

# INTRODUCTION TO ARGUMENT AND RHETORIC

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## What is an argument?

An argument is not a fight or a debate. When we think of an argument we might imagine a disagreement between people, when in fact, an argument may not imply discord at all. An argument might even be creative, productive and educational. It involves reasonable minds seeking the best solution to a problem or conflict. An argument is a search for truth and a desire to resolve unnecessary messes. Difficulty arises in that there is always tension between truth and persuasion. (Definition from Bean & Ramage 2001.)

## The relationship between argument and rhetoric

Every act of communication attempts to persuade a particular audience to understand an idea or point of view put forth by the communicator. Thus, argument is the process of persuading an audience to understand and/or behave in an intended manner (see claims). Aristotle, the ancient Greek Godfather of rhetoric, described speech and writing as distinct entities. The art and science of persuading through speech he called *dialectic* and persuading through writing he called *rhetoric*. They overlap considerably.

## Rhetoric

Rhetoric is defined as discovering *in the particular case* the available means of persuasion. A very modern way of saying *in the particular case* is *context*. The question of persuasion always comes down to: what will work in this context? As all two-parent children know, what persuades one parent, does not persuade the other. So, for arguments to be persuasive, there must be context-appropriate means. Here are some other things to know about arguments based on Aristotle's taxonomy.

## Appeals

Persuasion is brought on by proofs, or appeals, invented by the author in each context. A skilled author consciously builds these elements into the argument in ways that will most effectively persuade in the particular case. A weakness of much student writing is that they engage one appeal too heavily and ignore the others. Writers might focus heavily on logos appeals and leave pathos and ethos to chance. Speakers might focus primarily on pathos and mythos and leave logos weak, hoping to persuade by the power of their passions. Effective arguments seek to balance the appeals. The appeals are:

- Logos: appeals to logic using reasoning
- Ethos: the persuasive appeal of one's character
- Pathos: the appeal to emotion
- Mythos: appeals using narratives of cultural heritage or social memberships

## Logos

For the ancient Greeks, logos meant more than logic or reasoning alone: it meant "thought plus action"; "thought" being the ideas themselves and "action" being the way in which those ideas are presented to the audience. Logos appeals to patterns, conventions, and modes of reasoning (Covino and Jolliffe 17). How the information is presented, then, matters as much as what the information is. (See "The Science of Why

We Don't Believe Science" as corroboration of this:

<http://motherjones.com/politics/2011/03/denial-science-chris-mooney>.)

(Description adapted from <http://papyr.com/hypertextbooks/comp1/logos.htm>.)

Facts, by themselves, are not necessarily appeals to logos. 50,000, The Goldilocks Number, is a great example of how facts and statistics are often making other kinds of appeals. (Source [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a\\_eJm-T65Al](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_eJm-T65Al).)

### **Ethos**

Ethos, the ethical appeal, is based on the character, credibility, or reliability of the writer.

There are many ways to establish good character and credibility as an author:

- Use credible, reliable sources to build your argument; cite the sources properly.
- Respect the reader by stating the opposing position accurately.
- Establish common ground with your audience. Most of the time, this can be done by acknowledging values and beliefs shared by those on both sides of the argument. Thus, mythos might establish ethos.
- If appropriate, disclose personal motivation for making the argument.
- Organize your argument in a logical, easy to follow manner. There are many patterns that might work—chronological, Toulmin, inductive, deductive, etc.
- Proofread: careless mistakes cast doubt on the reliability of the author.

(Description adapted from <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/588/>.)

### **Pathos**

Pathos, or the emotional appeal, focuses on the audiences' needs and emotional sensibilities; it appeals to the amygdala brain. Argument emphasizes reason, but reason relies on emotion. For example, telling the story of a single child who has been abused, stimulating an audiences feelings of empathy, may be more persuasive than simply stating the number of children abused each year, giving a human face to the numbers.

Only use an emotional appeal if it truly supports the claim you are making, not as a way to distract from the real issues of debate. An argument should never use emotion to misrepresent the topic or frighten people. Many fallacies work on false pathos appeals.

(Description adapted from <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/588/>.)

### **Mythos**

Modern rhetoricians have added Aristotle's description of mythos as an appeal. "Proof by mythos assumes that people value their membership in a society and share in its cultural heritage. Mythos is the sum total of stories, values, faith, feelings, and roles that make up the social character of a people. Proof by mythos often calls upon patriotism, cultural pride, and heroes or enemies as evidence" (383). Much of pop culture is appealing to mythos. Proof by mythos most often uses narrative as its evidence. However, a story need not be repeated in full. Clear references to a story that everyone is familiar with is sufficient to evoke the feelings of kinship and shared values. These stories may involve historical (George Washington at Valley Forge), economic (Bill Gates the great innovator), or religious values (The courage and self sacrifice of the Pilgrims). Proof by mythos urges opponents to see that as members of a society and citizens of a nation, they share a common history and common values and so are not so

different after all. Everyone of good will wants the best for both themselves and their neighbors. (Description adapted from Osborn, Michael and Suzanne Osborn. *Public Speaking*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988.)

### **Types of Claims**

A **claim** is the concise summary, stated or implied, of the argument's main idea. Many arguments have more than one claim. Claims must be credibly supported through the process of argumentation to be persuasive. Aristotle noted that the kinds of claims most writers/speakers make fall into one of three categories. Although many scholars say there are four (or more) types of claims, they are essentially breaking these three types into smaller chunks, which doesn't seem necessary in most cases. There are:

- claims to determine the nature or quality of a thing, person, event, etc. (evaluation, reviews, definitions, eulogies, etc)
- claims to determine the significance of facts—past and scientific (forensics)
- claims to determine future actions (recommendations, policy proposals, etc.)

