# Chapter 17. Developing Projects that Argue

## In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize writing projects that require argument
- Explore writing strategies that support argument
- Reflect to predict, problem-solve, and improve throughout the process of writing arguments

While much of your writing will be designed to move your reader or present

your own judgment in some way, in some writing situations your overarching goal will be to **change your readers' minds on a specific point of argument**. Argumentative writing can be highly motivating: the US is sometimes referred to as having "an argument culture," and writers often rise to the challenge of persuading a resistant audience to consider new ways of thinking. In school assignments, arguing logically within the frameworks of a field or discipline is also a major *way of thinking* that students are asked to demonstrate—in part because scholars and innovators use argumentation not just to defend positions but to create new knowledge. Formal written argument is thus an integral part of the culture of US academia.

Your lifelong experience as an arguer—whether you are used to dramatic vocal disagreements or quieter ways of indicating that you approve or disapprove of a situation—can serve you well as you work on a formal written argument, but it can also cause you to underestimate the workload or overlook key factors in your readers' experience. Likewise, some of the kinds of "arguments" you may see in your daily life aren't good models for someone who actually wants to change another person's beliefs or behavior. In popular media, people frequently list several reasons they believe in or support a position, without adapting those reasons to a specific audience or situation. Likewise, some school assignments may ask you to describe several "pros and cons" of a situation, regardless of your actual beliefs. A list of reasons or a description of relevant claims, even when they are supported by credible evidence, is not an effective argument. Advanced writers know that our statements are only effective when they are rhetorical—that is, when our writing is designed for and directly affects our readers.

As a result, the argument writing that seems to call for the most immediate passion and active engagement also benefits from the strongest reflective practice and exploration. Like an attorney preparing for weeks before a one-day trial, writers who argue often put in many hours of less visible inquiry, planning, and readjusting to create successful documents. People are generally not persuaded by random facts or ALL CAPS SENTENCES, so writers need to select and arrange arguments in ways that are relevant to and acceptable by our readers. To do this, we often begin by finding the root of the problem: "How do we disagree?"

Advanced arguers can keep several threshold concepts in mind:

## Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Successful arguers seek always to understand our readers' reasons and locate evidence that readers will find persuasive.

## Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Argument isn't about producing three correct points with two credible sources and one refutation: it's a social engagement. Persuasive arguers need connect claims and evidence to what we learn about the larger community contexts that influence readers' expectations and beliefs.

## There are many ways to solve a writing problem

Since argument is contextual and rhetorical, there is no one right way to write an argument. Sometimes there's not even one clear best argument to make, so writers need to take extra time to explore and experiment before we commit to our central claims and approaches.

This chapter will help you explore key strategies that arguers use, and use them to help you reflect on your options at each stage of your project, so that you have the skills to successfully navigate the process of arguing your point.

### Explore 17.1

Consider your recent conversations with friends or family, and note down one recent "low-stakes" argument you've had recently, and one disagreement that felt more important or impactful. Thinking back, how would you describe your argument style or approach—was it similar in both situations, or did you use different strategies?

## 17.1 How Do We Disagree? Exploring Fundamental Argument Strategies

While humans overall are storytelling beings, as an individual you may have been arguing with people even longer than you have been telling them stories. (There is a rumor in my own family that each child's first word was "No.") You may thus feel that you have a fair understanding of how to go about arguing, so when you create a written argument that does not satisfy a reader, it can feel very frustrating.

To understand this frustration, consider the difference between throwing a ball to a friend and designing a robot to accomplish the same task. Although you no longer think consciously about it, when you pick up a ball and glance at your friend across the yard, you are collecting, processing, and adapting to a wide range of information in real time: the weight of the ball against your fingertips, the distance you see between you and your friend, the wind you feel against your face. As you start to throw, your body continues to adapt to the size, shape, texture, and weight of the ball, and to any change in your friend's position.

If you had to build a device to deliver one ball to one location, much less a device that would adapt to different balls or locations, it would take hours. Similarly, moving from casual everyday spoken arguments to written argumentation means that you have to convert your intuitive skills into distinct strategies. You need strategies to reach readers who are at a distance in space and time. On top of that, as you may have read elsewhere in this book, you are writing for readers who cannot read your mind to understand your intent or your knowledge, who come from communities that rely on different types of evidence than you may be comfortable with, and who have not yet noticed all the nuances and complexities of your subject. Reflecting on these conditions and planning your argument can thus take more time than you expect. At the heart of formal argumentation are three strategies you can practice:

- **Strategy 1**: Identify what the disagreement is.
- **Strategy 2**: Understand the influence of an argument's "backstory."
- **Strategy 3**: Predict the right combination of sufficient and credible evidence, appeals, and/or reasoning to affect a range of readers at a distance in space and time.

You may hear these strategies identified by different names. A famous philosopher named Stephen Toulmin who studied arguments described this process as establishing the *claim*, the *warrant*, and the *grounds* or *data* of your argument; you may also hear instructors refer to strategies involving your *thesis*, your *assumption-checking*, and your *support*.

