

Critical Thinking Skills Tutorial

Understanding Arguments: Rhetoric

This Tutorial includes two files:

- **Lesson (33a_Understanding_Arguments_Rhetoric_Lesson)**

In order to learn the material presented in this tutorial more effectively, we have created a “notes” section in the exercises file. Take notes for this tutorial by answering the questions listed in the exercises file.

- **Exercises (33b_Understanding_Arguments_Rhetoric_Exercises** – located in the same area as the lesson)

- It has highlighted areas for you to take notes and answer the exercises using an application such as Adobe Acrobat Reader.
- Download and save this file as your own; you will share it with an instructor after you complete the lesson and exercises.

Please contact the Writing Center with any questions or difficulties:

csmtwc@smccd.edu or 650-574-6436.

Understanding Arguments: Rhetoric

Introduction

What is an argument?

From a logical point of view, **an argument is a series of statements intended to establish a proposition.** Whenever you put forward an opinion, belief or statement, and also put forward those ideas or reasons which give you that opinion, you are making an argument. Here is an example:

- **Put that knife down! It's dangerous.**
[Main statement]: Put that knife down.
[Why?] It's dangerous.

This speaker puts forward a main command: "Put that knife down!" And he also gives his reason for why the knife should be put down: "It's dangerous."

Here is another example:

- I've always liked Stephen King's novels. They're exciting and well-written, and he's often very funny.

This speaker puts forward an opinion about novelist Stephen King: that he likes King's novels. This speaker proposes three distinct reasons: the novels are (a) exciting, (b) well-written and (c) funny.

Why do we consider these three separate reasons? Well, a novel could be exciting, without being funny or well-written; it could be funny, but not thrilling or very well-written; and it could be well-written but bore you to tears. So each element can stand alone: exciting, well-written, funny.

So: an argument consists of a statement that puts forward an opinion or assertion, and of statements that provide a basis for that opinion.

However, when we present an "argument", we are usually not just explaining our opinions. We are usually trying to **persuade others to do, believe or understand something.**

Look again at our two examples:

- Put down that knife. It's dangerous.

This person is not speaking just for fun: he's trying to persuade someone to put down a knife.

Our other speaker is probably talking to someone who doesn't know what is so good about Stephen King's novels. Perhaps, by explaining his reasons, this speaker can give his friend some reasons for reading King:

- I've always liked Stephen King's novels. They're exciting and well-written, and he's often very funny.

Think for a moment about what it means to *persuade* people. When you persuade people, you are by definition talking to people who don't necessarily think the same things as you do; maybe they actively disagree with you. After all, if your readers knew and believed everything that you did, you wouldn't need to persuade them of anything.

This raises the problem: how can you get people to listen to you? How can you make them trust you, or get them to believe that you've considered their point of view? And let's face it: have you considered their point of view?

So: To argue effectively, and to understand other people's arguments, you need two things:

1. **You need to understand logic.** You must make sure you know what your opinion is, and make sure that you clearly and logically explain what it is based on.
2. **You need to understand rhetoric,** or the art of persuasion. You must make sure that your listeners are involved and receptive, and that you understand where they are coming from.

This tutorial, "Understanding Argument: Rhetoric," focuses on the **rhetorical** elements of argument -- those elements which are included to help us persuade a specific audience to listen to our point of view.

NOTE: An accompanying tutorial, "Understanding Arguments: Logic," focuses on the logical elements of argument. It analyzes how statements are combined to support a conclusion, and shows you how to summarize the logical elements of an argument using a technical layout called "standard form." For a thorough understanding of critical analysis, you should complete the logic tutorial as well as this tutorial.

Please open your Understanding Arguments: Rhetoric exercises file and complete note 1.

Defining Rhetoric

Here are two versions of a letter from Maria, who wants to borrow \$500 from her aunt.

Version 1:

"Dear Aunt: I need a car. I will be able to pay you back before March. So **please lend me \$500.** Love, Maria."