An **assumption** is an unstated opinion that is part of the argument. Nearly all arguments contain assumptions. Part of the process of critical reading must be uncovering assumption.

A **belief** (religious, moral, cultural, ethical) is not an argument. Neither are personal likes or dislikes. These cannot be argued and should not be considered part of argument. Beliefs are based on certain assumptions or axioms which need not be proved (and are also not successfully argued).

**Prejudice** is an uninformed opinion because it is based upon insufficient or unexamined evidence. Human beings have many prejudices. However, a prejudice that persists in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary may suggest a person's unwillingness to search for truth and may even indicate a severe mental or emotional handicap and inability to reason.

(Claim definitions is from an unsourced handout.)

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An **implicit** argument is not stated outright, but rather the conclusion should be understood based on the claims, appeals and reasoning made by the author.

An **explicit** claim or conclusion is clear and obvious. The author expresses all detail in a way that leave no doubt to the intended meaning.

**Concession:** When you concede a point in an argument, you are saying that you actually agree with your opponent on a particular issue. Remember that this is not a sign of weakness. In fact, you are strengthening your ethos appeal because you seem a reasonable person willing to see more than one side of the argument.

**Refutation:** When you deliberately, directly attack an opponent's argument, point by point, you are said to be "refuting" the argument.

Anticipating and addressing **counter-arguments**: When making an argument, you must remain aware of what points your opponents will likely take exception to. If you can anticipate what the likely objections will be, and then address them in your argument, you'll likely strengthen your position.

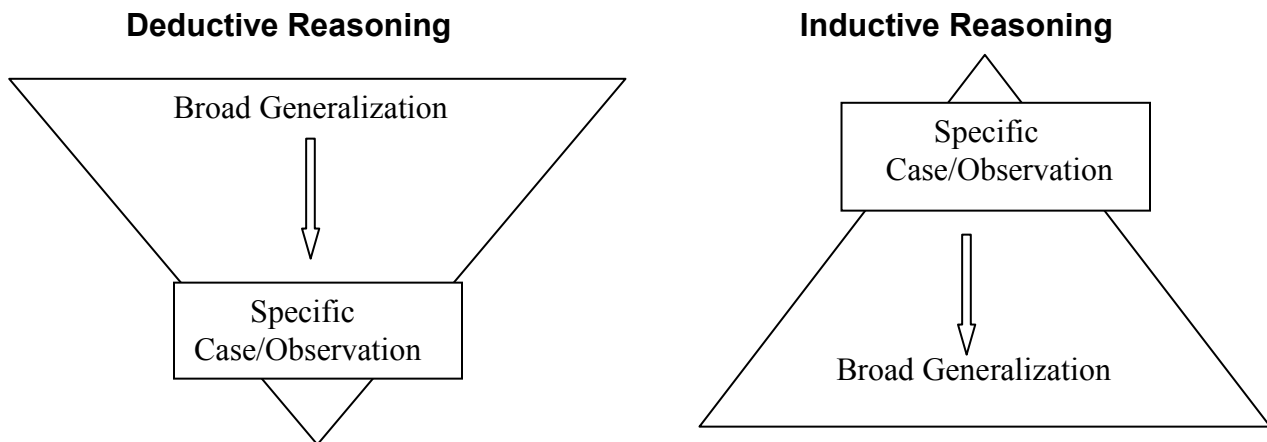
(These terms found at <http://www.writingcentre.ubc.ca/workshop/tools/argument.htm>.)

**Deductive and Inductive Reasoning** represent the two basic ways of presenting an argument. Deductive reasoning begins with a generalization and progresses to a specific case. Inductive reasoning begins with a specific case or observation and progresses toward a generalization. Since the type of reasoning used determines how claims are made and supported, understanding the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning is necessary for responding critically to written arguments. Many academic essays contain both patterns.

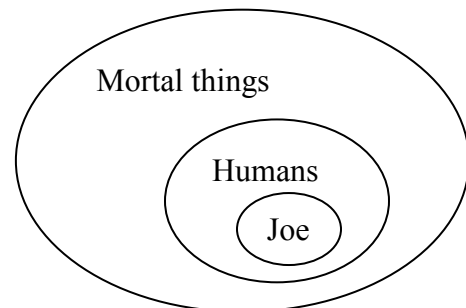
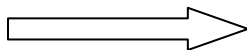
**Deductive**: When it rains, John's old car won't start. It's raining. Therefore, John's old car won't start. (Applies a broad generalization to a specific case.)

**Inductive**: John's old car won't start. It's raining. Therefore, John's old car won't start when it's raining. (Uses a specific case to reach a generalization.)

What we think of as formal logic is typically deductive. In our everyday reasoning, however, we more often use inductive reasoning: "An inconsiderate driver just cut me off! The driver is from New Jersey. Therefore, all drivers from New Jersey are inconsiderate drivers." Here are a few graphic representations of reasoning patterns.



**Deductive reasoning** can also be illustrated in terms of larger and smaller classes. Compare this example to the graphic at the right: All humans are mortal. Joe is a human. Therefore, Joe is mortal.



Inductive/Deductive concepts presented here are adapted from Katherine J. Mayberry's *Everyday Arguments: A Guide to Writing and Reading Effective Arguments* and *The Little, Brown Handbook, Eighth Edition*.