

Introduction

An essential part of a complex web of culture, argument shares intellectual space with analysis, evaluation, understanding, and knowledge. Yet written argument, which logically explains and defends a controversial idea, seems to be disappearing as a form of discourse. Here I offer a manifesto for the protection, for the nurturance, of this endangered species. Why? Because argument deserves to survive and flourish. It should be taught more rigorously in schools, colleges, and universities. It should more regularly enter the public conversation, informing and being informed by ordinary human feelings and actions. Unfortunately, it's too often shackled and bound by the immuring vocabulary of Greek words, life-sentenced to the dustiness of classrooms, relegated to the aerie-like confines of the Ivory Tower or cinder-block facsimiles thereof: the mad-discipline in the attic—or on the very edge of campus.

This manifesto calls not so much for revolution as for evolution, or at least reform: a reenvisioning of what writers and scholars, producers of ideas and creators of new knowledge, ought to be doing and ought to be teaching others. It also calls for you, the writer, to do something perhaps a little different from what you've previously been taught.

“Argument” and “imagination” are not usually conjoined, but doing so infuses written argument with energy and value. You as the writer need not only imagine an audience but imagine what kinds of questions that audience might raise. You also need to imagine what does not at present exist: an idea that emerges from within yourself, and that would therefore be different from

anything else yet written or thought, as different as each individual is from every other. And further, if such a process takes place, you will find yourself acknowledging and taking into account the viewpoints of others. This process, I'm arguing here, will advance knowledge as it enhances your own understanding. In addition, it's a process that values and validates the individual as he or she emerges within a context of a larger, projected audience—the group to which that individual speaks, and whose influence constrains, limits, and at the same time engenders the creativity of the solitary mind.

The organizing idea behind this volume is not just the argument but the “imaginative argument.” Look up “imaginative argument” in a search engine—all of the hits use the term as if it were an absolute, a summum bonum. And yet imaginativeness is oh-so-rarely taught in conjunction with argument. I make the case in the following pages that you as a writer should attempt to form not just an argument about an issue, a text, a situation, but an *imaginative* argument—one that perhaps has not been offered many times before, one that could involve a new use of language or ideas, one that might even employ a novel range or mix of source materials, what I later call a “new-write” or “newrite.” Or something else—really, who knows what?—it's imaginative, hence unforeseeable. And you are not doing this just to be weird and ornery; rather, you are trying to see the issue in an innovative way—a way that will be interesting, partly because it's unexpected, but at the same time graspable and credible because it is offered in a formal, fair-minded, logically structured manner.

Here's how I would characterize the status quo: you, the proverbial student in the chair, do not want to write argument. You do not want to risk statements that could be attacked, refuted, made mockery of—or even to make strong assertions that might provide a point of vulnerability. And your timidity is not a surface timidity: it goes as deeply into your mind as it does into your educational past. You've been schooled to tread the paper-paved path of least resistance; to repeat ideas that you've been indoctrinated with; to parrot the language of authorities you supposedly value—but rarely to approach a problem from a fresh,

vital vantage point, or even look at it through a quirkily inventive, eccentric optic.

Yet this stifles an important intellectual endeavor: figuring out what you genuinely feel and think about something. Don't just try to anticipate what others might want you to think—or even what people you respect and admire might themselves think or want you to think. Determine your own angle, your own true beliefs. Use some ingenuity. It is not easy to say what you think or feel about complex issues, at least not in a clear and comprehensible manner. If it were, they wouldn't be complex issues. In a way, writing argument consists of looking at evidence that supports both what attracts you about something and what you might find confusing, elusive, repulsive. It consists of trying to figure out, as you sort through contradictory evidence, what matters—not just to you, but to an audience as interested, as invested, as passionate as you are.

I admit that against me stands a long and still flourishing tradition of repeating the already-established and oft-reiterated. Indeed, much of our educational system envisions the dispensing of such truth—"facts"—as its primary goal. Charles Dickens's famous pedagogue from *Hard Times*, Thomas Gradgrind, embodies this teaching philosophy:

"Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else." (1)

Dickens has created a caricature here, of course. But now 150 years later, many people still believe in a Gradgrindian educational philosophy. Recently, when I was team-teaching a course on political theory, I was asked to lecture about writing. I basically presented (in vastly compressed form) what follows in this volume you are now holding. I explained how it was necessary to have not just an argument but an imaginative argument; how my auditors needed to form their own ideas and make their own judgments; how they needed to see the texts as being ones that spoke to them as those texts spoke from a remote past; how each generation, indeed, each individual, must come to terms with those texts and must argue why those terms matter to an

audience. The professor in charge of the course, who had been looking uncomfortable for the entire eight minutes I was speaking, stood up quickly at the bell. She said, “Yes, yes, that’s all true. But we also want to make sure that in your papers it’s clear that you *got it*.” What she wanted was ingestion and regurgitation of received ideas—and ocular proof thereof.

