

Argumentation

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1. Rational means of persuasion: The use of arguments

In order to conduct a rational argument, one should comply with the following rules:

- ❖ You should have a clear point of view that needs to be defended.
- ❖ The argument that you conduct should be acceptable in at least one of the following ways:
 - It should be valid on the basis of the factualness of the evidence that is presented.
 - It should be acceptable on the strength of a generally accepted pragmatic premise (for example, the expertise of the writer or the general acceptance of specific evidence).
 - It should make a strong enough impact on the needs, joys, fears, etc. of the reader.
- ❖ Your argument should be relevant, in other words it should be seen to be related to the point of view.
- ❖ The argument should be complete.

A condition for argument therefore entails the presentation of an argument in favour of or against a specific point of view.

Example

What is the point of view in the following example and what argument is conducted in support of it?

The proposal that a liquor store be established in the shopping centre at Die Boord should be rejected. The establishment of a liquor store in a residential area has more disadvantages than advantages for the residential area concerned. In the first place, it draws certain elements that would disturb the particular character of the residential area and ultimately have a negative impact on it. In the second place, the market in the immediate vicinity is not big enough to guarantee the success of such an initiative, particularly if it is taken into account that there are already various liquor stores in the centre of town that meet the needs of the community.

The following questions on the relationship between point of view and argument are now relevant:

- ❖ How do we know when we are dealing with the statement of a point of view?
- ❖ How is an argument normally structured, in other words which elements of an argument can be distinguished?
- ❖ What types of arguments or models of argumentation, as they are referred to, can be distinguished?
- ❖ What are the advantages and disadvantages of these models?
- ❖ When is which model used?

2. Points of view and the manner in which they are marked

A point of view is a statement about reality where factualness, correctness or general acceptability is not above suspicion. Three points of view can be distinguished:

- ❖ Point of view on the probability of a situation. Defence of a point of view on the probability of a situation leads to a conclusion where the factualness can be tested.

Example

The following points of view are relevant examples:

- It will rain tomorrow in the Western Cape.
- The rise in the petrol price will lead to increased inflation.
- The theft of registered firearms is the biggest contributing factor to the rise in the number of armed crimes.

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- ❖ Point of view on the desirability of a situation. Such points of view are evaluative statements on specific states of affairs.
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Example

In the following points of view, statements are made on the desirability of some or other state of affairs:

- The establishment of the shopping centre will be particularly disadvantageous to the neighbourhood.
- The fact that employees have to pay for parking at their place of work is unacceptable.
- The merger of the two companies will be of great benefit to the group.

Markers of argumentation

The question is, of course, always: How do you know when you are dealing with argumentation? There are not always clear indications of the existence of an argument. In such cases, it is on a contextual basis that you have to determine whether you are dealing with an argument or not. A proposition is presented about which there can be a difference of opinion. Such a statement - the point of view of the argument - is usually followed by some form of justification.

The context, combined with the content, does of course also help to clarify the persuasive or argumentative character of a message.

Something to think about

Can you think of ways in which context can warn you that you are dealing with an argument?

In many cases, the reader is, in fact, warned that an argument is being presented in the message. Some of these markers are briefly mentioned here:

- ❖ The point of view or the fact that a point of view is being taken is sometimes marked quite clearly with phrases such as *my point of view is that, I am of the opinion that, I find that, I believe that, as far as I am concerned, I feel that, my conclusion is that, thus and therefore*.
 - ❖ Modal elements can be used to mark points of view on desirability and probability, among which are modal verbs such as *must, can* and *may* and modal adverbs such as *perhaps, unfortunately, indeed* and *maybe*.
 - ❖ Verbs can be used that indicate that a point of view is being taken, such as *find, think, suppose, expect* and *judge*.
 - ❖ Verbs can be used that mark a positive or negative point of view being taken, such as *hope, wish, admire, fear* and *reject*.
 - ❖ Other determinants can be used, such as *apparently, essentially* and *seemingly*, that are related to the element of uncertainty in the point of view.
 - ❖ Words with a positive or negative evaluative meaning can be used: *good, handy, nice, interesting, boring, masterpiece, bad, reject, unacceptable*, etc.
 - ❖ Words that state, inform and explain can be used, such as *declare, elucidate, testify, justify, motivate, support, witness, detail, data* and *proof*.
 - ❖ Words and expressions can be used that introduce different elements of an argument, such as *since, because, therefore, thus, in short, notwithstanding, in fact, but, on the one hand, on the other hand, as a result of, in consequence of, arising from, in the first place* and *secondly*.
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Test yourself

Look at a few examples of scientific writing in your particular field and try to identify those words that give an indication of argumentation.

