Emotional appeals (appeals to pathos) are powerful tools for influencing what people think and believe. We all make decisions—even including the most important ones—based on our feelings. That’s what the Food and Drug Administration hoped to capitalize on when it introduced nine new warning labels for cigarettes, one of which you see above. One look at the stained, rotting teeth and the lip sore may arouse emotions of fear strong enough to convince people not to smoke.

Editorial cartoonist for Newsday Walt Handelsman borrows the emotional strategy of cigarette warning labels to stir up opposition to continuing conflict in Afghanistan. His imaginary “package” (shown above) evokes fear through an iconic image (Death with his sickle) and stirs political anger via an explicit alert: “Prolonged war with no clear objective is harmful to the nation’s health!” Yet such labels lead Bob Dorigo Jones, an opponent of lawsuit abuse, in an entirely different direction, publishing a book entitled Remove Child before Folding: The 101 Stupidest, Silliest, and Wackiest Warning Labels Ever. His intention is to make us laugh and thereby, perhaps, to question or even doubt the effectiveness of such scary warnings.
The kinds of arguments packed into these three images all appeal to emotion, and modern science has shown us that we often make decisions based on just such appeals. So when you hear that formal or academic arguments should rely solely on facts, remember that facts alone often won’t carry the day, even for a worthy cause. The civil rights struggle for gay marriage in the last few years provides a particularly good example of a movement that persuaded people equally by means of the reasonableness and the passion of its claims. Like many debates, the one over gay marriage provoked high emotions on every side, emotions that sometimes led more to divisiveness than progress toward solutions.

Of course, we don’t have to look hard for less noble campaigns that are fueled with emotions such as hatred, envy, and greed, campaigns that drive wedges between groups, making them fearful or hateful. For that reason alone, writers should not use emotional appeals casually. (For more about emotional fallacies, see p. 75.)

**Reading Critically for Pathos**

Late on the night of May 1, 2011, the White House blog carried this post: “Tonight, President Obama addressed the Nation to announce that the United States has killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda.” Earlier
that evening, the president had appeared on TV to deliver that brief ad-
address, setting off a barrage of texts, tweets, and YouTube postings as the
United States recalled the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001. Ten
years later, the president could finally tell the American people that the
mastermind of that attack was dead.

The president’s address to the nation was very brief—under ten min-
utes. As he spoke directly to the American people, some fifty-six million
people tuned in: the Huffington Post announced that some four thousand
tweets per second were sent during the nine and a half minutes of the
speech. Clearly, the remarks stirred powerful emotions, as in this passage
whose concrete and descriptive language brought back vivid memories:

The images of 9/11 are seared into our national memory. . . . And yet
we know that the worst images are those that were unseen to the
world. The empty seat at the dinner table. Children who were forced to
grow up without their mother or their father. Parents who would never
know the feeling of their child’s embrace. Nearly three thousand citi-
zens taken from us, leaving a gaping hole in our hearts.

Yet as analysts pointed out, the president’s speech was also measured.
As President George W. Bush had done before him, Obama was careful to
say that the United States is not and never has been at war with
Islam—but with terrorism. Rather, he simply announced that “a small
team of Americans . . . killed Osama bin Laden and took custody of his
body.” Rather than celebrating or gloating, the president spoke with calm
control about American values:

So Americans understand the costs of war. Yet as a country, we will
never tolerate our security being threatened, nor stand idly by when our
people have been killed. We will be relentless in defense of our citizens
and our friends and allies. We will be true to the values that make us
who we are. And on nights like this one, we can say to those families
who have lost loved ones to al Qaeda’s terror: Justice has been done.

—from whitehouse.gov/blog

Note that last sentence: “Justice has been done.” Using the passive voice
puts the emphasis on justice, leaving out who or what had brought that
justice. That is just one way in which this passage is understated and
calm. Note also the use of words that signal resolve: “we will never toler-
ate . . . nor stand idly by.” We will be “relentless in defense” and “true to
the values.” Here the president appeals to emotions that he says “make
us who we are.”
Reactions to the announcement of Osama bin Laden’s death

Outside the White House, stronger emotions were on display as crowds celebrated with chants of “USA, USA, USA.”

**RESPOND**

Working with a classmate, make a list of reasons why speakers in highly charged situations like this one (the president speaking on the death of Osama bin Laden) would need to use emotional appeals cautiously, even sparingly. What consequences might heightened emotional appeals lead to? What is at stake for the speaker in such situations, in terms of credibility and ethos?

