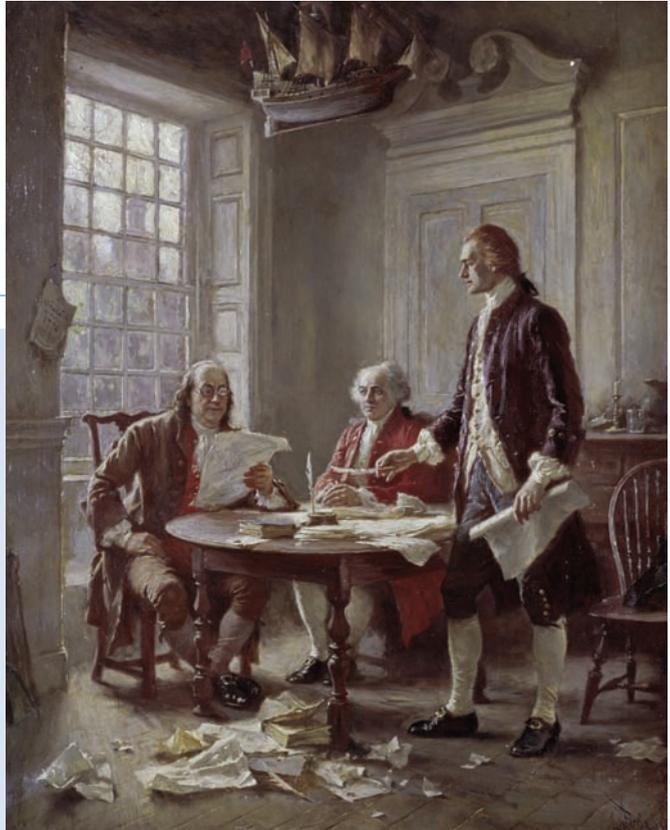


Writing Effective Arguments

READ: Who are the figures in the painting? What are they doing?

REASON: What details in the painting help to date the scene?

REFLECT/WRITE: What is significant about the moment captured in this painting?



The basics of good writing remain much the same for works as seemingly different as the personal essay, the argument, and the researched essay. Good writing is focused, organized, and concrete. Effective essays are written in a style and tone that are suited to both the audience and the writer's purpose. These are sound principles, all well known to you. But how, exactly, do you achieve them when writing argument? This chapter will help you answer that question.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Too often students plunge into writing without thinking much about audience, for, after all, their “audience” is only the instructor who has given the assignment, and their purpose is to complete the assignment and get a grade. These views of audience and purpose are likely to lead to badly written arguments. First, if you are not thinking about readers who may disagree with you, you may not develop the best defense of your claim. Second, you may ignore your essay's needed introductory material on the assumption that the instructor, knowing the assignment, has a context for understanding your writing. To avoid these pitfalls, use the following questions to sharpen your understanding of audience.

Who Is My Audience?

If you are writing an essay for the student newspaper, your audience consists—primarily—of students, but do not forget that faculty and administrators also read the student newspaper. If you are preparing a letter-to-the-editor refutation of a recent column in your town's newspaper, your audience will be the readers of that newspaper—that is, adults in your town. Some instructors give assignments that create an audience such as those just described so that you will practice writing with a specific audience in mind.

If you are not assigned a specific audience, imagine your classmates, as well as your instructor, as part of your audience. In other words, you are writing to readers in the academic community. These readers are intelligent and thoughtful, expecting sound reasoning and convincing evidence. From diverse cultures and experiences, these readers also represent varied values and beliefs. Do not confuse the shared expectations of writing conventions with shared beliefs.

What Will My Audience Know about My Topic?

What can you expect a diverse group of readers to know? Whether you are writing on a current issue or a centuries-old debate, you must expect most readers to have some knowledge of the issues. Their knowledge does not free you from the responsibility of developing your support fully, though. In fact, their knowledge creates further demands. For example, most readers know

the main arguments on both sides of the abortion issue. For you to write as if they do not—and thus to ignore the arguments of the opposition—is to produce an argument that probably adds little to the debate on the subject.

On the other hand, what some readers “know” may be little more than an overview of the issues from TV news—or the emotional outbursts of a family member. Some readers may be misinformed or prejudiced, but they embrace their views enthusiastically nonetheless. So, as you think about the ways to develop and support your argument, you will have to assess your readers’ knowledge and sophistication. This assessment will help you decide how much background information to provide or what false facts need to be revealed and dismissed.

Where Does My Audience Stand on the Issue?

Expect readers to hold a range of views, even if you are writing to students on your campus or to an organization of which you are a member. It is not true, for instance, that all students want coed dorms or pass/fail grading. And, if everyone already agrees with you, you have no reason to write. An argument needs to be about a topic that is open to debate. So:

- Assume that some of your audience will probably never agree with you but may offer you grudging respect if you compose an effective argument.
- Assume that some readers do not hold strong views on your topic and may be open to convincing, if you present a good case.
- Assume that those who share your views will still be looking for a strong argument in support of their position.
- Assume that if you hold an unpopular position your best strategy will be a conciliatory approach. (See p. 103 for a discussion of the conciliatory argument.)

How Should I Speak to My Audience?

Your audience will form an opinion of you based on how you write and how you reason. The image of argument—and the arguer—that we have been creating in this text’s discussion is of thoughtful claims defended with logic and evidence. However, the heated debate at yesterday’s lunch does not resemble this image of argument. Sometimes the word *persuasion* is used to separate the emotionally charged debate from the calm, intellectual tone of the academic argument. Unfortunately, this neat division between argument and persuasion does not describe the real world of debate. The thoughtful arguer also wants to be persuasive, and highly emotional presentations can contain relevant facts in support of a sound idea. Instead of thinking of two separate categories—argument and persuasion—think instead of a continuum from the most rigorous logic to extreme flights of fantasy. Figure 4.1 suggests this continuum with some kinds of arguments placed along it.