I know that many institutions within our culture strongly resist change, do not encourage Doubting Thomas figures, and demand, instead, just grateful acceptance. Seventeenth-century Irish poet John Denham wrote a couplet characterizing this position—the exact opposite to my own—and in the mid-nineteenth century, the grammarian Gould Brown quotes Denham with approbation:

Those who have dealt most in philological controversy have well illustrated the couplet of Denham:

The Tree of Knowledge, blasted by disputes
Produces sapless leaves in stead of fruits. (iii)

For Denham, as for Brown, the facts of knowledge are inviolate—only damaged by debate; undermined, rendered lifeless or sterile by “gainsayers.” Denham suggests here (and elsewhere in the 1668 poem “The Progress of Learning” Brown quotes from) that controversy weakens any understanding of divine creation, fatally blights “The Tree of Knowledge.” Disputatiousness “blasts” away its beauty and wonder. Instead of having something we can hold on to, eat from, benefit from, we have a ravaged tree, on its way toward death. (This is an example, by the way, of the logical fallacy called a “faulty analogy.” I will discuss logical fallacies in some detail in Chapter 12.) In short, Denham and Brown make a plea for the value of knowledge unencumbered by debate and controversy. Just ingest it and be happy. Or just ingest it.

This quasi-Gradgrindian conception of knowledge not only informs the philosophy of many teachers today (who want to make sure that you’ve “*got it*”) but generally appeals to authority figures because it allows them to claim that authority as unimpeachable. I’d argue that when authority figures take this posi-

tion, you probably have good reason to distrust them, whether they be teachers or writers, the media or the Supreme Court, your favorite website or presidential candidates. To squelch discussion and debate limits freedom of thought, limits freedom. Gould Brown evidently wanted just that kind of unimpeachable authority, writing for an audience that he felt needed to know the precepts—the “facts”—of English grammar, rather than all the anxiety-provoking controversies surrounding those precepts (probably my erstwhile political theorist colleague felt the same about her role in our class).

By contrast, I expect a little more than “facts.” The genre of argument demands more than just evidence that you as students “got it”—since the facts themselves often need to be argued for, or are under some dispute, and the “truth,” the “it” (of “got it”)—a notoriously slippery entity—eludes, gambols, dances away at the touch of an eyebeam or the utterance of a single remark. Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing in 1838, has a contemporary conception of the “truth.” He writes in “Literary Ethics”:

Truth is such a flyaway, such a slyboots, so untransportable and unbarrelable a commodity, that it is as bad to catch as light. Shut the shutters never so quick, to keep all the light in, it is all in vain; it is gone before you can cry, Hold. And so it happens with our philosophy. Translate, collate, distil all the systems, it steads you nothing; for truth will not be compelled, in any mechanical manner. But the first observation you make, in the sincere act of your nature, though on the veriest trifle, may open a new view of nature and of man, that, like a menstruum, shall dissolve all theories in it; shall take up Greece, Rome, Stoicism, Eclecticism, and what not, as mere data and food for analysis, and dispose of your world-containing system, as a very little unit. A profound thought, anywhere, classifies all things: a profound thought will lift Olympus. (103–4)

The “it” of “got it” must be captured, coaxed, looked at from many angles, and possibly unmasked. Truth consists not so much of an “it,” or of “facts,” as of propositions based on observation,

but which need to be defended and proven—within a certain intellectual context—to subsume and classify antecedent ideas.

Although this is not the place to enter the debate about the relative nature of truth, it's important to question and think about how truths are arrived at. Lewis Carroll contends, in a memorable exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty, that the powerful people make the truth, and can make words mean whatever they want them to mean:

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.” (274)

I know this might at first appear sinister, but I see it in a positive way. The power that Humpty alludes to can reside within you as the writer: you are master. You can persuade others of your position, even though you do not have billions of dollars, or enormous influence in the media, or a job in the White House’s West Wing. You can establish a truth via arguing for it. It’s hard work, and you can’t convince everybody. But you can try.

Establishing a truth involves negotiating its terms; it involves other minds, other subjectivities. Is there a truth “out there” that you can “discover”? Maybe, maybe not. As Wallace Stevens writes, “Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.” When did we first hear of the “the” in “the truth,” which implies that there is only one? Surely there are many. But just because there might be no eternal truth—or if there is, it’s ever-elusive—this doesn’t mean we all live in solipsistic, subjective, closed-off universes, either, worlds where we just make up whatever we want. Indeed, while our subjectivities are rarely congruent, they surprisingly often overlap, intersect, or asymptotically approach each other. Your job as a writer is to push the borders of your own subjectivity in the direction of others, just as you simultaneously determine where others’ subjective worlds touch, overlap, and

impinge on your own. I can't promise you that the truth you discover will be apodictic or eternal, or even that all these subjectivities neatly interlock, but your argument, your work, if it's been done honestly and thoroughly—or “sincerely,” as Emerson suggests—will have the capacity to make an impact and effect change on others, on you, on your world.

A very fundamental human act undergirds and empowers this activity of arguing for truth. It's one that you see in children all the time, one that might even be annoying: the relentless asking of questions. Just as a child might ask again and again, “Why?” until an adult finally shushes him or her with a “Because that's the way it works,” or “Just because. Now leave me alone!” so you as thinkers and writers should be asking question upon question. If you are perpetually curious, your questions will help you understand, assess, contextualize, make sense of a given situation, a given idea, text, or topic. And these questions should reach outward—“What have others asked and said?”—at the same time that they should delve within: “How do I feel about this?” “What do I really think?” Questioning allows you to open yourself to possibilities—an action that characterizes genuinely creative thought.

