

Learning Commons: Writing Centre/Argument and Persuasion

The Basic Principles of Persuasive Writing

Persuasive writing is writing that sets out to influence or change an audience's thoughts or actions. Persuasion is inescapable in everyday life. Whether it takes the form of an ad on a bus, radio or television commercial, movie trailer, a drink special posted in your favorite coffee shop, a politician's speech, or a message from a family member asking you to run some quick errands, it is so much a part of the daily experience of living that it often goes unnoticed. Taking the time to look at everything you read or the media you view critically, analyzing whether or not its purpose is to persuade and which (if any) persuasive techniques are being used will help you become a stronger persuasive writer, as well as strengthen reading and analysis skills. Persuasion isn't only happening in writing or on television. There are, of course, many occupations where persuasion is a skill used on an everyday basis, such as law, teaching, clergy, writing and journalism, marketing, graphic design, and others – in fact, there is a role for persuasion in any job one could undertake.

How Do We Get Others to Accept or Consider Our Point of View?

According to Aristotle, there are three main appeals to make in an argument: *logos*, or the appeal to logic/reason; *ethos*, or the appeal to ethics; and *pathos*, or the appeal to emotion. These three appeals form the backbone of modern persuasive writing as well, although other appeals may be added. The most common of these is the appeal to a sense of tradition. No matter which appeals you make, it is critical to remember that there are at least two sides to every issue. If you take the attitude that there is only one side – your side – you may alienate your reader. Knowing other perspectives on an issue and knowing which of their points are valid, even in light of the point of view you are supporting, will help build a bridge to potentially hostile audience members as well as show all audience members that you are a credible, well-informed writer. When considering how to best persuade readers and when thinking about how to address multiple viewpoints, remember that your own persuasive point – the thing you want to persuade readers of – needs to be completely clear early on in the paper and remain the focus throughout. Otherwise, your paper will be informative and probably interesting to readers, but will not persuade them of anything.

Appealing to Logic

Remember that an argument is an appeal to a person's sense of reason; it is not a violent fight, dispute, or disagreement. It is a measured, logical way of trying to persuade others to agree with you. The appeal to logic helps to keep an argumentative or persuasive piece of writing from becoming angry in tone or emotionally charged in a negative way; it also helps to bolster credibility in a way that using other appeals doesn't. An appeal to logic is calm, based in facts and direct observation, and is swayed by evidence, not passion. Incorporating the appeal to reason/logic shows readers that not only is your position well thought out, it is not simply based in personal belief or feeling about the topic. This is especially valuable when discussing controversial matters. When you begin to build your persuasive writing based on a *logos* appeal, there are some general questions you can ask to help you develop your argument:

- Do I have enough evidence? Does it come from credible, trustworthy sources?
- Will my audience believe my evidence? Is it valid for supporting my position?
- What are the assumptions built into my argument, and are those assumptions fair? Is my argument verifiable?
- Does my conclusion follow logically from the claims I make?

There are two major approaches you can take as you reason through your argument and the claims you are making.

Deduction

Deduction begins with a general principle or premise and draws a specific conclusion from it. For example: People who smoke endanger their health. (major premise) My father smokes. (minor premise) Therefore, my father is endangering his health. (conclusion) In order to create a strong argument based on your premises and conclusions, you need to be able to offer direct evidence in support of your claims. In this case, it may not be possible to provide direct evidence showing a cause-effect relationship between your father's smoking and his health. In fact, your father's health may currently be fine, in spite of his smoking. There are, however, other issues you may bring in to support the argument that your father should stop smoking, such as the impact of second hand smoke on family and friends, statistics showing the number of people who die of lung cancer that is caused by cigarettes, and medical evidence showing the damage that smoking has done to other men who have similar health and lifestyle profiles as your father.

Induction

Induction supports a general conclusion by examining specific facts or cases. For example, if you wanted to argue that your father's health is declining, you could cite specific facts such as yellowing teeth and bad breath, weight loss, loss of ability to exercise normally, shortness of breath, heavy coughing after physical exertion, and so on. It may be possible to show a cause/effect relationship between these specific facts and his smoking. You can always support logical appeals with facts, statistics, and direct observations from credible sources.