Moreover, writing successful arguments will require you to move in alternating directions in relation to your readers. At some points, you must *separate* yourself from your imagined readers; at others, you must identify where you and they *share* some common principles. When you are chatting with friends about whether to order pizza, these back-and-forth moves may occur intuitively, but when you are composing a complex written argument, you should focus on one kind of move at a time.

## Establish and define the disagreement

Before you can know *why* your readers disagree with you, you need to know what you're *really* disagreeing about. This first step may seem unnecessary: who would write an argument without knowing what the disagreement was? Outside a school or work environment, a strongly felt disagreement—say, about which sports team is performing best this season—is often obvious, so you may not need to consider this step for long. But inside a classroom or professional office, some disagreements may be harder to pinpoint.

> **You may not really be disagreeing (yet)**: If your initial claim is too broad, too cautious, or too vague, you may still be focused on *explaining* a situation rather than arguing for a distinct position. The sentence "Sometimes writing is hard for students" will not provoke

many people to disagree. To create a foundation for a formal argument, you can narrow the focus ("Requiring college application essays"), make a bolder or more daring claim ("creates unfair disadvantages"), and identify a specific angle or aspect of the problem ("for students who cannot afford a private college-prep coach").

**You may not know what your readers most disagree with you about**: Disagreements are audience- and context-dependent: a claim about the benefits of telework will elicit calm nods in one workplace but fervent opposition in another, while the claim that "Pluto is a planet" elicited very little disagreement a few decades ago but is now widely argued against. If you have ever argued with a friend or family member over one event (like being late to dinner) only to discover that the person was actually angry about a different problem (your overall work schedule), you know how difficult it is to have a successful argument when the area of disagreement isn't fully defined.

**You may not know the goal of disagreeing**: In writing a timed essay response or in composing a newspaper editorial, you may be aiming to "win" an argument by successfully demonstrating how all credible evidence supports your view. On the other hand, in the opening rounds of a diplomatic negotiation or in recruiting a prospective client, you might "win" simply by sounding reasonable enough that the reader doesn't dismiss your ideas in the first round. In a political subcommittee, a custody mediation, or a project brainstorming session, you may need to reach a consensus in which all participants have compromised in some ways.

**You may not see the nuances of a disagreement**: In academic and professional writing, disagreements may arise about what appear to be very small matters: which of Elizabeth Bennet's younger sisters is the most thoroughly developed character in *Pride and Prejudice*, or whether a 5% increase in study participants' sleep time would be a significant enough gain to persuade scientists to adopt a new therapy. These arguments are important to the writers, and necessary to help them create new knowledge, but the exact contrary positions can be harder to distinguish when you are new to the conversation.

Sometimes writers find it useful to explore argument categories—also called *stases*—that were defined by philosophers such as Aristotle several thousand years ago to help discern what arguments are appropriate to a situation.

- **Arguments of fact,** definition or category: Pluto is not a planet; the current economic state is a recession; a "hybrid" car is still essentially an old-style gas-guzzler

- **Arguments of value or degree:** Pluto's status was unfairly changed; this is our worst recession in 100 years; fully electric cars are the best option for people concerned about climate change
- **Arguments of cause or effect:** Data from the New Horizons spacecraft about other exo-planets will cause a reevaluation of Pluto's status; the recession was the result of deregulation of the mortgage industry; buying an electric car will save you money over a ten-year period
- **Arguments of policy or solution:** Universities should support independent astronomers' work rather than big-budget space projects like New Horizons; the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau must be given more oversight power to prevent such abuses by lenders; special tax breaks for hybrid vehicle buyers should be canceled since they are now competitive on price and value

Often, arguments combine two or more of these approaches: "Data from the New Horizons spacecraft will not **cause** a reevaluation of Pluto's status, so funding **should be** redirected to smaller projects by independent scientists." The key is to know which approach(es) you are taking at any given time. You may also have to broaden or narrow the focus of your argument ("Battery-only cars are good for urban and some suburban drivers"), to simplify it or attend to complications, or to adapt it to the knowledge or concerns of your readers.

## Understand the backstory

When you transplant an apple tree, you have to dig deep to bring all the roots along; when you "transplant" your readers to a new way of thinking, you need to consider their roots as well. This step can be harder than defining the main disagreement, because it involves mind-reading and counter-motion. That is, you have to learn to think like, and sometimes move directly toward, the very readers with whom you have just begun to disagree, rather than simply pile up the evidence in your favor. In most academic and professional written arguments, your goal is not just to find their soft spots so you can crush their resistance; arguers who empathize and find common ground with readers create more persuasive documents.

- **Identify core values in the backstory**. The reasons why you and your friends argue over which restaurant to order from rarely have to do with the "front-story" evidence. You all agree about the facts: the pepperoni pizza is spicy and hot but greasy, and the vegetarian restaurant is healthy and flavorful but has slow delivery time. You may disagree about the best choice because for this one evening, you each hold different values or priorities: one of you hates spicy food, one of you wants to lose weight (and thinks the pizza won't help), and one of you has a final exam to study for (and so needs a faster dinner).

