**Argument: The Basics**

What is Argument?

Arguments are claims backed by reasons that are supported by evidence. There are five highly relevant characteristics of argument:

Argumentation is a social process. Having an argument involves two or more individuals responding to one another's claim and support for such a claim. Argument is not simply restating the same claims and reasons; rather it is supporting, modifying or defending positions accordingly. As a process, arguments unfold based on the contributions of the dialogue participants.

Argumentation aims to gain adherence from an audience. People argue to gain assent for their positions. The world is filled with ambiguous situations that argument attempts to render more certain. Argumentation is a listener and audience-oriented activity—even if the audience is just one person. Ultimately, one wishes to persuade the audience to act on the advanced claim, whether it is to encourage action or gain support.

Argument is an art. As an art, argument has techniques and general principles; therefore, it is a learned craft. Although there are suggested guidelines and argumentative tools, there is no science of argument.

Argument involves contested issues. As a mode of influence, argument has persuasion as a central goal. Argument does not occur where there is consensus.

Argument fills much of our lives. Whether we recognize so or not, argument dominates our lives. We spend time arguing about what to eat, who to invite, when to do things, and where to go.

Why Argue?

That people argue seems obvious. People argue for four main reasons:

**To clarify thinking as individuals or groups.** Oftentimes, individuals and groups do not know what they believe but are still faced with information that requires interpretation. Argument can help individuals and groups learn about issues.

**To explain or defend actions or beliefs.** People have reasons for doing what they do, though oftentimes the reasons are not made clear. Argument seeks to shed light on those reasons and make them explicit and open to scrutiny.

**To solve problems or make judgments.** The world is filled with controversies about how best to act, all with competing interests and evidence that prescribe a particular direction. Argument helps facilitate decision-making about what people should and should not do.

**To have fun.** Participating in the clash of ideas can be an intellectually stimulating process that is primarily pleasurable. Argument is not always serious and deliberative; in fact, most arguments that people have are over relatively unimportant issues.

What's the difference between argument and logic?

Argument is fundamentally a communicative exercise, whereas logic is a more philosophical endeavor that does not champion persuasion as a primary goal. Therefore, argument, unlike logic, is an audience oriented process. For a person to be persuaded of a belief or action, they must find the arguer’s arguments compelling. This requires audience adaptation and development of credibility in addition to developing good, reasonable claims and supporting reasons.  
  
Argument requires audience adaptation. Arguers must keep in mind that not all arguments are persuasive to all audiences. Additionally, some techniques might be more successful than others for specific audiences: professionals are more likely to want polished, analytical, logical presentations, whereas protestors are more likely to want a highly charged, emotive argument that rallies moral indignation for their cause.

Argument requires establishing credibility. Credibility, as classical rhetoricians recognize, involves intelligence, character, and goodwill. Intelligence means having knowledge of your subject and arguing in a clear, logical fashion. Character means displaying traits your audience admires—like honesty, sincerity, integrity, and moral commitment. Goodwill means treating your audience with respect, putting your case in terms they can understand, and acknowledging their points of view. Aristotle notes that credibility is often the controlling factor in persuasion; if the audience does not perceive the speaker as credible, then the audience will not be as attentive to the message itself.

**How Does Oral Argument Differ From Written Argument?**

**Memory.** Written argument can be referenced again and again. Titles and subtitles give readers a preview of what is to come, aiding comprehension of their reading. The exact phrasing of oral argument disappears as soon as it is spoken. Consequently, listeners often understand oral arguments only in fragments rather in their totality. As a result, very complex arguments are difficult to develop orally.

**Physicality.** Oral argument intimately involves the human body. Pitch, rate, gesture, and tone of voice, are all forms of nonverbal communication that introduce the potential for misunderstandings. Written argument generally is clearer. Consequently, the friction that is possible from verbal interaction plays a large role in (mis)understanding.

**What are Basic Components of an Argument?**

Argument, while based in logic, is ultimately an exercise in language. Thus, argument is not exclusively the study of deductive or inductive reasoning—these are tasks reserved for philosophical inquiry. Instead, argument investigates the communicative aspects of reasoning. Arguments can be divided into four general components: claim, reason, support, and warrant.

Claims are statements about what is true or good or about what should be done or believed. Claims are potentially arguable. "A liberal arts education prepares students better than other forms of education" is a claim, while "I didn't like the book" is not. No one can really dispute whether I liked the book or not, but one can argue about the benefits of liberal arts. "I thought the movie was cool" is not an arguable statement, however, “that movie was an actor’s best" does present possibilities for argumentation, for people can disagree and offer support for why such an acting job was the actor's best based on criteria of what constitutes an outstanding performance.

Reasons are statements that support a given claim, making a claim more than a mere assertion. Reasons are statements in an argument that pass two tests. First, reasons are answers to the hypothetical challenge: “Why do you say that?” or “What justifications can you give me to believe that?” If a claim about liberal arts education is challenged, a reasoned response could be: “It teaches students to think independently.” Reasons can be linked—most often, not explicitly—to claims with the word "because."

Support substantiates the reasons offered and helps compel audiences to accept an advanced claim. This usually comes in the form of evidence. Evidence comes in different sorts, and tends to vary from one academic field or argument topic to another. Scientific arguments about global warming require different kinds of evidence than mealtime arguments about the latest movie. Evidence offers challenges and support to the reasons given. Evidence comes in various forms, including specific examples, statistics, data, testimonies and narratives, to name only a few.

Warrants are the inferences or assumptions that connect the support to the claim. Warrants often answer the question “what do you have to believe in order to believe that the support justifies the claim or reason being made?” If a reason given to justify a liberal education is the improvement of critical thinking, then the implicit assumption, or warrant, is that critical thinking is good. Warrants are often just assumed and rarely articulated, which can make them difficult to detect.

For Example:

**Claim:** Recent tax cuts should be abandoned.

**Reason:** …because they only benefit the rich.

**Support:** Statistics show that the majority of the tax cuts are targeted at upper middle class and upper class families, not poor families and individuals.

**Warrant:** Tax cuts that only benefit the rich are unfair.  
  
Or,  
  
**Claim:** The Civil War was caused by slavery.

**Reason:** …because the Northern states rejected the Southern states reliance on slavery.

**Support:** The recorded debates in newspapers and state legislatures in the North focused on the South’s reliance on slavery, not economics.

**Warrant:** The record of debates in newspapers and legislatures is an accurate guide to determining the cause of conflict.

Most argumentative controversies, as can be seen in the examples, center on the truth or validity of the support and warrants. Thus, the interpretation of data and inferences provides the richest source for students of argument to learn.