Version 2:

"Dear Aunt: I have a big favor to ask you, and I hope you don't mind. I need a car. It's for a good reason--to drive me to work and to school in safety, and I know you'd want that. There is a bus route I could take, but it turns out that the first bus won't get me to class on time; I'm afraid that I won't pass my class if I'm always half an hour late! I guess I could walk most of the way which would be pretty healthy -- I know, I know, exercise is important!! -- but I have to really devote myself to school to get it over with; and I'm worried about not having enough time for work and school if I have to spend a couple of hours a day walking. So... I'm writing to ask if you could **please lend me \$500.** I feel bad for asking, because I know that my brother borrowed \$250 from you recently and he hasn't gotten around to paying you back, which is really bad of him. You must feel like we all treat you like the cash machine. Please, if it's any inconvenience at all just say no--I'll figure something out. But if you do feel able to lend me the money, I will be able to pay you back before March. Either way, auntie, hope to see you soon! Love, Maria."

Both letters put forward the same logical argument. There is a main statement (bolded), and supporting reasons (underlined):

I need a car.
I will be able to pay you back before March.
THEREFORE, please lend me \$500.

So what's the difference? Well, imagine how you'd feel if you were the aunt! The first version would probably offend you. It's very brief and robotic. At least the second version makes more of an effort to be courteous (indeed, to kiss up).

Let's look at the sentences missing from the first version, and see if we can explain Maria's thinking.

Maria's Letter	Maria's Thinking
"I have a big favor to ask you, and I hope you don't mind."	Why should Maria say this? If she doesn't, Aunt Moneybags might think she is greedy and taking her generosity for granted.
"It's for a good reason--to drive me to work and to school in safety, and I know you'd want that."	Clever Maria defends her need for a car by pointing to something that she and her aunt agree on: the need for safety. By lending me money, she hints to her aunt, you will help me to do what you want me to do.
"There is a bus route I could take, but it turns out that the first bus won't get me to class on time; I'm afraid that I won't pass my class if I'm always half an hour late!"	Here, Maria has already anticipated an objection that her aunt might raise: Why can't she take the bus? In fact, there is a reason, so to make sure that her aunt understands it, Maria raises the question herself and supplies the answer.
"I guess I could walk most of the way which would be pretty healthy -- I know, I know, exercise is important!! -- but I have to really devote myself to school to get it over with; and I'm worried about not having enough time for work and school if I have to spend a couple of hours a day walking."	Maria reckons that right now, Auntie is thinking, "Come on, girl, walking up that hill three times a week will do you good." And what's more, Auntie is right. So Maria wants her to know that she agrees with her that walking is good, and she needs to explain what other priorities have outweighed it and why.
"I feel bad for asking, because I know that my brother borrowed \$250 from you recently and he hasn't gotten around to paying you back, which is really bad of him. You must feel like we all treat you like the cash machine. Please, if it's any inconvenience at all just say no--I'll figure something out."	Why mention the reckless brother? Because Maria figures that her aunt is thinking about him already. "Those Cinquemani kids -- they're no good. I give \$250 to the boy, and where is it now? I'm not throwing good money after bad, etc. etc. etc." So Maria tries to stop this train of thought by showing her aunt that she has anticipated this reaction, sympathizing with it, and making sure Auntie knows that she (Maria) is different.
Either way, auntie, hope to see you soon!	A little courtesy never hurts. Also, note how Maria doesn't want her aunt to feel that she has to make the loan. She knows that when people feel pressured, they usually resent the person that puts them under pressure. A resentful aunt won't shell out the car money.

Persuasion

What does this analysis tell us?

It tells us that we do not persuade others simply by presenting our logical reasons. After all, Maria does not add one word of extra reason as to **why** she needs the car. To persuade others, we must also consider:

- how our reader feels about us;
- how our reader is likely to react to our ideas;
- what objections or opposing opinions our reader is likely to raise;
- where we agree with our reader;
- where we disagree with our reader, and why;
- how our reader perceives us.

In short -- **we must put ourselves in the place of our reader**, as Maria has done.

Therefore, any written or spoken argument consists NOT ONLY of logical elements (statement, reasons) but also of statements that help us connect with our reader. We need our readers to hear, accept and understand us. The parts of Maria's letter that we analyzed above are not part of the *logic* of her argument, but part of its *rhetoric*. They exist not to support the logic, but to persuade her aunt to fork over the money.

