Chapter 2

Modern Approaches to Argument

In Chapter 1, you examined ancient rhetorical tools and applied them to a modern text. In this chapter, you will encounter a variety of modern approaches to argument. The rhetorical techniques and strategies presented in both chapters will provide you with the theoretical background for constructing your own arguments, synthesizing an array of sources to support a position, and analyzing the arguments that others construct.

The Rhetorical Triangle

The modern **rhetorical triangle** consists of five elements:

- writer
- audience
- message
- purpose
- rhetorical context

Traditionally, the rhetorical triangle contains the first three components: writer, audience, and message. Although the communication process is more complicated than can be captured by a graphic illustration, Figure 2-1 shows the process reduced to a simple triangle. The three points of the triangle are writer, audience, and message, and the rhetorical triangle is often connected to the three Aristotelian proofs, or appeals, of ethos (writer), logos (message), and pathos (audience) that you read about in Chapter 1.

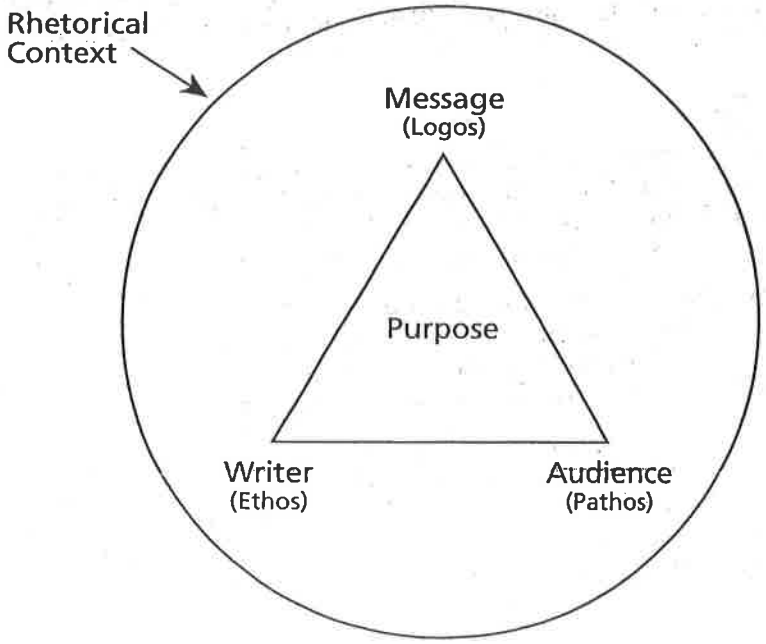

Fig. 2-1 The Rhetorical Triangle

Writer

The writer must ask the question "What can I do to build my credibility and make the audience trust my message?" In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which we shall continue to analyze in Chapter 2, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spends considerable time establishing his ethos. You recall that he does so by giving a warm greeting, finding common ground with his "fellow clergymen," and giving his opponents credit as "men of genuine good will." He also establishes that he is not an "outsider" because of his organizational ties to Birmingham and his calling to fight injustice wherever it exists.

Writing Effectively

You can build your ethos through the choices you make in terms of tone, style, and dealing with counter-arguments.

Audience

To have a message accepted by an audience, the writer should try to appeal to their emotions, which is why the audience is often linked with pathos in the rhetorical triangle.

Because he was also a clergyman, King understood his primary audience well. He knew what would appeal to their humanity and their consciences. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," rather than sprinkle pathos throughout the letter, King chooses instead to concentrate the emotional appeal in one long periodic sentence. He makes the audience feel the pain of segregation, as he writes about "vicious lynch mobs," "hate-filled policemen," human beings "smothering in an airtight cage of poverty," the impossibility of explaining segregation to a child, and a list of "inner fears and outer resentments" that culminates in the cry, "then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."

Writing Effectively

The writer must ask, "What values and beliefs do I appeal to in the audience? How can I engage both the audience's heart and mind?" The more you know about your audience, the better able you will be to find what will appeal to their emotions.

Message

In the rhetorical triangle, message is often linked with logos, the content of the communication. People sometimes confuse logos with logic. The logical argument is certainly an important component of logos; however, logos involves the entire content of the message, which goes well beyond the limits of logic.

For example, in "Letter from Birmingham Jail" King not only builds his own argument; he also refutes the major and minor premises of the clergymen's arguments, which are sometimes unstated. He points out their inconsistencies and provides evidence to counter their assertions. He writes,

> "You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes."

Writing Effectively

As you construct and analyze arguments, ask, "What assumptions support the reasoning? What is the evidence?"

Balancing writer, audience, and message

In Figure 2-1, writer, audience, and message are the three points of an equilateral triangle. The triangle emphasizes the importance of the three elements working equally together, in balance. For example,

- If you put too much emphasis on message, you risk forgetting about the audience or establishing yourself insufficiently.
- If your emphasis is too much on the emotional appeal to the audience, then the content of your message might suffer, or the audience might not trust you.
- If you focus too much on yourself as the writer, then you might be dismissed as an egotist or a blowhard.

Writing Effectively

Seek to balance the three major elements of writer, audience, and message. These must work together to achieve the goal of your communication: your purpose.

Purpose

The purpose of your communication is your rhetorical goal. What are you trying to achieve with your message? In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King was seeking to persuade the local clergymen of the rightness of his action, and help unite the African-American community. He also wanted the letter to reach out to the white political moderate, who he says "is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice." King knew his audience would be resistant to his cause, so his purpose had to be clear and strong. The open letter format—which allowed his letter to be read by everyone—shows his purpose to be much larger than he initially suggested: he wanted not just to refute the claims of the clergymen, but also to persuade the community at large that his cause was right.

Writing Effectively

To identify the purpose of your communication, ask "What is my goal? What do I hope to achieve?" It is important that the goals be clear and specific. Unclear goals lead to unclear communication.

Rhetorical Context

The background or situation to which a persuasive message is addressed is considered **rhetorical context**. As the rhetorical situation changes, so should the response. Aristotle refers to the rhetorical context as those proofs that are *inartistic* or *extrinsic* because they are not under the control of the writer and do not emerge from the writer's creative efforts.

In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," the rhetorical context is the incarceration of King and his followers for breaking the law against public demonstrations. He was arrested on Good Friday, the day commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. King uses this rhetorical context to his advantage, allowing him to compare himself to Christ as well as to other religious and historical figures who had broken the

law or who were considered extremists. Had King not been arrested on that day, he would not have had such a strong rhetorical context for his letter. King wrote:

> But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ..."

Writing Effectively

As a writer, consider how you can best tailor a response to the specific demands of a given situation. How should your response change as the rhetorical context changes?

Informal Logic: The Toulmin Scheme

Formal logic is an abstract discipline that deals with absolutes. Everyday life, however, does not operate in the realm of absolutes—it is messier, more complicated. Events in life are often random, so people must make decisions based on probability rather than absolute certainty. To bridge the gap between the absolute and the practical, philosopher Stephen Toulmin developed a model of informal logic commonly known as the **Toulmin scheme**.

Informal Logic

In 1958, Stephen Toulmin published a book titled *The Uses of Argument*, which has greatly influenced the study of both analyzing and making arguments. Toulmin's scheme was developed for use in the courtroom as a practical tool for persuading judges and juries. The model does not attempt to prove, but it gives good reasons and persuasive arguments. In the Toulmin scheme, there are reasonable arguments on either side. The model consists of the following:

- claim
- reasons
- warrant
- grounds
- backing
- conditions of rebuttal
- qualifier

In the Toulmin scheme, an enthymeme provides the claim, the reasons, and the warrant. As you recall from the analysis of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in Chapter 1, one of the local clergymen's objections to King's involvement was restated in the following enthymeme:

King should not be leading local protests because he is an outsider.

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King should not be leading local protests because he is an outsider.

To decide whether the claim in this enthymeme is sound, you need to examine the reasons and the underlying assumptions and decide whether the audience will accept and grant them.

Claim

In the Toulmin scheme, a **claim** is a statement of a position, a stand, or what you may have come to know as a thesis statement. A claim is an arguable statement. It is not a statement of the obvious; it presents an issue about which reasonable people might disagree. The claim in the enthymeme above is this:

King should not be leading local protests...

Reasons

Reasons support claims. An individual claim may have many supporting reasons for an argument. In the previous enthymeme, the stated reason is the following:

...because he is an outsider

Warrant

The **warrant** is the unstated assumption that makes the enthymeme work. The audience must accept the warrant in order to find an argument persuasive. The warrant is often the most vulnerable part of an argument because it appeals to the values and beliefs of an audience, which can be difficult to determine. Underlying the enthymeme is the local clergymen's warrant or unstated belief:

Outsiders should not be leading local protests.

Grounds

Claims, reasons, and warrants represent an argument in broad outline, stated in phrases or sentences. Of course, arguments involve much more than this. The **grounds** provide the actual evidence in support of the reasons. Grounds include facts, citations from authorities, examples, and statistics. Well-stated grounds make reasons more concrete for an audience.

In the statement that prompted Dr. King to write "Letter from Birmingham Jail," the local clergymen provide an example of grounds for their argument when they note that "we are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders."

Backing

Backing supports the warrant. If an audience already accepts the unstated assumption or warrant, then backing is unnecessary. However, if the person making the argument is unclear about the warrant or unfamiliar with the values and beliefs of the audience, then the writer must provide backing to support the warrant. Without it, the argument will not be persuasive to the audience.

In their statement of April 12, the Alabama clergymen give backing to support the warrant "Outsiders should not be leading local protests" by asserting that resolving these local problems requires people with "knowledge and experience of the local situation." It is to these statements that King reacts in his response.

Conditions of Rebuttal

No argument is complete without anticipating the counter-arguments, and the **conditions of rebuttal** bring up and address those counter-arguments. Rebuttal attacks the reasons and grounds and/or the warrant and backing.

In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King refutes both the local clergymen's reasons (that he is an outsider) and their grounds (that local leaders are already handling the situation in a peaceful and lawful manner). King asserts that he is not an outsider because he has local ties to Birmingham, was invited there by local leaders, and has been called to fight injustice wherever it occurs—"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." In this way he rebuts the clergymen's warrant (outsiders should not be leading local protests) and their backing (outsiders lack sufficient knowledge of local issues). King adds that we are all interrelated, so it no longer makes sense to see the world in terms of insiders and outsiders.

Qualifier

A **qualifier** limits a claim. In the real world there are few absolutes or certainties, and this applies to analyzing and making arguments, too. Terms like *always* and *never* are problematic because opponents can often find exceptions to such broad statements. To remedy this situation, Toulmin introduced the qualifier, which limits the scope of the claim.

In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," one problem with the clergymen's argument is that they present their claims as absolute: they admit no justification for King to lead protests in Birmingham. Because the local clergymen do not limit their claim with a qualifier, King is able to provide numerous reasons why their claims are faulty.

Writing Effectively

Although both the six-part classical oration format and the Toulmin scheme are effective tools for making arguments, analyzing arguments, and synthesizing sources into arguments, the Toulmin scheme has an added advantage for you as a writer. Since it is based on probability, not formal logic, the Toulmin scheme allows for the possibility of dialogue between opposing views and deeper exploration of issues.

A Modern Alternative to Traditional Argument

The goal of traditional argument, from Aristotle to the modern day, is to defeat the opponent. This model centers on absolute victory and makes use of military terminology such as "attacking" one's opponent and developing rhetorical "strategy." In the 1960s, psychologist Carl Rogers developed an approach to counseling that in recent years has also influenced methods of argument.

The Rogerian Approach to Argument

The goals of **Rogerian argument** differ from those of the traditional approach in substantive ways. Although traditional argument seeks all-out victory over the opponent, Rogerian argument tries to find mutually acceptable solutions to problems using the following techniques:

- seeking common ground
- building trust
- reducing threat

In the traditional model, when people perceive that they are being attacked, they stop listening and become defensive and hostile. In Rogerian argument, the writer makes every effort to avoid confrontation. The writer does this by giving as much credit as possible to the opponents' counter-arguments, rather than simply dismissing these counter-arguments outright. In this framework, if opponents believe that their arguments are being understood and taken seriously, they will be more open to listening to the writer's position.

