

RECOVERING ARGUMENT:

**A GUIDE TO
CRITICAL THINKING
AND
WRITING**

Richard E. Mezo

Universal Publishers
Parkland, Florida
1999

Mezo, Richard E.

Recovering Argument: A Guide to
Critical Thinking and Writing

p. cm.

ISBN

English language—Rhetoric—Handbooks,
manuals, etc.

Title

PE

Copyright © 1999 by Richard E. Mezo.

All rights reserved.

Post Office Box 24814, GMF
Barrigada, Guam 96921-4814

published by

Universal Publishers/uPUBLISH.com

USA • 1999

ISBN: 1-58112-806-1

www.upublish.com/books/mezo2.htm

Table of Contents

Preface.....	ii
A Humanist Manifesto.....	iv
Communication: Writer and Audience	1
Argument and Its Forms.....	5
Concepts for Argument.....	10
Understanding Argument.....	13
Response and Claim in Argument	19
Analogy and Argument.....	21
Abstraction, Generality, and Clarity	22
Cause and Effect Reasoning.....	25
Deduction and Induction	27
Common Fallacies	35
Evaluation.....	40
Emotional Appeals.....	45
A Note on Insults and Hate Language	50
A Brief Usage Guide.....	53
Appendix	56

Preface

Writing is an attempt to find and communicate the truth about a subject; argument in particular depends upon setting forth assertions and proof in a continuing dialogue in an attempt to arrive at truth. When I say “truth,” I am speaking of *provisional* or *probable* truth, because absolute truth cannot be found, given human limitations. The argument may be in the form of an essay (informal) or a paper (formal) or another form of writing or communication; however, the first duty of the writer is this search for provisional or probable truth. The methods and procedures the writer uses to obtain evidence regarding the subject must be as completely free from bias or subjectivity as possible. It is much better for the writer to expect that he or she will be biased or prejudiced about the subject and to try to arrange controls at the very beginning.

It is important that, as the writer examines the evidence, no judgement be made until all the evidence has been impartially considered. The writer is in fact a kind of jury and judge at the same time. It is easy to find evidence that fits into our prejudices and to overlook any evidence that does not. It is also easy, in many instances, to look for “two sides” of a controversial topic and to overlook the other fifteen “sides” or more that are equally relevant. Then the writer can give some time to one side, and then an equal amount to the other, and evade his or her own responsibility to find the truth by saying to the reader, “You decide. I’ve given both sides.”

Some human problems may have no solution. The writer can only do as much as possible and try to present a reasonable discussion of the subject. There is nothing shameful in not finding an answer. There is shame in not

using the evidence properly and responsibly or in misrepresenting it. Writing is necessarily a moral or ethical activity and the result will either be good or ill. Good writing certainly demands skill, and skill may be acquired if one is diligent and has the desire to write. But good writing requires more than skill—it demands an attitude of openness and fairness to the subject.

A Humanist Manifesto

A humanistic approach to argument is an attempt to put an emphasis upon human reason in communication. It insists that communication be free of political cant or pretense, and it does not approve of certain current efforts to water down instruction in argument. It opposes the popular analogy that would make education merely a facet of commercial business. It attempts to put argument back into a human perspective that has existed to some degree since the time of the ancient Greeks.

Some of the assumptions of a humanistic approach to argument are these:

1. Audiences consist of human beings; they are not “buying units” or “consumers” to whom products (or ideas) can be marketed. Neither are they radio receivers that detect “broadcast signals” from the person making an argument.
2. In the act of communication, there must be a “coming together” or “communion” of speaker or writer and audience.
3. Our society has, in the past, developed forms and conventions for oral and written argument that are different. These two great methods of human communication have profoundly different purposes and therefore use very different structures.
4. In schools, drill and practice in grammar and the mechanics of the language may be necessary; however, after several years of instruction by such methods, students need to be taught the concepts of argument.

5. Learning to argue effectively must be the responsibility or duty of individual students, even though they are assisted by a teacher.

6. The goal of all argument, oral or written, is to discover and then to communicate the truth about an experience or a subject. The goal should never be to make points or to win contests; the person making an argument should not attempt to “sell” himself or herself or to sell ideas. No speaker or writer of deliberative discourse should try to force his or her audience to accept opinions not based on evidence or to make an elaborate show of presenting “both sides” of some presumed argument while ignoring the truth.

