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A Rulebook for Arguments

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I

Short Arguments: Some General Rules

Arguments begin by marshaling reasons and organizing them in a clear and fair way. Chapter I offers general rules for composing short arguments. Chapters II–VI discuss specific *kinds* of short arguments.

1 Identify premises and conclusion

The very first step in making an argument is to ask yourself what you are trying to prove. What is your conclusion? Remember that the conclusion is the statement for which you are giving reasons. The statements that give your reasons are your *premises*.

Consider these lines from Winston Churchill:

I am an optimist. It does not seem to be much use being anything else.

This is an argument—not just an amusing quip—because Churchill is giving a *reason* to be an optimist: his premise is that “It does not seem to be much use being anything else.”

Premises and conclusion are not always so obvious. Sherlock Holmes has to explain one of his deductions in “The Adventure of Silver Blaze”:

A dog was kept in the stables, and yet, though someone had been in and had fetched out a horse, [the dog] had not barked.... Obviously the ... visitor was someone whom the dog knew well.¹

Holmes has two premises. One is explicit: the dog did not bark at the visitor. The other is a general fact that Holmes assumes we know about dogs: dogs bark at strangers. Together these premises imply that the visitor was not a stranger. It turns out that this is the key to solving the mystery.

When you are using arguments as a means

of inquiry, you sometimes may start with no more than the conclusion you wish to defend. State it clearly, first of all. Maybe you want to take Churchill a step further and argue that you and I should be optimists too. If so, say so explicitly. Then ask yourself what reasons you have for drawing that conclusion. What reasons can you give to prove that we should be optimists?

You could appeal to Churchill's authority. If Churchill recommends optimism, who are you or I to quibble? This appeal will not get you very far, however, since equally famous people have recommended pessimism. You need to think about the question on your own. Again, what is *your* reason for thinking that we should be optimists?

One reason could be that optimism boosts your energy to work for success, whereas if you feel defeated in advance you may never even try. Optimists are more likely to succeed, to achieve their goals. (Maybe this is what Churchill meant as well.) If this is your premise, say so explicitly.

This book offers you a ready list of different forms that arguments can take. Use this list to develop your premises. To defend a

generalization, for instance, check [Chapter II](#). It will remind you that you need to give a series of examples as premises, and it will tell you what sorts of examples to look for. If your conclusion requires a deductive argument like those explained in Chapter VI, the rules outlined in that chapter will tell you what types of premises you need. You may have to try several different arguments before you find one that works well.

2 Develop your ideas in a natural order

Short arguments are usually developed in one or two paragraphs. Put the conclusion first, followed by your reasons, or set out your premises first and draw the conclusion at the end. In any case, set out your ideas in an order that unfolds your line of thought most clearly for the reader.

Consider this short argument by Bertrand Russell:

The evils of the world are due to moral defects quite as much as to lack of intelligence. But

the human race has not hitherto discovered any method of eradicating moral defects.... Intelligence, on the contrary, is easily improved by methods known to every competent educator. Therefore, until some method of teaching virtue has been discovered, progress will have to be sought by improvement of intelligence rather than of morals.²

Each sentence in this passage prepares the way for the next one, and then the next one steps smoothly up to bat. Russell begins by pointing out the two sources of evil in the world: “moral defects,” as he puts it, and lack of intelligence. He then claims that we do not know how to correct “moral defects,” but that we do know how to correct lack of intelligence. Therefore—notice that the word “therefore” clearly marks his conclusion—progress will have to come by improving intelligence.

Getting an argument to unfold in this smooth sort of way is a real accomplishment. It’s not easy to find just the right place for each part—and plenty of wrong places are available. Suppose Russell instead argued like this:

The evils of the world are due to moral defects quite as much as to lack of intelligence. Until some method of teaching virtue has been discovered, progress will have to be sought by improvement of intelligence rather than of morals. Intelligence is easily improved by methods known to every competent educator. The human race has not hitherto discovered any means of eradicating moral defects.

These are the same premises and conclusion, but they are in a different order, and the word “therefore” has been omitted before the conclusion. Now the argument is much harder to understand, and therefore also much less persuasive. The premises do not fit together naturally, and you have to read the passage twice just to figure out what the conclusion is. Don't count on your readers to be so patient.

Expect to rearrange your argument several times to find the most natural order. The rules discussed in this book should help. You can use them to figure out not only what kinds of premises you need but also how to arrange them in the best order.

3 Start from reliable premises

No matter how well you argue from premises to conclusion, your conclusion will be weak if your premises are weak.

Nobody in the world today is really happy. Therefore, it seems that human beings are just not made for happiness. Why should we expect what we can never find?

