

MAKING GOOD ARGUMENTS



FREE TO THE PEOPLE

Introduction:

- An argument is not a fight
- We all make arguments every day: every time you try to persuade someone of anything
- That means we also *hear* arguments every day when anyone tries to persuade *us*
- This might be the most important stuff you ever learn: getting good at argument is like seeing the code in the Matrix of social life

Argument and Civic Engagement

- Arguments are also the foundation of our democracy—vital to the “public sphere”
- Jurgen Habermas—public sphere versus private interests
- National elections make this very clear: how do you assess debates? How about commercials? Speeches? Promises? They’re all full of arguments
- But it all starts local: do we build a park or fill the potholes? Raise taxes or cut services?

How do we persuade?

- Aristotle and Rhetoric: “The faculty to identify the available means of persuasion in any given instance.”
- What are the means of persuasion?

Ethos: appeal to character

- Dr. Fauci and Dr. Birx on coronavirus: why do we listen to them?
- Demonstrating that you care about the audience (eunoia)

Pathos: appeal to emotion

- Remember that Sarah McLaughlin commercial for the RSPCA?
- Not *displaying* emotion, but appealing to it

Logos: appeal to reason

- You don't have to be right...you have to *appeal to the audience's sense of reason*.
- This is what we're going to talk about most here

If these are the "means of persuasion," then what does it mean for them to be "available" in "any given instance?"

- Three parts of a situation: the exigence (defect to be solved), audience (group who can act on that), constraints (limits and opportunities for persuasion).

So now we've got why arguments matter, what the kinds of persuasion are, and we've talked about the situations where we use them. But what really is an argument?

How to make an argument in three parts: claim, warrant, and evidence (Toulmin model).

Claim: the thing you want to say, a contested statement about the world

Evidence: the reasons that support that claim

Warrant: the reason why the evidence supports the claim.

The warrant is the tricky part: usually, we don't even say them, but they're the hidden glue of all arguments.

Here's an example:

My dog is the cutest dog in the world. He has cute little ears!

The first part is the claim. The second part is the evidence. But what's the warrant? "Having little cute ears is what makes a dog the cutest dog in the world." I didn't say that part—it's just implied. This is an argument strategy called *enthymeme*, and it's a very effective one: if I don't say it, the audience has to fill it in, and that makes them *participate* in my argument. Also, if your warrant is questionable, sometimes you can just leave it out to avoid scrutiny. Do cute little ears really make a dog the cutest in the world? Maybe not.

Here's a more serious one:

A new study in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* says that cotton masks don't stop coronavirus from getting through. If coronavirus can get through the masks, then they don't work. Therefore, wearing a cotton mask doesn't matter. (This study is cited in our reading list).

What's the claim? *Wearing a cotton mask doesn't matter.*

What's the evidence? *Study shows cotton masks don't stop the virus getting through.*

What's the warrant? *If masks don't stop the virus, then they don't work.*

There are a lot of ways to analyze this argument. If you know about the evidence, that's one place you can go to. Did you read that study? What was its methodology? Are there other studies that dispute it?

But most of the time we're in situations where we don't have access to the same information that others have. Let's say you didn't read the study. Then how do you test this argument? The answer is the warrant—that piece is usually a *more general principle* about connecting claim and evidence that isn't specific to this case.

For example, the evidence here says the virus gets through—but not, for example, that it doesn't keep the virus from getting quite as far as not wearing a mask, so the data doesn't support the conclusion.

--thinking about warrants—how we make logical connections—means you can better judge arguments even when you don't know much about them

In conclusion:

- Studying argument makes you smarter. This is the basics of good decisions!
- Important for a democracy
- Helps you persuade others, and know when other people who are persuading you might be right or wrong

Future segments: lots of things lead us to *bad reasoning*. We'll talk about some big spicy ones: conspiracy theories and scams!

Suggested Reading:

- Aristotle, *Rhetoric*
- Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*
- Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1:1 (1968).
- Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument*
- Ben Burgis, *Give them an Argument*
- Bae, et. al "Effectiveness of Surgical and Cotton Masks in Blocking SARS-CoV-2: A Controlled Comparison in 4 Patients," *Annals of Internal Medicine*, April 6, 2020, <https://annals.org/aim/fullarticle/2764367/effectiveness-surgical-cotton-masks-blocking-sars-cov-2-controlled-comparison>

For a full list of book recommendations, visit:

<https://www.carnegielibrary.org/staff-picks/navigating-information-fatigue-making-good-arguments/>

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