7. The teaching and learning of argument requires frequent, extensive, and disciplined reading of materials outside of textbooks. Reading and writing and speaking are indivisible aspects of the language and should not be taught in isolation.

8. Models from *actual* communication (not just parts of textbooks or other teaching material) should be provided to students for instruction in communication.

9. Forms and structures taught in classes should correspond strictly to those used in actual communication; these should not be forms and structures invented solely for “student use” (three or five paragraph themes; “I-search” papers; interpersonal “trust exercises”; or other obstacles to communication).

10. Practicing the “forms” of communication when one has nothing to communicate is detrimental to instruction in argument.

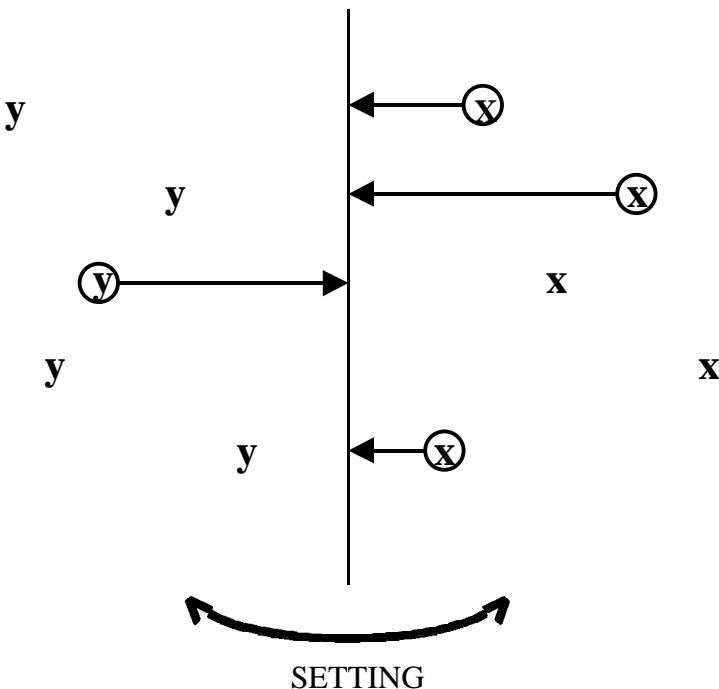
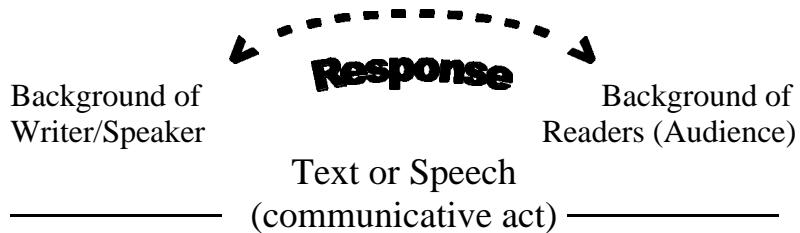
Communication: Writer and Audience

It is important to understand the relationship between writer and audience in any discussion of argument. Except in quite particular and always defined circumstances, writing is public and to write in an expository mode means to engage in dialogue or debate with an audience. Reader response is the purpose of all writing. It follows that argument, which is in the expository mode, is simply one of the many types of persuasive writing, because persuasion would necessarily also embrace the descriptive and narrative modes of writing. Argument, being an expository type of writing, is an attempt to communicate ideas (and different from description and narration, which attempt to communicate experience).

Persuasion in narrative and description, however, is not usually attempted directly, although it is a vital part of these modes. In expository writing, the persuasive attempt may be made either directly or indirectly; in argument, assertions of opinion are made and supported by evidence (fact, examples, expert opinion). Because the dialogue and debate suggested by argument require a response from the reader, it seems to follow that the reader would have certain duties and responsibilities in the act of communication, just as the writer would.

The writer of argument is obligated to meet the reasonable expectations of a reader, including forms and diction appropriate to the audience. The reader's duty would be to make himself or herself a part of the addressed audience.