- **Identify unstated assumptions in the backstory**. The reasons why Pluto was officially designated "the ninth planet in our solar system" one decade and "just one of several dwarf planets in the Kuiper belt" the next does not have to do with a change in the front-story facts about Pluto but with a change in the definitions about what constitutes a "planet." Scientists commonly accept that backstories change: as we learn more about astronomical bodies generally, we should be willing to revise our models and categories.

Before your readers will be persuaded by your evidence in the front story of an argument, they may need to agree with—or at least grant the possibility of worthiness to—your backstory and values. A challenge is that the backstory of your own argument may seem so obvious to you that you have difficulty imagining that others don't see and share your views on it. So before you begin amassing evidence about your topic or issue, you need to investigate your assumptions and those of your readers, as thoroughly as you can.

For instance, in order to argue that "An electric car is the most environmentally friendly vehicle you can purchase," you need to know whether your readers agree with your definition of "environmentally friendly car." If they value overall resource use more than reducing fossil fuel consumption, then purchasing *any* new car may not meet their values. To write a successful argument for readers with those values, you would need to address the *overall environmental costs* of buying a new electric car.

In a school assignment, you may be able to decide that your target audience does not include people who don't at least grant your basic premise: "If they don't want to help the environment at all, they won't ever buy an electric car, so I'm not writing to them." However, that approach only goes so far: eventually, writers must argue to people who disagree with or misunderstand *some* of our basic premises, values, and assumptions. By clarifying areas of common values with readers, you not only increase your chances of arguing successfully on a single point, but you adopt an approach that treats readers as reasonable colleagues, which will benefit all of your argumentative writing.

## Explore 17.2

Name something that is your favorite (such as your favorite food, course, city, or cause). Staying with that one topic, list two different argumentative claims you support, but you think your peers would disagree with: you could write one that is evaluative ("X is *delicious/fun/important*"), one that is causal (what are the *origins* or *consequences* of X?), and/or one that focuses on policy ("Somebody *should* _____ regarding X."). Consider either the causal or policy statement: write one more sentence describing a backstory of why your peers might *reasonably* disagree: "My peers and I might have different values/expectations about ____."

**Learn**

- To learn more about **readers who can't read your mind**, see Chapter 15, Developing Projects that Explain.
- To learn more about **community expectations about evidence**, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more strategies for **writing in different argument categories**, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves.

## Provide sufficient evidence, appeals, and reasoning

Once you know the disagreement focus and the backstory values (or warrants) for each person or group that has a stake in the situation, you can finally start building an argument. When writers argue, we do state our opinion, but it's not "*just* an opinion": it's an opinion supported by reasoning and evidence. If you just state your position, readers are unlikely to change. Unfortunately, you cannot learn to "support your argument" once and for all, the way you learn to snap your fingers. Persuading a cranky five-year-old to try a new food and persuading a skeptical investor to support a new business plan will require very different uses of evidence and reasoning.

When you argue with a friend in real time, you have multiple opportunities to correct, strengthen, and revise your approaches as your friend resists or poses questions. When you compose a textual and/or visual argument for one or more skeptical readers, you need to anticipate many possible resistances and questions—the way a programmer for a ball-throwing robot needs to account in advance for many throwing situations. You may need to develop additional skills with one of the following strategies in supporting your front-story.

### Provide relevant, credible evidence to fit your audience

Instead of summarizing all the facts, advanced writers select data that best matches our readers' needs—and helps us address the strongest resistance points an audience will present. Just having "three points" to your argument isn't enough; you have to provide the evidence that best responds to readers' most serious doubts, and often that best-match evidence is the hardest to find or create. For example, gathering specific financial data to support a five-year earnings projection may be the hardest part of your business plan, yet you cannot leave it out: that will be among the first questions an investor will ask.

Likewise, you need to assemble support that your particular audience will view as credible. The five-year-old may be persuaded by an engaging story about Perry and the Parsnips, while the lead investors will want numbers based on sources they consider up-to-date and reliable. Other audiences may be persuaded by

comments from experts, studies published in reputable journals, detailed observations you provide, and/or careful analytical reasoning. The more you know about the expectations of your readers' discourse community, the better you'll be able to match your arguments to their needs.

## Provide a chain of reasoning that "shows your work"

If you ever felt frustrated when someone's argument was "Because I said so," you experienced an audience's reaction to insufficient reasoning. It's a little like having a friend who can do complicated chemistry equations in their head, without writing down all the steps. This quick calculation helps the work of the original thinker, but it does not help an outsider *replicate the thought experiment*. When you write an argument, you cannot just add in a fact or expert testimony here and there: you need to show your argument work just as equation-solvers show their mathematical work, so that someone who doesn't read your mind can replicate your thinking.

