

Engl 350 Rhetoric & the History of Ideas  
 Spring 2006  
 Debate Assignment

Basic assignment: For the next four weeks, we'll have 50 minute debates each Thursday. Two groups will argue the questions, pro and con. Members of a third group will go home over the weekend and individually write a paper defending their position on the issue. Each *team*, writing or debating, owes me an abstract for every reading they mention.

Grading: The paper and the better of the two debates each is worth 10% of the final grade. Both papers and debates will be judged by the same standards: clarity, strong support from the course readings and from common-sense knowledge, responsiveness to opposing views, and good presentation. See the attached assessment standards for details.

**Debate format**

12:40--Class starts. Advocates have five minutes of preparation time. An audience member will be appointed Sergeant at Arms, responsible for timekeeping. Advocates will hand in abstracts of any text they are mentioning to the instructor.

12:45--Debate begins. Advocates for Position I go first. Each group has a total of fifteen minutes, to be divided as they wish. For example, the advocates for Position I might want to take 10 minutes to make their main arguments, reserving 5 for rebuttal. Position I always has the right to make a brief (30 second) closing statement. I *strongly* recommend that groups give no more than two speeches; certainly, don't make a speech if you have nothing new to say.

1:15--Formal debate ends. The audience has fifteen minutes to question the advocates or each other and to make statements of their own.

1:30--Decision. The audience decide the exact phrasing of the positions they will vote on, and then vote. Every member of the audience must vote. Majority rules; in case of a tie, Position II wins.

1:35--The instructor will introduce next week's debate topic.

**Debate schedule**

Week-Question	Groups Debating		Group Deciding (writing)
	Position I	Position II	
3-Ethics?	1	2	3
4-Knowledge?	3	4	1
5-Truth?	2	3	4
6-Democracy?	4	1	2

**Week 3: Ethics?**  
**Does the good rhetorician need to be a good person?**

Jill, a Senior English major with a Rhetorical Studies emphasis, is going to start up a new company she's calling The Opinion Manufactory, Inc. She has invited everyone in the Engl 350 class to get in on the ground floor, and invest \$1000. Her business plan is as follows:

TOM clients will be advocacy and lobby groups that want to influence legislation in Congress. They will hire TOM to generate public pressure for particular bills. TOM will work for any group, left, right, center or other.

TOM will start by using the client's phone lists of people likely to support its client's views. Personnel at TOM's phone bank will call citizens on the list and ask them to respond to a series of statements. For example, if the client wants to oppose drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Preserve, questions might include something like:

- The arctic environment needs protection. Yes/No
- Drilling for oil can injure wildlife. Yes/No

The phone bank personnel will input the citizen's answers into their computer during the interview. At the end of the interview, the TOM phone bank will the citizen for consent to send their views to Congress.

If consent is given, the computer record of the interview will be forwarded to a highly skilled editor. The editor will rewrite the sentences the citizen agreed with, making them in to a letter to Congress. The editor will change their wording, grammar, organization, typeface etc. in order to make them more unique and persuasive, while preserving their substance. For example:

- The arctic environment needs protection.

Might be rewritten as:

- Please believe me, we have to protect our arctic wilderness.*

The technical editor will then print out the letter, with the citizen's name at the end, and send a copy to the citizen and another to the citizen's representatives in Congress.

Position I: We should not invest in The Opinion Manufactory. Rhetoric must be ethical. The good rhetorician needs to be a good person, speaking for good ends, in order to persuade, and TOM isn't!

Position II: We should invest in The Opinion Manufactory. Rhetoric is an a-ethical power. The good rhetorician doesn't need to be a good person, or speak for good ends, in order to persuade, so TOM is going to be very successful.

**Week 4: Knowledge?**  
**What does the rhetorician need to know?**

Carl Herndl is a professor of rhetoric here at ISU. In fact, he's a rhetorical theorist, with special expertise on contemporary and feminist theory.

Carl Herndl is also listed as co-author of a recent paper on "Impacts of integrated crop-livestock systems on nitrogen dynamics and soil erosion in western Iowa watersheds," published in the *Journal of Geophysical Research* (the first page is attached). Herndl has no degree in Agronomy or any related discipline.

What, if anything, did Herndl probably contribute to the article?

Position I: Herndl contributed to the substance of the article. A good rhetorician can construct knowledge in any discipline.

Position II: Herndl at best helped the real authors correct their grammar and style. A good rhetorician can only help polish the language of a disciplinary expert—if that.

**Week 5: Truth?**

Position I: Rhetoric needs the truth. The good rhetorician persuades by making the truth clear.

Position II: Rhetoric does not need the truth. The good rhetorician persuades through crafting appearances.

**Week 6: Democracy?**

Position I: Rhetoric is vital to democracy. It is only through rhetoric that democratic values like freedom and justice can be maintained.

Position II: Rhetoric corrupts democracy. Rhetoric only serves to maintain the hegemony of the ruling ideologies that oppress people.

## **Basic Principles of Debating**

1. Stand up and take off your headgear. (Contact instructor in advance to get excused from this requirement.)
2. Begin speaking by stating your name, and thanking the audience and your opponent for their attention.
3. Next, take a position—tell your audience exactly what you are arguing for. Tell your audience how many arguments to expect. Then make them, one by one.
4. A good argument is one which draws on the course readings and on your own common-sense knowledge.
4. Close by summarizing your arguments briefly, thanking the audience for their attention, and asking them for a decision.
5. The team must hand in an abstract for every text it mentions.

## **Debate paper**

Working as an individual, state your personal position on the question for the week. Support your position with strong arguments, drawn from your personal knowledge and the readings. Go on to state the best argument(s) *against* your position, and refute it/them. Write clearly, and eliminate "padding."

Do not judge the debate: do not summarize the arguments of the advocates, or write about who you think "won." Your job is to take a position, yourself, on the issue, and defend your view. The purpose of the debate is to educate you; feel free to learn from it what some of the best arguments are, pro and con, and use them to your advantage. You may of course use arguments that weren't made at the debate at all. Also feel free to exchange drafts and/or discuss your work with your groupmates.

You must hand in an abstract for every text you mention. You can do this as a group—I don't need multiple copies from each individual.

Length: about 4 typed pages, normal margins & fonts.

Due: In class the following Tuesday.

Note: You may rewrite your debate paper. With permission, you can also change topics and write on a different debate case.

## Assessment Standards for Debates and Papers

### 1. The advocate (team) is CLEAR.

- The advocate takes a strong position and announces it right up front. Warning: this may be the most difficult skill to master. At times it won't be until the end of the debate that we all figure out what the real issue is. But it's your job as an advocate to try to locate the central question you think needs answering, and to give a strong answer to it.
- The advocate previews her main arguments in advance, signposts each one as she makes it, and summarizes the whole at the end.

### 2. The advocate (team) uses STRONG SUPPORT.

- The advocate supports her points with examples or reasoning from authorities—people who know something about the subject—in other words: the readings!
- The advocate supports her points with examples or reasoning from her real-life, person, common-sense knowledge.

### 3. The advocate (team) is RESPONSIVE to the arguments against her (them).

- The advocate acknowledges the arguments against her, and answers them with strong and clear arguments of her own.

### 4. The advocate (team) PRESENTS WELL

- The advocate uses forceful, yet respectful, language, in defending her position. In particular, the advocate avoids unnecessary qualifiers like "I think..." or "I believe..."
- The advocate displays a strong ethos in her self-confidence, team spirit etc. For example, good team spirit is displayed when debate responsibilities are shared among team members.
- The advocate displays thorough preparation, in particular by submitting an abstract for every text she mentions. (Note: can be done as a group.)