“Opening yourself” means that you must scrutinize, if you can, your preconceptions, your closely held beliefs, even your notions of good and bad, of saintly and evil, of right and wrong. You shouldn't let these notions ossify into hardened cerebral monuments, though. You should be constantly interrogating them, problematizing them—at least in your writing, if not in your life. In the process of asking questions, provided that they really probe the issues, you suddenly recognize your personal stake in the topic. No longer is writing about x or y a dry—or for that matter a wet, perspiration-inducing—academic exercise, but rather a way of discovering and inventing your “take” about something—and then it's an occasion to share that with others. It's an opportunity to transform their subjective worlds as you define and reshape your own.

What follows here is a book about how to make arguments, how to structure them in formal writing, and how to use your

language to make them vivid, memorable, striking, and forceful. It's not just meant to set out some rules that can be followed like formulas or flowcharts. Yet I hope it's a book that inspires you to want to write argument *because argument matters*. It's a book about creativity, a book about how to identify and imagine a present and a future audience for one's ideas.

Let me offer this manifesto-like assertion, which I'm hoping will be as applicable a hundred years hence as it was a hundred years ago, or as it is today: cherish your curiosity, your individual insight—even if it hurts. To adopt an argumentative way of thought is to be intellectually alive, constantly wondering; yet it's tantamount to existing in a realm of provisionality and uncertainty, to seething, almost to enduring a kind of disease. I know this is more than merely unsettling, especially since such a contingency has become an essential part of our worldview. Playwright Tom Stoppard succinctly captures this idea in his 1972 play *Jumpers*: “Copernicus cracked our confidence and Einstein smashed it: for if one can no longer believe that a twelve-inch ruler is always a foot long, how can one be sure of relatively less certain propositions, such as that God made the Heaven and the Earth?” (74). When our own confidence is cracked, it augurs loss; it provokes instability, anxiety, even alarm. That's in part why you hate to make arguments. Making arguments puts everyone under pressure. That's why many teachers adopt Gradgrind's philosophy and why so many of you remain rooted to your chairs, listening to and maybe absorbing the “facts,” maybe not.

But let's join Stoppard and abandon “confidence.” Instead, look toward anxiety as a tool for thought. Anxiety has a bad reputation, but anxiety about the way things work, about the way things seem to be, about how to explain a book, a person, or a universe—forms the basis for writing argument, for creating new knowledge. I wanted to write that all the important new knowledge—the new discoveries, breakthroughs, and inventions—are still to come, are yet to emerge in a distant if hazy future. I'm just not sure that's true. It might be. But think about the future, for it is your writing that will help create it, and before you can create it, you must challenge not only the present but your own capacity to supersede it.



The chapters that follow—on audience, invention, the thesis, the writing process, research, style—all strive to persuade you that having an argument is necessary, but not quite sufficient; good, but not quite good enough. You have to have an *imaginative* argument. Chapter 1 defines the genre and differentiates it from other nonfiction writing. Chapter 2, on audience, suggests that as you envision your audience, you simultaneously create it by offering readers not what they expect but what they really want: new knowledge. Chapter 3, on the writing process, strives to show how one must actively work toward creation of an essay of the kind being suggested: it's not something that emerges, Athena-like, whole from one's brain; it must be thought about, imagined, tested out, revised. Chapter 4, which covers the idea of thesis, lays out conventional thesis strategies and shows how these often function as only "pseudo-theses"—and as such are deficient. By contrast, the truly argumentative thesis is more potentiality than actuality—and serves to open up new areas of questioning. Chapter 5 examines how to develop your paper, and Chapter 6 discusses the research paper, especially as it has transformed in the digital age. Chapter 7 explores the paragraph—a "paper in miniature." Chapters 8 and 9 look at "creative" or nonstandard forms of discursive essay, and Chapter 10 presents "streamwriting" as a method of composing and a way to figure out your own ideas. Chapter 11 discusses the oft-dreaded and arduous process of rewriting.

Chapters 12 and 13 stress the need to say things in an imaginative and forceful—yet at the same time scrupulously honest—way. Chapter 12, for example, covers some figures of speech and demonstrates how to use various rhetorical patterns in order to give your language greater impact. It also lays out logical fallacies, ways of "cheating at argument" that I suggest you learn to recognize in others and avoid in your own work—they should not be used by responsible writers. Their use in fact represents, at best, intellectual complaisance; at worst, a demented version of imagination. Chapter 13, on style, offers ways to craft a distinctive, interesting style, including both prohibitions and

suggestions. I provide twelve brief snippets of essays by renowned stylists and show what makes them worthy of inclusion—worthy of awe. In two concluding chapters (Chapters 14 and 15), I discuss argument in this digital era, and the need to avoid repeating the already out-there. Finally, I urge you to embrace a version of fuzzy logic that I call “fuzzy subjectivity”—a new way of thinking and imagining that has the capacity to effect change.