Analyzing an Argumentative Essay

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☰ WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about various strategies you can use to analyze argumentative essays. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. **Importance of Understanding Arguments**
2. **Analyzing an Argument**
3. **Sample Argument Analysis**

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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 to 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 arguments as part of a conversation are important skills within and outside of college. Additionally, techniques including notetaking 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 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. Is the argument's point and purpose clear to you?

4. **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? 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. Sample Argument Analysis

The following is the thesis of an argument from an (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, 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. 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.

☑ SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that it is **important to understand 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** on an argumentative thesis.

Best of luck in your learning!