The most common rhetorical elements in any paper consist of:

- Counterarguments, which can be conceded or refuted;
- Rogerian strategy;
- Rhetorical questions.

Please open your Understanding Arguments: Rhetoric exercises file and complete note 2.

Rhetoric and Critical Thinking

Before you start looking at common elements of rhetoric, take a moment to ask yourself why understanding rhetoric should support your critical thinking.

1. Readers Need to Understand Rhetoric to Critique Arguments.

As a reader or listener, you should be able to identify rhetoric so that you can distinguish it from sound logic.

Most attempts at persuasion do not rely on logic or sound reasoning. Instead, they try to appeal to our feelings or flatter us in some way.

- **Example:** A current TV commercial for an expensive hair-color product announces that viewers should treat themselves to this product, because "you're worth it."

Is this a logical argument? Look at the main point:

You should use this product.

Logical reasons for such a statement should include things like:

This product works.

This product is good value.

This product is easy to use

...and so on. But instead, we are told that we are "worth it."

This isn't logic: it's rhetoric.

The writers of this commercial have focused on a potential stumbling point for this product, and turned it to an advantage: namely, the cost. Yes, the product is a bit expensive.

So: The writers don't focus on the merits of the product itself. They focus on the women watching the ad: they focus on the *audience*. They imagine a woman at home, watching some TV model twirling her glowing hair around her shoulders. The home woman sighs, "\$15... Forget it, it's not like I'm a model." The writers play on the universal desire for self-esteem: *You're worth it*, the model tells the home audience, as if she could hear us thinking "Forget it." And now, buying this product has become synonymous with self-respect. If we still think \$15 is too much for a bottle of goo that will change our hair color to brown, this means we don't respect ourselves.

A week later the woman stands in front of a row of bottles of hair-colorant in the supermarket. This product stands on the top shelf and costs a little more than its competitors. The woman hesitates, and then realizes she is reluctant to spend the extra dollars. This annoys her: why shouldn't she spend that money on herself? She thinks, "Oh, why not? I can afford a decent product. I've worked hard." She buys the more expensive brand, because she's worth it. And the commercial has done its job.

Understanding rhetoric helps us see when we're being manipulated instead of persuaded, and resist it!

2. Writers Need to Understand Rhetoric to Critique Themselves

As a writer, using rhetorical elements forces you to look critically at your own ideas, and to anticipate and consider objections and disagreements.

As Maria's letter shows, using rhetoric forces us to think about our reader's point of view: What does she think? Where might she disagree with me, and what can I say in reply to her disagreements?

Often, as writers think carefully about such questions, they make some discoveries:

- They find they actually agree with their readers in some ways.
- They find that they can't adequately respond to some of their readers' counterarguments.

- They consider new ideas.
 - They realize some of the limitations of their own perspective.
 - They think about how they come across to other people.
 - Often, they end up questioning or changing their original ideas!
- **Example:** Maria tells her aunt that she doesn't want to walk to school because she can't spare the time. But she does tell her aunt that she understands the importance of exercise, so Auntie won't think she hasn't given it some thought.

Suppose she spent more time on this, and imagined her aunt's possible responses:

Maria's argument	Auntie's possible response
I guess I could walk most of the way which would be pretty healthy -- I know, I know, exercise is important!! -- but I have to really devote myself to school to get it over with; and I'm worried about not having enough time for work and school if I have to spend a couple of hours a day walking.	Yes, exercise takes time. But in the end, it creates time, because you will feel better and be more alert. The President finds time to run for half an hour a day--you sure can! And why do you want to get school over with so quickly? It's better to take a little more time, and do a better job, and keep in good health.

Maria might well find herself thinking, "She has a point!" And who knows? She might throw away the letter, resolve to add a semester to her deadline, and walk to school. In short, she might end up rethinking her original ideas, because she took the time to imagine someone's critique of those ideas.

Understanding rhetoric gives us a chance to see our ideas from another's point of view, to critique and define them, and sometimes to change them.

Please open your Understanding Arguments: Rhetoric exercises file and complete note 3.

Counterarguments: Concessions and Refutations

However many wonderful reasons you have for your point of view, you can be sure that someone else thinks differently. So when you explain your point of view, you need to anticipate and deal with readers' objections or differences.

Arguments that support your opponent's point of view are called **counter-arguments**. So any time you raise an argument that does *not* support your view, you are dealing with a **counter-argument**.

Maria's request for a loan includes a couple of counter-arguments:

"There is a bus route I could take, but it turns out that the first bus won't get me to class on time; I'm afraid that I won't pass my class if I'm always half an hour late!"

"I guess I could walk most of the way which would be pretty healthy -- I know, I know, exercise is important!! -- but I have to really devote myself to school to get it over with; and I'm worried about not having enough time for work and school if I have to spend a couple of hours a day walking."

Counter-arguments are the "Yes, but...." of argument.

Almost any persuasive argument takes time to go over **counter-arguments**. Let's look at some brief examples, from Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

Background: This letter was written in 1963, during the height of the campaigns for African-Americans' civil rights. A group of clergymen had published an open letter in the newspapers, arguing that although they sympathized with the goal of the civil rights leaders, they disapproved of breaking the law or any kind of direct action (i.e., sit-ins, boycotts, protests etc.) In return, King wrote them this open letter from his jail cell (he had been incarcerated for leading the kinds of protests they disapproved of). In this letter, he explains the goals and principles of the civil rights movement. The counter-arguments are in bold.

Counterargument: The clergymen had argued against direct action, and argued in favor of negotiation. King addresses this here:

"You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue."

Counterargument: The clergymen complained that King had not waited to give local politicians time to "change things" before engaging in disruptive actions. King addresses this here:

One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken in Birmingham is untimely. Some have asked: "Why didn't you give the new city administration time to act?" ... [But] We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.

Counterargument: The clergymen complained that King should be patient and needed to wait. King addresses this here:

Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging dark of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim.... then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

As a writer, how do you handle counter-arguments?

When you raise a counter-argument, you can do one of two things:

1. Explain why you believe it is wrong. This is called **refutation**.
2. Agree with it, but explain why it does not change your mind. This is called **concession**.

Why bother?

Remember, there are important reasons for including counter-arguments:

- You show your readers that you really have thought about their points of view;
- You can more effectively change their minds, by addressing their opinions and objections openly;
- It helps you to be objective--after all, your readers may have a point!

Refutation

Sometimes, your readers have ideas or beliefs that you think are incorrect, and your argument will consist of correcting or arguing against these beliefs.

Let's look at Maria's letter again:

"There is a bus route I could take, but it turns out that the first bus won't get me to class on time."

The aunt's counter-argument would be that Maria could take the bus, and still get to school. However, Maria knows otherwise: the scheduled bus won't get her to class on time. Her aunt might not know that, so she tells her. Thus, Maria **refutes** the idea that the bus is as good as a car -- meaning, she shows that it is not true.

Martin Luther King also **refutes** some of the clergymen's arguments:

Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging dark of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim.... then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

The clergymen believe it is easy to wait for justice: he **refutes** this idea, by describing at great length the difficulty of black American life in the 1960s. (The original passage is much longer, and you should read it in full.)

Here are more examples of how writers include **refutations** in their arguments (the counterarguments are underlined):

Online institutions create special concerns about the quality of instruction.... Those who believe that high-quality education requires face-to-face interaction will always question the performance of virtual institution. However, many faculty members and students say on-line programs actually enhance interaction. *[Steven Crow, "Virtual Universities Can Meet High Standards." In his discussion of online education, Crow raises the **counter-argument** that students require face-to-face time with teachers, and **refutes** it. The rest of this paragraph will expand on the ways in which online courses enhance interaction.]*

While the popular perception is that school crime is primarily an urban problem, a 1991 report from the U. S. Justice Department, School Crime: A National Crime Victimization Survey Report, indicates otherwise. [R. Craig Sautter, "Standing Up To Violence." In his discussion of classroom violence, Sautter raises a **counter-argument** that school crime mostly takes place in cities, and **refutes** it. Again, this is a way to introduce a paragraph showing evidence that this common belief is wrong.]

