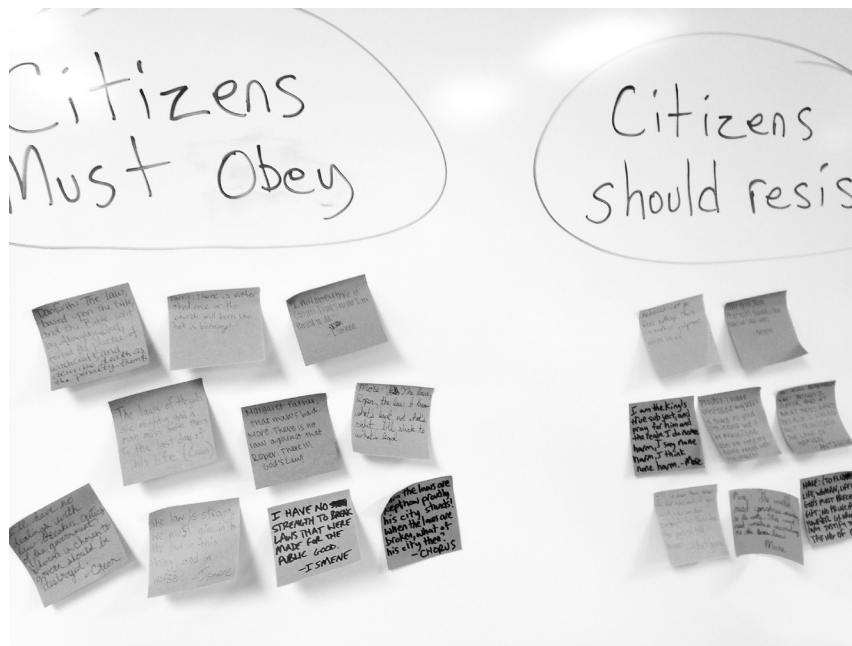
#### Step One: Discussion

In social studies class, Anton and his peers participated in a fishbowl discussion focusing on the question “What makes a law just or unjust?” The fishbowl procedure worked this way:

- Four to five students sat in an inner circle and discussed their answer to the question.
- The other students sat in an outer circle and took notes on points raised in the discussion.
- When an outer circle student wanted to contribute a point, he or she would tap one of the inner circle students on the shoulder and take that place, while the speaker returned to the outer circle.
- The teacher monitored the discussion, encouraging new speakers to add points by asking if anyone could add a different point of view.

#### Step Two: Claim and Counterclaim

The next day, Anton’s English teacher took students to the computer lab and allowed them access to online versions of all three of the plays they’d read that grading period. He had them work in pairs to find two lines in the texts, one that supported the idea that citizens should obey laws and one that supported the idea that citizens should resist unjust laws. When several of the pairs struggled to come up with lines, the teacher offered two suggestions: first, the students were allowed to summarize actions or scenes in the play instead of writing down a specific line of text, and second, they could use the search function to look for specific words in the online texts.



Anton and his partner searched the online text for the word *law* in all three plays. From those, they chose the following two lines from *Antigone*:

- **Citizens should obey:** “I will obey those in control. That’s what I’m forced to do.” (Ismene)
- **Citizens should resist:** “I’ll lie down there forever. As for you, well, if you wish, you can show contempt for those laws the gods all hold in honour.” (Antigone)

Anton and his partner wrote each line on a sticky note and put it on the board in the room along with those from the rest of the class. The teacher then gave each student five minutes to read each group of sticky notes silently and, individually, come up with a statement that summarized the lines. When the students returned to their seats, he called on volunteers to share their statements and, as a class, the students came up with a claim and counterclaim:

