Analyzing an Argumentative Essay

by Sophia Tutorial

WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial presents strategies for analyzing argumentative essays by evaluating sample arguments:

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1. Arguments: An Overview

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, an interpretation of data, or to argue for (or against) a position or action.
- **The media.** Arguments are used in media including 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.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose you turn on your car's radio and listen to the following three arguments:

An ad for a public radio station, thanking those who made donations during its last fundraising drive, and stating that the station is funded by "listeners like you." Although this argument only makes claims about the source of funding, it also makes an implicit claim that funding a public radio station is inherently good, and that people "just like you" regularly do so. How do you think the rest of this argument unfolds?

<p>🚩 **HINT**</p>

Remember, not all arguments state what they argue for directly.

The second argument occurs after the public radio station commercial. The station plays a song by a small band named "The Devil Makes Three." The song, "All Hail," makes several explicit arguments (followed by several implicit arguments) about what is wrong with society. The societal ills to which the song refers include drug use and capitalism run rampant.

When the song ends, the most explicit argument is broadcast. It's election season, and a group called the "Concerned Veterans" of your home state sponsor a advertisement arguing that a senator who is running for re-election — who supported "Obamacare" during the statewide adoption vote — is likely to force "Obamacare" on all citizens. They argue that "Obamacare" is bad policy, and that elected officials who support it (including the senator) should not be re-elected.

These three arguments are each driven by specific motives and are designed to accomplish specific purposes. As an engaged listener, you should avoid accepting all claims as facts, and critically analyze each argument.

2. Analyzing Arguments

Engaged reading (and listening), and thinking critically about arguments as part of a conversation, are important skills within and outside of college. 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. Here are a few things to look for when you deconstruct an argument:

- When reading argumentative writing, ask yourself what its primary argument is, and how you can identify it.
- Next, look for the primary support items, including evidence and rhetorical appeals.
- You should also identify the writer's purpose with respect to the argument. What does he or she want you to believe or do? Ask yourself if the writer is credible (or not), and why you think so. Has the writer behaved ethically in constructing and presenting the argument?

Following are some techniques you can use to deconstruct an argument:

- **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.
- **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.
- **Reflect on the conclusion.** Which technique is used in the conclusion, and how effective is it? Re-consider the ending of the work. Is the argument's point and purpose is clear to you?
- **Examine the structure, style, tone, and syntax.** Evaluate the argument's structure, organization, and flow. A way to do this is to summarize it in your own words, piece-by-piece. Doing so will give you a clearer view of the "big picture" of the argument and how it is made.

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? Regarding the intended audience of the work, how will they respond to it? 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*.

3. Argument Example #1

Following are two sample arguments that you can use to practice this analysis. The first example is an article (published on slate.com) 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. Following is the thesis of this argument:

> "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 pop punk, and thereby brought punk to the masses. The primary forms of support include commentary and critical analysis of Green Day's albums, quotes 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 including, "their fast fame, coupled with Kurt Cobain's 1995 suicide, symbolized a changing of the guard in rock."
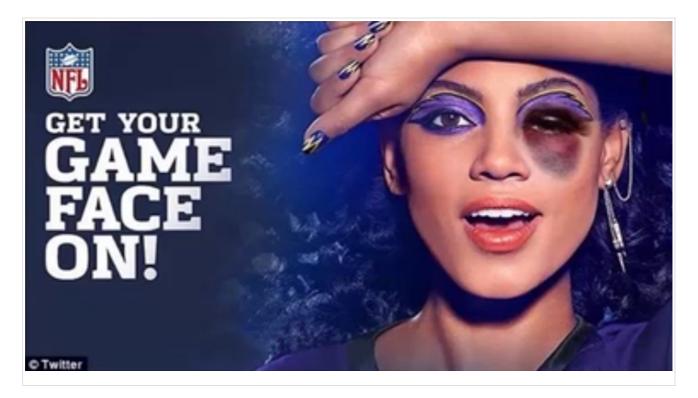
The author's purpose seems to be to persuade readers that Green Day's admission to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is defensible. Also, she seems to be credible. Dee Lockett is a culture journalist (i.e, she researches and writes about pop culture, including music). She cites other pop music experts, and makes a compelling

case for her thesis.

Readers can dispute the writer's inclusion of Green Day in the same category as grunge rockers. By doing so, she 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. Readers 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.

4. Argument Example #2

The second argument to analyze is an image, one of the many visual arguments you likely encounter on a daily basis. The original image was posted at www.farrahgray.com, though its creator is unknown. Since the original posting, the image (and its feminist critique) has been shared widely through social media.

The thesis of this argument is that the National Football League (NFL) tries to camouflage acts of domestic violence committed by players and other personnel, but it can't hide them forever. As with many images, the primary appeal is one of pathos. When confronted with an image of a beautiful football fan with a half-closed black eye, most viewers feel a combination of empathy (with the victim), and irony (in response to the manufactured image). Underlying the appeal to pathos, however, is an appeal to logos: an insistence on the reality of domestic violence, and the practice of covering it up when it is committed by NFL players, coaches, and staff members.

The purpose of this image seems to be to call attention to the NFL's hypocrisy, and its mishandling of the Ray Rice domestic abuse case and other cases of abuse. The image is participates in an ongoing conversation regarding the treatment of women in America.

Credibility is difficult to evaluate in an argument like this one. The image seems credible because it makes its

case directly and unequivocally. However, it relies on emotion and irony, rather than reason and evidence (forms of support often used to establish credibility).

In responding to this image, consider whether it is manipulative. If it is, how manipulative is it? Does it make its case dishonestly? Does the importance of the message outweigh the need for reason and evidence? Although the image is compelling, is it effective in accomplishing change or calling attention to an issue, or is it a form of dark humor?

Consider the use of visual elements in this (or any) image. The model's happy, expectant expression is disturbing in the modified image, suggesting that she has been forced to project happiness she doesn't feel. However, the text included in the image — "Get your game face on" — is doubly ironic. It hints that the "game face" is the makeup used to hide the effects of domestic abuse, and that a battered face is a woman's "game face" when the NFL is involved.

☑	**SUMMARY**

> This tutorial identified some of the many contexts in which arguments can be found in everyday life. It also outlined how to analyze arguments using rhetorical awareness and engaged reading strategies. Two examples were provided for practicing this analysis.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall