



Teacher Notes: Argumentative Writing

A Brief Definition:

Argumentative writing includes two opposing views on an issue. The writer targets an audience, supports his/her position with evidence and reason.



The Context: Where/When/Why

- Common requirement in college
- Promotes critical thinking
- Authentic need to write argumentative texts in the workplace



The Motivation of the Writer: "So what?"

- Why should the reader care about this work?
- What can we learn from reading the work?
- What is the contradiction between views of the text?
- Is some aspect of the text particularly compelling?

The Process

1 State Your Position:

Students identify a subject, analyze their audience and state their purpose for writing about an issue.

2 Provide Reasons:

Students provide evidence that supports their position.

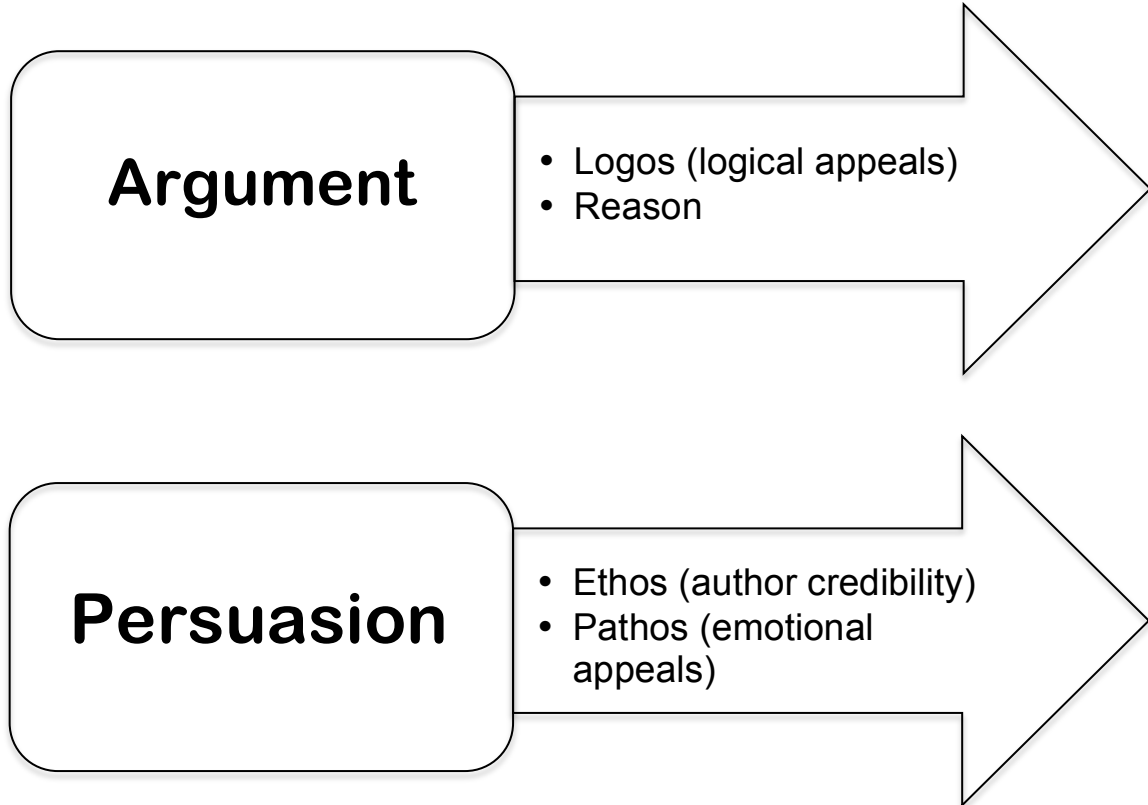
3 Provide Counterarguments:

Students research and acknowledge the opposing viewpoint.

4 Restate Your Case:

Students paraphrase and summarize the key reasons to support their position.

Argument vs. Persuasion



Argument vs. Persuasion

“With its roots in orality, rhetoric has a bias for viewing audiences a particular. Aristotle said, ‘The persuasive is persuasive to someone.’ In contrast to rhetoric, writing has a bias for an abstract audience or generalized conception of audience... For this reason, a particular audience can be persuaded, whereas the universal audience must be convinced, particular audiences can be approached by way of values, whereas the universal audience (which transcends partisan values) must be approached with facts, truths, and presumptions.”

- Miller & Charney

Conducting Mini-Debates

The purpose of this activity is to use oral debate skills to strengthen written assignments. In the May 2004 **Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy**, *From dialogue to two-sided argument: Scaffolding adolescents' persuasive writing*, the authors refer to the National Assessment of Educational Progress's 1998 Writing Report Card, which indicated that 55% of the 12th-grade students in the US scored below "sufficient" on a persuasive writing task. The article suggests that teachers bring together "the experiences of dialogue and written argument" to improve students' "metacognitive understanding of the fundamentals of argument."

The authors also suggest that while two-sided written arguments are often difficult for teens, two-sided spoken arguments are not. By speaking about an issue prior to writing, this affords students the opportunity to explore alternative perspectives, offer counterarguments, and rebut counterarguments in an academic arena. The authors of the article contend the following:

"We need to place persuasive writing within a meaningful context. Writing is a social activity -- a means of sharing ideas with others. When we put persuasive writing in the context of debate we give students additional reason to write. It becomes a means by which students formalize their thinking, share their ideas, and get feedback. As a result, students are motivated to examine their writing, its structure, and its impact on their readers."

Make sure to review the academic meaning of "argument" and set ground rules for group interaction. An argument is a thoughtful process of reasoning in support of a claim; it's not a quarrel or a dispute. The goal is to support a claim and to better understand complex, multifaceted issues, not to put people on the defensive. When someone feels insulted, meaningful interaction ceases to exist.

Common Rhetorical Devices Used in Argumentative Writing

1. Rhetorical question: (using a question to which no answer is required)

Can you believe what's going on here?

2. Emotive language: (using descriptive language)

Imagine being left to eat lunch all alone in the cold, unfriendly cafeteria.

3. Parallel structures: (keeping all verb forms, nouns etc. equal)

They went hiking, biking and swimming.

4. Sound patterns: (i.e., Alliteration and Assonance)

It was a muddy, Monday morning (alliteration); a fine time was had by all (assonance).

5. Contrast: (using opposites in language)

Sometimes we have to be cruel to be kind.

6. Description and Imagery: (i.e. using metaphor, simile and personification)

She was as tall as a tree.

7. The 'rule of three': (repeating the same idea in three different ways)

I ask you, is this fair, is it right, is it just?

8. Repetition: (repeating the same phrase throughout a speech or writing)

MLK: I have a dream...

9. Hyperbole: (using exaggeration for effect)

I'd give my right arm for a piece of that chocolate.

10. Anecdote: (telling a story to illustrate a point)

I remember the time when...