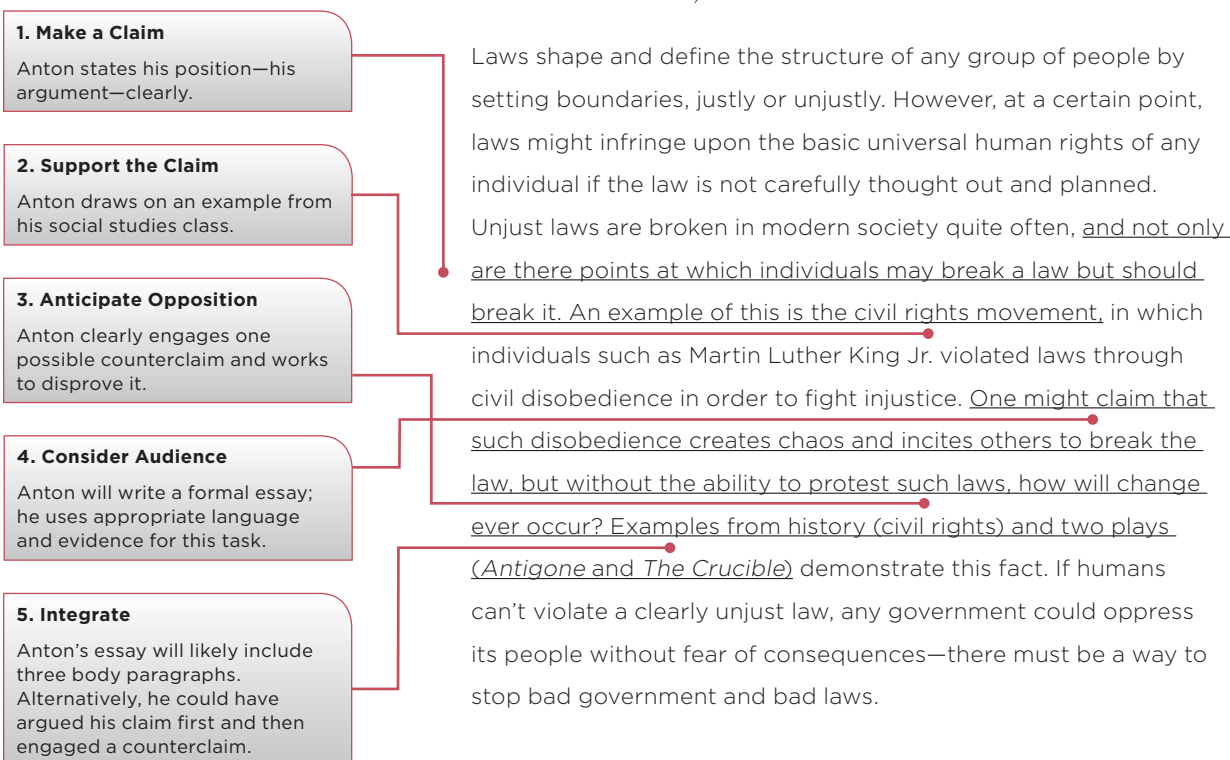
- **Claim:** Because laws represent the collective wisdom of a society, no one individual has the right to violate those laws.
- **Counterclaim:** Because the majority group in a society can overlook the rights of minorities or can be misled by a powerful view, individuals have the right to violate laws that are clearly unjust.

### Step Three: Individual Writing

In preparation for writing a full essay in answer to the prompt above, Anton’s teacher asked each student to write a single paragraph in class. Students were allowed to use their notes from the discussion and to refer to the sticky notes on the board in order to express their initial thoughts.

Anton’s teacher was clear about the expectations for the assignment. Following the mental moves for argument, students were expected to both take a stand (make a claim) and recognize alternate points of view (counterclaim). The teacher also emphasized the importance of evidence in establishing these claims.

Here is Anton’s first draft, written in class:



## Student Example 2: Class Discussion

In John Reynolds's eighth grade Global Studies class, there's no simple multiple choice exam at the end of the semester. Instead, each student is expected to research the position of a nation involved in the tension between North Korea and the rest of the world. Students write individual "white papers" summarizing the position of the countries they're assigned and then work in teams of three to prepare arguments for a solution to the conflict that draws on factual information and represents the actual positions of the countries they represent. On the day of the exam, the students gather around a large table and conduct six-party talks while Mr. Reynolds plays the role of facilitator and takes notes on each student's contributions.

Because this is an exam, Mr. Reynolds needs to assess each student. The final grade includes several components, each of which has its own rubric: a score for the white paper, a score for contributions to the discussion, an individual self-assessment, and a reflection written by each student that discusses the effectiveness of his or her contributions.

Here is the reflection written by Sam, who took on the role of South Korea. While Sam never uses the words *claim* or *counterclaim* in this reflection, those ideas are clearly present:

In order to positively contribute to the group, I knew that I had to have a goal and understanding of what South Korea, my assigned country, would desire. The first day of deliberation, I brought forth several points, but specifically a main issue in North Korea that their population is starving. The response to my point was surprising; argumentative debate and disorder broke out. I realize now that the tone and accusation I made came out incorrectly; I was intending on bringing up a way to show that North Korea needs other countries' help. The following day, I made sure to react to comments with a calmer and less aggressive manner, and I used my notes to prepare to respond to other views to reach a compromise. I proposed that North Korea should rejoin the six-party talks and start to denuclearize their weapons, and as more trust is gained, South Korea would take action in removing the United States troops from their border. While discussing in small groups on the first day, I found out that each country had different objectives and main concerns, which made forming a solution harder, but after talking and presenting evidence, overall, all of the countries contributed to making a final, peaceful compromise.

### The Task

*Using your research, represent your assigned country in our classroom's six-party talks concerning the North Korean border. Be prepared to use evidence to propose a solution to the disputes over the border's military conflict and to persuade other countries to see your point of view.*

By allowing his students to work together and discover the consequences of argument, evidence, and counterclaims in action, Mr. Reynolds creates a sense of relevancy and practicality. He also gives students a valuable discussion experience with enough structure to ensure learning.

“When the girls do a project with several assessment pieces, as Sam did in her reflection,” John told us, “they deconstruct their learning, and this, to me as a teacher, is the essence of creating and nurturing exemplary students. The written piece of argument as content is important, but the self-assessments, reflections, and peer evaluations demonstrate how students learn where their arguments succeeded, failed, and could be improved.”

### **Works Cited**

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