

Model Argumentative Essays

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial examines two of the greatest argumentative essays written in English: Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," and "Politics of the English Language" by George Orwell.

1. "Letter From Birmingham Jail"
2. "Politics and the English Language"

1. "Letter From Birmingham Jail"

Although he was a renowned orator, Martin Luther King Jr. was also a master of argumentative writing. His "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is one of the greatest modern argumentative essays. Written in 1963 while he was jailed for participating in a nonviolent demonstration against segregation, King's letter was addressed to clergy who had publicly denounced the protests.



DID YOU KNOW

"Negro" and "colored," words used by King in his "Letter," were, at the time, socially-acceptable terms for African Americans.

King's letter contains examples of all three forms of rhetorical appeal: ethos, pathos, and logos.

➦ **EXAMPLE** King uses ethos, appeals to credibility, in consistently referring to biblical passages and his experiences as a clergyman. Because the members of his audience were church leaders, he gained credibility by asserting that he's not only a protest leader, but a Christian leader — one who, like his readers, is devoted to his people and to doing what he believes is right.

Here is a passage that demonstrates ethos:

Excerpt From "Letter From Birmingham Jail"

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth-century prophets left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Greco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian

call for aid.

King's shared knowledge of his subject matter with his audience, and his application of it to the point he argues, advances his purpose. He appeals to the highest authority recognized by his audience.

He also uses pathos, or emotional appeals, in several parts of his letter to demonstrate the injustice of the system he opposes. Here is an example:

Excerpt From "Letter From Birmingham Jail"

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity...when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she cannot go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness towards white people...when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodyness"--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

In these two sentences, King invites readers to share his perspective. Using a direct form of address — "you" — he illuminates what it was like to be black at that time in the South. It's a great way to refute an argument; in this instance, the argument that he and his fellow protesters should wait for justice to come to them. By means of the images presented in his second sentence, King enables readers to realize how little they understand the experiences of southern blacks, and forces them to empathize with those who have endured those experiences. King does not assign blame for the suffering of black people, and does not make "you-don't-understand" statements. Instead, he *shows* readers that they do not understand.

King also used logos, or logical appeals, to make his argument. Here is an example of how he used reasoning to undermine the view that he and other protesters were culpable because their protest was illegal.

Excerpt From "Letter From Birmingham Jail"

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just laws, and there are unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all." ...An unjust law is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow, and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal...We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany

was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany, but I am sure that if I had lived in Germany during that time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers even though it was illegal.

By first discussing, then dismantling, the link between segregation laws and anti-protesting ordinances, and then comparing the Birmingham authorities to those of other unjust governments, King uses reason to expose the unstated and unsustainable assumptions behind the counterarguments about the illegality of his actions.

All writers and students of writing should read Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in its entirety to experience — and appreciate — the full impact of this work, and to learn from the examples of effective argumentation that it provides.

2. "Politics and the English Language"

Published in 1946, George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" is another masterful example of argumentative writing. This essay is a stinging criticism of the ways in which many writers use language. Orwell provides examples of poor sentence construction and cliché phrases to advance his claim that not only is lazy writing indicative of lazy thinking, but that one promotes the other. This essay, and much of Orwell's writing, may be difficult for some readers, but it is worthwhile to read it carefully, while evaluating his arguments and the way in which he makes them.

Orwell's mastery of the English language is illustrated by his ability to deconstruct the work of professional writers and identify the weaknesses in it. He uses these findings to support his claims. It seems that Orwell's goal for the essay was to expose the laziness of many writers who rely on stock phrases and overblown terminology instead of carefully considering what they want to write and then writing it. He uses political speech writing to demonstrate careless and uninformed use of language, as shown in the following excerpt.

Excerpt From "Politics and the English Language"

In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing...When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases--bestial, atrocities, iron heel, bloodstained tyranny, free peoples of the world, stand shoulder to shoulder--one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy...The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved, as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself. If the speech he is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters the responses in church. And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity.

Orwell discussed four primary types of language weakness in his essay:

- Dying metaphors: those that have lost the fresh imagery of a new idea and become stock phrases used by lazy or inept writers who don't think carefully about what they want to convey
- Operators, or false verbal limbs: unnecessarily complex verb structures that hide what is being said instead of conveying information

➦ **EXAMPLE** Orwell provides examples of operators, especially those used to discuss war and politics, including "render inoperative" (rather than "destroy"); "exhibit a tendency to" (rather than "do"); and unnecessarily long and imprecise phrases, like "brought to a satisfactory conclusion" or "deserving of serious consideration."

- Pretentious diction: the use of words that are unnecessarily long or foreign (especially Latin and Greek words), when commonplace words convey the intended meaning clearly and precisely. Orwell asserts that pretentious diction is used to disguise ignorance: to hide a writer's lack of a worthwhile message behind "big" words.
- Meaningless words: terms and phrases writers use to avoid saying what they think. As Orwell indicates, it's particularly common to encounter entire sentences in art or literary criticism that are completely without meaning. Consider this example:

Excerpt From "Politics and the English Language"

When one critic writes, "The outstanding feature of Mr. X's work is its living quality", while another writes, "The immediately striking thing about Mr. X's work is its peculiar deadness", the reader accepts this as a simple difference [of] opinion.

This is also an example of Orwell's sense of humor. He is truly offended by meaningless writing, and willing to ridicule anyone who uses it. Orwell may not have had many friends who were art critics!

Following are the concluding sentences of "Politics and the English Language," which make the essay's final call to action better than any summary or paraphrase could.

Excerpt From "Politics and the English Language"

The present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. Political language--and with the variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists--is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one's own habits, and from time to time one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless phrase--some jackboot, Achilles' heel, hotbed, melting pot, acid test, veritable inferno, or other lump of verbal refuse--into the dustbin where it belongs.



SUMMARY

This tutorial examined the ways in which two accomplished writers of argumentative essays constructed two very different, but equally powerful, arguments.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall