
UNIT 7 ARGUMENTATIVE COMPOSITION-1

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall talk about

- i) argumentative composition and how it differs from other kinds of writing;
- ii) the techniques employed in argumentative writing.

We shall also show you how an argument is composed.

After completing the unit you should be able to (i) describe and use some of the techniques of argument, and (ii) compose an argument successfully.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In Units 1-2 (Block 1) we discussed the composition of a paragraph. In Unit 3 we discussed the various steps in writing a longer composition, and in Unit 4 we took up expository composition. We shall now introduce you to argumentative composition, even though it is difficult to make a clear distinction between an expository composition and an argumentative composition.

7.2 PERSUASIVE AND ARGUMENTATIVE COMPOSITIONS

When you read textbooks, newspapers, magazines, novels, or anything else, you are likely to come across persuasive writing, which has the power to influence the reader into believing or doing what the writer wishes. Since the aim is to make the reader accept the author's view as correct, there is an attempt to argue, sometimes not very logically, to bring home to the reader a certain point of view. But when one argues, one has to give reasons in support of a statement or against it. Therefore, argument is usually based on logic, which is the science of 'reasoning'. In an argument one has to offer reasons in support of, or against an opinion expressed in the form of a statement.

In an expository composition the aim is to explain something and make it clear. Never before have people been able to know so much about so many subjects. The increase in the flow of information of every kind is due to the number of ways in which information can be gathered and conveyed these days, that is, the means of communication. We have newspapers, magazines, and journals, and also the radio, television, the telephone, copying machines, and computers, to name just a few simple devices. It is not surprising, therefore, that expository writing has become a powerful influence on our lives. Whenever we wish to know the facts about a subject, what something is or how it operates, how to do something, or why one thing causes another, we turn to expository writing.

When one argues about something, one tries to find out all the facts about the subject. In other words exposition helps argument. After all, if an argument is not based on facts, it is not likely to be convincing. To give you an example, if I discuss Women's Liberation, I must present some background information on how the concept emerged through the years to be able to argue for or against a certain point of view. Such a background is provided by expository writing. In expository composition, therefore, the writer seeks to inform the readers, not to persuade them to accept his view.

It is difficult to say how exactly a reader is affected by various kinds of writing. A poignant story, that is, a story producing a sharp feeling of sadness or pity, a frightening description, or an appealing expository essay may also affect a reader's feelings or beliefs. But in persuasive and argumentative writing, the effect upon the reader is the author's principal object. The writer, in order to convince his reader, must know him as well as the subject he is talking or writing about. The writer must ask: How can I influence my readers' beliefs and actions? What do they believe now? How do they act? What sort of people are they? What kind of argument is likely to appeal to them? The reader, on his side, too, must raise as many questions as he can about the subject being discussed.

Instead of simply agreeing with what the writer says, the reader has to be careful to weigh the evidence, check the facts, evaluate the arguments and resist blind emotion, and then make up his mind. Let the writer convince you by facts and logic. Remember the following questions, which should help you to decide whether to believe in a writer's argument or not.

- 1 What controversial subject is the topic of the discussion?
- 2 Can you state both sides of the controversy?
- 3 Has the author sufficient knowledge and experience to discuss the subject with authority?
- 4 Are facts and evidence used to support the argument?
- 5 Is any information which is damaging to the argument left out?
- 6 Do the arguments sound reasonable?
- 7 Do you see any mistakes in reasoning?
- 8 Are you being asked to agree with the argument solely on the basis of a powerful emotional appeal?

These questions will help you to judge an argumentative composition for its merits and defects.

7.3 TECHNIQUES OF ARGUMENT

There are various tactics which writers employ in order to persuade their readers to accept their point of view.

7.3.1 The Assertive Argument

One of the techniques of argument is the assertive way, which is marked by forceful statements or claims. In an assertive argument the writer gives general reasons in support of his or her position. The readers accept or reject such claims to the extent they are in accordance with their own experiences.

Example 1

Women have a right to equal opportunities in public life and worthwhile careers. They must be given improved training facilities in every field, equal access to the professions, to universities, and to courses enabling them to obtain higher qualifications — and then opportunities for winning promotions in their chosen careers must be genuine and meaningful.

Glossary

¹access : entrance

(The mark¹ placed before the syllable that carries the main stress in a word.)

In the above passage we seem to feel that the assertion is a general truth and, therefore, strong enough to convince us. Read the passage carefully and answer the following questions. You may check your answers with those given by us at the end of this unit.

Self-check Exercise 1

1 What does the writer assert?

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2 Does the writer support his assertion by giving facts or illustrations, or using any other technique to prove his point?

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Making general statements about social situations is very common. Sometimes generalisations are all that we can talk about because detailed evidence does not exist.

Indeed such assertions act as useful guides in cases where evidence is not available. At the same time, remember that, however brilliant and forceful a general assertive statement may appear to be, an assertion by itself does not make the case very strong.

7.3.2 Argument by Illustration

A step above assertion are those arguments which are supported by illustrations or examples. In the following passage the writer uses an example to support his statement that a middle class Chinese housewife in Singapore does not do so much work as an American woman.

Example 2

In Singapore recently I had an opportunity to see how middle class Chinese wives lived. Mrs. Chang Eng's husband enjoyed an income markedly less than the average in Buck's county, but her day ran something like this: rise at ten; dress in clothes laid out by a personal maid; inspect the children, who were being cared for by an amah; check the day's meals, which would be prepared by a cook and served by a maid; drive to the daily mah-jongg game in a car handled only by the chauffeur; and in the late afternoon return home to rest and dress for her own dinner party, where she will be hostess but for which she has not done a single bit of preparatory work.

(from Michener: *A Michener Miscellany*, 1950-1970)

Glossary

¹county : a district

amah : a nurse-maid

mah-jongg : a Chinese game played by four persons with 144 pieces

chauffeur : a person employed to drive someone's car

Self-check Exercise 2

1 List the words in the above passage which suggest domestic activity.

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.....

2 What are the activities of a middle class housewife in a Chinese family in Singapore?

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Note the use of the semicolon in the above example. The semicolon is a mark (;) used in writing and printing to separate different members of lists and sometimes independent parts of a sentence. In this passage, the semicolon separates different items on a list. The activities of a Chinese housewife appear to be screened in front of your eyes. The use of the semicolons convinces us that the Chinese housewife finishes her day's activities without doing any work herself.

Self-check Exercise 3

Put a semicolon where necessary:

- 1 You know it has happened yet you don't want to believe it.
- 2 Work when you work play while you play.
- 3 To err is human to forgive divine.

As with the assertive argument, the writer's contention in an illustrative argument may not be untrustworthy; it may simply need stronger evidence before it can be accepted.

7.3.3 The Factual Argument

An indisputable way of arguing is presenting the evidence of facts. Facts are things that have actual existence, or events that have actually happened. Statements of facts can, therefore, be used in an argument. In Example 3 cited below the author talks of the British Parliament's decision to open 24-hour child care centres to enable women to lead useful lives and not be pinned down by domestic work. The data, however, suggests that Parliament's decision has not been carried out in practice.

Example 3

At the last count, there were only 466 local authority nurseries caring for 25,574 children in all — and this at a time when Britain has nearly nine million working women, representing close on 40 per cent of the country's total work force.

(from Michael D. Jacobson: *Pros and Cons: A Debater's Handbook*, Routledge)

7.3.4 Refutation or Counter-argument

To refute is to disprove, to answer another person's argument. Often refutation is the main purpose of an argument. Whenever you argue, remember that there may be counter-arguments from other people. Refutation points out the weaknesses in another person's logic or evidence.

Study the following debate on whether married women should get jobs. See how an argument is proved wrong by giving a counter-argument.

Example 4

For

(1) Married women have as much right to take part in the general activities of the community as other people. They are just as likely to do good work, and many of them do not feel satisfied solely by household and family duties.

(2) While young children may need their mothers, older children are sufficiently cared for during the day by school facilities. All responsible mothers who take a job make sure that their husbands will be at home in time to look after their children.

Against

(1) A married woman should find enough scope for her talents in looking after the home and her husband. Her first duty is to care for her family.

(2) The rise in juvenile delinquency is partly due to working mothers' absence from home, which contributes to unconscious resentment, bewilderment and the build-up of an anti-social attitude in later years.

(from Michael D. Jacobson; *Pros and Cons: A Debater's Handbook*, Routledge)

Glossary

re'sources : possessions in the form of wealth and goods that help one to do what one wants

'juvenile de'linquency : crimes by young persons

un'conscious : not intentional

re'sentment : the feeling of anger at bad treatment

be'wilderment : confusion

'anti-'social : that causes damage to the way in which people live together peacefully

Self-check Exercise 4

Read the following passage on 'Examinations:

Should they be abolished?' and provide three counter-arguments.