Appealing to Emotion

The logical appeal is an indispensable tool for persuasion, but emotional appeals are also powerful and are often easier for readers to engage with. Emotional appeals need to be used with caution, however, as if they are poorly done, they can cause you and your writing to lose credibility. Arguments about controversial topics, especially those based in personal belief, often rely on emotional appeals alone. These arguments can capture an audience and influence their feelings, but they tend to lack substance and dissolve when inspected critically. If done poorly, emotional appeals can be manipulative and alienating. If done correctly, however, they can greatly aid an argument. Appealing to emotion in addition to creating a logically sound, factually supported argument helps to engage readers and helps them to remember and act on the issue in question. One way to effectively and ethically incorporate an emotional appeal is to use vivid images in your argument. For example, if you were targeting an anti-smoking argument at your father, who smokes, you could write: "I remember when Grandma died of lung cancer. It was the only time I have ever seen you cry, Dad. I remember that you also made me promise not to start smoking." You could also offer strong examples in support of your argument. Use language and/or images that are emotionally charged, such as describing the pain of undergoing surgery and chemotherapy or the difficulty of rehabilitation, even after successful treatment for lung cancer. Again, be sure that when you use an emotional appeal, you use it "legitimately." You should not use it as a substitute for logical and/or ethical appeals. Don't use emotional appeals to draw on stereotypes or manipulate the audience's emotional fears. Don't use emotional appeal to get an automatic, knee-jerk reaction from someone. If you use emotionally charged language or examples simply to upset or anger an audience, you are using emotion illegitimately. Your use of emotional appeal shouldn't oversimplify a complicated issue.

Using Ethos, or Appealing to Ethics

Ethos is based on the audience's perception of the speaker. It may be referred to as the "silent appeal" because it is only successful if the writer uses information, phrasing, and rhetorical strategies, rather than clear statements, to show that she or he is trustworthy and reliable as a source. For example, which writer would seem more credible – one that admits to a bias, but goes on to argue a point logically, or one who tells the readers he has researched the topic completely and his point of views are correct? The art of including ethos in an argument requires you to not only pay attention to how credible your sources are, but to how you are using them and how you are using language

and communication strategies to present yourself as a writer and thinker in the best possible light.

In some rhetorical traditions, the “appeal to ethics” differs slightly from ethos as presented in the Canadian tradition. This type of appeal to ethics asks readers to look at the argument in terms of what is “right” or best for everyone involved. It makes readers think about the greater good and what should be done to serve it. When writing an ethical appeal, it is important to be sure that you have also considered the ethics of an issue and determined the outcome of what you are proposing on all sides. Ethical appeals are frequently made in persuasive media dealing with sustainability, environmental issues, education, and health. When making an ethical appeal, be sure that you are not only appealing to the ethics of a certain belief system, as it may not be one your readers are part of. If you were to include an ethical appeal in a paper you were writing to convince your father to stop smoking, you might want to discuss his secondhand smoke and the affect it is having on the family, the family’s property, and any pets you may have. If you have younger siblings, suggesting that your father’s smoking is encouraging them to make poor health choices for themselves could also work.

Appealing to Tradition

An appeal to tradition asks readers to accept or act on something because it has worked in the past or it has “always been like that”. This is a dangerous appeal to use and frequently leads to fallacies, but it is worth addressing because it is frequently used in advertising, political messages, and civic proposals (or by those fighting civic proposals). An appeal to tradition can be used well in addition to other appeals in a case where there is recorded, measurable evidence that something really has been effective in the past or the current state of things really is more effective than a proposed change. For example, an appeal to tradition could work in a paper suggesting that a diet of fresh, home-cooked foods and regular exercise at least three days a week is the best way to lose weight. If there is sufficient evidence to show that this approach has worked for centuries as diet fads come and go, this would be an appropriate time to appeal to tradition. Generally, however, this is an appeal to be wary of and to look out for when you encounter it in media.

Use of Definition in an Argument

To help keep your argument strong, be sure to clearly define your central concept, even if the word(s) you are using to present it are familiar to readers. If you forget to define your terms (or choose not to define them), you run the risk of alienating your audience, confusing them, or causing them to come to inappropriate conclusions. For example, before making the argument that teachers should monitor their students, the word “monitor” should be defined. Does “monitor” include eavesdropping on their group discussions? Does it include accessing their registrar’s files to see how well (or how poorly) the students are doing in their other classes? Does it mean reading their e-mail in an online course without their knowledge? You would want to be clear about such a term so that someone wouldn’t misinterpret its usage in a particular context and react to your argument as if you were proposing something very different. After all, you may only mean that teachers should pay careful attention to whether grades are improving or declining over the course of a term, but your readers may think that you are proposing that teachers should be able to have access to a student’s complete academic history. Definition also comes into play when choosing the vocabulary for a piece of writing. It is important to know a word’s connotative meaning as well as its denotative (dictionary) definition, or else you run the risk of using a word that has a strong negative charge or a cultural meaning (or “baggage”) that is inappropriate for your argument. For example, if you were writing about healthy weight loss, the word “skinny” would be a poor choice because of its connotations including poor health, anorexia, excessive vanity, weakness, hunger, and so on. The dictionary definition of “skinny” may not include any of these terms, but they are connotations nonetheless.

Credible and Convincing Evidence

No matter how clear your reasoning is, how well you capture readers' emotions, how much your argument benefits the greater good, and how well worded it is, it can still fall flat if the evidence used doesn't work. Evidence can fail if there is too little of it, if it comes from a source that lacks credibility, or if it is not appropriate for the argument you are making. Carefully analyzing the sources you are using by asking questions, such as the ones below, will help you ensure that the paper you've spent so much time planning ends up being as effective as possible.

- Is there enough evidence to create a strong, irrefutable case? If not, what is missing?
- Is the evidence credible? Have you reviewed the author, publisher, and content of the source carefully to ensure that it is correct, unbiased, and up-to-date?
- Can you verify the evidence in additional sources? (This is another important test for credibility.)
- Are you taking the evidence out of context?
- Do you fully understand the research or context of the evidence? Are you sure it actually says what you need it to in order to support your argument?

More About Credibility

It is a frustrating and frustratingly common experience to find a source that says all the right things and has all the right information to support your argument, only to realize that it is not appropriate for academic use. These sources are said to lack credibility. A source that lacks credibility may be heavily biased, out of date, inconsistent, manipulative of information, or just plain incorrect. Instructors and professors are well-known for telling students not to use Wikipedia or other similar sources for this reason – a Wikipedia entry can be written by anyone, and a reader who is not familiar with the topic is unlikely to know if the form the entry is in the day they are reading is accurate and reliable or not. If an argument is supported by sources that lack credibility, the credibility of the writer of the argument is damaged.

Points to Consider When Determining Credibility

The points below will help you choose which sources will be most helpful in your research and writing. If you are drawing on an authoritative, expert figure to back up what you say, is the authority actually reliable? When trying to determine whether someone is a credible authority, consider the following elements:

- Is your expert a current authority on the specific subject in question?
- Is your expert up-to-date on the most current procedures, statistics, testing programmes etc. in their field?
- Is your expert viewed favourably by their peers? Is he/she respected in the field?
- Is your expert associated with reputable organizations?
- Is your expert as free of bias as possible?

Remember that when quoting a source you must be careful that you don't accidentally (or intentionally) take the quote out of context, changing the original meaning. Keep in mind that the author of the source should be knowledgeable about the subject; he/she should not simply be someone famous. For example, Canadian Olympic snowboarder Maeëlle Ricker may be an expert when it comes to endorsing snowboard wax, but she's not necessarily an expert when asked about global warming. Stephen Fry's celebrity status does not make him an expert authority on the national economy, but he would be a reliable, trustworthy source on the development of British comedy. Be sure that the source you are using is still current in the field. For example, you might not want to use a long-retired politician as your focus expert on the state of the unity issue in Canada today or a book on the internet that was published in 1990. Analyze statistics carefully to ensure that they are accurate and appropriate to use, asking questions such as:

- Were the survey questions as objective as possible?
 - Was the sample pool representative or biased?
 - Are the statistics accurately tabulated?
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- Have the statistics been taken out of context?
- Is there enough context provided so that the reader gets a clear view of any pre-existing bias?