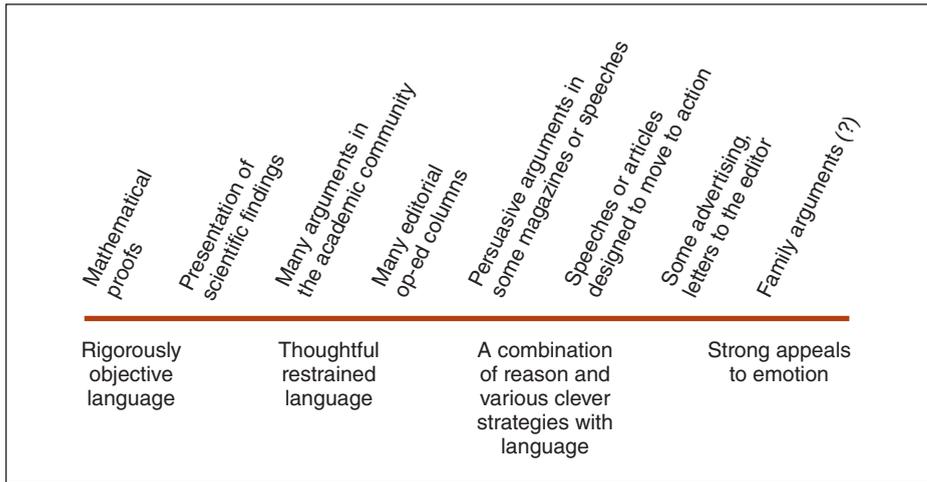


FIGURE 4.1 A Continuum of Argumentative Language

Where should you place yourself along this continuum of language? You will have to answer this question with each specific writing context. Much of the time you will choose “thoughtful, restrained language” as expected by the academic community, but there may be times that you will use various persuasive strategies. Probably you will not select “strong appeals to emotion” for your college or workplace writing. Remember that you have different roles in your life, and you use different *voices* as appropriate to each role. Most of the time, you will want to use the serious voice you normally select for serious conversations with other adults. This is the voice that will help you establish your credibility, your *ethos*.

As you learned in Chapter 2, irony is a useful rhetorical strategy for giving one’s words greater emphasis by actually writing the opposite of what you mean. Many writers use irony effectively. Irony catches our attention, makes us think, and engages us with the text. Sarcasm is not quite the same as irony. Irony can cleverly focus on life’s complexities. Sarcasm is more often vicious than insightful, relying on harsh, negative word choice. Probably in most of your academic work, you will want to avoid sarcasm and think carefully about using any strongly worded appeal to your readers’ emotions. Better to persuade your audience with the force of your reasons and evidence than to lose them because of the static of nasty language. But the key, always, is to know your audience and understand how best to present a convincing argument to that specific group.

UNDERSTAND YOUR WRITING PURPOSE

There are many types or genres of argument and different reasons for writing—beyond wanting to write convincingly in defense of your views. Different types of arguments require different approaches, or different kinds of evidence. It helps to be able to recognize the kind of argument you are contemplating.

What Type (Genre) of Argument Am I Preparing?

Here are some useful ways to classify arguments and think about their support.

- **Investigative paper similar to those in the social sciences.** If you are asked to collect evidence in an organized way to support a claim about advertising strategies or violence in children’s TV programming, then you will be writing an investigative essay. You will present evidence that you have gathered and analyzed to support your claim.
- **Evaluation.** If your assignment is to explain why others should read a particular book or take a particular professor’s class, then you will be preparing an evaluation argument. Be sure to think about your criteria: What makes a book or a professor good? Why do you dislike Lady Gaga? Is it her music—or her lifestyle?
- **Definition.** If you are asked to explain the meaning of a general or controversial term, you will be writing a definition argument. What do we mean by *wisdom*? What are the characteristics of *cool*? A definition argument usually requires both specific details to illustrate the term and general ideas to express its meaning.
- **Claim of values.** If you are given the assignment to argue for your position on euthanasia, trying juveniles as adults, or the use of national identification cards, recognize that your assignment calls for a position paper, a claim based heavily on values. Pay close attention to your warrants or assumptions in any philosophical debate.
- **Claim of policy.** If you are given a broad topic: “What should we do about _____?” and you have to fill in the blank, your task is to offer solutions to a current problem. What should we do about childhood obesity? About home foreclosures? These kinds of questions are less philosophical and more practical. Your solutions must be workable.
- **Refutation or rebuttal.** If you are given the assignment to find a letter to the editor, a newspaper editorial, or an essay in this text with which you disagree, your job is to write a refutation essay, a specific challenge to a specific argument. You know, then, that you will repeatedly refer to the work you are rebutting, so you will need to know it thoroughly.

What Is My Goal?

It is also helpful to consider your goal in writing. Does your topic call for a strong statement of views (i.e., “These are the steps we must take to reduce childhood obesity”)? Or, is your goal an exploratory one, a thinking through of possible answers to a more philosophical question (“Why is it often difficult to separate performance from personality when we evaluate a star?”)? Thinking about your goal as well as the argument’s genre will help to decide on the kinds of evidence needed and on the approach to take and tone to select.

Will the Rogerian or Conciliatory Approach Work for Me?

Psychologist Carl Rogers asserts that the most successful arguments take a conciliatory approach. The characteristics of this approach include

- showing respect for the opposition in the language and tone of the argument,
- seeking common ground by indicating specific facts and values that both sides share, and
- qualifying the claim to bring opposing sides more closely together.