Examinations test only memory and the capacity to pass examinations, without testing the capacity for original thought or imagination. Cramming induces disinterest in learning. Examinations promote a liking for the brilliantly clever pupils, and the less gifted feel neglected.

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The passages so far taken up in this unit have been chosen because they exemplify a particular device or strategy which writers can use to persuade their readers. Most writers, however, make use of more than one such device to persuade you to accept their point of view. One major characteristic of the convincing argument which needs to be discussed is that the writer has foreseen possible objections to his assertion. Therefore, he tries to forestall possible criticism which his readers might make. In the following passage on Women's Lib., the writer takes into account the views of the conservatives who do not wish to change. They look down upon women's organisations all over the world.

Example 5

Women's Lib. may have aggravated and irritated many people, but that is precisely what it has set out to do. However extreme some of its actions and statements may seem to the more conservative-minded, it has succeeded in getting many members of the public to start thinking and talking about issues which had not interested or even occurred to them previously. Without the 'ginger' provided by the Women's Liberation Movement, progress towards equality would not have advanced so far, so fast as it has.

Glossary

'aggravated': annoyed

'ginger': the quality of being active

Self-check Exercise 5

1 What is meant by 'conservative-minded'?

.....

2 Tick the correct answer:

Women's Lib. has offended

a) women.

b) people.

c) children.

d) conservatives.

Self-check Exercise 6

What are the various techniques which help to make an effective argument?

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7.4 COMPOSING AN ARGUMENT

In an argumentative composition, you should first of all decide what you are arguing for and limit yourself to what is possible within the time and space available to you. It is advisable to stick to specific issues, such as the following:

- i) Examinations should be abolished.
- ii) There should be employment for all.
- iii) Pass-Fail is a better system of evaluation than the five-letter grading used at universities.

Having decided to speak for or against a certain point of view, think of the kind of evidence you will be able to offer and the order in which it will be presented. Try and give some background of what you are discussing. If you talk of Women's Lib., for example, you ought to say something about how and when the Women's Lib. Movement started and how it developed.

As you argue in support of your assertion, you will meet opposing claims or facts. We usually answer counterclaims by refutations, where they are needed, rather than by answering them all at one place. Refutations should be written in a precise manner so as not to check the progress of your composition.

Remember that one needs greater control on the organisation of one's thoughts in an argumentative composition than in expository or narrative compositions. Therefore, pay due attention to connectives. Words like *thus*, *as a result*, *therefore*, *however*, *on the other hand*, and *moreover* help to build logical relationship in the argument. When you revise your composition, strike out words that seem unnecessary.

One expects an argument to end with a final statement, a conclusion or a generalisation.

Self-check Exercise 7

What are the things you must keep in mind while composing an argument?

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7.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have told you about the important features of argumentative compositions and the tactics used to support an argument. We have shown you how an argumentative composition should be organised.

7.6 KEY WORDS

'argument : reason given (for or against a proposition)

'argu'mentative : using methodical reasoning

com'pose : construct in words

'factual : based on facts

'illu'stration : making clear by examples

per'suasive : able to persuade

'refu'tation : proving the error of an argument

7.7 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Exercise 1

1 Women should have equal opportunities for higher education and promotions in their chosen careers.

2 No.

Exercise 2

1 dress, personal maid, children, amah, meals, cook, maid, dinner party, hostess.

2 The Chinese woman would rise at ten, get dressed, inspect the children, check the meals, drive to play a game, rest in the afternoon, and dress for the dinner party.

Exercise 3

1 You know it has happened; yet you don't want to believe it.

2 Work when you work; play while you play.

3 To err is human; to forgive divine.

Exercise 4 : Specimen answers

1 Examinations can test one's ability to express one's thoughts and ideas in an organised way.

2 Examinations make even the indifferent students read.

3 The less gifted people are also motivated to do well and rise in the esteem of their teachers.

Exercise 5

1 favouring the established order of society

2 (d)

Exercise 6

One can write in an assertive manner. One can use illustrations or facts to prove one's point. And one can refute another person's argument or make a counter-argument.

Exercise 7

We have to (i) make sure of the subject we want to write about, (ii) stick to a specific issue, (iii) think of the kind of evidence we can use to support the argument, (iv) provide background information, where needed, (v) answer opposite claims, (vi) use the right connectives to show the logical relationship in the argument, and (vii) make a conclusive statement at the end.