Some readers, in some straightforward situations, can make do with a short chain of reasoning; other readers and other arguments will require a longer chain. The shortest chain always has at least two links, so a fact, example, or quotation will need to be connected to your own reasoning: it cannot "speak for itself." Even a fairly simple or commonly agreed-on fact could be interpreted in multiple ways unless readers are guided directly to a conclusion.

> **Fact:** A recent survey shows that nearly 40% of teens say they sometimes text while driving . . .
>
> . . . which outnumbers those who admit to driving while intoxicated, demonstrating how serious a problem texting is.
>
> . . . which is fewer than was reported just a few years ago, demonstrating that anti-texting campaigns are working.
>
> . . . which conflicts with other reputable surveys which show from 20% to 60% of teens admitting this behavior, demonstrating how difficult it is to accurately measure this problem.

To develop that last statement into a longer chain of reasoning, you could explain:

- which reputable person or organization conducted each reputable survey,
- how each survey was conducted that may have influenced its results,
- how this compares to the last several years' worth of similar surveys, and
- what challenges remain in designing and interpreting the results of the survey.

Do you need this level of detail? The answer to the question "How much is enough?" depends on several factors. An audience of skeptical sociologists reading an extended

article might need and appreciate that extended chain; an audience of state legislators reading a brief letter might not. As you build your chain, your own credibility is also a factor: if you are the US Surgeon General writing about cancer research, you may not need to show your work as much as if you are an unknown college student whose expertise in this area your readers may have little reason to trust.

Finally, the genre and purpose of the document are factors in your decision: in an assignment for a college class in the US—in a culture that places high value on accurate detail and specific logical moves—the overriding purpose is to show your work, even if you know your instructor doesn't really need the information you are providing. Meanwhile, in an advertisement or campaign speech, sometimes the purpose is specifically *not* to show the chain of reasoning, which might not hold up to scrutiny (what do baseball players really know about buying a pickup truck, after all?). In any case, if a reader says, "I'm not convinced," even when your facts are correct and your evidence is appropriate, that may signal that you need to add some more steps to your reasoning.

## Provide a balance of appeals suitable to the audience and situation

When you think of finding "evidence" or "reasons" for your argument, you're usually working on an appeal to logic. This approach is highly valued in US academic writing, where the scientific method of hypothesis posing, experimentation, and analysis based on data anchors much of our approach to communication. Outside school, though, appeals to logic—or to *logos*, to use the Greek term—are often combined with or even superseded by two other kinds of appeals.

Appeals to emotions, or to *pathos*, are particularly common in advertising and in social media discussions. At root, most of these moves attempt to appeal to someone's fears (about growing old, losing money, or being disliked) or appeal to someone's desires (about having great friends, becoming rich and famous, or living an adventurous life). Emotional appeals have the advantage of being almost instantaneous: if you put a picture of a cute baby or a puppy up on a screen, the "Awwww!" reaction comes immediately, without anyone needing to read the fine print, calculate a percentage, or consult a manual.

Because emotional reactions are so instant and powerful, however, readers in US academic and professional settings sometimes feel that a writer is trying to manipulate rather than honestly persuade them. Writers must therefore adapt their use of emotional appeals to match a particular audience. You may feel justified in increasing the emotional appeals to your five-year-old ("Parsnips will help you grow up big and strong! Wonder Woman always eats her parsnips!"), but you might choose not to take that tack with your business investors ("Without this plan, children will be weeping in the streets!").

You can also make appeals to values your readers share—appeals to *ethos*—which happen frequently in political speeches as well as advertisements. A conspicuous

appeal to values suggests that readers should take a very particular action (voting, donating, buying) because that is a good way to show they believe in a very general value (patriotism, charity, human rights). In a more subtle appeal, a writer might argue that readers who want to make the world a better place for future generations (a moral value) should buy a car that pollutes less—or a celebrity or influencer will lend their good name (and, by implication, their respected values) to support a product or politician.

Like a celebrity on TV or TikTok, you also appeal to your readers' values to increase your own *ethos* or credibility. In some cases, you may tell a personal story that directly explains the principles or values that guide you and that you share with readers, or describe the professional experience that gives you particular insight into your current project. And in all your writing projects, your choices and approaches—such as using a particular genre or diction or referring to credible sources—can imply that you are "authentic" or a "hard worker" and so should be trusted by readers.

In academic and professional documents, a little emotional or ethical appeal—perhaps in the opening or closing sections—can have significant impact. However, they can also raise readers' skepticism if they suspect writers are using such appeals merely to conceal logical weaknesses in the core arguments, so you should use them carefully.

## Use counterargument, concession, and refutation as persuasive strategies

Argument writers are often encouraged to summarize and respond to opposing points of view. When you directly state these counterarguments, you make a strong ethical appeal (by showing that you are the kind of writer who takes the time to understand your readers). You also clarify your own claims and evidence, since new information or arguments are often easier to understand when they are compared to contrasting or more familiar ideas. In most cases, you will also need to carefully refute these opposing claims—strongly if you are in a direct-debate mode, more gently if you are building to a compromise—so that readers are not left wondering what your true position is. However, in some cases you can build an ethical appeal by conceding a small point entirely, to show that you are willing to be reasonable: "It's true that if you already own a late-model fuel-efficient car, buying a new electric car will not save you enough money on fuel to offset the cost of buying another new car."

