

Activity 6 – Argument and Persuasion

1. Read the following excerpt from the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts – Appendix A.
2. Note three examples of evidence to support the special place of argument.
3. Summarize the difference between argument and persuasion.
4. How does this information compare to your current practice?

The Special Place of Argument in the Standards

While all three text types are important, the Standards put particular emphasis on students' ability to write sound arguments on substantive topics and issues, as this ability is critical to college and career readiness. English and education professor Gerald Graff (2003) writes that "argument literacy" is fundamental to being educated. The university is largely an "argument culture," Graff contends; therefore, K–12 schools should "teach the conflicts" so that students are adept at understanding and engaging in argument (both oral and written) when they enter college. He claims that because argument is not standard in most school curricula, only 20 percent of those who enter college are prepared in this respect. Theorist and critic Neil Postman (1997) calls argument the soul of an education because argument forces a writer to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of multiple perspectives. When teachers ask students to consider two or more perspectives on a topic or issue, something far beyond surface knowledge is required: students must think critically and deeply, assess the validity of their own thinking, and anticipate counterclaims in opposition to their own assertions.

The unique importance of argument in college and careers is asserted eloquently by Joseph M. Williams and Lawrence McEnerney (n.d.) of the University of Chicago Writing Program. As part of their attempt to explain to new college students the major differences between good high school and college writing, Williams and McEnerney define argument not as "wrangling" but as "a serious and focused conversation among people who are intensely interested in getting to the bottom of things cooperatively":

"Argument" and "Persuasion"

When writing to persuade, writers employ a variety of persuasive strategies. One common strategy is an appeal to the credibility, character, or authority of the writer (or speaker). When writers establish that they are knowledgeable and trustworthy, audiences are more likely to believe what they say. Another is an appeal to the audience's self-interest, sense of identity, or emotions, any of which can sway an audience. A logical argument, on the other hand, convinces the audience because of the perceived merit and reasonableness of the claims and proofs offered rather than either the emotions the writing evokes in the audience or the character or credentials of the writer. The Standards place special emphasis on writing logical arguments as a particularly important form of college- and career-ready writing.

Those values are also an integral part of your education in college. For four years, you are asked to read, do research, gather data, analyze it, think about it, and then communicate it to readers in a form . . . which enables them to assess it and use it. You are asked to do this not because we expect you all to become professional scholars, but because in just about any profession you pursue, you will do research, think about what you find, make decisions about complex matters, and then explain those decisions – usually in writing – to others who have a stake in your decisions being sound ones. In an Age of Information, what most professionals do is research, think, and make arguments. (And part of the value of doing your own thinking and writing is that it makes you much better at evaluating the thinking and writing of others.) (ch. 1)

In the process of describing the special value of argument in college- and career-ready writing, Williams and McEnerney also establish argument’s close links to research in particular and to knowledge building in general, both of which are also heavily emphasized in the Standards.

Much evidence supports the value of argument generally and its particular importance to college and career readiness. A 2009 ACT national curriculum survey of postsecondary instructors of composition, freshman English, and survey of American literature courses found that “write to argue or persuade readers” was virtually tied with “write to convey information” as the most important type of writing needed by incoming college students. Other curriculum surveys, including those conducted by the College Board and the states of Virginia and Florida¹, also found strong support for writing arguments as a key part of instruction. The 2007 writing framework for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (National Assessment Governing Board, 2006) assigns persuasive writing the single largest targeted allotment of assessment time at grade 12 (40 percent, versus 25 percent for narrative writing and 35 percent for informative writing). (The 2011 prepublication framework maintains the 40 percent figure for persuasive writing at grade 12, allotting 40 percent to writing to explain and 20 percent to writing to convey experience.) Writing arguments or writing to persuade is also an important element in standards frameworks for numerous high-performing nations.²

Specific skills central to writing arguments are also highly valued by postsecondary educators. A 2002 survey of instructors of freshman composition and other introductory courses across the curriculum at California’s community colleges, California State University campuses, and University of California campuses found that among the most important skills expected of incoming students were articulating a clear thesis; identifying, evaluating, and using evidence to support or challenge the thesis; and considering and incorporating counterarguments into their writing. On the 2009 ACT national curriculum survey, postsecondary faculty gave high ratings to such argument-related skills as “develop ideas by using some specific reasons, details, and examples,” “take and maintain a position on an issue,” and “support claims with multiple and appropriate sources of evidence.”

The value of effective argument extends well beyond the classroom or workplace, however. As Richard Fulkerson (1996) puts it in *Teaching the Argument in Writing*, the proper context for thinking about argument is one “in which the goal is not victory but a good decision, one in which all arguers are at risk of needing to alter their views, one in which a participant takes seriously and fairly the views different from his or her own” (pp. 16–17). Such capacities are broadly important for the literate, educated person living in the diverse, information-rich environment of the twenty-first century.

¹ Unpublished data collected by Achieve, Inc.

² See, for example, frameworks from Finland, Hong Kong, and Singapore as well as Victoria and New South Wales in Australia.