From the very start of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King attempts to build trust, seek common ground, and reduce threat by addressing his "opponents" as "My Dear Fellow Clergymen." He credits the clergymen with being "men of genuine good will," whose arguments "are sincerely set forth." He does not attack their character but instead emphasizes that they all share a common profession and a common goal of ending segregation.

Throughout the letter King makes references to biblical and historical figures and philosophers who would be familiar to the clergymen. He accepts some of the points in the clergymen's argument, such as the fact that the demonstrations in Birmingham were unfortunate. Toward the end of the letter, he verbally draws himself closer to his audience by switching pronouns from *I* and *you* to *we* when expressing his hope for the day when they will all sit down together as fellow clergymen.

Although King's letter is not totally Rogerian, he makes use of certain elements of the Rogerian approach, and these techniques make his argument more palatable to his audience.

Writing Effectively

The advantage of the Rogerian approach to argument is its emphasis on building bridges rather than tearing them down. As a writer you might face a rhetorical situation in which it is important for you to maintain a cordial relationship with your adversary. When this is the case, giving as much credit as you can to your opponent's points of view might be the best path to follow.

The Text Says/The Text Does Analysis

"The text says/the text does" analysis is a technique for close reading and rhetorical analysis of a text. The method consists of two elements:

- summary of the content of the text (what the text says)
- description of the construction, organization, and form of the text (what the text does)

We will refer to this method as a *says/does analysis*. Here is the concluding paragraph from Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." It is followed by a *says* statement, then a *does* statement.

> I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

What The Text Says

To synthesize an argument in a text is to state the content very briefly. This sentence summarizes the concluding paragraph of "Letter from Birmingham Jail":

> I hope that we can meet again someday as Christian brothers in a time of racial harmony.

What The Text Does

The concluding paragraph ties together all of King's previous arguments and re-establishes the personal tone of the opening paragraph. King also uses the double metaphor of raising the "fog of misunderstanding" from "our fear-drenched communities" to make his conclusion more vivid and memorable.

Says/does analysis is useful for breaking a piece of writing down into a simpler, more understandable form. It enables readers to examine a text in terms of its content as well as its structure.

Visual Arguments

Visual rhetoric is the incorporation of visual elements into an argument and the rhetorical impact of those images on an audience. Visual rhetoric includes photographs, drawings, graphs, charts, maps, posters, advertisements, Web pages, and cartoons, to name a few.

The claim that "a picture is worth a thousand words" has become a cliché, but it is nonetheless true. A visual image can make or amplify a claim just as words can, but visual images can often have a greater impact than words. Because visual images are processed by a different area of the brain than language is, visual images can strengthen an argument, exercise the imagination, and stimulate the brain in ways that words do not. Thus, when visual images are combined with text, together they can have a broader and more profound effect on the audience than words alone can.

If a printed edition of Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" had included images of intolerance and photographs of King leading demonstrations and being taken to jail, the impact of the document would be quite different, possibly even inflammatory, despite King's moderate tone.

Sensitivity to the impact of visual rhetoric is useful in both analyzing and making arguments. You will find examples of visual rhetoric in Chapters 3 through 10 of this book. For instance, Chapter 3, "Photography," integrates a number of photographs with textual information. Chapter 4, "War," illustrates how photographs and bar graphs can be used as writing prompts for constructing and strengthening arguments. Chapter 9, "Food," uses both a painting and a cartoon to highlight the complexities of contemporary issues. Chapter 8, "Genes," provides a purposeful graphic and prompts for making your own visuals to support arguments. These chapters can also guide you in incorporating elements of visual rhetoric into your writing.

Chapter 2 Review Questions

1. What is the rhetorical triangle?
2. What is informal logic?
3. How is informal logic used to make an argument?
4. In informal logic, what is a claim?
5. How does a reason support a claim in informal logic?
6. What role does a warrant play in informal logic?
7. What is the goal of Rogerian rhetoric, and how does it differ from the goal of traditional argumentation?
8. What are the features of says/does analysis?
9. What are the components of visual rhetoric?
10. How can visual rhetoric be used to make or enhance an argument?