As you explore the options for constructing a written argument, you may need to loop through all three of these challenges more than once, like a robot-designer who adjusts the mechanism or programming, then tests the robot's ball-throwing, and then adjusts the mechanism again. Each time you define the argument more exactly, you'll find it easier to know how to uncover the values and assumptions that lie behind it, in order to see where you and your audience share common ground

and where you separate from one another. As you gain a clearer understanding of your readers' current position, you'll better be able to predict the kind and amount of evidence and reasoning that you will need to move them toward your own perspective. This cycle of refining your argument is crucial: Your readers will most likely encounter your document only one time, so your focus, connection, and support must guide them precisely toward the beliefs or actions you intend.

## Explore 17.3

Write a one-sentence argument related to your favorite (or least favorite) food, class, place, or cause, stating it in a way that you imagine many people will disagree with. Now imagine the difference between trying to persuade a close friend to agree, and trying to persuade a highly-resistant reader (such as your grumpiest relative, your most skeptical instructor, or the owner of a business that strongly supports another food, place, or cause). Choose two of the strategies above: selecting evidence, choosing appeals, developing a chain of reasoning, or responding to counterarguments. For each of the two, write a sentence explaining how your approach to that strategy would be different depending on which audience you were persuading: "For a friend, I would use an appeal such as ___, while for a competing business owner I would use more _____ appeals."

## Practice

- To learn about and practice avoiding **logical fallacies**, see Reason Appallingly.

## Learn

- To learn more about **discourse communities**, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more about creating **counterarguments**, see Chapter 18, Developing Projects that Propose Change.

## 17.2 Reflect To Predict: Exploring Your Argument Project

All advanced writers benefit from planning a project, perhaps by writing an outline or identifying a research process; reflective writers take some additional steps to deliberately explore a range of options and predict which ones will be most successful.

Remember that you can DEAL as you explore and predict aspects of your project. Predicting as an arguer requires many of the same considerations as you will encounter in other writing tasks: you will want to **define** your audience and your goals, **explore** your own subject knowledge and consider your dispositions, **act** to acquire resources and develop early

insights, and **learn** how you can combine new strategies with previous ones that have been successful for you as a writer.

Because you will need to *identify the front-story, the backstory, and your key support* very early in the process of composing an argument, you may want to take some time with the explorations explained here.

## Explore your position and your readers' concerns

Your answer to "how do we disagree?" depends fundamentally on understanding your own goal and your readers' values and expectations. Identify both the front story and the backstory of the argument: what do you and readers most disagree about, and what differences in assumptions and values are at the root of that conflict? You may be able to gain some initial perspective just by taking time to analyze the situation, but you may also need to seek out credible information about the issue and your readers. You should also consider how intensely readers doubt or disagree with your position, and whether there are any points you might be willing to concede or compromise on.

## Explore details in the front story and backstory

While all writers research, argument writers need to research in three different layers—even, and perhaps especially, with arguments we think we already know well. You already have experience using research to assemble the reasons, explanations, and data that support your opinion. Yet in order to respond to your readers' counterarguments, you also need to inquire into some of the reasons, explanations, and data that contradict or question your perspective. (Remember that most interesting controversies have more than just two "sides," so it can help to examine several points of view.) Finally, you need to investigate your readers themselves: everything you can learn about their backstory assumptions and values will help you adapt your writing. Just as leaving out one instruction step could result in someone assembling a bookcase that tilts badly and fails to hold books, leaving out an inquiry step can result in an unstable argument that fails to persuade readers.

## Explore the intensity, scope, and structure of your argument

Like explainers, arguers also have to answer the question "How much is enough?" When you can identify your goals and challenges up front, the better you'll be able to predict how much, and what kind, of arguments and evidence you will need to offer if you want to change readers' minds.

- Explore your goals and your readers' constraints. Just as it takes more energy to lift a heavy object than a lighter one, or throw a ball fifty feet rather than five, it will take more effort to persuade resistant readers than

to persuade those without a strong opinion, and more effort to argue successfully for a complete change of policy than to create a proposal for a local pilot project. Are you preparing to work on an intense argument, or are you stepping into a less strenuous challenge?

- The scope of your argument will also depend on your intentions and your readers' situation. For instance, when your audience is busy or the issue is less controversial, you may not need to present as much detail. When your audience is skeptical or you urgently need readers to change their thinking, you will need to provide more evidence, address counterarguments more thoroughly, and use a range of appeals—which may mean that you need to narrow your focus to cover less ground in more depth (from "fighting global warming" to "installing offshore wind turbines in Virginia," e.g.).

