Argument:
Engaging the Complexities of an Issue

Adversarial Argumentation vs. Academic Argumentation

In everyday usage, the term “argument” implies an adversarial relationship between two or more people. Adversarial arguments usually involve one side using any means possible to prove the other side wrong – in other words to “win.”

Academic argumentation has purposes that are quite different from those of adversarial argument. Their principal function is to achieve rational understanding and willing agreement.

What finally matters is whether the argument advances or impedes our pursuit of knowledge and truth. The outcome of such argumentation therefore depends upon the willingness of all participants to address the issue in a spirit of intellectual honesty and goodwill.

This means that those who engage in academic argumentation need to fully address the complexities of the issue under consideration. They need to think carefully not only about their own ideas and arguments but also about those advanced by others. This approach encourages an open forum of different voices and positions and ultimately builds the better argument.

Absolute Arguments vs. Complex Arguments

Absolute arguments are simplistic and ineffective. They tend to depict the world in black and white, yes/no, good/bad terms and prevent a full or convincing analysis of the issue under discussion. If you claim to be in the possession of the absolute truth, then all it takes is a single counter-example to disprove your position. Also, when one does take an absolute position, one sounds arrogant and fanatical to most audiences.

Complex arguments explore in depth the many aspects of the issue being considered. This involves presenting your own thoughts clearly but dealing fairly and effectively with the thoughts of others. The following paragraphs describe some do’s and don’ts for engaging complexity and building persuasive arguments.
Methods to Understand the Complexities of an Issue

**Fair statement of the opposition:** To address the complexities of an issue, you usually need to refer to positions which you oppose. These viewpoints should be stated in words that would be acceptable to your opponents, not slanted or distorted.

**Concession of points not under dispute:** To concede a point does not undermine your argument or give credence to the opposing side. It is actually better to concede undisputed points and to place your efforts, instead, on defining and contesting points of genuine disagreement.

**Qualification of argumentative claims:** A carefully limited claim is clearer, stronger, and harder for the opposition to counter-attack. Qualifications also usually indicate the insight you have gained about the issue being discussed.

**Rebuttal of the opposition:** An argument will show a more complete understanding of an issue if it identifies and addresses its own weaknesses. These are the “landmines” that an opponent can use to attack your reasoning. Focusing on rebuttals to your opponents’ objections can make it easier to develop your ideas.

Methods that Impede the Complexities of an Issue

**Straw-person arguments:** This method means that one does not fairly restate the opposing positions but only pretends to do so. In this way, one can appear to “honestly” show the opposing views and then easily “knocking down” those views.

**False dichotomies:** This method tries to maintain that there are only two options or solutions to a problem: one favorable and the other a worst-case scenario. This purposely restricts the range of potential responses to the issue.

**Red herring issues:** In argumentation, a red herring consists of introducing an irrelevant but sensational issue in order to divert the argument. This prevents further understanding of the real issue.

**Ad hominem attacks:** These are essentially cheap shots to an opponent’s character. By directing attention away from ideas and evidence and toward personalities, *ad hominem* attacks blur our understanding of the issue being discussed.