

# Analyzing a Persuasive Argument

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about various strategies you can use to analyze persuasive essays. You will also strengthen your problem solving skill by analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of arguments that you encounter in daily life. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

## 1. Importance of Understanding Arguments

Arguments and argumentative writing are encountered everywhere—not just in college classes. You might come across them in discussions and debates, and in other non-academic settings:

- **Politics:** Argumentative writing is used in politics for a range of purposes (e.g., to state a position on an issue, to promote a candidate, to propose legislation, etc.). It is also used by pundits to comment on candidates, issues, and events.
- **Advertisements:** It's likely that you encounter argumentative writing every day in advertisements, which seek to persuade consumers to purchase products and services.
- **Professional interaction:** Argumentative writing is part of professional life. Attorneys, doctors, businesspeople, and others write proposals, project plans, and other documents to support a course of action, present an interpretation of data, or argue for (or against) a position or action.
- **The media:** Arguments are used in media like television, movies, and music, which subtly or directly endorse certain perspectives or ways of viewing the world.

One of the more valuable aspects of rhetorical awareness and engaged reading is that they can be applied in many situations. When people or organizations (e.g., politicians, pundits, advertisers, business associates, etc.) attempt to persuade you, your ability to recognize an argument, and to identify and evaluate its components, enables you to make intelligent decisions and effective responses.

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## 2. Analyzing an Argument

Engaged reading (and listening) and thinking critically about persuasive arguments as part of a conversation are important skills within and outside of college. Additionally, techniques including note-taking and SQ3R (an acronym for Scan, Question, Read, Recite, Review) will help you to get as much as you can from an argument, whether you plan to use it as a source for written work or not.

Some arguments are so well-constructed that readers don't notice their components. It's important to deconstruct all arguments, no matter how smooth or convincing they are, and evaluate the components. Doing so will enable you to recognize the techniques and strategies that have been used.

When analyzing an argument, you need to identify:

- The text's primary argument
- The primary support items, including evidence and rhetorical appeals
- The writer's purpose with respect to the argument

With these aspects in mind, here are some techniques you can use to deconstruct an argument:

1. **Find the thesis and summarize the argument.** In written work, highlight or underline the thesis. When working with other forms of communication, state the thesis in a sentence. Next, summarize the argument in your own words, and think about whether you agree or disagree with it, or whether your position falls somewhere in-between.
2. **Consider the evidence and appeals.** Analyze the evidence, and decide how, and to what degree, it supports the thesis. Also, consider whether the evidence is credible and whether it has been used honestly (or not). It's also a good idea to examine the rhetorical appeals. Which kinds are used, and where are they located? Are all of them effective and ethical? Be sure to consider the use of pathos and emotional appeals.
3. **Reflect on the conclusion.** Which technique is used in the conclusion, and how effective is it? Reconsider the ending of the work. Are the argument's point and purpose clear to you?
4. **Analyze the audience.** Remember that a writer's audience includes both intended and unintended readers. Start by considering the intended audience of the work. Based on the factors you considered above, how will this audience respond to the writer's argument?
5. **Examine the structure, style, tone, and syntax.** Evaluate the argument's structure, organization, and flow. Ask yourself whether the structure is effective and, if it is not, how you would have constructed it. Also consider the writer's style, tone, syntax, and word choices. Are they effective in communicating to you, personally? What about to the overall audience? Was the author successful in their purpose? How do all of these elements affect your perception of the entire argument?

Try using these practices (and asking these questions) on an argument that interests you, or one that you are constructing. They will help you to gain a deeper, more critical understanding of not only what is argued, but how. You will practice this in Touchstone 1.1. In the following sample, notice how the analysis pays close attention to the argument in the text. In the analysis, the author uses textual evidence, examples, and words from the argument, to support her point.



#### Problem Solving: Skill Tip

Consider that you're listening to a debate on a controversial subject matter, such as how tax dollars should be spent. How would you use the knowledge from this lesson to analyze the arguments? How would this analysis affect how you feel about the issue? By analyzing the strength of an argument, you are better equipped to make informed decisions, and thus, think critically to solve problems.

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### 3. Sample Argument Analysis

The following is the thesis of an argument from an article titled "Green Day Will Likely Go in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Next Year. They Deserve It" by Dee Lockett. This example is representative of arguments you can find online, and you can use it to practice an analysis:

*Those surprised that Green Day is eligible already—Rock Hall rules state that an artist becomes eligible 25 years after the release of their first record—should check out their first two albums, 1990's 39/Smooth, and 1992's Kerplunk, which are about as good as anything you'll find on Dookie.*

The argument is essentially that Green Day created the pop-punk genre, and thereby brought punk to the masses.

The primary forms of support include commentary and critical analysis of Green Day's albums, quotations from rock critics and industry experts, information about the music history that led up to Green Day, and what the band helped to build. These elements balance logos and ethos (i.e., appeals to logic and credibility). The article also makes a subtle appeal to pathos in sentences such as:

*Their fast fame, coupled with Kurt Cobain's 1995 suicide, symbolized a changing of the guard in rock.*

The author's purpose seems to be to persuade readers that Green Day's admission to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is defensible. Based on the topic and information presented, we can determine that the audience of readers that the author is trying to persuade is likely made up of rock music fans who are well-informed about different artists in the genre. Lockett argues:

*Another knock on Green Day is that the band's a one-trick pony, trotting out the same repetitive song structures again and again. But after Dookie they pushed the boundaries of pop punk, at the risk of alienating their newly enormous fan base. 1997's Nimrod and 2000's Warning contain some of the most experimental work the band has done.*

Also, she seems to be credible: Dee Lockett is a culture journalist (i.e., she researches and writes about pop culture, including music). She cites other pop music experts and makes a compelling case for her thesis:

*Last week in Billboard, Eric Rosenthal wrote, "To the extent that there's rock music on the radio, it's most likely tributes to Soundgarden, Nirvana, or Green Day." I suspect that of those three it's Green Day's influence you'll hear most, coming from big-selling bands like Paramore and 5 Seconds of Summer—who, by way of Blink-182, Green Day effectively grandfathered—among others. That kind of influence is one of the Rock Hall's primary factors for induction, and probably makes Green Day a shoo-in.*

This audience of readers can dispute the writer's inclusion of Green Day in the same category as grunge rockers. Through this inclusion, Lockett creates an impression that Green Day was part of the grunge movement in rock music. Some readers might view this assertion as disingenuous; it may seem that the writer wants to elevate Green Day by (inaccurately) associating it with the grunge movement.

*That Seattle band—along with grunge and hard-rock contemporaries like Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, and Alice in Chains—was at its peak when Dookie reached record stores, and the album’s upbeat pop punk stood out brightly in such company.*

Readers in this audience might also question whether commercial success (e.g., selling lots of records) equates to being a great band. However, there is solid evidence that these attributes are favored by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, which is the premise that she argues here:

*Over time, though, Green Day’s influence has only grown. “Based on interviews I’ve done, I’ll bet you Dookie has inspired more people to buy their first guitar than any LP in the past 20 years,” the music writer Ian Cohen wrote recently on Twitter. To date, the album has sold more than 20 million copies worldwide—which makes it a diamond album, an RIAA certification for selling more than 10 million units, a venerated sales milestone in the industry.*



#### HINT

In this sample argument analysis, you can see how a writer can complete a close reading of a source. When analyzing an argument, we can use textual evidence—quotes from the source—to discuss how the author made her argument and whether she was successful in achieving her purpose. You will write a similar analysis in Touchstone 1.1.



#### WATCH

Non-profit community centers are important institutions, especially in economically struggling cities like Detroit. In the following *Sophia Talks* video, learn how one team used persuasive techniques to change lives in their community.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that it is **important to understand persuasive arguments** not only in academic contexts, but in everyday life as well. You encounter argumentative rhetoric in politics, advertisements, professional interactions, and the media, so being able to break down these arguments is a valuable skill.

**Analyzing an argument** involves locating the thesis and summarizing the argument in your own words, evaluating the evidence and appeals used to support the thesis, considering the effectiveness of the conclusion, and looking at how the structure, style, tone, and syntax of the writing impact the argument's effectiveness. In order to practice these techniques, you performed a short **sample argument analysis**. Finally, you examined the relationship between analyzing arguments and strengthening your problem solving skill.

Best of luck in your learning!

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## REFERENCES

Lockett, D. (2014, October 13). *Green Day Will Likely Go Into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Next Year. They Deserve It*. Slate Magazine. Retrieved from [www.slate.com/culture/2014/10/green-day-rock-and-roll-hall-of-fame-why-the-band-deserves-to-be-inducted-next-in-2015.html](http://www.slate.com/culture/2014/10/green-day-rock-and-roll-hall-of-fame-why-the-band-deserves-to-be-inducted-next-in-2015.html).