**Using Emotions to Build Bridges**

You may sometimes want to use emotions to connect with readers to assure them that you understand their experiences or, to use President Bill Clinton’s famous line, “feel their pain.” Such a bridge is especially important when you’re writing about matters that readers regard as sensitive. Before they’ll trust you, they’ll want assurances that you understand the issues in depth. If you strike the right emotional note, you’ll
establish an important connection. That’s what Apple founder Steve Jobs does in a 2005 commencement address in which he tells the audience that he doesn’t have a fancy speech, just three stories from his life:

My second story is about love and loss. I was lucky. I found what I loved to do early in life. Woz [Steve Wozniak] and I started Apple in my parents’ garage when I was twenty. We worked hard and in ten years, Apple had grown from just the two of us in a garage into a $2 billion company with over four thousand employees. We'd just released our finest creation, the Macintosh, a year earlier, and I’d just turned thirty, and then I got fired. How can you get fired from a company you started? Well, as Apple grew, we hired someone who I thought was very talented to run the company with me, and for the first year or so, things went well. But then our visions of the future began to diverge, and eventually we had a falling out. When we did, our board of directors sided with him, and so at thirty, I was out, and very publicly out. . . .

I didn’t see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods in my life. During the next five years I started a company named NeXT, another company named Pixar and fell in love with an amazing woman who would become my wife. Pixar went on to create the world's first computer-animated feature film, Toy Story, and is now the most successful animation studio in the world.


In no obvious way is Jobs’s recollection a formal argument. But it prepares his audience to accept the advice he’ll give later in his speech, at least partly because he’s speaking from meaningful personal experiences.

A more obvious way to build an emotional tie is simply to help readers identify with your experiences. If, like Georgina Kleege, you were blind and wanted to argue for more sensible attitudes toward blind people, you might ask readers in the first paragraph of your argument to confront their prejudices. Here Kleege, a writer and college instructor, makes an emotional point by telling a story:

I tell the class, “I am legally blind.” There is a pause, a collective intake of breath. I feel them look away uncertainly and then look back. After all, I just said I couldn’t see. Or did I? I had managed to get there on my own—no cane, no dog, none of the usual trappings of blindness. Eyeing me askance now, they might detect that my gaze is not quite
focused. . . . They watch me glance down, or towards the door where someone’s coming in late. I’m just like anyone else.
—Georgina Kleege, “Call It Blindness”

Given the way she narrates the first day of class, readers are as likely to identify with the students as with Kleege, imagining themselves sitting in a classroom, facing a sightless instructor, confronting their own prejudices about the blind. Kleege wants to put them on edge emotionally.

Let’s consider another rhetorical situation: how do you win over an audience when the logical claims that you’re making are likely to go against what many in the audience believe? Once again, a slightly risky appeal to emotions on a personal level may work. That’s the tack that Michael Pollan takes in bringing readers to consider that “the great moral struggle of our time will be for the rights of animals.” In introducing his lengthy exploratory argument, Pollan uses personal experience to appeal to his audience:

The first time I opened Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation*, I was dining alone at the Palm, trying to enjoy a rib-eye steak cooked medium-rare. If this sounds like a good recipe for cognitive dissonance (if not a visual version of Michael Pollan’s rhetorical situation

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indigestion), that was sort of the idea. Preposterous as it might seem to supporters of animal rights, what I was doing was tantamount to reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* on a plantation in the Deep South in 1852.

—Michael Pollan, “An Animal’s Place”

In creating a vivid image of his first encounter with Singer’s book, Pollan’s opening builds a bridge between himself as a person trying to enter into the animal rights debate in a fair and open-minded, if still skeptical, way and readers who might be passionate about either side of this argument.

**Using Emotions to Sustain an Argument**

You can also use emotional appeals to make logical claims stronger or more memorable. That is the way that photographs and other images add power to arguments. In a TV attack ad, the scowling black-and-white photograph of a political opponent may do as much damage as the claim that he bought his home on the cheap from a financier convicted of fraud. Or the attractive skier in a spot for lip balm may make us yearn for brisk, snowy winter days. The technique is tricky, however. Lay on too much emotion—especially those like outrage, pity, or shame, which make people uncomfortable—and you may offend the very audiences you hoped to convince.