3. The most important elements in an argument

We do not pretend to give a detailed discussion in this study guide on the theory of argumentation. Instead, in this section, we give a usable explanation of the most important elements to be found in an argument.

Example

In the next example, an argument is presented that consists of various distinct elements:

The point of view of the Personnel Association that remuneration of lecturers will, in future, be determined on the basis of merit should be strongly supported, since this would give recognition to aspects such as productivity and initiative. This is, after all, a principle that has been applied in the private sector for many years, with particularly good results. A survey in the insurance sector, for example, showed that achievement levels rose by more than 6% within one year after greater emphasis was placed on merit increases. The question is, of course, whether the private sector and the public sector are in fact comparable in all respects. This question is becoming less important, however, in a time in which certain sectors of the public sector, among which are universities, have to be managed increasingly on a business basis.

In this (fabricated) example, all the different elements of an argument occur:

- ❖ **Point of view or conclusion.** The most noticeable element of the argument is, of course, the point of view (or the conclusion) that has to be defended. In the example above, this is stated as follows: *The point of view of the Personnel Association that remuneration of lecturers will, in future, be determined on the basis of merit should be strongly supported.*
- ❖ **Premise.** The premise is the statement that supports the point of view. In the example above, this is stated as follows: *since this would give recognition to aspects such as productivity and initiative.*
- ❖ **Justification.** The justification is usually a statement that can be formulated in the if-then form, which establishes the link between the point of view and the premise. In the example above, this can be stated

as follows: *If remuneration is based on merit (and, by implication, leads to a rise in productivity and initiative), then the point of view of the Personnel Association (namely, ...) should be strongly supported.*

- ❖ **Support (of the justification).** The supportive element of the argument is the element in which the evidence is presented and which should give the justification its power. In the example above, support on the basis of comparison is given (namely, the fact that the merit principle is being used successfully in the private sector), followed by the supportive evidence: *A survey in the insurance sector, for example, showed that achievement levels rose by more than 6% within one year after greater emphasis was placed on merit increases.*
- ❖ **Marker of the power of the argument.** Not all arguments are always conducted equally logically and scientifically. The arguer (sometimes involuntarily) frequently gives an indication of the power of the argument by using words that denote some degree of certainty or uncertainty. In the example above, this is the word *strongly* in the first sentence. Take the role of words and expressions such as definitely, doubtlessly, without doubt, perhaps and possibly. Writers (and speakers) of course frequently use defining markers to hide their own uncertainty about the power of an argument or use markers of uncertainty to keep a back door open, as it were.
- ❖ **Reservation.** Arguments frequently raise counter-arguments. You can sometimes pre-empt counter-arguments against your own argument by giving an example. In the example above, this is stated as follows: *The question is, of course, whether the private sector and the public sector are in fact comparable in all respects.*
- ❖ **Concession.** With the concession, you usually weaken your or others' reservations against an argument yourself. In the example above, this is stated as follows: *This question is becoming less important, however, in a time in which certain sectors of the public sector, among which are universities, have to be managed increasingly on a business basis.*

One of the requirements of an argument is that it be as complete as possible. In terms of the elements of an argument mentioned here, this means that an argument should contain at least a point of view, a premise, a justification and a support of the justification. Persuasive texts frequently fail precisely because arguments are presented that are incomplete.

4. Models of argumentation

When you have to persuade someone of something, there is a variety of models of argumentation that you can use. These models can be placed on a spectrum that extends from those models that deal with a more factual approach towards argumentation to those models that are more pragmatic. Some of the models will be discussed here. Much can be said about them but we will remain brief.

Deduction

Traditionally, logical arguments are divided into two categories: Deductive arguments and inductive arguments.

A deductive argument is based on a generally accepted (usually tested) rule or law, in other words the premise is generally accepted and the point of view can be deduced from it. A deductive argument is valid when its premise (if it is a tested premise) contains sufficient grounds from which the conclusion can be drawn, in other words if (in the most ideal case) it is impossible for the premise to be true if the conclusion is not true. A simple example can serve to clarify this point:

Premise: All adult men have a beard.

John is an adult man.

Conclusion: John has a beard.

Deductive arguments are used daily in business documents as a means of persuasion precisely because they are some of the strongest forms of argumentation that a writer (or speaker) can use.

Example

What is the general validity in the following two arguments?