Although many people believe that capital punishment saves the state money, an execution actually costs more than life in prison. [This example typifies the kind of argument raised in student essays. The writer identifies a common **counter-argument** supporting the opposing point of view, and **refutes** it. This writer should take this paragraph to compare costs, and justify her refutation.]

You might think that unskilled jobs would be a snap for someone who holds a Ph.D. and whose normal line of work requires learning entirely new things every couple of weeks. Not so. The first thing I discovered is that no job, no matter how lowly, is truly "unskilled." [Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*. Ehrenreich raises a common **counter-argument**, and **refutes** it--she goes on to describe some of the skills involved in her 'unskilled' work.]

Please open your Understanding Arguments: Rhetoric exercises file and complete note 4.

Concession

When you make a **concession**, you identify opposing arguments that you agree are true, or at least reasonable. Doing this helps you clarify your argument and explain your priorities.

1. Using concessions helps you clarify your argument. Most issues are not black-and-white. Whatever your opinion on whatever issue, those who disagree with you almost certainly have at least one point worth considering. For example:
 - you might support capital punishment, but still concede the problem of innocent people being executed;
 - you might argue that Robert De Niro is a great actor, but still concede that his recent movies haven't succeeded so well;
 - you might believe that marijuana should be legal, but still concede that this might lead to more pot-heads and more cases of lung cancer;
 - you might complain that parking tickets impose on motorists, but still concede that we need tickets to prevent people from obstructing fire hydrants or bus lanes.

Here's an example of how a writer uses a concession to show that he understands many aspects of a particular position (the concession is underlined):

Franklin D. Roosevelt was one of this country's greatest presidents. True, he did not have a spotless record; he authorized the internment of Japanese-Americans during the war, which was outrageous; and he did very little for civil rights. But he did a lot for poor people. He helped the U.S. recover from a great depression, set the stage for success in World War II, and created a humanitarian and involved government which remains a model to this day.

Showing that you understand complexities in your position does not weaken your argument: it **strengthens your argument**.

2. Using concessions helps you **explain your priorities**. Because you must show that one point outweighs another, you can help clarify your own priorities. For example:

- you might *concede* that capital punishment occasionally executes an innocent person by mistake, but explain why society's need for the death penalty *outweighs* this problem;
- you might *concede* that De Niro's recent movies haven't been so successful, but explain why he *nonetheless* deserves his reputation as a great actor;
- you might *concede* that legalizing marijuana might lead to increased use and health problems, but explain why other considerations are more *important* (perhaps you believe that marijuana use should be protected by the Constitutional right to the "pursuit of happiness," for instance, which would override whatever problems it might cause);
- you might *concede* that parking tickets have their uses in securing safe parking, but explain why this doesn't *justify* excessive ticketing.

Here's an example of how a writer uses a concession to show that he understands and accepts an opposing argument, but not enough to change his position (the concession is underlined):

Many supporters of the death penalty argue that it provides an extra deterrent in cases where a life sentence has already been earned. For instance, where a life sentence is the maximum penalty, a third-time armed robber has little to lose by killing his victims: he's already facing life. This may in fact be true--in at least one recorded case, a burglar said that he refrained from killing his victim because he didn't want to "get the chair." But even if the death penalty does, on rare occasions, prevent a crime, it also perpetrates them. Illinois has found that as many of its death row inmates were completely exonerated, as were executed (eleven) over a ten-year period. This raises serious fears that innocent people are indeed wrongly executed. The prospect of the state executing an innocent man can't be tolerated, not even where it may theoretically deter crime.

Showing that you understand and can prioritize different ideas does not weaken your argument: it **strengthens your argument**.

Here are more examples of how writers include concessions in their presentations:

....The computer and its associated technologies are awesome additions to a culture, and they are quite capable of altering the psychic... habits of our young. But like all important technologies of the past, they are Faustian bargains, giving and taking away, sometimes in equal measure, sometimes more in one way than another. [Neil Postman, *The End of Education*. As he argues that we need to assess the effect of technology on education, Postman **concedes** that technology is indeed something to get excited about, but uses this to clarify his opinion that we do stand to lose as much as gain from technology. His book argues, among other points, that we cannot expect technology to provide new goals for education.]

Americans are told that we're freer than any citizens in history, lucky to live in a society that protects individual rights. We're certainly free when plannin our lives, like where we work

and who our friends are. But, in our society, we're not free to be ourselves. *[Philip K. Howard, The Collapse of the Common Good. Howard **concedes** that we are "free" in certain ways, but argues that we are not free in others. He uses concession to clarify and pinpoint his argument.]*

Huddling is an understandable reaction for any minority group faced with new and scary challenges. But institutionalized separatism only crystallizes racial differences and magnifies racial tensions. *[Arthur Schlesinger Jr., The Disuniting of America. In his discussion of the role of single-sex or single-race colleges or student groups, he **concedes** that it's natural for people to want to stick together, but goes on to argue that this aggravates tensions in the long run. He uses concession to explain the importance of people working and studying together.]*

Television has not been an unmixed blessing. Its parade of glamorous men and women, with their troops of friends and beautiful houses, creates false expectations in its viewers. The cast of "Friends" are supposed to be coffee-shop waitresses and museum curators, but they live in Manhattan apartments that would cost millions of dollars! Perhaps the falsely exorbitant lifestyles modeled by television has contributed to our enormous national debt, as well as increasing obesity. But let's not forget the documentaries, the wonderful movies, the informational programs, the televised concerts and plays: these have brought many previously unknown riches to people that surely equal, if not outweigh, the negatives. *[This example concedes some of television's negative influences, then sets out to explore some of its benefits.]*

Please open your Understanding Arguments: Rhetoric exercises file and complete notes 5 through 7.

Rogierian Strategy: Making Contact

Rogierian strategy includes statements or comments designed to make contact with our reader or listener. Such comments are not part of our logical argument, and don't address counter-arguments. But they show the reader or listener that we see his point of view; we are thinking about how he might feel; we are putting ourselves in his place.

For example, Maria acknowledges that her aunt might be starting to resent being asked for money:

I feel bad for asking, because I know that my brother borrowed \$250 from you recently and he hasn't gotten around to paying you back, which is really bad of him. You must feel like we all treat you like the cash machine.

Here's another example, in which an uncle presents the case to his nephew for selling his car to pay for school fees:

I know you hate to give up your beautiful car. Believe me, I know just how you feel. When I was your age, I loved my car; I used to drive around just enjoying the feeling of being in charge. It's a sign of freedom, isn't it? A sign of independence. But the fact is, it's very expensive. You're working two jobs to make the payments, and it's interfering with your

college studies. However great your car is, it's not more important than your degree--after all, you can always get a great car later!

In both examples, the speakers are not really raising **counter-arguments**. The speakers address how the audience is probably *feeling* as they listen. The aunt, Maria thinks, is probably feeling used ("Here we go again, someone needs money and suddenly I'm everyone's favorite aunt"); the nephew is probably thinking sadly about all those times he drove about on his own ("But that car is really important to me!").

Logically, arguments doesn't require all the "I-feel-your-pain" statements. But these do help the *rhetorical* purpose of the argument, which is to make your listener more ready to listen to your logic and perhaps accept it.

Here are more examples of writers using Rogerian strategy to show understanding or empathy with their readers (the sentences reflecting Rogerian strategy are underlined)

It's hard to imagine a worse nightmare than losing a child to violence. Nor can we imagine any group less deserving of sympathy than those who molest or injure children. But this understandable outrage sometimes leads us to condone legal solutions that are both cruel and ineffective. One example is the law that permits citizens to determine who--if any--among their neighbors has been convicted of a sex offence. *[This example establishes sympathy with its audience, before the writer takes her position.]*

Giving up smoking is hard, and not just because of the cravings. Smokers use cigarettes to underline their daily pleasures and punctuate their day. That ten-minute break between work shifts really isn't long enough to enjoy--you can't read, or go home, or take a nap; but you can make it your own by having a smoke outside the back door. A glass of wine loses appeal without the accompanying cigarette, and a good smoke announces the end of a special meal. But hard as it is, giving up smoking is probably the single most important goal that smokers can achieve. *[This example shows, in some detail, that the writer understands what smokers feel about their habit -- the writer does not want to just launch into another lecture about the evils of smoking without making this kind of contact.]*

I know you're tired. But you can manage another ten sit-ups. *[This speaker simply makes contact with the listener.]*

Please open your Understanding Arguments: Rhetoric exercises file and complete note 8.

Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions are questions offered in the place of supporting reasons. We use a rhetorical question often when we get carried away--when the answer seems so obvious that we need only ask the question to elicit it:

Of course we should keep the death penalty, because **how would you feel if something happened to your family?**

What kind of world do you want for your children? We should support environmental measures, like recycling and cutting down on fossil fuels.

Children have rights, of course, but **what about the rights of parents?**

Unlike concessions, refutations and Rogerian strategy, however, rhetorical questions are almost NEVER a good idea.

1. **Rhetorical questions usually cover up sloppy thinking.** Let's look at the first example again:

Of course we should keep the death penalty, **because how would you feel if something happened to your family?**

Let's bring out the hidden thinking here:

[Q: How would you feel if something happened to your family?]

Assumed answer: You'd want to kill them.

So... It's natural to want to kill someone who has harmed your loved ones.

So... The state should administer the kind of punishments that would come naturally to individuals.

THEREFORE, capital punishment is essential.

Now that we spell it out, we realize how much more work is needed to support this argument. OK, maybe most of us *would* want to kill someone who injured our family. But the connection between individual desires and state action has not been justified or even mentioned. The speaker has not really thought his argument through.

2. **Rhetorical questions often annoy your audience.** Rhetorical questions look dismissive, and they are. By posing a question that he doesn't bother to answer, the writer implies that of course any reasonable person would answer this question the same way. However, readers may well have answers of their own, and may not appreciate being brushed aside.

People talk about the rights of the accused, but **what about the victim's rights? Who speaks for them?**

READER: The District Attorney, that's who. And the police, and the Justice Department....

People need to get a hold of their priorities. **Who really cares if there's a baseball strike or not?**

READER: I do!!!!

Life presents many mysteries that science can't answer. **Who really knows the truth about time travel?**

READER: I do. Time travel isn't possible. Period.

Using a rhetorical question usually indicates that the speaker hasn't bothered to consider other points of view. This never bodes well for critical thinking!

Here is a good rule of thumb: **When you find yourself using a rhetorical question, answer it. Cross the question out; replace it with the statement that answers it.** Now you have identified the statement you mean to rely on, you can make sure that it really does support your argument; you can also make sure to support it thoroughly. You can also take the opportunity to use some good Rogerian strategy!

People talk about the rights of the accused, but **what about the victim's rights?** Who speaks for them?

= People talk about the rights of the accused, but **we shouldn't forget that the victim also has rights. The work of the District Attorney and the police is not primarily to attack the accused, but to defend the rights of the victim.**

People need to get a hold of their priorities. **Who really cares if there's a baseball strike or not?**

= People need to get hold of their priorities. **Certainly, we can understand that a baseball strike upsets baseball fans; no one likes to lose their pastimes. But surely other problems, like poverty or homelessness, must have a greater claim to our attention.**

Please open your Understanding Arguments: Rhetoric exercises file and complete notes 9 and 10.

Please open your Understanding Arguments: Rhetoric exercises file and complete exercises 1 and 2.

Final Activity

Instructions:

1. Now that you have completed the lesson, notes and exercises for this tutorial, please share your tutorial notes and exercise answers with the Writing Center, either by emailing them to csmtwc@smccd.edu or by stopping by room 18- 104.
2. The Instructional Aide will review your notes and exercises and give you the Exit Quiz. If you pass the quiz, the Instructional Aide will give you credit for this tutorial. If you do not pass the quiz, you will need to make an appointment to meet with a Writing Center Instructor. To make this appointment, sign up using the same method you use to make essay conference appointments. Be sure to include a comment or note that you are meeting about a tutorial.
3. During this appointment, the instructor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your notes, answers to the exercises, and quiz. The instructor will then give you credit for completing this tutorial.