But sometimes a strong emotion such as anger adds energy to a passage, as it does when writer Stuart Taylor and history professor K. C. Johnson react in outrage when Mike Nifong, a prosecutor charged with deliberately lying about evidence in an emotionally charged rape case at Duke University, received only a twenty-four-hour sentence for his misconduct. In an op-ed in the *Washington Post*, the authors review the wider dimensions of the biased prosecution and turn their ire especially on faculty who were too eager to pillory three white student athletes at Duke for an alleged crime against a minority woman that subsequent investigations proved never occurred. As you read the following excerpt, notice how the authors’ use of emotional language might lead some readers to share their anger and others to resent it:

To be sure, it was natural to assume at first that Nifong had a case. Why else would he confidently declare the players guilty? But many academics and journalists continued to presume guilt months after massive evidence of innocence poured into the public record. Indeed,
some professors persisted in attacks even after the three defendants were declared innocent in April by North Carolina Attorney General Roy Cooper—an almost unheard-of event.

Brushing aside concern with “the ‘truth’ . . . about the incident,” as one put it, these faculty ideologues just changed their indictments from rape to drunkenness (hardly a rarity in college); exploiting poor black women (the players had expected white and Hispanic strippers); and being born white, male and prosperous.

This shameful conduct was rooted in a broader trend toward subordinating facts and evidence to faith-based ideological posturing. Worse, the ascendant ideology, especially in academia, is an obsession with the fantasy that oppression of minorities and women by “privileged” white men remains rampant in America. Its crude stereotyping of white men, especially athletes, resembles old-fashioned racism and sexism.

—Stuart Taylor and K. C. Johnson, “Guilty in the Duke Case”

In using language this way, writers can generate emotions by presenting arguments in their starkest terms, stripped of qualifications or subtleties. Readers or listeners are confronted with core issues or important choices and asked to consider the consequences.

A sign posted outside the house where the party at the center of the Duke rape case occurred urges prosecutor Mike Nifong to apologize.
It's difficult to gauge how much emotion will work in a given argument. Some issues—such as racism, rape, abortion, and gun control—provoke strong feelings and, as a result, are often argued on emotional terms. But even issues that seem deadly dull—such as funding for Medicare and Social Security—can be argued passionately when proposed changes in these programs are set in human terms: cut benefits and Grandma will have to eat cat food; don’t cut benefits and Social Security will surely go broke, leaving nothing for later generations of seniors. Both alternatives might scare people into paying enough attention to take political action.

Using Humor

Humor has always played an important role in argument, sometimes as the sugar that makes the medicine go down. You can slip humor into an argument to put readers at ease, thereby making them more open to a proposal you have to offer. It’s hard to say no when you’re laughing. Humor also makes otherwise sober people suspend their judgment and even their prejudices, perhaps because the surprise and naughtiness of wit are combustive: they provoke laughter or smiles, not reflection. That may be why TV shows like South Park and Modern Family became popular with mainstream audiences, despite their sometimes controversial subjects. Similarly, it’s possible to make a point through humor that might not work in more sober writing. Although there were many arguments for and against the repeal of the military’s Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy in the fall of 2011, the satirical newspaper The Onion printed an article in which it simultaneously celebrated and bemoaned an unconsidered consequence of allowing gay men and women to serve openly, namely gay troops’ new vulnerability to being publicly broken up with by their significant others back home:

Hailed as a monumental step toward equality by gay rights activists, hundreds of Dear John letters reportedly began reaching newly outed troops overseas this week, notifying soldiers for the first time ever that their same-sex partners back home were leaving them and starting a new life with someone else.

According to Pentagon observers, the torrent of brusque, callous letters—which followed Tuesday’s repeal of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy—has left romantically betrayed homosexuals in every branch of the service grappling with feelings of rejection and despair, a momentous milestone in U.S. military history.
“For too long, gays and lesbians in the armed forces were barred from receiving such letters, leaving them woefully unaware that the person they once called their soul mate had been cheating on them throughout their deployment,” said Clarence Navarro of the Human Rights Campaign, an LGBT advocacy group. “But now all troops, regardless of their sexual orientation, are free to have their entire lives ripped out from underneath them in a single short note.” “This is a great day for homosexuals,” Navarro added. “Even those who now have nothing to return home to.”


Our laughter testifies to what many people in favor of the repeal had argued all along: that the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell would show that gay troops were just like anyone else in our military, right down to having their hearts broken in a callous manner.

A writer or speaker can use humor to deal with especially sensitive issues. For example, sports commentator Bob Costas, given the honor of eulogizing the great baseball player Mickey Mantle, couldn’t ignore problems in Mantle’s life. So he argues for Mantle’s greatness by admitting the man’s weaknesses indirectly through humor:

It brings to mind a story Mickey liked to tell on himself and maybe some of you have heard it. He pictured himself at the pearly gates, met by St. Peter, who shook his head and said, “Mick, we checked the record. We know some of what went on. Sorry, we can’t let you in. But before you go, God wants to know if you’d sign these six dozen baseballs.”

—Bob Costas, “Eulogy for Mickey Mantle”

Similarly, politicians use humor to admit problems or mistakes they couldn’t acknowledge in any other way. Here, for example, is President George W. Bush at the 2004 Radio and TV Correspondents’ Dinner discussing his much-mocked intellect:

Those stories about my intellectual capacity do get under my skin. You know, for a while I even thought my staff believed it. There on my schedule first thing every morning it said, “Intelligence briefing.”

—George W. Bush

Not all humor is well-intentioned. In fact, among the most powerful forms of emotional argument is ridicule—humor aimed at a particular target. Eighteenth-century poet and critic Samuel Johnson was known for his stinging and humorous put-downs, such as this comment to an
aspiring writer: “Your manuscript is both good and original, but the part that is good is not original and the part that is original is not good.”

Today, even bumper stickers can be vehicles for succinct arguments:

![Bumper Sticker Images]

But ridicule is a two-edged sword that requires a deft hand to wield it. Humor that reflects bad taste discredits a writer completely, as does ridicule that misses its mark. Unless your target deserves assault and you can be very funny, it’s usually better to steer clear of humor.

**Using Arguments Based on Emotion**

You don’t want to play puppetmaster with people’s emotions when you write arguments, but it’s a good idea to spend some time early in your work thinking about how you want readers to feel as they consider your persuasive claims. For example, would readers of your editorial about campus traffic policies be more inclined to agree with you if you made them envy faculty privileges, or would arousing their sense of fairness work better? What emotional appeals might persuade meat eaters to consider a vegan diet—or vice versa? Would sketches of stage props on a Web site persuade people to buy a season ticket to the theater, or would you spark more interest by featuring pictures of costumed performers?

Consider, too, the effect that a story can have on readers. Writers and journalists routinely use what are called human-interest stories to give presence to issues or arguments. You can do the same, using a particular incident to evoke sympathy, understanding, outrage, or amusement. Take care, though, to tell an honest story.

**RESPOND**

1. To what specific emotions do the following slogans, sales pitches, and maxims appeal?
   
   “Just do it.” (ad for Nike)
   
   “Think different.” (ad for Apple computers)
“Reach out and touch someone.” (ad for AT&T)
“Yes we can!” (2008 presidential campaign slogan for Barack Obama)
“Country first.” (2008 presidential campaign slogan for John McCain)
“By any means necessary.” (rallying cry from Malcolm X)
“Have it your way.” (slogan for Burger King)
“You can trust your car to the man who wears the star.” (slogan for Texaco)
“It’s everywhere you want to be.” (slogan for Visa)
“Know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing!” (tag line for Calvin Klein jeans)
“Don’t mess with Texas!” (anti-litter campaign slogan)
“Because you’re worth it.” (ad for L’Oréal)

2. Bring a magazine to class, and analyze the emotional appeals in as many full-page ads as you can. Then classify those ads by types of emotional appeal, and see whether you can connect the appeals to the subject or target audience of the magazine. Compare your results with those of your classmates, and discuss your findings. For instance, do the ads in news magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* appeal to different emotions and desires from the ads in publications such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Spin*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Automobile*, and *National Geographic*?

3. How do arguments based on emotion work in different media? Are such arguments more or less effective in books, articles, television (both news and entertainment shows), films, brochures, magazines, email, Web sites, the theater, street protests, and so on? You might explore how a single medium handles emotional appeals or compare different media. For example, why do the comments pages of blogs seem to encourage angry outbursts? Are newspapers an emotionally colder source of information than television news programs? If so, why?

4. Spend some time looking for arguments that use ridicule or humor to make their point: check out your favorite Web sites; watch for bumper stickers, posters, or advertisements; and listen to popular song lyrics. Bring one or two examples to class, and be ready to explain how the humor makes an emotional appeal and whether it’s effective.