1. The stance of certain government departments no longer to allow payment for after-hours work is being opposed, and justly so, by the trade unions concerned. The worker is always worth his wage - this is a fundamental principle of the labour market.
 2. The idea that others can prescribe to the University on its language policy is not acceptable. Universities surely have the right, as autonomous bodies, to determine their own language policies.
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The problem is, of course, that the general rules or laws on which deductive arguments are based are not always as acceptable as one would expect. They then require justification themselves. In this way, then, a chain of arguments develops.

People in the process of persuasion sometimes fail to ensure that the premise is above suspicion. In both the previous examples, the premise on which the arguments are built are not necessarily acceptable.

Induction

Unlike the case of a deductive argument, an inductive argument proceeds from a premise that does not necessarily have sufficient grounds for a conclusion to be drawn but that has a specific *measure* of support for the conclusion. An inductive argument works, in fact, according to the principle of *pattern*: A conclusion is drawn on the basis of the pattern that occurs in a comparable state of affairs. The premise then usually refers to comparable cases in which the conclusion has already been drawn. Inductive arguments are therefore, in essence, analogy arguments in which the issue is the degree of probability that can be deduced from the cases presented in the premise. A simple example can serve to clarify this point:

Premise: Most bank managers are relatively conservative.

Carl is a bank manager.

Conclusion: Carl is conservative.

Example

Production rises sharply when workers are allowed to work flexitime. This was the case in two of the Company's affiliates, A and B.

The danger of this model of argumentation is, of course, the extent of the pattern: How many cases should you have before the pattern is established with certainty and before the degree of probability that your conclusion is valid is high enough? In the example above, the power of the inductive argument is weakened considerably by the fact that there are only two cases that can be presented as justification for the argument.

Comparison: A particular type of inductive argument?

Comparison can actually be regarded as a simple form of inductive argumentation or **analogy argumentation**, since, in such an argument, a

one-to-one comparison is used as the basis of the argument. The following example illustrates the point:

Example

The principle that remuneration of lecturers will, in future, be determined on the basis of merit should be strongly supported. This is, after all, a principle that has been applied in the private sector for many years, with particularly good results.

Again, there is of course, a basic danger in this model: People sometimes compare things that are not really comparable (“Don’t compare apples with pears”). What works for the private sector does not perhaps work for the public sector and who says that the economy of country XYZ is, in all other respects, comparable with that of South Africa?

Pragmatic models of argumentation

Pragmatic argumentation is pragmatic precisely because it is not always very rational in the strict sense of the word. This form of argumentation proceeds from a more situation-bound point of view and usually leads to arguments in which advantages and/or disadvantages are indicated in the premise.

Weighing up advantages and disadvantages

The best-known pragmatic model is probably the one in which advantages and disadvantages are compared. A type of “scoreboard approach” is therefore followed in this model of argumentation:

Example

The building of the hospital and shopping centre has elicited strong reaction from the residents of the area. If, however, one evaluates the matter carefully, it does seem as if it is a decision that can be only to the good of the town. There has long been a need for a proper medical facility that can offer specialised services. The shopping centre will furthermore take a great amount of traffic away from the

centre of town, which will make the situation there more manageable. A large number of employment opportunities will also be created.

The only complaint is the increase in traffic in the suburb. This point is, however, relative, since the centre is situated beside a main route and traffic will therefore not pass through the suburb as such.

In order to evaluate such an argument, it is, of course, important to determine whether all possible advantages and disadvantages are mentioned. Writers frequently use this model to try and sell a specific point of view by adding or by leaving out advantages or disadvantages (depending on the position that has to be defended).

Goal-and-means argumentation

Writers of persuasive texts frequently use a model that proceeds from the assumption that specific means will help to realise a specific goal. In some cases, this even becomes “The goal justifies the means”.

Example

The decision to have eleven official languages in South Africa does, of course, give rise to a serious problem: How can it be guaranteed that all eleven languages enjoy equal treatment and who has the task of ensuring this? The solution to the problem lies in the establishment of the Pan-South African Language Board, a body that has as its goal the equal treatment and development of all eleven the official languages.

One of the most conspicuous dangers of this model is that the means that are presented are not necessarily the only (and therefore the best) means with which to achieve the goal.

Use of hypothetical examples

An effort to persuade sometimes involves a hypothetical example with which the reader can identify, as in the following example:

Example

It is tremendously important that one plans for one's retirement early enough. Take the case of Mr X, who starts his career at the age of 24. He decides, on the basis of the good advice of his broker, that, in addition to his pension, he wants to have an additional annuity of R2 000 000 paid out on his retirement to enable him to maintain his standard of living. If he takes out a policy immediately, it will cost him approximately R360 per month to achieve this goal. If, however, he delays this step and takes out a policy only after 15 years, his premium will be R640 per month or R360 per month will give him a much smaller dividend.