Some Common Fallacies

A fallacy is a flaw in logic that occurs when making an argument. These happen frequently and can not only destroy an argument, but harm the credibility of the person making the argument. Learning the common fallacies will help you to both avoid them in your own writing and recognize them in the work of others, which will benefit you as a writer, researcher, and critical thinker. Below are some of the more common fallacies that show up in student writing. As you read through these, keep in mind that the examples show only some forms that these fallacies can take. The more practice you get looking for and avoiding fallacies, the easier it will be to recognize these flaws in any form they may take.

Evading the Issue

To produce this fallacy, a writer avoids the central point of an argument, instead drawing attention to a minor (or side) issue. This is sometimes done intentionally, in order to draw the reader away from a weak argument or to disguise what the writer is really suggesting, but it may also be the result of a poorly organized paragraph or essay.

Ex. You've put through a proposal that will cut overall loan benefits for students and drastically raise interest rates, but then you focus on how the system will be set up to process loan applications for students more quickly.

Ex. You oppose an oil pipeline going through British Columbia, but instead of focusing on reasons why it would be a bad idea, you discuss the number of bald eagles that live in and migrate through British Columbia each year.

Ad Hominem

Here, the writer attacks a person's character, physical appearance, or personal habits instead of addressing the central issues of an argument. This type of attack sometimes comes in the form of character assassination (especially in politics). Before looking at a person's character/personal traits rather than ideas and policies, one must be positive that those personal traits actually play a role in the argument. Otherwise, they are distracting and a way of evading the issue or distracting readers.

Ex. A group of executives wants to oppose electing a new board member because he has been through four messy divorces due to his infidelity; his experience and background, however, would make him an ideal candidate for the open place.

Ex. You are putting together a campaign for a friend to be elected as president of the student council. You suggest that he would be a better representative than the competition because he is good looking and photogenic, while the other candidate is not.

Ex. You read in a music review that Lady Gaga can't be taken seriously as a musical artist because of how she dresses. Keep in mind, however, that character/personality are sometimes relevant to an argument. For example, one could make a strong and logically sound argument against hiring a candidate who has a record of taking bribes to be in charge of the finance for a campaign.

Genetic Fallacy

This fallacy looks at where a person or idea originated, rather than the person or idea itself.

Ex. Susan shouldn't be put in charge of this project. How can anyone born and raised in the tiny town of Dundas ON understand the problems/complexities of the transit system in a city as large as Vancouver?

Ex. A writer suggests that film critiques by Roger Ebert aren't valid for an international audience since he is a critic from the United States. On the other hand, there are times when where a writer or idea originates might tie into and have an impact on the validity of the argument. If context is a key component of the argument, it would not be fallacious reasoning to discuss whether or not an idea is valid based on its place of origin. This comes into play frequently in papers dealing with topics in the liberal arts. For example, if you were to write a paper about Canadian interpretations of American action films, dismissing a review by Roger Ebert because he is offering an American interpretation, rather than a Canadian one, would be valid.

Ad Populum

This type of argument uses illegitimate emotional appeal, drawing on people's emotions, prejudices, and stereotypes. The emotion evoked here is not supported by sufficient, reliable, and trustworthy sources. Ad populum tends to appeal to the general population and may take a "lowest common denominator" approach. You will see this frequently in arguments dealing with community or civic interests as well as advertising.

Ex. A commentator on a conservative talk show suggests that women should have to undergo more rigorous job interview procedures than their male counterparts because they are more emotional, likely to need maternity leave, easily distracted, and other reasons that play to sexist stereotypes of women.

Ex. A classmate writes a paper suggesting that smoking needs to be outlawed because smoking creates people who have bad teeth, bad breath, poor health, and impose secondhand smoke on those around them.

Hasty Generalization

A hasty generalization is based on insufficient, unreliable, and unverifiable evidence. This is a common fallacy in student writing, to the point where many writing instructors take special care to discuss it in class. It is easy to fall into this fallacy based on direct observation and limited research, as it may seem like a complete picture is presented from just a few snapshots. To avoid this fallacy, be sure that you have done thorough research in a variety of sources that offer differing perspectives on the issue you are discussing.