In their essay “Euthanasia—A Critique,” authors Peter A. Singer and Mark Siegler provide a good example of a conciliatory approach. They begin their essay by explaining and then rebutting the two main arguments in favor of euthanasia. After stating the two arguments in clear and neutral language, they write this in response to the first argument:

We agree that the relief of pain and suffering is a crucial goal of medicine. We question, however, whether the care of dying patients cannot be improved without resorting to the drastic measure of euthanasia. Most physical pain can be relieved with the appropriate use of analgesic agents. Unfortunately, despite widespread agreement that dying patients must be provided with necessary analgesia, physicians continue to underuse analgesia in the care of dying patients because of the concern about depressing respiratory drive or creating addiction. Such situations demand better management of pain, not euthanasia.

In this paragraph the authors accept the value of pain management for dying patients. They go even further and offer a solution to the problem of suffering among the terminally ill—better pain management by doctors. They remain thoughtful in their approach and tone throughout, while sticking to their position that legalizing euthanasia is not the solution.

Consider how you can use the conciliatory approach to write more effective arguments. It will help you avoid “overheated” language and maintain your focus on what is doable in a world of differing points of view. There is the expression that “you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” Using “honey” instead of “vinegar” might also make you feel better about yourself.

MOVE FROM TOPIC TO CLAIM TO POSSIBLE SUPPORT

When you write a letter to the editor of a newspaper, you have chosen to respond to someone else’s argument that has bothered you. In this writing context, you already know your topic and, probably, your claim as well. You also know that your purpose will be to refute the article you have read. In composition classes, the context is not always so clearly established, but you will usually be given some guidelines with which to get started.

Selecting a Topic

Suppose that you are asked to write an argument that is in some way connected to First Amendment rights. Your instructor has limited and focused your topic choice and purpose. Start thinking about possible topics that relate to freedom of speech and censorship issues. To aid your topic search and selection, use one or more invention strategies:

- Brainstorm (make a list).
- Freewrite (write without stopping for ten minutes).
- Map or cluster (connect ideas to the general topic in various spokes, a kind of visual brainstorming).
- Read through this text for ideas.

Your invention strategies lead, let us suppose, to the following list of possible topics:

Administrative restrictions on the college newspaper
 Hate speech restrictions or codes
 Deleting certain books from high school reading lists
 Controls and limits on alcohol and cigarette advertising
 Restrictions on violent TV programming
 Dress codes/uniforms

Looking over your list, you realize that the last item, dress codes/uniforms, may be about freedom but not freedom of speech, so you drop it from consideration. All of the other topics have promise. Which one do you select? Two considerations should guide you: interest and knowledge. First, your argument is likely to be more thoughtful and lively if you choose an issue that matters to you. But, unless you have time for study, you are wise to choose a topic about which you already have some information and ideas. Suppose that you decide to write about television violence because you are concerned about violence in American society and have given this issue some thought. It is time to phrase your topic as a tentative thesis or claim.

Drafting a Claim

Good claim statements will keep you focused in your writing—in addition to establishing your main idea for readers. Give thought both to your position on the issue and to the wording of your claim. *Claim statements to avoid:*

- Claims using vague words such as *good* or *bad*.

VAGUE:	TV violence is bad for us.
BETTER:	We need more restrictions on violent TV programming.
- Claims in loosely worded “two-part” sentences.

UNFOCUSED:	Campus rape is a serious problem, and we need to do something about it.
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BETTER: College administrators and students need to work together to reduce both the number of campus rapes and the fear of rape.

- Claims that are not appropriately qualified.

OVERSTATED: Violence on television is making us a violent society.

BETTER: TV violence is contributing to viewers' increased fear of violence and insensitivity to violence.

- Claims that do not help you focus on your purpose in writing.

UNCLEAR PURPOSE: Not everyone agrees on what is meant by violent TV programming.

(Perhaps this is true, but more important, this claim suggests that you will define violent programming. Such an approach would not keep you focused on a First Amendment issue.)

BETTER: Restrictions on violent TV programs can be justified.

(Now your claim directs you to the debate over restrictions of content.)

Listing Possible Grounds

As you learned in Chapter 3, you can generate grounds to support a claim by adding a “because” clause after a claim statement. We can start a list of grounds for the topic on violent TV programming in this way:

We need more restrictions on violent television programming *because*

- Many people, including children and teens, watch many hours of TV (get stats).
- People are affected by the dominant activities/experiences in their lives.
- There is a connection between violent programming and desensitizing and fear of violence and possibly more aggressive behavior in heavy viewers (get detail of studies).
- Society needs to protect young people.

You have four good points to work on, a combination of reasons and inferences drawn from evidence.

Listing Grounds for the Other Side or Another Perspective

Remember that arguments generate counterarguments. Continue your exploration of this topic by considering possible rebuttals to your proposed grounds. How might someone who does not want to see restrictions placed on television programming respond to each of your points? Let's think about them one at a time:

We need more restrictions on violent television programming because

1. *Many people, including children and teens, watch many hours of TV.*

Your opposition cannot really challenge your first point on the facts, only its relevance to restricting programming. The opposition might argue that if

parents think their children are watching too much TV, they should turn it off. The restriction needs to be a family decision.

2. *People are affected by the dominant activities/experiences in their lives.*

It seems common sense to expect people to be influenced by dominant forces in their lives. Your opposition might argue, though, that many people have the TV on for many hours but often are not watching it intently for all of that time. The more dominant forces in our lives are parents and teachers and peers, not the TV. The opposition might also argue that people seem to be influenced to such different degrees by television that it is not fair or logical to restrict everyone when perhaps only a few are truly influenced by their TV viewing to a harmful degree.

3. *There is a connection between violent programming and desensitizing and fear of violence and possibly more aggressive behavior in heavy viewers.*

Some people are entirely convinced by studies showing these negative effects of violent TV programming, but others point to the less convincing studies or make the argument that if violence on TV were really so powerful an influence, most people would be violent or fearful or desensitized.