Hypothetical examples can sometimes be ineffective precisely because readers cannot always identify with them very easily. One should also guard against the creation of a hypothetical example that exceeds the limits of reasonableness and validity.

Argumentation on the basis of a dilemma

Argumentation on the basis of a dilemma is usually used in cases where a choice has to be made between two or more equally unpopular options. This is the case in the following example:

Example

The magazine is now confronted by an uncomfortable choice: Either it can meet the demands of a reading public that wants more sensation by placing articles that fall within that category or it can continue with its policy by placing articles that have more substance. Other examples, however, have shown that there is no choice: If you do not meet the demands of your reading public, your subscriptions drop, you have a lower advertisement income and, eventually, you have to close shop.

This form of argumentation frequently puts the reader under pressure. The test is always whether the options that are presented for the solution of the dilemma are the only ones.

Argumentation on the basis of authority

This model is frequently used in the course of everyday life, definitely in the world of business communication. An authority, where the expertise and credibility are above suspicion, is used to state a specific point of view. The point of view then becomes acceptable on the strength of the status of that authority. The dangers of this type of argument are obvious: Is the person really an authority? Did the person really make that statement? Is the statement in line with what other authorities maintain? Are there reasons to doubt the credibility of the person?

Example

The writing skills of many Afrikaans speakers are nothing to boast of. Many of us who enjoy reading experience this for ourselves through what others write in the written media. This has also been confirmed in an important investigation conducted by the well-known Prof. Johan Combrink of Stellenbosch.

5. Problems of argumentation

The value of an argument can be negatively affected in various ways. These problems of argumentation can be divided into two broad categories:

- ❖ an argument that can be negatively affected by content
- ❖ an argument that can be negatively affected by formulation

Problems with content

Writers are sometimes inclined to avoid or transfer onus of proof. This occurs particularly when arguments are incomplete, in other words when a core element, such as the premise, justification or support, is missing. Justification of a point of view is apparently offered in the following example:

Example

I believe that it is a bad suggestion because it simply will not work.

To maintain that the suggestion will not work is not justifying the point of view. The question is why the suggestion will not work.

The incompleteness of an argument is sometimes hidden behind markers such as *self-evident*, *logical* and *without doubt*, as if the writer is informing the reader that further argumentation is not necessary. What this does show, in fact, is that the issue is not necessarily as self-evident, logical or without doubt as the writer maintains.

Example

It is self-evident that universities should retain their control on the quality of academic programmes.

Arguments are sometimes oversimplified, as in the following case:

Example

Totalitarian states can be kept under control only by means of deterrents. This history proved after the Second World War. The policy of deterrents implemented by NATO did, after all, lead to one of the longest periods of relative peace that the world has yet experienced.

Who says that there were not other causes for the “relative peace”?

In the next example, the argument is actually slightly distorted:

Example

The proposal by the University that an investigation be conducted into the manufacture of communication satellites should be approached with caution. We would otherwise run the danger of universities entering the manufacturing sector.

In this confrontational article, a leap is made from an investigation by the university to the possibility that the university might enter the manufacturing sector. This leap is not justified and ultimately boils down to a distortion or misrepresentation of information.

Problems with formulation

Writers are sometimes guilty of arguing in circles, as in the following example:

Example

The company is opposed to the democratisation of the management system, since participatory management is not the solution for us.

Democratisation of the management system and participatory management essentially refer to the same point, which therefore makes this statement meaningless.

The use of loaded language as a rhetorical mechanism could succeed in numerous cases but there are cases where this could be less successful, even unsuitable. What is your opinion on the use of language in the following example?

Example

The ridiculous idea of holding an exhibition of this incredibly stupid artist's work could only have taken root in the brain of some culturally deprived being because anyone with any sense would be able to

show that such an exhibition would have an unbelievably detrimental effect on the status of the gallery concerned.

An argument sometimes contains hidden assumptions that, were they to be uncovered, might not stand up to a test of validity or acceptability.

Example

At this stage, the Cosovacs became the victims of particularly cruel attacks by the people living in the area.

In the example above, the Cosovacs are referred to as “the victims of particularly cruel attacks”. The assumption is therefore that they were attacked and that they had to defend themselves. In a reaction to this propagandistic report, it was contended that it was the Cosovacs who were the perpetrators in this particular case and that they had come up against people who had given resistance to looting, etc.

6. Closing remark

In this study guide I have presented only a few thoughts on argumentation, simply to start you thinking. There is much more to this very important topic than meets the eye and I would suggest that one gets to know at least some part of the extensive literature on the topic.

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