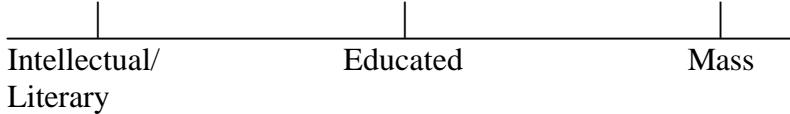
COMMUNICATION MODEL



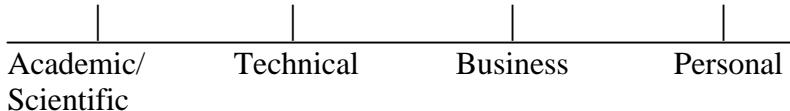
As suggested by the solid curving arrow along the bottom of the diagram, a writer becomes a reader and readers also become writers. In the diagram **Y** is the author of the text; the **X**'s make up the addressed audience. The text is the communicative device that brings about a connection or communion (coming together) of author and audience. The arrows connecting both the writer and the readers to the text represent the specific communication effort each must willingly make.

The text is both a physical document and a carrier of the ideas or experiences to be communicated. The duties of the writer and the readers to that act may be specified quite clearly and concretely, and need not be a matter of special concern; it is primarily the duty of the writer, for example, to identify his or her audience and to adopt an appropriate style. The audience may consist of a “general” group of readers or a “special” group as indicated below:

General Audience



Special Audience



Each type of audience, general and special, may be seen as a continuum along which more specific parts of the audience are located; each audience requires a fairly particular format and style. (The parts shown above are not intended to be exclusive, merely suggestive.) However, it must be emphasized that the audience does not determine the basic content of the argument, only the argument's format and style. Any writer's first responsibility is to the truth about the subject, not to the audience.

Argument and Its Forms

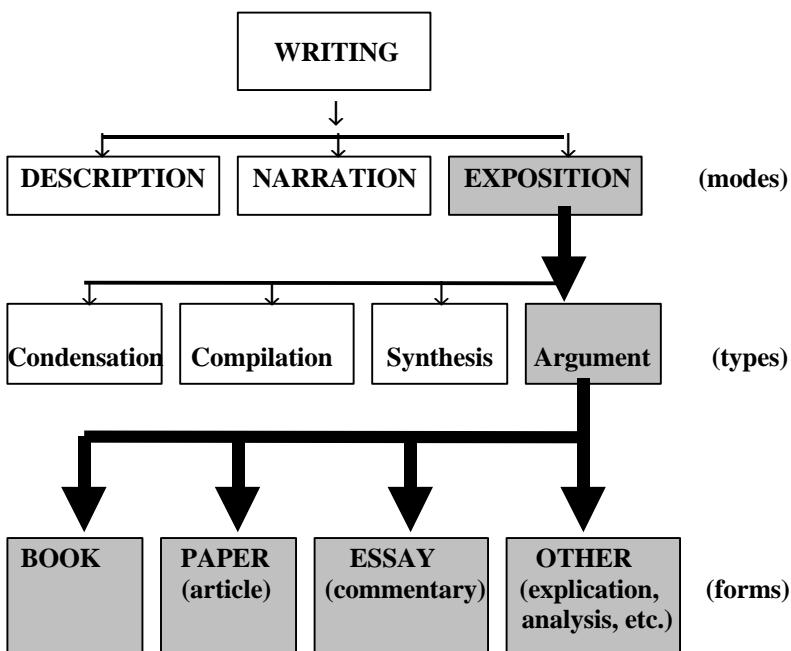
Writing and Speaking

Writing, despite much work on rhetoric and composition since the middle of this century, is still a much misunderstood activity. Many teachers still tell their students to “write like you speak,” even though it should now be generally understood that oral language and written language follow quite distinct forms and customs and are structured very differently. Similarly, teachers may ask for “essays” from students when they really mean “papers” and vice versa. A basic understanding of writing structures is therefore necessary for teachers as well as students.

The three types of writing (which came to be called “modes”) that all teachers of writing need to understand have recently become, through some convoluted kind of thinking, “methods of development.” It should be fairly obvious to practitioners of writing--writers themselves--the vast difference between descriptive/narrative writing, which has as its subject the material world, and expository writing, which deals with abstractions--the world of ideas. Yet textbook writers sometimes insist that since these modes are in practice all jumbled up, there is no use in teaching them separately.

If I have exaggerated the statements of some textbook writers above, it is only a slight exaggeration. Terms are of small importance in themselves, yet they are necessary; it does not matter what we call the types of writing, but we must, as writers, recognize the great difference between writing about tangible things and writing about “abstract” things. In the pages that follow, I have tried to use familiar terms, but it is the concepts presented here that are important, not the particular terms.

Persuasion is a widely misunderstood concept; “rhetoric” is rightly called the “art of persuasion,” and it includes (along with oral communication) descriptive and narrative writing as well as writings in the expository mode. Below is an outline of some of the common terms in writing with an indication of their relationships.



Note that “paper” and “essay” are very similar forms of argument; the major distinction is that the essay is relatively “informal” in vocabulary and structure, and the paper is more “formal” in its vocabulary and structure. Essays are three-part forms and papers are mostly four-part forms.

ESSAY

- I. Introduction
- II. Body
- III. Resolution

PAPER

- I. Statement of the Problem
- II. Review of the Literature
- III. Argument
- IV. Conclusion

(formal citations, notes,
documentation, and appendixes
are also used)

The following general comments are an attempt to place “argument” in perspective and to provide some practical advice for writers. In argument, the writer is primarily interested in deliberative discourse, although many of the concepts may also apply to forensic and epideictic discourse. Definitions of some essential concepts follow.

Three kinds of discourse (adapted from Aristotle):

1. Deliberative = deals with public matters
2. Forensic = deals with personal actions (legal, judicial)
3. Epideictic = deals with ceremonial praise (people or organizations)

Three kinds of appeal may be made to an audience:

1. Rational Appeal = Opinions (assertions) are derived or inferred from the evidence in a reasonable manner. Persona’s argument is logical, not fallacious.
2. Emotional Appeal = Argument is not mechanical or perfunctory, and must include legitimate emotion, including calls for action. However, an illegitimate emotional appeal is made when a writer or speaker attempts to manipulate an argument by ignoring reason and attempting to play upon an audience’s emotions.
3. Ethical Appeal = Writing in which the persona is honestly and objectively presenting evidence (not excluding, hiding, or ignoring any relevant material) and looking for the truth has strong ethical appeal.

Rules for argument:

1. Don’t distort evidence to suit your argument by leaving out material, misquoting sources, or by taking statements out

of context in order to mislead.

2. Don't ignore any legitimate argument against your own argument.
3. Don't "poison the well." (Don't try to manipulate the reader by the tone of your argument, by using logical fallacies, or by making illegitimate emotional appeals.) Ridicule and satire, however, may be used when you have a good logical argument.

Concepts for Argument

An **argument** consists of assertions made about a subject, along with evidence that supports or substantiates the assertions. Arguments have a “thesis” or a main assertion; sometimes it is directly stated and sometimes implied. Within any given argument may be underlying assumptions or other arguments.

An **assertion** is a positive statement of opinion. It forms the basis for all argument and is the material of expository writing.

An **assumption** is an unstated opinion that is part of the argument. Nearly all arguments contain assumptions. Part of the process of critical reading must be checking the assumptions of an argument.

An **axiom** is a “self-evident truth.” Axioms are valuable and necessary in closed or limited systems (e.g., mathematical axioms) but cannot be cited as evidence in open systems (systems related to human affairs).

A **belief** (religious, moral, cultural, ethical) is not an opinion. Neither are personal likes and dislikes. These cannot be argued and should not be considered part of argument. Beliefs are based on certain assumptions or axioms which need not be proved (but these are not argued).

A **bias** is an attitude based solely upon uninformed opinion. It is a more general term than “prejudice” and may include a number of prejudices.

Evidence consists of facts, examples, and expert testimony. Any assertion must be supported or substantiated by evidence. General knowledge that is appealed to by a writer

must be honest, informed opinion or material that can be independently verified. It cannot be based on the prejudice or bias of the writer.

Examples given as evidence must be generalizable and be in the common experience of the readers; examples cannot be “anecdotal.”

Expert opinion (authority) is the opinion of a person who has very specific training and experience in an area. People who hold M.D. degrees are not the only experts; there are experts in all areas and their opinions must be given deference by those who are not experts.

Extrapolation is an assertion about the future based upon evidence gathered from the past and projected ahead.

Facts are statements about something that can be verified.

Impartiality suggests that one’s inferences and conclusions are derived logically from the weight of the evidence, not from one’s wishes or desires.

Inference is the operation of deriving a conclusion from facts or premises.

Informed opinion is not necessarily the opinion of an “expert.” (That would be “expert opinion or testimony.”) Informed opinion is the opinion of someone who has attempted to consider the evidence for an argument in a fair and impartial manner and who was made logical inferences from that evidence. Uninformed opinion (ignorance) is its opposite and has no place in argument.

Interpretation is an application of some pre-determined idea or criterion to the evidence. Some interpretations may

be useful and others may not.

Logic is a set of rules for the process of argument. These rules must either be stipulated as “axioms” or as operational assumptions before the argument. Logic is a well-established norm of Western thought.

Prejudice is an uninformed opinion because it is based upon insufficient or unexamined evidence. Human beings have many prejudices. However, a prejudice that persists in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary may suggest the person’s unwillingness to search for truth and may even indicate a severe mental or emotional handicap and an inability to reason.

Rationalization is an attempt to justify or find “reasons” for an uninformed or unjustifiable opinion that is held.

Reason is necessary to argument and is based entirely on logical principles. Without reason, there can be no argument--there will be only shouting matches or the use of force. Reason includes making logical inferences and justified evaluations. Reason does not consist of giving “both sides” to some argument and then “letting the reader decide.” Reason insists upon honest, complete efforts to find the truth about a subject.

Support or substantiation of any idea (opinion) by citing evidence for it is essential to argument.

Truth is necessarily provisional or probable, not absolute. Some persons prefer to use other words to indicate a probable truth, since even the most verifiable fact is not 100% conclusive. A writer’s obligation, nevertheless, is to this provisional truth.

Understanding Argument

There are three major elements of evaluating an argument--these are pre-evaluation, the evaluation itself, and final acceptance or rejection.

Pre-Evaluation

Definition

Definition is one of the factors to be considered early in the analysis of an argument. After all, if writer and reader are not in agreement as to the meaning of the terms used, argument is impossible. If, for example, the subject is “pornography,” and one side defines it as any public reference to sexual behavior, while the other side defines it as a reference to sexual behavior that is associated with violence, these two sides are arguing quite different matters. A consensus about the meaning of terms is first necessary; one can never be sure that even the most common terms convey the same meanings and connotations to both writer and individual members of the audience.

Meanings are commonly stipulated (in good faith) solely for the purposes of argument. However, in such instances, it may be forgotten that the goal of argument is to find the truth about the subject. Stipulation is a temporary measure that may be expedient and useful, but ultimately the meaning of the terms must be defined to the satisfaction of all concerned. Since argument, oral or written, is in the public sphere and is only appropriate under a democratic form of government, all meanings must ultimately be governed by the reasoned determination of a majority of speakers.

A formal definition puts the term into a more general class that consists of similar things (classification) and then indicates how it is different from the other members of that class. There are also more informal methods of definition, such as a comparison of lexical meanings; or a comparison of one thing to another that is similar or dissimilar, or specifying its function; or by considering the term's historical development. The dictionary is a guide in any definition, not (as in the popular imagination) the absolute authority.

In deductive reasoning, a fallacy of four terms is made when the same term is used with different meanings in a categorical syllogism. Such inconsistencies are fairly easy to detect, however, and the much more frequent and serious problem is defining a term that means one thing to a writer and quite another to a reader. A definition of critical terms used in an argument is an essential element in evaluating any argument.

Assumptions

An argument in which no assumptions are made would mean beginning the argument from the writer's most basic perceptions of the world. Each argument would be volumes in length, which would serve no useful purpose. We, as writers, must make certain assumptions in order to make our arguments efficient and effective; each reader must do the same. And problems in argument sometimes lie in these assumptions--that is, when assumptions are unwarranted or when they are deliberately used to deceive the reader. One of the first matters that a critical reader must examine is the argument's assumptions.

As human beings we assume many things, including the idea that our lives have meaning and that we can trust our

senses to some limited degree. We assume (most of us) that human life has value and that harming others is wrong. It may be that our survival as humans depends upon our making such assumptions, even if they cannot be proved. As writers, we make a number of other assumptions that most people would agree upon, even though verifiable evidence is tenuous or non-existent. Most educated persons seem to be able to live with such ambiguity, although less educated people may have difficulty in doing so and may claim, without justification, that axioms and absolute principles underlie their arguments.

In argument, it is generally the writer's responsibility to make clear the assumptions of the argument; as the audience becomes less familiar with the particular assumptions made, the writer's obligation to clarity increases. The assumptions must be grounded in what appears to be real and can thus be verified. If the assumptions are to be challenged, some clear basis for the challenge (other than the respondent's prejudices) is necessary. Testing assumptions found in an argument is a continuing part of normal reading activity, which is a much more complex matter than usually supposed.

A good reader mentally marks what seem to be unwarranted assumptions that are part of the argument and continues reading until the end. Then the reader goes back over any suspicious areas with the entire argument in mind. From this beginning, it may be necessary to read more on the subject in order to determine whether the assumption is warranted; if indeed it is, it may be necessary to try to rearrange or modify the reader's previous knowledge to account for the discordant element noted.

Context

Argument is form of dialogue; such an assertion, of course, implies that all argument is public, not private. In dialogue, responses, implicit or explicit, are expected by the writer. It is important to see any particular argument, then, in its proper context, which is as part of that dialogue (such exchanges that may go on for centuries--and often do). For example, when a contemporary writer takes exception to something posited by Aristotle, he or she is engaging in that dialogue which started with Aristotle. Education itself is an attempt to put arguments in the perspective of historical dialogue.

Dialogue that is seen only from the argument of one person or group may be distorted, because it is taken out of the dialogue's context. The more a reader becomes familiar with context, the less likely that reader will be to distort or misunderstand the argument. Extemporaneous arguments, often so valued by teachers of speech (and often by the voting public), are frequently made in ignorance of context and thus may be frivolous and misleading.

Evaluation

Arguments should be evaluated by their basis in logic, their proper use of inductive and deductive reasoning, their use of legitimate support (evidence), their consistency, and their contextual value. In addition, an argument that is lacking in substance may not be considered legitimate. Facts (matters that can be verified) are useful for supporting arguments but are not arguments themselves. See other portions of this manuscript for material relating to the evaluation of legitimate arguments.

Acceptance or rejection of argument

An argument cannot be accepted merely because the reader feels some sympathy or empathy for the writer or because the writer's prejudices agree with the reader's own prejudices. It is necessary to consider the evidence that the writer offers in support of reasonable assertions. One perhaps should not challenge beliefs (unless these beliefs can be shown to directly cause injury to human beings), but one should insist that belief is never argument. To educated people, persuasion must rest upon logic and reason, not upon shouting loudly or upon some sophisticated trick directed toward the reader. Pseudo-scientific materials or materials that are derived from wild guesswork and speculation cannot be admitted, even provisionally, in place of evidence. In those subject areas in which "hard" evidence (easily verifiable evidence) is difficult or impossible to obtain, the standard of proof should be very high indeed. Unfortunately, some persons in the social sciences and humanities have argued and continue to argue for very low standards of proof.

The only basis for a rejection of an argument is logic and reason--not the emotional reaction that one might have

to an unsympathetic or hostile “persona” making the argument, and certainly not on the basis of one’s own prejudices about the subject. How does a person recognize and overcome prejudices? It is difficult and takes a sincere effort. Consider, for example, the “issue” of the spanking of children by their parents. Scientific evidence and expert testimony indicate that this sort of minor violence is not effective with children, and that the children who are spanked are more likely to use violence themselves. Yet many people have prejudices in favor of such spankings (due to their own unexamined experiences), and they often react strongly to any suggestion that spanking be stopped.

The acceptance or rejection of an existing argument or a number of arguments is usually the first step in writing another argument. Painstaking care must be given in summarizing or otherwise using and presenting these source arguments accurately and thoroughly and to listing and citing them properly. Mere summary by quotation or paraphrase has no value in itself in argument; it is when source arguments are used to support the writer’s own assertions that they become valuable.