4. *Society needs to protect young people.*

Your opposition might choose to agree with you in theory on this point—and then turn again to the argument that parents should be doing the protecting. Government controls on programming restrict adults, as well as children, whereas it may only be some children who should watch fewer hours of TV and not watch adult “cop” shows at all.

Working through this process of considering opposing views can help you see

- where you may want to do some research for facts to provide backing for your grounds,
- how you can best develop your reasons to take account of typical counter-arguments, and
- if you should qualify your claim in some ways.

Planning Your Approach

Now that you have thought about arguments on the other side, you decide that you want to argue for a qualified claim that is also more precise:

To protect young viewers, we need restrictions on violence in children’s programs and ratings for prime-time adult shows that clearly establish the degree of violence in those shows.

This qualified claim responds to two points of the rebuttals. Our student hasn’t given in to the other side but has chosen to narrow the argument to emphasize the protection of children, an area of common ground.

Next, it’s time to check some of the articles in this text or go online to get some data to develop points 1 and 3. You need to know that 99 percent of homes

have at least one TV; you need to know that by the time young people graduate from high school, they have spent more time in front of the TV than in the classroom. Also, you can find the average number of violent acts by hour of TV in children's programs. Then, too, there are the various studies of fearfulness and aggressive behavior that will give you some statistics to use to develop the third point. Be sure to select reliable sources and then cite the sources you use. *Citing sources is not only required and right; it is also part of the process of establishing your credibility and thus strengthening your argument.*

Finally, how are you going to answer the point about parents controlling their children? You might counter that in theory this is the way it should be—but in fact not all parents are at home watching what their children are watching, and not all parents care enough to pay attention. However, all of us suffer from the consequences of those children who are influenced by their TV watching to become more aggressive or fearful or desensitized. These children grow up to become the adults the rest of us have to interact with, so the problem becomes one for the society as a whole to solve. If you had not disciplined yourself to go through the process of listing possible rebuttals, you may not have thought through this part of the debate.

DRAFT YOUR ARGUMENT

Many of us can benefit from a step-by-step process of invention—such as we have been exploring in the last few pages. In addition, the more notes you have from working through the Toulmin structure, the easier it will be to get started on your draft. Students report that they can control their writing anxiety when they generate detailed notes. A page of notes that also suggests an organizational strategy can remove that awful feeling of staring at a blank computer screen.

In the following chapters on argument, you will find specific suggestions for organizing the various kinds of arguments. But you can always rely on one of these two basic organizations, regardless of the specific genre:

PLAN 1: ORGANIZING AN ARGUMENT

- Attention-getting opening (why the issue is important, or current, etc.)
- Claim statement
- Reasons and evidence in order from least important to most important
- Challenge to potential rebuttals or counterarguments
- Conclusion that reemphasizes claim

PLAN 2: ORGANIZING AN ARGUMENT

- Attention-getting opening
- Claim statement (or possibly leave to the conclusion)
- Order by arguments of opposing position, with your challenge to each
- Conclusion that reemphasizes (or states for the first time) your claim

GUIDELINES for Drafting

- **Try to get a complete draft in one sitting so that you can “see” the whole piece.**
- **If you can’t think of a clever opening, state your claim and move on to the body of your essay.** After you draft your reasons and evidence, a good opening may occur to you.
- **If you find that you need something more in some parts of your essay, leave space there as a reminder that you will need to return to that paragraph later.**
- **Try to avoid using either a dictionary or thesaurus while drafting.** Your goal is to get the ideas down. You will polish later.
- **Learn to draft at your computer.** Revising is so much easier that you will be more willing to make significant changes if you work at your PC. If you are handwriting your draft, leave plenty of margin space for additions or for directions to shift parts around.

REVISE YOUR DRAFT

If you have drafted at the computer, begin revising by printing a copy of your draft. Most of us cannot do an adequate job of revision by looking at a computer screen. Then remind yourself that revision is a three-step process: rewriting, editing, and proofreading.

Rewriting

You are not ready to polish the writing until you are satisfied with the argument. Look first at the total piece. Do you have all the necessary parts: a claim, support, some response to possible counterarguments? Examine the order of your reasons and evidence. Do some of your points belong, logically, in a different place? Does the order make the most powerful defense of your claim? Be willing to move whole paragraphs around to test the best organization. Also reflect on the argument itself. Have you avoided logical fallacies? Have you qualified statements when appropriate? Do you have enough support? The best support?

Consider development: Is your essay long enough to meet assignment requirements? Are points fully developed to satisfy the demands of readers? One key to development is the length of your paragraphs. If most of your paragraphs are only two or three sentences, you have not developed the point of each paragraph satisfactorily. It is possible that some paragraphs need to be combined because they are really on the same topic. More typically, short paragraphs need further explanation of ideas or examples to illustrate ideas. Compare the following paragraphs for effectiveness:

First Draft of a Paragraph from an Essay on Gun Control

One popular argument used against the regulation of gun ownership is the need of citizens, especially in urban areas where the crime rate is higher;

to possess a handgun for personal protection, either carried or kept in the home. Some citizens may not be aware of the dangers to themselves or their families when they purchase a gun. Others, more aware, may embrace the myth that “bad things only happen to other people.”

Revised Version of the Paragraph with Statistics Added

One popular argument used against the regulation of gun ownership is the need of citizens, especially in urban areas where the crime rate is higher, to possess a handgun for personal protection, whether it is carried or kept in the home. Although some citizens may not be aware of the dangers to themselves or their families when they purchase a gun, they should be. According to the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, from their web page “Firearm Facts,” “guns that are kept in the home for self-protection are 22 times more likely to kill a family member or friend than to kill in self-defense.” The Center also reports that guns in the home make homicide three times more likely and suicide five times more likely. We are not thinking straight if we believe that these dangers apply only to others.

A quick trip to the Internet has provided this student with some facts to support his argument. Observe how he has referred informally but fully to the source of his information. (If your instructor requires formal MLA documentation in all essays, then you will need to add a Works Cited page and give a full reference to the website. See pp. 318–329.)

Editing

Make your changes, print another copy, and begin the second phase of revision: editing. As you read through this time, pay close attention to unity and coherence, to sentence patterns, and to word choice. Read each paragraph as a separate unit to be certain that everything is on the same subtopic. Then look at your use of transition and connecting words, both within and between paragraphs. Ask yourself: Have you guided the reader through the argument using appropriate connectors such as *therefore*, *in addition*, *as a consequence*, *also*, and so forth?

Read again, focusing on each sentence, checking to see that you have varied sentence patterns and length. Read sentences aloud to let your ear help you find awkward constructions or unfinished thoughts. Strive as well for word choice that is concrete and specific, avoiding wordiness, clichés, trite expressions, or incorrect use of specialized terms. Observe how Samantha edited one paragraph in her essay “Balancing Work and Family”:

Draft Version of Paragraph

Women have come a long way in equalizing themselves, but inequality within marriages [?] do exist. One reason for this can be found in the media. Just last week America turned on their televisions to watch a grotesque dramatization of skewed priorities. On *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire*, a panel of ^{agr} inequality

Vague reference.

Wordy.

Short sentences.

Vague reference.

women vied for the affections of a millionaire who would choose one of them to be his wife. This show said that women can be purchased. Also that men must provide and that money is worth the sacrifice of one's individuality. The show also suggests that physical attraction is more important than the building of a complete relationship. Finally, the show says that women's true value lies in their appearance. This is a dangerous message to send to both men and women viewers.

Edited Version of Paragraph

Although women have come a long way toward equality in the workplace, inequality within marriages can still be found. The media may be partly to blame for this continued inequality. Just last week Americans watched a grotesque dramatization of skewed priorities. On *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire*, a panel of women vied for the affections of a millionaire who would choose one of them to be his wife. Such displays teach us that women can be purchased, that men must be the providers, that the desire for money is worth the sacrifice of one's individuality, that physical attraction is more important than a complete relationship, and that women's true value lies in their appearance. These messages discourage marriages based on equality and mutual support.

Samantha's editing has eliminated wordiness and vague references and has combined ideas into one forceful sentence. Support your good argument by taking the time to polish your writing.

A Few Words about Words and Tone

You have just been advised to check your word choice to eliminate wordiness, vagueness, clichés, and so on. Here is a specific checklist of problems often found in student papers with some ways to fix the problems:

- *Eliminate clichés.* Do not write about "the fast-paced world we live in today" or the "rat race." First, do you know for sure that the pace of life for someone who has a demanding job is any faster than it was in the past? Using time effectively has always mattered. Also, clichés suggest that you are too lazy to find your own words.
- *Avoid jargon.* In the negative sense of this word, *jargon* refers to non-specialists who fill their writing with "heavy-sounding terms" to give the appearance of significance. Watch for any overuse of "scientific" terms such as *factor* or *aspect*, or other vague, awkward language.
- *Avoid language that is too informal for most of your writing contexts.* What do you mean when you write: "Kids today watch too much TV"? Alternatives include *children*, *teens*, *adolescents*. These words are less slangy and more precise.
- *Avoid nasty attacks on the opposition.* Change "those jerks who are foolish enough to believe that TV violence has no impact on children" to language that explains your counterargument without attacking those who

may disagree with you. After all, you want to change the thinking of your audience, not make them resent you for name-calling.

- *Avoid all discriminatory language.* In the academic community and the adult workplace, most people are bothered by language that belittles any one group. This includes language that is racist or sexist or reflects negatively on older or disabled persons or those who do not share your sexual orientation or religious beliefs. Just don't do it!

Proofreading

You also do not want to lose the respect of readers because you submit a paper filled with “little” errors—errors in punctuation, mechanics, and incorrect word choice. Most readers will forgive one or two little errors but will become annoyed if they begin to pile up. So, after you are finished rewriting and editing, print a copy of your paper and read it slowly, looking specifically at punctuation, at the handling of quotations and references to writers and to titles, and at those pesky words that come in two or more “versions”: *to, too, and two; here and hear; their, there, and they're*; and so forth. If instructors have found any of these kinds of errors in your papers over the years, then focus your attention on the kinds of errors you have been known to make.

Refer to Chapter 1 for handling references to authors and titles and for handling direct quotations. Use a glossary of usage in a handbook for homonyms (words that sound alike but have different meanings), and check a handbook for punctuation rules. Take pride in your work and present a paper that will be treated with respect. What follows is a checklist of the key points for writing good arguments that we have just examined.

A CHECKLIST FOR REVISION

- Have I selected an issue and purpose consistent with assignment guidelines?
- Have I stated a claim that is focused, appropriately qualified, and precise?
- Have I developed sound reasons and evidence in support of my claim?
- Have I used Toulmin's terms to help me study the parts of my argument, including rebuttals to counterarguments?
- Have I taken advantage of a conciliatory approach and emphasized common ground with opponents?
- Have I found a clear and effective organization for presenting my argument?
- Have I edited my draft thoughtfully, concentrating on producing unified and coherent paragraphs and polished sentences?
- Have I eliminated wordiness, clichés, jargon?
- Have I selected an appropriate tone for my purpose and audience?
- Have I used my word processor's spell-check and proofread a printed copy with great care?

FOR ANALYSIS AND DEBATE

FIVE MYTHS ABOUT TORTURE AND TRUTH

DARIUS REJALI

A professor of political science at Reed College, Iranian-born Darius Rejali is a recognized expert on the causes and meaning of violence, especially on torture, in our world. His book *Torture and Democracy* (2007) has won acclaim and resulted in frequent interview sessions for Rejali. His latest book is *Spirituality and the Ethics of Torture* (2009). The following essay appeared on December 16, 2007, in the *Washington Post*.

PREREADING QUESTIONS Can you think of five myths about torture? What do you expect Rejali to cover in this essay?

- 1 *So the CIA did indeed torture Abu Zubaida, the first al-Qaeda terrorist suspect to have been waterboarded. So says John Kiriakou, the first former CIA employee directly involved in the questioning of "high-value" al-Qaeda detainees to speak out publicly. He minced no words last week in calling the CIA's "enhanced interrogation techniques" what they are.*
- 2 *But did they work? Torture's defenders, including the wannabe tough guys who write Fox's "24," insist that the rough stuff gets results. "It was like flipping a switch," said Kiriakou about Abu Zubaida's response to being waterboarded. But the al-Qaeda operative's confessions—descriptions of fantastic plots from a man who intelligence analysts were convinced was mentally ill—probably didn't give the CIA any actionable intelligence. Of course, we may never know the whole truth, since the CIA destroyed the videotapes of Abu Zubaida's interrogation. But here are some other myths that are bound to come up as the debate over torture rages on.*
- 3 **1. Torture worked for the Gestapo.** Actually, no. Even Hitler's notorious secret police got most of their information from public tips, informers and interagency cooperation. That was still more than enough to let the Gestapo decimate anti-Nazi resistance in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark, Norway, France, Russia and the concentration camps.
- 4 Yes, the Gestapo did torture people for intelligence, especially in later years. But this reflected not torture's efficacy but the loss of many seasoned professionals to World War II, increasingly desperate competition for intelligence among Gestapo units and an influx of less disciplined younger members. (Why do serious, tedious police work when you have a uniform and a whip?) It's surprising how unsuccessful the Gestapo's brutal efforts were. They failed to break senior leaders of the French, Danish, Polish and German resistance. I've spent more than a decade collecting all the cases of Gestapo torture "successes" in multiple languages; the number is small and the results pathetic, especially compared with the devastating effects of public cooperation and informers.
- 5 **2. Everyone talks sooner or later under torture.** Truth is, it's surprisingly hard to get anything under torture, true or false. For example, between 1500

and 1750, French prosecutors tried to torture confessions out of 785 individuals. Torture was legal back then, and the records document such practices as the bone-crushing use of splints, pumping stomachs with water until they swelled and pouring boiling oil on the feet. But the number of prisoners who said anything was low, from 3 percent in Paris to 14 percent in Toulouse (an exceptional high). Most of the time, the torturers were unable to get any statement whatsoever.

And such examples could be multiplied. The Japanese fascists, no strangers to torture, said it best in their field manual, which was found in Burma during World War II: They described torture as the clumsiest possible method of gathering intelligence. Like most sensible torturers, they preferred to use torture for intimidation, not information.

3. People will say anything under torture. Well, no, although this is a favorite chestnut of torture's foes. Think about it: Sure, someone would lie under torture, but wouldn't they also lie if they were being interrogated without coercion?

In fact, the problem of torture does not stem from the prisoner who *has* information; it stems from the prisoner who *doesn't*. Such a person is also likely to lie, to say anything, often convincingly. The torture of the informed may generate no more lies than normal interrogation, but the torture of the ignorant and innocent overwhelms investigators with misleading information. In these cases, nothing is indeed preferable to anything. Anything needs to be verified, and the CIA's own 1963 interrogation manual explains that "a time-consuming delay results"—hardly useful when every moment matters.

Intelligence gathering is especially vulnerable to this problem. When police officers torture, they know what the crime is, and all they want is the confession. When intelligence officers torture, they must gather information about what they don't know.

4. Most people can tell when someone is lying under torture. Not so—and we know quite a bit about this. For about 40 years, psychologists have been testing police officers as well as normal people to see whether they can spot lies, and the results aren't encouraging. Ordinary folk have an accuracy rate of about 57 percent, which is pretty poor considering that 50 percent is the flip of a coin. Likewise, the cops' accuracy rates fall between 45 percent and 65 percent—that is, sometimes less accurate than a coin toss.

Why does this matter? Because even if torturers break a person, they have to recognize it, and most of the time they can't. Torturers assume too much and reject what doesn't fit their assumptions. For instance, Sheila Cassidy, a British physician, cracked under electric-shock torture by the Chilean secret service in the 1970s and identified priests who had helped the country's socialist opposition. But her devout interrogators couldn't believe that priests would ever help the socialists, so they tortured her for another week until they finally became convinced. By that time, she was so damaged that she couldn't remember the location of the safe house.

- 12 In fact, most torturers are nowhere near as well trained for interrogation as police are. Torturers are usually chosen because they've endured hardship and pain, fought with courage, kept secrets, held the right beliefs and earned a reputation as trustworthy and loyal. They often rely on folklore about what lying behavior looks like—shifty eyes, sweaty palms and so on. And, not surprisingly, they make a lot of mistakes.
- 13 **5. You can train people to resist torture.** Supposedly, this is why we can't know what the CIA's "enhanced interrogation techniques" are: If Washington admits that it waterboards suspected terrorists, al-Qaeda will set up "waterboarding-resistance camps" across the world. Be that as it may, the truth is that no training will help the bad guys.
- 14 Simply put, nothing predicts the outcome of one's resistance to pain better than one's own personality. Against some personalities, nothing works; against others, practically anything does. Studies of hundreds of detainees who broke under Soviet and Chinese torture, including Army-funded studies of U.S. prisoners of war, conclude that during, before and after torture, each prisoner displayed strengths and weaknesses dependent on his or her own character. The CIA's own "Human Resources Exploitation Manual" from 1983 and its so-called Kubark manual from 1963 agree. In all matters relating to pain, says Kubark, the "individual remains the determinant."
- 15 The thing that's most clear from torture-victim studies is that you can't train for the ordeal. There is no secret knowledge out there about how to resist torture. Yes, there are manuals, such as the IRA's "Green Book," the anti-Soviet "Manual for Psychiatry for Dissidents" and "Torture and the Interrogation Experience," an Iranian guerrilla manual from the 1970s. But none of these volumes contains specific techniques of resistance, just general encouragement to hang tough. Even al-Qaeda's vaunted terrorist-training manual offers no tips on how to resist torture, and al-Qaeda was no stranger to the brutal methods of the Saudi police.
- 16 And yet these myths persist. "The larger problem here, I think," one active CIA officer observed in 2005, "is that this kind of stuff just makes people feel better, even if it doesn't work."

Source: *Washington Post*, June 28, 2008. Reprinted by permission of the author.

QUESTIONS FOR READING

1. What context for his discussion does the author provide in the opening two paragraphs?
2. What worked better than torture for the Gestapo? What led to an increase in torture in the Gestapo?
3. What do the data show about getting people to speak by torturing them?
4. Who are the people most likely to lie under torture?
5. Why are interrogators not very good at recognizing when the tortured are lying?

QUESTIONS FOR REASONING AND ANALYSIS

6. What structure does the author use? What kind of argument is this?
7. What is Rejali's position on torture, the claim of his argument?
8. What grounds does he present in support of his claim?
9. Describe Rejali's style; how does his style of writing help his argument?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND WRITING

10. Which of the five discussions has surprised you the most? Why?
11. Has the author convinced you that all five myths lack substance? Why or why not? If you disagree, how would you refute Rejali?
12. Why do intelligence and military personnel continue to use harsh interrogation strategies even though the evidence suggests that what, if anything, they learn will not be useful? Ponder this question.

TORTURE IS WRONG—BUT IT MIGHT WORK | M. GREGG BLOCHE

A law professor at Georgetown University, Gregg Bloche is also a physician. His MD and JD degrees are both from Yale University. Bloche specializes in medical ethics, health care law, and human rights law. Widely published, he is the author of *The Hippocratic Myth* (2011). His essay on torture appeared on May 29, 2011.

PREREADING QUESTIONS Has Bloche intrigued you with his title? What do you expect his position to be?

Torture, liberals like me often insist, isn't just immoral, it's ineffective. We like this proposition because it portrays us as protectors of the nation, not wusses willing to risk American lives to protect terrorists. And we love to quote seasoned interrogators' assurances that building rapport with the bad guys will get them to talk.

But the killing of Osama bin Laden four weeks ago has revived the old debate about whether torture works. Could it be that "enhanced interrogation techniques" employed during the George W. Bush administration helped find bin Laden's now-famous courier and track him to the terrorist in chief's now-infamous lair?

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and current administration officials say no. Former attorney general Michael Mukasey and former vice president Dick Cheney say yes.

The idea that waterboarding and other abuses may have been effective in getting information from detainees is repellant to many, including me. It's

contrary to the meme many have embraced: that torture doesn't work because people being abused to the breaking point will say anything to get the brutality to stop—anything they think their accusers want to hear.

5 But this position is at odds with some behavioral science, I've learned. The architects of enhanced interrogation are doctors who built on a still-classified, research-based model that suggests how abuse can indeed work.

6 I've examined the science, studied the available paper trail and interviewed key actors, including several who helped develop the enhanced interrogation program and who haven't spoken publicly before. This inquiry has made it possible to piece together the model that under-girds enhanced interrogation.

7 This model holds that harsh methods can't, by themselves, force terrorists to tell the truth. Brute force, it suggests, stiffens resistance. Rather, the role of abuse is to induce hopelessness and despair. That's what sleep deprivation, stress positions and prolonged isolation were designed to do. Small gestures of contempt—facial slaps and frequent insults—drive home the message of futility. Even the rough stuff, such as "walling" and waterboarding, is meant to dispirit, not to coerce.

8 Once a sense of hopelessness is instilled, the model holds, interrogators can shape behavior through small rewards. Bathroom breaks, reprieves from foul-tasting food and even the occasional kind word can coax broken men to comply with their abusers' expectations.

9 Certainly, interrogators using this approach have obtained false confessions. Chinese interrogators did so intentionally, for propaganda purposes, with American prisoners during the Korean War. McCain and other critics of "torture-lite" cite this precedent to argue that it can't yield reliable information. But the same psychological sequence—induction of hopelessness, followed by rewards to shape compliance—can be used to get terrorism suspects to tell the truth, or so the architects of enhanced interrogation hypothesize.

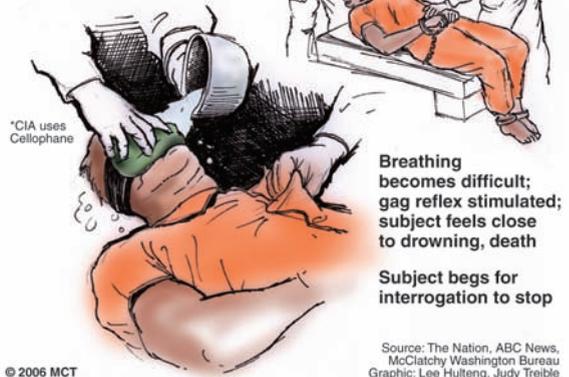
10 Critical to this model is the ability to assess suspects' truthfulness in real time. To this end, CIA interrogators stressed speedy integration of intelligence from all sources. The idea was to frame questions to detect falsehoods; interrogators could then reward honesty and punish deceit.

What is water-boarding?

Water-boarding is a harsh interrogation method that simulates drowning and near death; origins traced to the Spanish Inquisition.

Subject strapped down

Cloth* held tightly over subject's face; water poured onto cloth, over face



Source: The Nation, ABC News, McClatchy Washington Bureau
Graphic: Lee Hulteng, Judy Treible

It's been widely reported that the program was conceived by a former Air Force psychologist, James Mitchell, who had helped oversee the Pentagon's program for training soldiers and airmen to resist torture if captured. That Mitchell became the CIA's maestro of enhanced interrogation and personally water-boarded several prisoners was confirmed in 2009 through the release of previously classified documents. But how Mitchell got involved and why the agency embraced his methods remained a mystery.

The key player was a clinical psychologist turned CIA official, Kirk Hubbard. I learned through interviews with him and others. On the day 19 hijackers bent on mass murder made their place in history, Hubbard's responsibilities at the agency included tracking developments in the behavioral sciences with an eye toward their tactical use. He and Mitchell knew each other through the network of psychologists who do national security work. Just retired from the Air Force, Mitchell figured he could translate what he knew about teaching resistance into a methodology for breaking it. He convinced Hubbard, who introduced him to CIA leaders and coached him through the agency's bureaucratic rivalries.

Journalistic accounts have cast Mitchell as a rogue who won a CIA contract by dint of charisma. What's gone unappreciated is his reliance on a research base. He had studied the medical and psychological literature on how Chinese interrogators extracted false confessions. And he was an admirer of Martin Seligman, the University of Pennsylvania psychologist who had developed the concept of "learned helplessness" and invoked it to explain depression.

Mitchell, it appears, saw connections and seized upon them. The despair that Chinese interrogators tried to instill was akin to learned helplessness. Seligman's induction of learned helplessness in laboratory animals, therefore, could point the way to prison regimens capable of inducing it in people. And—this was Mitchell's biggest conceptual jump—the Chinese way of shaping behavior in prisoners who were reduced to learned helplessness held a broader lesson.

To motivate a captive to comply, a Chinese interrogator established an aura of omnipotence. For weeks or months, the interrogator was his prisoner's sole human connection, with monopoly power to praise, punish and reward. Rapport with the interrogator offered the only escape from despair. This opened possibilities for the sculpting of behavior and belief. For propaganda purposes, the Chinese sought sham confessions. But Mitchell saw that behavioral shaping could be used to pursue other goals, including the extraction of truth.

Did the methods Mitchell devised help end the hunt for bin Laden? Have they prevented terrorist attacks? We'll never know. Not only are counterterrorism operations shrouded in secrecy, but it's impossible to prove or disprove claims that enhanced interrogation works better than other methods when prisoners are intent on saying nothing.

Scientific study of this question would require random sorting of suspects into groups that receive either torture-lite or conventional forms of

interrogation. To frame this inquiry is to show why it can't be carried out: It would violate international law and research ethics. The CIA, Hubbard told me, conducted no such study for this reason.

18 So we're left with the unsavory possibility that torture-lite works—and that it may have helped find bin Laden. It does no good to point out, as some human rights advocates have, that the detainees who yielded information about his courier did so after the abuse stopped. The model on which enhanced interrogation is based can account for this. The detainees' cooperation could have ensued from hopelessness and despair, followed by interrogators' adroit use of their power to punish and reward.

19 This possibility poses the question of torture in a more unsettling fashion, by denying us the easy out that torture is both ineffective and wrong. We must choose between its repugnance to our values and its potential efficacy. To me, the choice is almost always obvious: Contempt for the law of nations would put us on a path toward a more brutish world. Conservatives are fond of saying, on behalf of martial sacrifice, that freedom isn't free. Neither is basic decency.

Source: *Washington Post*, May 29, 2011. Reprinted by permission of the author.

QUESTIONS FOR READING

1. What argument is embraced by those who are opposed to the use of torture?
2. What did Bloche learn about the purpose of "enhanced interrogation"? How is it used as part of a process for getting information?
3. What must interrogators assess for this model to work? How do they try to do this?
4. Why can we not know for certain if torture works?

QUESTIONS FOR REASONING AND ANALYSIS

5. What is Bloche's claim? (Be careful; it is not a simple statement.)
6. What grounds does he present in support of his claim?
7. Study the author's introduction; what does he gain by announcing his position on torture in his opening paragraph?
8. Study Bloche's conclusion: Why is deciding on one's position more difficult now? What does Bloche mean by his final sentence?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND WRITING

9. Has Bloche convinced you that the issue of using enhanced interrogation has become more complex? Why or why not? If you disagree with the author, how would you refute him?
10. Both Bloche and Rejali discuss the issue of interrogators needing to assess what, if any, good information they may be getting from interrogation. What does this tell you about the task of intelligence gathering? Ponder this issue for class discussion or writing.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Do Rejali and Bloche hold opposing viewpoints on the use of torture—or are their differences more that of approach and focus? Read each author again and then write an analysis of their differences in style, approach to the issue, and position on the issue.
2. Reflect on what you have learned about torture from Rejali and Bloche and then consider: What may be the greatest “unknown” part of the equation in the use of interrogation as a strategy for finding people who have broken the law? Or, put another way, what do you see as the biggest problem to assuring success from questioning people under pressure to get intelligence from them?
3. Should the debate over enhanced interrogation procedures be about effectiveness or ethics? And, if it should be about effectiveness, then how much evidence is needed to defend torture on the grounds that it works? Ponder these questions.

GOING ONLINE

The debate over the use of enhanced interrogation techniques and of hidden sites abroad continues. Bloche mentions several studies in his discussion. Go online and see what more you can learn about this debate. Ponder this question: Why do some continue these strategies when studies fail to confirm that they work?