- Selecting an initial structure for your written argument is also a rhetorical decision. A simple argument for agreeable readers might work best in a block pattern of paragraphs, with counterarguments noted briefly and responded to near the end, where a more complex situation involving multiple perspectives might benefit from a side-by-side pattern comparing arguments and counterarguments.

Once you understand your intensity and scope, you might also experiment with phrasing your initial claim: most academic arguments use an explicit argument statement, but these can vary in complexity depending on the goals and readers.

## Exercises to explore as you reflect to predict

Before you set out to write the actual first pages of your argument, you will want to acquire resources that will help you meet the challenges you've identified, and practice some of the strategies you may use as you compose. You already know of actions that can help you: perhaps you like to brainstorm initial pros and cons, read some popular articles about an issue, draft an outline, or schedule your research time. You might also explore some of the exercises below to see which might be particularly helpful in writing your arguments.

### Practice

- To practice **identifying goals and concerns**, see Assumption Inspection, Audience profile, Believing/Doubting, Counterargument Generator, Off on a Rant, or They Say + I Say.
- To practice **inquiring about the front story and backstory**, see Audience/ Stakeholder Mapping, Date My Topic, Evidence Shopping List, or Reason Appallingly.
- To practice **exploring your scope and structure**, see Deluxe Project Scheduler, Expand and Narrow, Explode a Moment, or Six Structures.

# 17.3 Reflect To Problem-Solve: Exploring Sticky Argument Problems

Advanced writers often take steps to solve problems during the composing process; reflective writers look for ways to step back from a problem to explore likely alternatives rather than staring at a blinking cursor or "just doing it."

As you compose your argument, you may encounter challenges that feel familiar to you: generating material, staying organized and focused, providing sufficient evidence, managing your time or finding a stronger motivation boost. When you get stuck, you can DEAL with your problem: define it, explore possible solutions, act to try out a new approach, and make a note of what you learned: did your strategy help?

**In composing an argument, you might find that you get stuck** trying to align your original views with the available evidence and with readers' questions and resistance points. The deeper you go into articulating your claims, the harder it can be to imagine the thoughts of someone who doesn't think like you. You may want to explore the strategies noted here, so that you have some new approaches ready to try.

## Focus and adapt your argument

The more you write about your issue, the more you learn—and the more you may become aware that your early arguments have evolved or need revising. You should specifically look for ways to ensure that your overall argument is debatable, consistent, and supported:

- Since it is easier—and less socially stressful—to summarize the facts of a situation or the explanations provided by other people, you may find that you have written a whole paragraph describing the history of electric cars, rather than arguing why someone should buy one. While adding some background information or quoting an interesting expert perspective can give readers useful context, you should look for ways to foreground your debatable claim and related reasons regularly in your document.

- As you write, you may find that you get caught up in an interesting subpoint or controversy: in order to persuade readers about the benefit of electric cars, you delve into the need for more places to charge a car, and then find yourself arguing for your city council to sponsor public charging stations. These points are *related* but perhaps not *essential* to an argument about buying a car—unless you decide you want to shift away from individual purchases to arguing about public policy.

- Sometimes you can improve a claim by adding more or better evidence or by "showing your work" more thoroughly. In other cases, though, you might need to change your overall argument. If you don't think you have data or examples strong enough persuade a particular group of readers that "A true electric car is *the most environmentally friendly* vehicle on the market," you might adapt to offer a less radical claim: "Battery operated cars are an *environmentally friendly* choice *for people who don't have access to public transportation*."

Your *persistence* with a clear argument will help you stay focused here—as long as you balance that disposition with your openness to readers' needs or concerns.

## Explore your evidence options

As you draft your document, you should keep checking that you have the right evidence for your readers: evidence about the *most controversial* points, evidence that readers find *sufficient* and *credible* by their standards, and evidence that is *explained thoroughly* so that readers see how it supports your claim. If you're not sure that you are successfully "proving your point," you might need to step back and try another approach. Remember that you can combine types of evidence: statistics matched with examples, or expert testimony connected to emotional appeals from local residents. Sometimes you just need additional or more precise data, and you will need to re-research a point to find a stronger source; sometimes it will make sense to gain credibility by conceding an opposing point and moving on. And sometimes if you shift into writing to refute or respond to readers' concerns, you gain more insight into how to support your own arguments.

## Exercises to explore as you reflect to problem-solve

When you get stuck composing your argument, you may use strategies you've used before: taking a break, reviewing the assignment directions, talking to a friend, working on a different part of the writing task, or connecting to a value that motivates you. If you're stuck because you are aren't sure whether your writing will persuade a resistant reader, you may also explore the exercises below to see which ones might be most helpful to try.

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### Practice

- To practice **focusing and structuring** your argument, see Add/Move/Change/Delete, Elevator Speech, Out On A Limb, Six Structures, or Subtopic Generator.
- To practice **strengthening your evidence**, see Dialogue, Inner Three-Year-Old, Rate My Source, Reason Appallingly, or They Say + I Say.