The premise of this argument is the statement that nobody in the world today is really happy. Sometimes, on certain rainy afternoons or in certain moods, this may almost seem true. But ask yourself if this premise really is plausible. Is *nobody* in the world today really happy? Ever? At the very least, this premise needs some serious defense, and very likely it is just not true. This argument cannot show, then, that human beings are not made for happiness or that you or I should not expect to be happy.

Sometimes it is easy to start from reliable premises. You may have well-known examples at hand or reliable sources that are clearly in

agreement. Other times it is harder. If you are not sure about the reliability of a premise, you may need to do some research and/or give an argument for the premise itself (see Rule 31 for more on this point). If you find you *cannot* argue adequately for your premise(s), then, of course, you need to try some other premise!

4 Be concrete and concise

Avoid abstract, vague, and general terms. “We hiked for hours in the sun” is a hundred times better than “It was an extended period of laborious exertion.” Be concise too. Airy elaboration just loses everyone in a fog of words.

NO:

For those whose roles primarily involved the performance of services, as distinguished from assumption of leadership responsibilities, the main pattern seems to have been a response to the leadership’s invoking obligations that were concomitants of the status of membership in the societal community and various of its segmental units. The closest modern analogy is the military

service performed by an ordinary citizen, except that the leader of the Egyptian bureaucracy did not need a special emergency to invoke legitimate obligations.³

YES:

In ancient Egypt the common people were liable to be conscripted for work.

5 Build on substance, not overtone

Offer actual reasons; don't just play on the overtones of words.

NO:

Having so disgracefully allowed her once-proud passenger railroads to fade into obscurity, America is honor bound to restore them now!

This is supposed to be an argument for restoring (more) passenger rail service. But it offers no evidence for this conclusion whatsoever, just some emotionally loaded words—shopworn words, too, like a politician on automatic. Did passenger rail “fade”

because of something “America” did or didn’t do? What was “disgraceful” about this? Many “once-proud” institutions outlive their times, after all—we’re not obliged to restore them all. What does it mean to say America is “honor bound” to do this? Have promises been made and broken? By whom?

Much can be said for restoring passenger rail, especially in this era when the ecological and economic costs of highways are becoming enormous. The problem is that this argument does not say it. It lets the emotional charge of the words do all the work, and therefore really does no work at all. We’re left exactly where we started. Overtones may sometimes persuade even when they shouldn’t, of course—but remember, here we are looking for actual, concrete evidence.

Likewise, do not try to make your argument look good by using emotionally loaded words to label the other side. Generally, people advocate a position for serious and sincere reasons. Try to figure out their view—try to understand their *reasons*—even if you disagree entirely. For example, people who question a new technology are probably not in favor of “going back to the caves.” (What *are*

they in favor of? Maybe you need to ask.) Likewise, a person who believes in evolution is not claiming that her grandparents were monkeys. (And again: what *does* she think?) In general, if you can't imagine how anyone could hold the view you are attacking, you probably just don't understand it yet.

6 Use consistent terms

Short arguments normally have a single theme or thread. They carry one idea through several steps. Therefore, couch that idea in clear and carefully chosen terms, and mark each new step by using those very same terms again.

NO:

When you learn about other cultures, you start to realize the variety of human customs. This new understanding of the diversity of social practices may give you a new appreciation of other ways of life. Therefore, studying anthropology tends to make you more tolerant.

YES:

When you learn about other cultures, you start to realize the variety of human customs. When you start to realize the variety of human customs, you tend to become more tolerant. Therefore, when you learn about other cultures, you tend to become more tolerant.

The “Yes” version might not be stylish, but it *is* crystal clear, whereas the “No” version hardly seems like the same argument. One simple feature makes the difference: the “Yes” argument repeats its key terms, while the “No” version uses a new phrase for each key idea every time the idea recurs. For example, “learning about other cultures” is redescribed in the “No” version’s conclusion as “studying anthropology.” The result is that the connection between premises and conclusion is lost in the underbrush. It’s interesting underbrush, maybe, but you are still liable to get stuck in it.

Re-using the same key phrases can feel repetitive, of course, so you may be tempted to reach for your thesaurus. Don’t go there! The logic depends on clear connections between premises and between premises and conclusion. It remains essential to use a

consistent term for each idea. If you are concerned about style—as sometimes you should be, of course—then go for the tightest argument, not the most flowery.

MOST CONCISE:

When you learn about other cultures, you start to realize the variety of human customs, a realization that in turn tends to make you more tolerant.

You can talk about studying anthropology and the like, if you wish, as you explain each step in turn.

¹ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of Silver Blaze,” in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Books, 1930), p. 199.

² Bertrand Russell, *Skeptical Essays* (1935; reprint, London: Allen & Unwin, 1977), p. 127.

³ Talcott Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966), p. 56. I owe the quotation and the rewritten version that follows to Stanislas Andreski, *Social Sciences as Sorcery*