Making an Argument

If you've gotten to this point in college, it's because you already know how to make an argument--at least, in some sense. You've written and spoken arguments of your own, and listened to and read arguments of others. Why do you need to know anything more? In particular, why do you need to learn about the *theory* of argument?

Consider: If you have a better idea ("theory") about what you're doing, you can do it better. You can use your theory about arguing to improve what you're doing. You can use theory to see what you're missing, and to try new things. Theory will give you a vocabulary for talking with others about what you're doing. Using theory about arguing may seem awkward at first--for example, you may find yourself taking a lot longer to prepare your arguments when you're trying to follow a theory; you even may do more things wrong (temporarily, at least). But in the long run, you should be better off--even as an athlete is in the long run better off for understanding something about the way her body works.

So I'm going to presume that you want to know something about argument: what it is, and how it works; a theory. There are at least two ways that may help you think about how to make argument:

The dialogue approach

The diagram approach

In this handout, I'll tell you something about both of the methods. It's your job to figure out which one works best for you, and to start using it to improve your argument.

Please note that these are two approaches to *thinking* about and *preparing* to make an argument. Once you've figured out what you want to argue, then you can go on to *present* your argument in any number of forms. You might write it down, you might give it orally, you might send it electronically over the internet, you might even draw or dance it. This will depend on the resources available to you, and on what your audience needs. (Also, on what I require you to do.) But what I'm talking about here is *not* two ways of presenting your argument, but two ways of thinking about it in advance: two ways of brainstorming; two ways of preparing; two ways of inventing arguments.

Why two ways, and not just one? Because it's likely that you think differently. If you have two ways of thinking at your disposal,one of them is likely to work better for you than the other.

Whenever you speak, you're addressing an audience of some sort. But when you make an audience, you're addressing an audience who *doubts or even disagrees.* The **dialogue approach** challenges you to think carefully about this audience.

We make arguments about issues. An **issue** is a matter that people openly disagree about, and that is worth arguing. When we make an argument about an issue, we're taking a stand on an issue, taking a position, making a **claim**. But we will be addressing people that either **doubt** or

object to what we are going to say**.** So an argument is speech that will address these doubts or objections—it answers them, before they are even asked. If you think about your argument in this way, you will be preparing your argument using the dialogue approach.

Consider this example. You want to go out to dinner with your friends. The question is: where? You plan on saying something like this:

You: The Mandarin is a great place to go.

If everyone agrees with you, there's no argument; you can simply go out to dinner. But you expect to meet doubts, doubts like:

Friend: Isn't that pretty expensive?
Friend: Isn't it too far away?

Or objections, like:

Friend: But the fried rice there is terrible!

If you want to uphold your original proposal, you are going to need to reply to these questions--you need to answer these doubts and objections. So to prepare your argument, you figure out in advance what answers you have. Your argument is your answer to a question, before it is even asked:

You: The Mandarin is a great place to go. The dinner specials have great food for a fair price, and we can get there by the bus.

To sum up: according to the dialogue approach, **an argument answers reasonable doubts and objections against a conclusion**. You build an argument by figuring out what the doubts and objections are going to be, and answering them before they're even asked. To put this more vividly: you build an argument by hearing voices in your head--the voices of people who disagree with you--and then talking back to them.

To get you started on hearing voices, it may be helpful to know that there are three main kinds of questions that your audience is likely to ask. First, people may doubt the basic grounds for what you say. They may ask you questions like:

How do you know that? (My favorite, abbreviated **HDYKT?**)
Why should I believe that?
What do you have to go on?
What's your evidence for that?
Is that really true?

This kind of question asks you to produce the premises (grounds, reasons) you have for your conclusion.

Once you've given some premises, a second kind of question asks for more. For example:

That doesn't seem like much of a reason. Can you tell me more? (abbreviated, **MORE?**)
What else do you have to go on?
Do you have any further arguments?
Can you give that further support?

This kind of question asks you to produce more premises (grounds, reasons) for your conclusion.

A third kind of question is also important. It asks:

So? So what? (abbreviated, **SO WHAT?**)
Why is that (premise) relevant to that (conclusion)?
What does that show?

These questions ask you to explain why the premises (grounds, reasons) make sense—why they actually support your conclusion.

Finally, there are **objections**. Objections don't just question what you're saying, they go on to directly challenge it. Objections often start with a "**BUT!**"; as for example:

But what about....
But isn't it a fact that....
But on the contrary....
But aren't you ignoring ….

So to construct an argument, you should take each claim you want to make, ask yourself **HDYKT?**, and answer. Then you should go back, and ask for **MORE?**, and give it. Be sure also to ask of each answer: **SO WHAT?** –why is that relevant**?** And then you should raise all the objections you can think of (**BUT! BUT! BUT!**), and then meet them.

Note that your group can be a great resource for thinking about your argument in this way. Instead of hearing voices in your head, you can hear *their* voices. The best groups in this class will be the ones that encourage internal disagreement.

Remember again, this is just one way of *thinking* about your argument. Even if you've prepared it using the dialogue approach, you still might present it by writing up all your answers into one cogent paragraph.

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Secondly, there's the **diagram approach**. Instead of having a dialogue in your head, the diagram method asks you to draw a picture. Every time you argue you're asking your audience to take a step from the premise to the conclusion. "Premise" literally means something like "starting point"--it is the place your audience is at the beginning of the argument, the ground(s) they're standing on. The "conclusion" is where you want them to end up. Using the diagram method, you draw the step from premise to conclusion like this:

P------->C

Why make this drawing? It can help you step back and take a careful *look* at your argument. For example, is P a good reason--does your audience really believe it, or do you need to give it some support? Like:

Q------>P------>C

Can you really make the step from P to C? Is it strong, or do you need to add some more reasons? Like:

P + R -------->C

So if I were thinking about arguing for the Mandarin, I might eventually come up with an argument like:

Last week, the Kung Pao Chicken was OK.---->The food there is good.

+It's cheap. ---->Let's go to the Mandarin.

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Step back and ask yourself which of these two approaches seems most comfortable to you as you construct arguments. Does having an imagined dialogue with your opponent help? Do you like to draw a diagram to see your argument, as it grows? How do your answers fit with your learning style, according to the extra credit assignment (the VARK inventory)?

I have to admit that my preference is the dialogue method, in part because in my experience it helps the most people learn how to argue better. Therefore, in class I'm going to be pressing you to ask and answer doubts and objections. But in the long run, you're going to be on your own, and it'll be up to you to figure out what, for you, is the best approach to thinking about arguments.

If there is a pop quiz on this material, the questions will be:

1. What are the three main kinds of questions your audience is likely to ask you, when you take a stand on an issue?

2. Which of the two approaches to argument do you like better, and why? (briefly)