# 17.4 Reflect To Improve: Exploring Your Growth as an Arguer and a Writer

As you complete a draft or finalize your project, you will benefit not just from making a few final edits, but from taking time to reflect on your work: you will want to define what you learned from this project, explore how to complete your revisions and identify key principles for writing, anticipate and adapt to meet the needs of future projects, and learn how you will keep improving as a writer.

You might also find that you want to explore some of the ways that you can improve your *argument* writing specifically, for this project and for future projects. Successful argument documents require skills at anticipating and responding to readers' concerns that you may want to add to your repertoire. You could thus give some extra time to the explorations explained here, so that you take full advantage of the opportunity to grow as a writer.

## Assess your insights to improve your arguments

Since you will learn about both your topic and your readers as you delve into an argument, you will want to pause after completing an initial draft to make sure your reasons and evidence still match your main goal and directly address your readers' concerns. Sometimes you find that your front story has evolved: you intended to argue about X, but became more focused on arguing about Y; you can revisit your introduction and early paragraphs to realign your draft to the current focus.

Similarly, feedback from your readers, or your own insights, may help you realize that your readers are more concerned about Z than you originally thought, and so you might need stronger or more clearly explained evidence, more focused appeals, or more direct responses to counterarguments for that section. Finally, once you're confident in your focus, you might see whether your project could benefit from following a consistent closed paragraph structure or using other coherence strategies to help readers keep track of the various sides of each point.

## Identify argument strategies to expand your writing story

Reflecting on how you have framed your own argument while responding to readers' concerns in this project—and identifying the places where you still got stuck—can help you transfer your improved argument skills to another project. Since you are living and learning in an "argument culture," you may find that even unremarkable writing tasks like weekly reports or emails to co-workers benefit from your ability to frame and anticipate arguments.

Even if you've been arguing all your life, planning and completing a formal argument project has probably helped you discover some new strategies or principles that can become part of your writing story. For example, you might find that "always check the backstory" can become one of your goals, or you may have learned some strategies that help you organize a complex document.

Finally, working through an argument project can help you understand some of your strengths, preferences, and growth areas as a writer. Maybe you've always been comfortable stating your opinion about sports but now you think you need more practice writing and supporting a claim relevant to your field or your personal goals—or maybe you discovered you have untapped strengths at imagining and responding to readers' concerns. The more you can articulate your goals and abilities as an arguer, the more growth and success you can enable across your writing through your life and career.

### Exercises and resources to explore as you reflect to improve

When you are considering the strategies that will best persuade readers to agree with your arguments, you might find that familiar strategies help: checking on feedback from your readers, using highlight colors to help you see patterns, or connecting to your core values for motivation. You may also find it helpful to explore the resources below to see which ones might support your work:

**Practice**

- To practice **highlighting argument insights**, see Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Conclusion Transplant, Letter to Kermit, Shrunken Draft, Ten Directed Revisions, Used To Think / Now I Think.

**Learn**

- To learn more about **revising**, see Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection.
- To learn more about **paragraphs, organizational patterns, and cohesion**, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.
- To learn more about **improving future writing tasks**, see Chapter 12, Creating Your Writing Theory.

## 17.5 Sample Writing Projects that Rely on Argumentation

### Experience-based writing project: Plain is the new fancy

The internet is full of fancy examples that everyone should envy: every day we see vacation destinations, clothing, technology, restaurants, colleges, craft projects,

video games, and athletic feats that dazzle us. Talk back to that conversation: drawing on your experiences and those of people you know well, write an argument to your peers in favor of choosing something plain instead. Take time to think carefully about your topic and angle, so you can focus on a topic and/or some reasons that are unexpected and that challenge readers' expectations.

Most of us would already agree that plain yoga pants are comfortable, that plain vegetables are more nutritious, or that a plain college will cost less, so those aren't arguable. But if you want to argue that yoga pants contribute to gender equity, that broccoli smoothies boost self-esteem, or that community colleges reduce family strife, you might pique readers' attention. Be sure to acknowledge skeptical readers' concerns, provide exact examples, and show your chain of reasoning. If a standard essay doesn't suit your thinking, consider composing the text for a public service announcement video, a script for a "Non-Desperate Housewives" scene, or a story for third-graders (but don't forget your goal of persuading your audience!).

## Practice

- To practice **arguing** about your experiences and judgments, see Assumption Inspection, Believing/Doubting, Cause-Effect Map, Counterargument Generator, Genre Switch, Out On a Limb, Ten Ways To Choose a Topic, or Used To Think / Now I Think.

## Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Narration to provide examples from your experience;
  - Causal argument and evaluative argument to explain how and why benefits occur; or
  - Reflection to consider how your own life has changed or could change for the better
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you argue about your experiences, see
  - Chapter 19 on conducting self-based research
  - Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

## Writing-about-writing project: What best helps writers learn?

Working with a combination of personal and professional sources, create an argument about what most helps writers learn to write. You might decide to narrow your argument to a particular group of writers: writers *like you*, writers *in high*

*school*, or writers *with learning disabilities*. Or you might narrow to a particular kind of writing, such as *lab reports*, *literary analyses*, or *blog posts*. This textbook, like many scholarly publications in the field of writing studies, presents some arguments; you may agree or disagree with any of them, as long as you have evidence to support your claim.

