

Further Tips and Topics for Argumentation

The following material relates to Chapter 16 of *Acting on Words*.

Traditionally, argumentative topics ask you to argue for or against *controversial* issues such as the following:

- Euthanasia
- Stem-cell research
- Abortion
- Capital punishment

A number of these topics have been “over explored” as academic exercises. Thousands if not hundreds of thousands of generic student essays exist on these topics; saying something new on the subject presents a challenge. If with your instructor’s approval you do decide to pursue one of these standard topics for argumentation, a good way to add meaning to your work is to specify the context, one that you know well. Bring in as much local and practical relevance as you can. Narrow your study to a particular place and time, even to a particular case. Perhaps the best way to gain value from your practice of argumentation is to be less concerned with finding one of a supposedly limited number of ideal issues (after all, humans can debate just about anything) and be more concerned to imagine the sorts of *conditions* or *circumstances* that require argumentative style.

You could, in fact, write an excellent essay or speech of argumentation on many of the topics listed at the website under Chapter 16, “Topics for Critical Analysis and Evaluation.” To adapt your responses as argumentation, you would simply need to imagine the following.

Scenario

You are to deliver your views to an audience; 30% of it strongly disagrees with your position. You must imagine in detail the controlling idea and reasons that this group of “opponents” would argue. Imagine that only 5% of the audience leans at all in favour of your position. The remaining 65% are relatively neutral, though more inclined to the “opposition” view than to yours. None of this changes the analysis you have done or the conclusions it has led you to; however, this does change the ways in which you shape your discussion and the tone you use to deliver it.

With this “oppositional” scenario in mind, you can revise your answer to one of the critical response topics for Chapter 16 into argumentation. As an added motivational detail, imagine the following:

Scenario

An intermission is called halfway through your presentation. During that break, the audience will mingle in the foyer, sipping drinks and chatting about what has been said. How will the 30% who strongly opposed your view interact with the other 70%? Will you have appealed effectively enough to the neutral group to keep them from joining the “opponents”? The success of your argumentative writing depends to a considerable extent on vividly imagining the details of this scenario: exactly why the “opponents” hold the views they do, what those views are, and what, if anything, might soften their resistance or at least appeal to the 70% who remain undecided.

A useful argumentation assignment includes not only your essay but your description of the hypothetical presentation circumstances, one that fills in the following:

Presentation Circumstances

- Setting—time and location of presentation or name of publication

- Nature of audience—size, demographics, attitudes on the topic
- Purpose of presentation or category of publication (e.g. letter to editor, editorial, feature article, academic seminar, etc.)
- Objective (e.g. influence at least 25% of audience to....)

Do you aim for a change of **knowledge**, a change of **thinking**, or a change of **action**?

What results do you hope will follow from the change? Be as specific as possible. You may wish to shape your argumentation as an oral address (see *Acting on Words* Chapter 20). Thinking and writing orally can be a useful way to remember that you are communicating, that recognizing the psychology of your readers or listeners is every bit as important to success as the more literary attributes of your work.

Topics for Argumentation

To supplement those topics listed at the website for Chapter 14, here are some more:

1. What are the arguments for and against the participation of women in active combat? What is *your* position?
2. “The West must accept some responsibility for the terror attacks of last September,” Prime Minister Jean Chrétien said while addressing the media on September 12, 2002. What are the arguments for and against this opinion? Explain your own position.
3. Read “The Case for Active Euthanasia” by Janice Procée (p. 497) and “Euthanasia Reconsidered” by Gail Deagle (p. 500). Develop a new idea or angle overlooked in both essays and write your own argumentative essay recommending a position on this controversial topic.
4. Mary Shelley’s fictional Dr. Frankenstein undertook a career in science, full of ideals and optimism. However, his drive for progress—to overcome death—resulted in

misery. Is applied science going too far today in a similar way? You may wish to read John Markoff's "The Doomsday Machines" (p. 505) for one discussion of this question and Bryce Clayton's response (p. 509) for another. Develop your own answer using sources such as your field of work or study, forms of personal experience with the topic, and other research. You may wish to concentrate on one particular field, such as medicine, genetics, information technology.

5. Is post-secondary education improving or declining? Interview older people who attended university or college in an earlier period. Also conduct other relevant research on this topic.

7. Is the gap between rich and poor in today's world as serious a problem as some people say? Explain and illustrate.

8. Is life getting better or worse? Narrow your topic!

9. In his 2006 book *Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning*, George Monbiot calls Canada "one of the most polluting nations on earth" (xi). He reports that in June 2006, 1400 Canadian mayors pledged to cut greenhouse gases by 30% by 2020 and 80% by 2050. Says Monbiot, "It's not nearly enough, but it still puts Harper and his flock of chickens to shame" (xii). Monbiot calls for a world reduction in greenhouse gases of 80% by 2025 if we are to avoid probable catastrophe. Write an argumentative essay or speech in which you either refute Monbiot's concerns or appeal to your audience to adopt a number of actions that you think will help meet his target or a modified target.