Ex. Based on your student community at UBC, you write a paper suggesting that Canada is the model the world should follow for immigrant and cultural relations. Although there are communities and cities within Canada that would provide further examples to uphold this idea, there are places in Canada where relations are strained and poor. Generalizing for the whole nation based on an individual example makes for a weak argument.

Ex. You read a source that says violent video games cause violence in communities, based on an isolated incident where a teen who played violent video games brought a gun to school.

Ex. A speaker tells the audience that women over 40 who are having a baby for the first time make the best mothers, based on the fact that many of the women in his workplace were first-time mothers in their 40s and they have avoided making parenting "mistakes" that he has observed in younger mothers.

Loaded Question

Here, the writer asks a question in such a way that an unjustified or unfounded assumption is a part of the question. The questions usually imply something negative about their subjects, though they might be used to suggest a positive answer about the subject if the writer wants the reader to be favourably disposed towards the subject.

Ex. At what point did the oil company decide it wanted to destroy our beautiful wilderness?

Ex. You are opposed to another fast food restaurant opening on campus, so you write, "It is unclear when UBC stopped caring about the health of its students, but this new restaurant shows that this lack of care continues." Note that the loaded question fallacy can take the form of an implied question, rather than one that is asked directly.

Ex. Why should the charitable work of celebrities go unnoticed and un-praised, just because they are famous?

Gambler's Fallacy

This issue assumes that the chances of something happening increases because it hasn't happened for a long time. This type of fallacy disregards the law of probability.

Ex. Let me handle this next sales pitch. My losing streak has to end at some point.

Straw Person

Here you address the weakest point of an opponent's argument, instead of focusing on a main issue. Or, you imply that an opponent is arguing something that he/she is not.

Ex. An instructor argues that in order to do well in a composition course, you have to work hard outside of class, and practice your writing. A classmate responds by saying that not everyone can afford to pay a tutor.

Red Herring

This type of fallacy manipulates the audience by avoiding the central argument, shifting attention to an irrelevant or unrelated issue. The user of a red herring intends to distract the audience from the important issues. Unlike the "evading the issue" fallacy, this one intentionally sets up a distraction rather than simply focusing on another aspect of the issue besides the one being argued.

Ex. A teacher accused of taking bribes might answer that he/she devotes many overtime hours in order to prepare her/his class material. In doing so, the teacher will start to make the argument seem to be about her/his level of preparedness, rather than the issue at hand.

Ex. You want to convince your brother to loan you money, but he knows that you plan to use it for an upcoming camping trip and he says no. You respond by saying that it is difficult for a student to make money because work/study programs limit hours, and then go on to talk about the difficulties of balancing work and school.

Slippery Slope

This fallacy takes an issue or event and escalates potential effects unrealistically. This happens frequently in advertising ("buy our product and all the girls will love you – don't buy our product and you will be a social outcast") and in arguments related to politics and causes.

Ex. If we keep adding Starbucks locations in Vancouver, they will have a complete monopoly and that will open the door for other corporate monopolies in the food and retail sectors. Soon, Vancouver will have only the same few businesses, block after block, and the economy of the city will be destroyed.

Appeal to Ignorance/Lack of Contrary Evidence

This is an easy mistake to make if you haven't done strong research or if you are basing your argument on an incomplete understanding of the issue. It indicates that something must be true because it has never been proven to be false. This fallacy is common in persuasion that deals with social, political, and cultural issues.

Ex. The Loch Ness monster must exist because no one has ever proven that it doesn't.

Ex. The Loch Ness monster must not exist because no one has ever proven that it does.

Ex. Sarah would be an ideal candidate for this job because she's never failed at managing a store (when, in fact, there is no data to show that she has ever worked at a store, much less managing one).

Oversimplification

This occurs when you avoid the complexities of an argument, or ignore the larger implications of the ideas being put forward. Like most of the fallacies listed here, this can happen based on insufficient research and preparation or on purpose to manipulate an audience. The latter happens frequently in political arguments.

Ex. Mandatory sentencing for heroin users will quickly put an end to heroin addiction.

Ex. Development in the mountains of British Columbia needs to stop if humans and black bears are to live in harmony.

Ex. Violent video games cause violent teens.

Bandwagon

This is a type of the ad populum fallacy in that it draws on our irrational fears of being left out of "the group." Humans generally want to feel like they "belong", so this can impact readers on an emotional level. This fallacy also appeals to the idea that if a majority of the population does or believes something, it must be right or beneficial.

Ex. Every Torontonians needs to be cheering for the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team in the playoffs, even when the team has played dismally all season.

Ex. Sixty percent of people living in Kitsilano want to cut back on corporate businesses in their neighbourhood, so corporate businesses should think about moving away from Vancouver.

Ad Misericordiam

This type of argument uses illegitimate emotional appeal to beg for mercy. It plays on the compassion of the audience. The plea is based on emotion, rather than on logic.)

Ex. Pleading with an instructor for an "A" on a paper, not because it's a good paper, but because you need a certain grade in the class to keep a scholarship.

Ex. A company denies that their CEO should be indicted for fraud because, although he handled the company's money unethically, he is a loving husband and fantastic father to his three little girls.

Ad Verecundiam (to authority)

This is appealing to weak (inappropriate) authority, or arguing that we should continue doing something because it's tradition. Like ad misericordiam and others are illegitimate uses of emotional appeal, this is an illegitimate appeal to tradition.

Ex. We should get completely drunk on Canada Day because we've done it since we were teenagers.

Ex. My English teacher says that Stephen Hawking's writing contains everything a person could want to know about astrophysics, so his books should form the basis for the curriculum in astrophysics courses at universities.

Tu Quoque (you too)

This is where you accuse an opponent of the same thing he/she has accused you of (instead of addressing the accusation itself). This fallacy avoids addressing the issue by reflecting blame back onto the other party. Although this appears in debates and other forms of published, widely-available persuasion, it is perhaps most familiar from the everyday arguments people get into with each other.

Ex. accusation: "You should exercise." reply: "Well, I don't see you working out".

Ex. accusation: "You need to make more sustainable choices in your daily life." reply: "Last time I was at your house, you had all the lights in every room on, and it wasn't even dark yet."

Begging the Question

This is a type of circular reasoning where you use your own claim to support the claim. This is much like saying that a certain book is the authority on film studies because the book itself claims to be the authority on film studies.

Ex. This vital legislation on natural resources must pass now. (Assumes that the legislation is vital.)

Ex. I can vouch for the authenticity of this antique jewellery that I am selling.

Non Sequitor

In this type of reasoning, the conclusion does not follow from the premises set out in the argument.

Ex. All drug dealers conduct their business in East Vancouver. Danny conducts his business in East Vancouver. Therefore, Danny must be a drug dealer.

Ex. All Americans love ranch dressing. Aziz loves ranch dressing. Therefore, Aziz is an American.

Ex. Corporate workers wear suits to work. Pang wears a suit to work. Therefore, Pang is a corporate worker.

False Dichotomy

Offers only two alternatives when more than two alternatives exist. This is used frequently in political arguments, especially over sensitive or divisive issues. For example, in the United States it is common to see arguments suggesting that either abortion should be outlawed or parents will start murdering their children if their children become burdensome to them. This example includes slippery slope, as well; often, the two fallacies go together.

Ex. An angry person suggests that if you don't like the way things work in Canada, you should just move to the United States.

Ex. The sales person in the shoe store tells you that if you don't buy the boots you are trying on, you can count on wet feet in the winter.

False Cause

This fallacy claims that certain causes or effects are linked to a specific event, without clear evidence to show that this is the case.

Ex. On the same night as one of the International Fireworks Competition displays, a nearby balcony catches on fire. This is a coincidence, though one might assume that the fireworks were to blame because of the timing of the fire and the inherent dangers of fireworks. However, closer inspection would show that not only were the fireworks fired from a barge in English Bay, there were no strong winds to carry embers from the display to the city. The fire would have come from some other cause, which would be revealed by further research and inspection; in this case, perhaps a lit cigarette wasn't put out thoroughly or a grill was tipped over to cause the fire.

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