Take time to adapt both your argument (front story and backstory) and your genre to a specific audience, and stay aware of what alternate views those readers may have. If you decide to write to scholars or instructors who already have a strong view about this, you might draft an academic essay with formal citations; if you decide to write to other students who are new to thinking about advanced writing strategies (for instance, students with less school experience), you might draft a video script or a poster.

## Practice

- To practice **arguing** about how writers improve, see Audience Profile, Counterargument Generator, Expert/Novice Exploration, Letter to Kermit, Off on a Rant, Scenarios, Used to think / Now I think, or Values Freewrite.

## Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Narration of your own or others' writing experiences
  - Definition of key rhetorical terms or strategies
  - Causal or evaluative argument to make your case
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you argue about how people write, see
  - Chapter 1 on threshold concepts
  - Chapter 19 on blending primary and secondary sources
  - Chapter 7 on open and closed paragraph structures
  - Chapter 11 on rhetorical sentences

## Inquiry-based writing project: The first step(s)

Sometimes the hardest part of solving a problem is deciding what to do *first*: in some cases, we rush in without choosing the best path, and other times we stall out because we don't see an easy way to get started. For this project, pick a difficult challenge that is important to you personally or professionally, review what kinds of actions experts recommend, and write an argument about what the *first major step* in solving that problem (or perhaps the first *two* steps, but no more) should be.

Remember that your claim should be debatable: if the first step is obvious and easy, there's no need to write about it. If you choose a large global problem such as HIV or religious freedom, try to narrow your focus to a specific location or challenge; if you choose an individual problem such as quitting smoking or preparing for an ultramarathon, be sure to address the scholarly research as well as individual complexities. You may write directly to a person making this choice, or to an organization or agency that supports changes. Be sure to read widely enough to understand several options for *first steps* and why people disagree, so that you can address the front story and backstory elements and any counterarguments. Depending on your audience, you might write a letter, an online magazine article, or a scholarly report.

## Practice

- To practice **arguing** about the most effective first step(s), see Assumption Inspection, Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Counter-argument Generator, Emperor For a Day, Evidence Shopping List, Gray-Area Finder, Magic Three Choices, Six Structures, Source Synthesis Grid, Subtopic Generator, or Used to Think / Now I Think.

## Learn

- To learn about **additional writing moves**, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Narration of your own experiences
  - Description of other writers' experiences
  - Explanation of different possible steps and their consequences
  - Exploration of the difficulties that people or groups face getting started
  - Synthesis of material from several sources to build credibility and detail
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you locate and argue from credible data, see
  - Chapter 5 on choosing a topic
  - Chapter 19 on developing a research question
  - Chapter 20 on evaluating source information
  - Chapter 13 on using genre patterns
  - Chapter 7 on planning paragraph structures
  - Chapter 22 on integrating evidence from sources

## Community-engaged writing project: Inclusive communities

Community organizations seek to serve a wide range of clients and constituencies, but identifying and reducing barriers to participation can take time, study, and

resources. Choose an organization or group in your campus or local community, especially one that you can visit personally for data collection or one with a comprehensive online presence, and evaluate that group's current level of inclusiveness. You can focus on one or more aspects of inclusion, such as how they include diverse staff or participants; how well their physical spaces, online resources, or services are accessible; or how their public statements, policies, or practices seek to involve a range of people and perspectives. You will need to argue that your criteria are valid, so you may need to do some research about what elements constitute an inclusive workplace or accessible materials, or to find examples of successful practices.

Since almost nobody will argue that inclusivity is a bad idea, consider focusing your arguments more narrowly, addressing how an organization that wants to do the right thing might more widely invite people to share its achievements and/or prioritize actions and resources to make beneficial improvements for employees or clients. Use specific evidence to support your judgments, which may be unanimous or mixed. You could write a report directly to someone in or responsible for the organization, or consider writing an argument or op-ed to a wider audience of the organization's supporters or clients.

## Practice

- To practice **arguing** about which approaches best support inclusion and equity, see Assumption Inspection, Believing/Doubting, Evidence Shopping List, Keyword Bingo, Question Ladders, Scenarios, Subtopic Generator, or They Say + I Say.

## Learn

- To learn about **additional writing moves**, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Description of the organization's facilities or practices
  - Definition of what an "effective" inclusion/equity strategy is
  - Evaluation arguments regarding the organization's performance
  - Reflection about your own experiences or assumptions
- To learn about **additional writing strategies** to help you document how effective an organization's inclusive efforts are, see
  - Chapter 19 on including diverse perspectives in your inquiry
  - Chapter 20 on gathering primary and secondary data
  - Chapter 21 on addressing conflicts and complications
  - Chapter 7 on using point-by-point organization
  - Chapter 22 on framing and citing your source information
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate style