

The Truth About Value Arguments and Commonsense Examples

By

Crystal Montoya

December 13, 2004

Argumentation and Debate is a difficult course. It requires a lot of time and effort and it pushes you beyond the boundaries of thinking that you're used to. I know this because I took Argumentation and Debate and I was a CA (course assistant) for the course. From my own personal experience and from observing the class, I think value arguments and commonsense examples are the most difficult course concepts to understand and put into practice. **BUT DON'T WORRY!** I know where you're coming from and just because these concepts are difficult, that doesn't mean you'll never understand them. As a matter of fact, I struggled a lot with value arguments and commonsense examples but by the end of the semester I found them to be my strongest arguments. To help you feel comfortable with them I'm going to go into detail about why these concepts are hard to grasp and then show how they can be powerful methods to use in a debate. I'll start with my theory of why these concepts are hard to grasp.

At this point in your college career you've probably taken a few composition and speech courses. All of which taught you how to construct a basic paper or argument and probably required a persuasive paper or speech. If your classes were anything like mine when it came to these papers, you were asked to quote statistics and professional opinions. As a matter of fact, my roommate is a TA for English 104 and says that she prefer her students avoid using any "I statements" and use *only* professional sources. Because we're so use to using only statistics and professional opinions, we've gotten to the point that we feel this is all we should use in arguments as well. For example, when I was a CA for this course Professor Goodwin and I gave a demo debate at the beginning of the semester. Both sides were well thought out and supported but the class didn't seem to think so. They felt Professor Goodwin's argument based on values was weak and the class disliked both of our commonsense examples. What the class pointed out as strengths of the debate were the use of professional sources and statistics. It seems like we've also gotten to a point where we think values should not be discussed at all and have no place in well-developed arguments. But people use values to determine their stand on issues all the time.

Think about it. If you think murder is wrong it's probably not because Dr. so and so said it was or because statistics show that murder leads to an increase in world hunger and taxes. You probably think it's wrong because you were brought up to value human life and you believe that to deny someone of that is morally wrong. This is an argument based on values. Much of what we believe and the issues we feel strongest about are based on our values. Students in this class have said that they try to stay away from these sticky issues and feel it's easier to take on a "to each their own" type of attitude. If we lived in a society where that was the case and everyone did what he or she felt like doing, we'd live in chaos. Eventually what someone felt was right another would think of as wrong and freedoms would be infringed upon. The fact is that society in general has a

common set of values and it's okay to use those values in an argument.

We've grown up in an individualistic society where we've learned that each person is entitled to their own beliefs. But there's a way to discuss our values and use them to defend our stand on an issue without forcing others to think like us. If they don't agree with your values then use your argument as a chance to educate someone on a different perspective. And in the same way, don't think someone's saying you're wrong because you don't agree with them but be openminded and use the opportunity to learn something. Like I mentioned before, society in general does have a common set of values and that's what you want to use in a value argument. You'll see that a value argument can actually be quite effective.

A good value argument is an argument based on values that your audience, opposition, and you would in general have in common. Some examples are murder is wrong, children dying is bad, and our freedoms being denied is bad. You then use these common values to develop an argument. Show how your argument falls in line with these values or how your opposition's doesn't. You don't need to quote a bunch of statistics and professional opinions you just need to let your audience know what values are at stake and why they are. You can also use commonsense examples as a way for your audience to easily see and relate to what you're saying.

Commonsense examples make an issue real to your audience. If your audience can *relate* to what you're saying they're more likely to *respond* to what you're saying. For instance, if I'm trying to convince you that a law should NOT be passed to take a person's drivers license away at age 75 you may not care one way or the other because you've still got a ways to go before you're 75. But if I use the example of you having to drive your grandma to her doctors appointments, to get her groceries, and have her depend completely on you and your family because there's no other way for her to get around, you might care a little more about the issue. Go ahead and use commonsense examples. They might not be the cold hard facts you're use to using but they'll reach your audience and strengthen your argument.

All in all, we are so use to writing papers and speeches that depend solely on statistics and professional opinions that we are hesitant to use anything else. I felt this way when I first took this course and I didn't adapt to value arguments and commonsense examples easily. But now that I know how effective they can be and how easy they are to construct I use them all the time (as you can probably see from reading this paper). The overall point I want to make is not to get discouraged and bent out of shape about the value arguments and commonsense examples. You'll be required to argue a value argument in one of your debates and you'll also be expected to incorporate commonsense examples. You'll be uncomfortable at first because you've stuck to statistics and professional opinions for so long, but you'll get the hang of it. Value arguments and commonsense examples are really powerful methods to use in an argument so just give them a shot. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised to see how much they add to an argument and how much easier it is to connect with your audience.