

Argumentation

Introduction

Argumentation is a form of critical reasoning and is essential if you are to be able to justify your policy position to politicians, decision makers and other stakeholders. Academics regard argument as one of four traditional modes of discourse, the others being narration (story-telling), description and exposition (informing).

Defining argumentation

The Oxford English Dictionary defines an argument as “a statement or fact advanced for the purpose of influencing the mind” or “a reason urged in support of a proposition” and defines argumentation as “a process of reasoning” or as “a methodical employment or presentation of arguments”. The strength of your argument is what ultimately determines whether you will be able to influence policy outcomes.

The starting point is having appropriate and objective research evidence. You can then use the evidence to prepare a reasoned and compelling argument. You will, in time, write this into a policy position.

Argumentation is the thought process in which you develop an argument. Argument assumes that there is more than one point of view, in other words that the topic or proposal is open to debate, and indeed that the points of view may be directly contradictory. An argument is thus simply the logical and systematic presentation of reason and supporting evidence intended to convince an audience to accept a particular point of view. Argument is rational. It does not depend on emotion or threat.

Argumentation depends on evidence which can be fact or opinion.

Facts offer objective data and can be proven. Facts may come from scientific measurement, or from the way nature works, or from observation, or from statistics. If factual evidence is poorly presented, you will quickly find that the parties are arguing over the facts rather than the conclusions to be drawn from the facts.

Opinions are personal views or judgements. They cannot be proven but can be legitimate if they come from an expert in a particular field though a widely held opinion (determined perhaps through a survey) would also be helpful. Opinions need to be credible.

Whilst stories are specific, a good narrative – perhaps an example of how a business has suffered from poor regulation – can be good way of making a specific point.

Taking care with the evidence

It is important to ensure that your evidence supports the conclusions that you draw. That may mean not using survey data with very small sample populations, for example. Do not make assumptions in your line of argument but start from provable facts. Otherwise, your arguments will be quickly undermined.

Persuasion

Some academics suggest that persuasion is subtly different to argument in that argument aims to secure agreement whereas persuasion aims to secure action. Argument, as already

noted, uses evidence and reasoning presented in a logical way. Persuasion additionally makes use of *pathos* and *ethos*. Osborn & Osborn (1988) describe *pathos* as 'proof based on motives and emotions'. This is where your narrative can become an important element of your argument. They describe *ethos* as an assumption that people 'can be persuaded by the personal influence of the source of a message'; on other words, if the speaker appears to be honest and trustworthy, likeable and credible, then the audience will be more likely to accept the argument and to act.

Anticipate objections

In preparing your argument, recognise that there are always other points of view. Brainstorm those potential objections and be ready to defend your position. At the very least, you should be ready for objections when they are raised. Ideally, you will be able to construct your arguments to explain why you think they are inappropriate.

Fisher & Ury (2011) recommend that you think about the way in which critics might respond to your target audience adopting your point of view. Then write two or three sentences to help your target audience defend their decision.

Kuhn & Crowell (2011) suggest that there are three ways in which people prepare arguments: the single perspective, in which they set out the advantages of their favoured position; the dual perspective, in which they additionally set out the cons of an opposing position; and, the integrative perspective, in which they include the pros and cons of all positions.

You may want to concede early on that a proposal will not completely solve a problem but rather that it will make a start on solving the problem. This will help to establish the limits of your argument.

Preparing your arguments

Kuhn & Crowell (2011) found, in their research, that the best way to prepare an argument is to work in small groups: to generate reasons for your own position; to formulate questions to secure additional evidence; to evaluate reasons and rank their importance; and, to anticipate alternative arguments and prepare responses.

In preparing your argument, remember:

- You need a powerful opening statement and a powerful closing statement;
- You need to be as specific as possible;
- Address the counter-arguments, but do so respectfully;
- Choose your words and writing style carefully and match it to your audience;
- Strike a balance between credible fact and authoritative opinion;
- Visuals in a document can provide a powerful way to convey a key message;

Ensure in written documents that you always end with your argument, rather than someone else's, so that the reader has your position at the front of their mind as they stop reading.

Avoid aggression

Many people argue, both orally and in writing, in ways that are aggressive and inflammatory. That is always counter-productive. Your audience will be much more likely to listen if you are calm and create a rapport such that everyone feels able to express their point of view. Indeed, you may even modify your own arguments and position in response.



Conclusion

Preparing arguments is a skill – but you will quickly improve if you practice. Do not be deterred if you feel that others are not being persuaded. Think through the arguments to support your position and present them in a logical order. Use narrative to add to your persuasion. If you have not prepared your arguments in a group, then ask your peers to offer advice and comments and potential objections so that you can refine your argument. Cite your sources – which will demonstrate your reliance on evidence – and be honest and truthful – which will ensure that you appear credible.

Further reading and further information

- ♦ Fisher, R, Ury, W, & Patton, B. (2011) *Getting to Yes: negotiating an agreement without giving in*, 3rd edition, rhBusiness Books
- ♦ Kuhn, D. & Crowell, A (2011) Dialogic Argumentation as a Vehicle for Developing Young Adolescents' Thinking, *Psychological Science* 22(4) 545-552, Available online: DOI: 10.1177/0956797611402512
- ♦ Osborn, M & Osborn, S (1988) *Public Speaking*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin
- ♦ Sandman, W (1991) Logic and emotion, persuasion and argumentation: 'good reasons' as an education synthesis, *Basic Communications Course Annual*, available online at ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol3/iss1/14
- ♦ University of Minnesota Libraries, *Writing for Success*, baf.fyi/writing1



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