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## Arguments Based on Character: Ethos



Whenever you read anything—whether it’s a news article, an advertisement, a speech, or a text message—you no doubt subconsciously analyze the message for a sense of the character and credibility of the sender: *Does this reporter seem biased? Why should I be paying attention to this speaker?* Our culture teaches us to be skeptical of most messages that bombard us with slogans, and that skepticism is a crucial skill in reading and evaluating arguments.

The mottoes associated with various sources of global information aim to “brand” them by helping to establish their character, what ancient rhetors referred to as *ethos*. And sometimes, slogans like “Fair & Balanced,” “All the News That’s Fit to Print,” or “Do No Harm” can be effective: at the very least, if a phrase is repeated often enough, it comes to sound natural and right. Maybe CNN is the most trusted name in news!

But establishing character usually takes more than repetition, as marketers of all kinds know. In the auto industry American companies

like Ford or GM are trying to reinvent themselves as forward-looking producers of fuel-efficient cars like the Volt, and they have mounted huge campaigns aimed at convincing buyers that their ethos has changed—for the better. Other companies are challenging them: Toyota's third-generation Prius has developed a strong reputation, a "good character" among buyers; the Nissan Leaf—which describes itself as "100% electric. Zero gas. Zero tailpipe"—was named "world car of the year" at the New York International Auto Show as well as a "top safety pick" by the Institute for Highway Safety, thus building an ethos of clean energy and safety. Tata Motors, whose motto is "We care," offers the Nano, the world's cheapest car whose character, they say, can be described as "the people's car." All of these companies know that their success in sales will be directly linked to their ability to establish a convincing and powerful ethos for their products.

If corporations can establish an ethos for themselves and their products, consider how much character matters when we think about people, especially those in the public eye. We'll mention only two very different examples: actor Charlie Sheen and football star Tim Tebow. Despite film credits that include *Platoon* and *Young Guns*, Sheen earned a hard-drinking, womanizing "bad boy" ethos after the questionable behavior of the character he played on TV sitcom *Two and a Half Men*



Charlie Sheen



Tim Tebow

crossed catastrophically into his real life. And though Heisman Trophy-winner Tim Tebow won two NCAA football championships with the Florida Gators before moving into the National Football League, his fame and ethos owe almost as much to unequivocal displays of his Christian faith, signaled on-field by the kneeling gesture now known as Tebowing.

As is often the case, fame brings endorsements. Tebow's "good guy" ethos was on display controversially yet believably in a pro-life Super Bowl ad he made for the Christian group Focus on the Family in 2010. But the athlete is also on the payroll for Nike and for Jockey underwear—usually fully clothed in his ads. And Sheen? What corporation would want to associate its products with such a questionable, and some might say self-destructive, character? In 2012, automaker Fiat hired him to sell Americans on the "Abarth" performance version of its tiny 500 sedan. A TV spot shows him hurling the Abarth at top speed inside a mansion filled with beautiful women: "I love being under house arrest," Sheen muses. In this case, celebrity ethos matches the product perfectly—especially given Fiat's target audience of men.

So you can see why Aristotle treats ethos as a powerful argumentative appeal. Ethos creates quick and sometimes almost irresistible

connections between audience and arguments. We observe people, groups, or institutions making and defending claims all the time and inevitably ask ourselves, *Should we pay attention to them? Can we trust them? Do we want to trust them?* Consider, though, that the same questions will be asked about you and your work, especially in academic settings.

In fact, whenever you write a paper or present an idea, you are sending signals about your character and reliability, whether you intend to or not. If your ideas are reasonable, your sources are reliable, and your language is appropriate to the project, you will suggest to academic readers that you're someone whose ideas *might* deserve attention. You can appreciate why even details like correct spelling, grammar, and mechanics will weigh in your favor. And though you might not think about it now, at some point you may need letters of recommendation from instructors or supervisors. How will they remember you? Often chiefly from the ethos you have established in your work. Think about it.

## Understanding How Arguments Based on Character Work

Put simply, arguments based on character (ethos) depend on trust. We tend to accept arguments from those we trust, and we trust them (whether individuals, groups, or institutions) in good part because of their reputations. Three main elements—trustworthiness/credibility, authority, and unselfish or clear motives—add up to *ethos*.

To answer serious and important questions, we often turn to professionals (doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, pastors) or to experts (those with knowledge and experience) for wise and frank advice. Such people come with some already established ethos based on their backgrounds and their knowledge. Thus, appeals or arguments about character often turn on claims like these:

- A person (or group or institution) is or is not trustworthy or credible on this issue.
- A person (or group or institution) does or does not have the authority to speak to this issue.
- A person (or group or institution) does or does not have unselfish or clear motives for addressing this subject.

## Establishing Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness and credibility speak to a writer's honesty, respect for an audience and its values, and plain old likability. Sometimes a sense of humor can play an important role in getting an audience to listen to or "like" you. It's no accident that all but the most serious speeches begin with a joke or funny story: the humor puts listeners at ease and helps them identify with the speaker. When President Obama spoke at the White House Correspondents' Dinner on April 30, 2011, he was coming off escalating attacks by "birthers" claiming that he was not a citizen of the United States. Obama used the opening of his speech to address those claims—in a humorous way aimed at establishing his credibility: To the tune of "I Am a Real American" accompanied by iconic American images interrupted every few seconds by a pulsating copy of his birth certificate, the president opened his remarks with a broad smile, saying "My fellow Americans," to loud laughs and cheers. After offering the traditional Hawaiian greeting of "Mahalo," he went on to say that, this week,

*the State of Hawaii released my official long-form birth certificate. Hopefully, this puts all doubts to rest. But just in case there are any lingering questions, tonight I am prepared to go a step further. Tonight, for the first time, I am releasing my official birth video.*



President Obama tells jokes at the White House Correspondents' Dinner

What followed was a clip from Disney’s *The Lion King*, which brought down the house. The president had shown he had a sense of humor, one he could turn on himself, and doing so helped to build credibility: he was, in fact, a “real American.” A little self-deprecation like this can endear writers or speakers to the toughest audiences. We’ll often listen to people confident enough to make fun of themselves, because they seem clever and yet aware of their own limitations.

But humor alone can’t establish credibility. Although a funny anecdote may help dispose an audience to listen to you, you will need to move quickly to make reasonable claims and then back them up with evidence. Showing your authority on a topic is itself a good way to build credibility.

You can also establish credibility by connecting your own beliefs to core principles that are well established and widely respected. This strategy is particularly effective when your position seems to be—at first glance, at least—a threat to traditional values. For example, when conservative author Andrew Sullivan argues in favor of legalizing same-sex marriages, he does so in language that echoes the themes of family-values conservatives:

**Legalizing gay marriage would offer homosexuals the same deal society now offers heterosexuals: general social approval and specific legal advantages in exchange for a deeper and harder-to-extract-yourself-from commitment to another human being. Like straight marriage, it would foster social cohesion, emotional security, and economic prudence. Since there’s no reason gays should not be allowed to adopt or be foster parents, it could also help nurture children.**

—Andrew Sullivan, “Here Comes the Groom”

Yet another way to affirm your credibility as a writer is to use language that shows your respect for readers’ intelligence. Citing trustworthy sources and acknowledging them properly prove, too, that you’ve done your homework (another sign of respect) and suggest that you know your subject. So does presenting ideas clearly and fairly. Details matter: helpful graphs, tables, charts, or illustrations may carry weight with readers, as will the visual attractiveness of your text, whether in print or digital form. Even correct spelling counts!

Writers who establish their credibility seem trustworthy. But sometimes, to be credible, you have to admit limitations, too, as the late biologist Lewis Thomas does as he ponders whether scientists

The National Institute of Mental Health boosts its credibility by having a spokesperson acknowledge how difficult it is for an immigrant to admit suffering from depression.

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have overstepped their boundaries in exploring the limits of DNA research:

Should we stop short of learning some things, for fear of what we, or someone, will do with the knowledge? My own answer is a flat no, but I must confess that this is an intuitive response and I am neither inclined nor trained to reason my way through it.

—Lewis Thomas, “The Hazards of Science”

As Thomas’s comments show, a powerful way to build credibility is to acknowledge outright any exceptions, qualifications, or even weaknesses in your argument. For example, a Volkswagen ad from the 1970s with the headline “They said it couldn’t be done. It couldn’t,” shows that pro basketball star Wilt Chamberlain, at seven feet, one inch, tall, just can’t fit inside the Bug. This ad is one of a classic series in which



**They said it couldn't be done.  
It couldn't.**

We tried. Lord knows we tried. But no amount of prizing or taking could squeeze the Philadelphia Yearer Wilt Chamberlain into the front seat of a Volkswagen.

So if you're 7'1" tall like Wilt, our car is not for you.

But maybe you're a mere 6'7". In that case, you'd be smart enough to appreciate what a big thing we've made

of the Volkswagen.

There's more headroom than you'd expect. (Over 37 1/2" from seat to roof.)

And there's more legroom in front than you'd get in a limousine. Because the engine's tucked over the rear wheels where it's out of the way and where it can give the most traction.

You can put 2 medium-sized suitcases

front behind the engine (in't), and 3 fair-sized kids in the back seat. And you can sleep an enormous infant in back of the back seat.

Actually, there's only one part of a VW that you can't put much into. The gas tank. But you can get about 29 miles per gallon out of it.



Volkswagen pokes fun at itself and admits to limitations while also promoting the good points about its car. As a result, the company gains credibility in the bargain.

Making such concessions to objections that readers might raise sends a strong signal to the audience that you've looked critically at your own position and can therefore be trusted when you turn to arguing for its merits. Speaking to readers directly, using *I* or *you*, can also help you connect with them, as can using contractions and everyday or colloquial language. In a commencement address, for example, Oprah Winfrey argues that the graduates need to consider how they can best serve others. To build her case, she draws on her own experience—forthrightly noting some mistakes and problems that she has faced in trying to live a life of service:

I started this school in Africa . . . where I'm trying to give South African girls a shot at a future like yours. And I spent five years making sure that school would be as beautiful as the students. . . . And yet, last fall, I was faced with a crisis. . . . I was told that one of the dorm matrons was suspected of sexual abuse.



Oprah Winfrey in South Africa



That was, as you can imagine, devastating news. First, I cried—actually, I sobbed. . . . And the whole time I kept asking that question: What is this here to teach me? And, as difficult as that experience has been, I got a lot of lessons. I understand now the mistakes I made, because I had been paying attention to all of the wrong things. I'd built that school from the outside in, when what really mattered was the inside out.

—Oprah Winfrey, Stanford University Commencement Address

In some situations, you may find that a more formal tone gives your claims greater credibility. You'll be making such choices as you search for the ethos that represents you best.

## Claiming Authority

When you read or listen to an argument, you have every right to ask about the writer's authority: *What does he know about the subject? What experiences does she have that make her especially knowledgeable? Why should I pay attention to this writer?*

When you offer an argument, you have to anticipate and be able to answer questions like these, either directly or indirectly. Sometimes the claim of authority will be bold and personal, as it is when writer and activist Terry Tempest Williams attacks those who poisoned the Utah deserts with nuclear radiation. What gives her the right to speak on this subject? Not scientific expertise, but gut-wrenching personal experience:

**I belong to the Clan of One-Breasted Women. My mother, my grandmothers, and six aunts have all had mastectomies. Seven are dead. The two who survive have just completed rounds of chemotherapy and radiation.**

**I've had my own problems: two biopsies for breast cancer and a small tumor between my ribs diagnosed as a "borderline malignancy."**

—Terry Tempest Williams, "The Clan of One-Breasted Women"

We are willing to listen to Williams's claims because she has lived with the nuclear peril she will deal with in the remainder of her essay.

Writers usually establish their authority in less striking ways. Attaching titles to their names, for example, subtly builds authority by saying they hold medical or legal or engineering degrees, or some special certification. Similarly, writers assert authority by mentioning their employers

At the opening of his radio interview on the Berkeley Bake Sale, host Michael Krasny announces his guests along with their credentials—both are presidents of student political organizations—to establish their ethos.

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and the number of years they've worked in a given field. As a reader, you'll likely pay more attention to an argument about global warming if it's offered by someone who identifies herself as a professor of atmospheric and oceanic science at the University of Wisconsin, than by your Uncle Sid, who sells tools. But you'll prefer your uncle to the professor when you need advice about a reliable rotary saw.

When your readers may be skeptical of both you and your claim, you may have to be even more specific about your credentials. That's exactly the strategy Richard Bernstein uses to establish his right to speak on the subject of "Asian culture." What gives a New York writer named Bernstein the authority to write about Asian peoples? Bernstein tells us in a sparkling example of an argument based on character:

The Asian culture, as it happens, is something I know a bit about, having spent five years at Harvard striving for a Ph.D. in a joint program called History and East Asian Languages and, after that, living either as a student (for one year) or a journalist (six years) in China and Southeast Asia. At least I know enough to know there is no such thing as the "Asian culture."

—Richard Bernstein, *Dictatorship of Virtue*

When you write for readers who trust you and your work, you may not have to make such an open claim to authority. But making this type of appeal is always an option.

Authority can also be conveyed through fairly small signals that readers may pick up almost subconsciously. On his blog, writer and media analyst Clay Shirky talks easily about a new teaching job. The italicized words indicate his confidence and authority:

This fall, I'm joining NYU's journalism program, where, for the first time in a dozen years, I will teach undergraduates. . . . I could tell these students that when I was growing up, the only news I read was thrown into our front yard by a boy on a bicycle. They might find this interesting, but only in the way I found it interesting that my father had grown up without indoor plumbing. *What 19 year olds need to know* isn't how it was in Ye Olden Tymes of 1992; *they need to know what we've learned* about supporting the creation and dissemination of news between then and now. Contemplating what I should tell them, *there are only three things I'm sure of*: News has to be subsidized, and it has to be cheap, and it has to be free.

—Clay Shirky, "Why We Need the New News Environment to Be Chaotic"

## CULTURAL CONTEXTS FOR ARGUMENT

**Ethos**

In the United States, students are often asked to establish authority by drawing on personal experiences, by reporting on research they or others have conducted, and by taking a position for which they can offer strong evidence. But this expectation about student authority is by no means universal.

Some cultures regard student writers as novices who can most effectively make arguments by reflecting on what they've learned from their teachers and elders—those who hold the most important knowledge and, hence, authority. When you're arguing a point with people from cultures other than your own, ask questions like:

- Whom are you addressing, and what is your relationship with that person?
- What knowledge are you expected to have? Is it appropriate or expected for you to demonstrate that knowledge—and if so, how?
- What tone is appropriate? And remember: politeness is rarely, if ever, inappropriate.

**Coming Clean about Motives**

When people are trying to sell you something, it's important (and natural) to ask: *Whose interests are they serving? How will they profit from their proposal?* Such suspicions go to the heart of ethical arguments.

Here, for example, someone posting on the Web site Serious Eats, which is “focused on celebrating and sharing food enthusiasm” online, acknowledges—in a footnote—that his attention to Martha Stewart, her Web site, and a *Martha Stewart Living* cookbook may be influenced by his employment history:

**Martha Stewart\* has been blipping up on the Serious Eats radar lately.**

**First it was this astronaut meal she chose for her longtime Microsoft billionaire friend Charles Simonyi, “a gourmet space meal of duck breast confit and semolina cake with dried apricots.” Talk about going above and beyond.**

Then official word comes that *marthastewart.com* has relaunched with a fresh new look and new features. The site, which went live in its new form a few weeks before this announcement, is quite an improvement. It seems to load faster, information is easier to find, and the recipes are easier to read—although there are so many brands, magazines, and “omnimedia” on offer that the homepage is a little dizzying at first.

*\*Full disclosure: I used to work at Martha Stewart Living magazine.*

—Adam Kuban, “Martha, Martha, Martha”

Especially in online venues like the one Kuban uses here, writers have to expect that readers will hold diverse views and will be quick to point out unmentioned affiliations as serious drawbacks to credibility. In fact, attacks on such loyalties are common in political circles, where it’s almost a sport to assume the worst about an opponent’s motives and associations.

But we all have connections and interests that represent the ties that bind us to other human beings. It makes sense that a woman might be concerned with women’s issues or that investors might look out for their investments. So it can be good strategy to let your audiences know where your loyalties lie when such information does, in fact, shape your work.

### Using Ethos in Your Own Writing

- Establish your credibility by connecting to your audience’s values, showing respect for them, and establishing common ground where possible. How will you convince your audience you are trustworthy? What will you admit about your own limitations?
- Establish your authority by showing you have done your homework and know your topic well. How will you show that you know your topic well? What appropriate personal experience can you draw on?
- Examine your motives for writing. What, if anything, do you stand to gain from your argument? How can you explain those advantages to your audience?

### RESPOND ●

1. Consider the ethos of these public figures. Then describe one or two products that might benefit from their endorsements as well as several that would not.

Cat Deeley—emcee of *So You Think You Can Dance*

Margaret Cho—comedian

Johnny Depp—actor

Lady Gaga—singer and songwriter

Bill O'Reilly—TV news commentator

Marge Simpson—sensible wife and mother on *The Simpsons*

Jon Stewart—host of *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central

2. Opponents of Richard Nixon, the thirty-seventh president of the United States, once raised doubts about his integrity by asking a single ruinous question: *Would you buy a used car from this man?* Create your own version of the argument of character. Begin by choosing an intriguing or controversial person or group and finding an image online. Then download the image into a word-processing file. Create a caption for the photo that is modeled after the question asked about Nixon: *Would you give this woman your email password? Would you share a campsite with this couple? Would you eat lasagna that this guy fixed?* Finally, write a serious 300-word argument that explores the character flaws or strengths of your subject(s).
3. Take a close look at your Facebook page (or your page on any other social media site). What are some aspects of your character, true or not, that might be conveyed by the photos, videos, and messages you have posted online? Analyze the ethos or character you see projected there, using the advice in this chapter to guide your analysis.

# 4

## Arguments Based on Facts and Reason: Logos



These three images say a lot about the use and place of logic (*logos*) in Western, and particularly American, culture. The first shows David Caruso as Lt. Horatio Caine in the TV series *CSI: Miami*, in which crime lab investigators use science to determine the facts behind unsolved murder cases. The second refers to an even more popular TV (and film) series, *Star Trek*, whose Vulcan officer, Spock, reasons through logic alone; and the third is a cartoon spoofing a logical argument (nine out of ten prefer X) made so often that it has become something of a joke itself.

These images attest to the prominent place that logic holds: like the investigators on *CSI*, we continue to want access to the facts on the assumption that they will help us make the best arguments. We admire those whose logic is, like Spock's, impeccable, and we respond to implied arguments suggested when they begin, "Nine out of ten doctors recommend . . ." Those are odds that most accept, suggesting overwhelmingly that the next doctor will also agree with the prognosis. But these images also challenge or undercut our reliance on logic alone: Lt. Caine and Spock

are characters drawn in broad and often parodic strokes; the “nine out of ten” cartoon directly spoofs such arguments. When the choice is between logic and emotion, however, most of us still say we respect *appeals to logos*—arguments based on facts, evidence, and reason (though we’re inclined to test the facts against our feelings and against the ethos of those making the appeal).

## Providing Hard Evidence

Aristotle helps us out in classifying arguments by distinguishing two kinds:

<b>Artistic Proofs</b>	Arguments the writer/ speaker creates	Constructed arguments	Appeals to reason; common sense
<b>Inartistic Proofs</b>	Arguments the writer/ speaker is given	Hard evidence	Facts, statistics, testimo- nies, witnesses, con- tracts, documents

We can see these different kinds of logical appeals at work in the most recent attempts of former vice president Al Gore to raise awareness and evoke action on global warming. On September 14, 2011, Gore launched a twenty-four-hour worldwide live-streamed event to introduce the new Climate Reality Project, beginning with a new thirty-minute multimedia presentation shown once an hour for twenty-four hours in every time zone across the globe. The project intends, according to its Web site, to bring

**the facts about the climate crisis into the mainstream and engage the public in conversation about how to solve it. We help citizens around the world reject the lies and take meaningful steps to bring about change.**

The project, Gore claims, is guided by “one simple truth”:

**The climate crisis is real and we know how to solve it.**

Note the emphasis on “the facts about the climate crisis”: Gore and his colleagues will have to rely on a lot of hard evidence and inartistic proof in asserting that the “climate crisis is real.” In an essay in *Rolling Stone*, Gore summarized some of this evidence, saying that today

**the scientific consensus [for the reality of global warming] is even stronger. It has been endorsed by every National Academy of science of every major country on the planet, every major professional scientific society related to the study of global warming and 98 percent of**



“Who Cares about Ice Bears?”

climate scientists throughout the world. In the latest and most authoritative study by three thousand of the very best scientific experts in the world, the evidence was judged “unequivocal.”

Here Gore refers to testimony, statistics, and facts to carry his argument forward. But he also must rely on less “hard” evidence, as when he says:

Determining what is real can be a challenge in our culture, but in order to make wise choices in the presence of such grave risks, we must use common sense and the rule of reason in coming to an agreement on what is true.

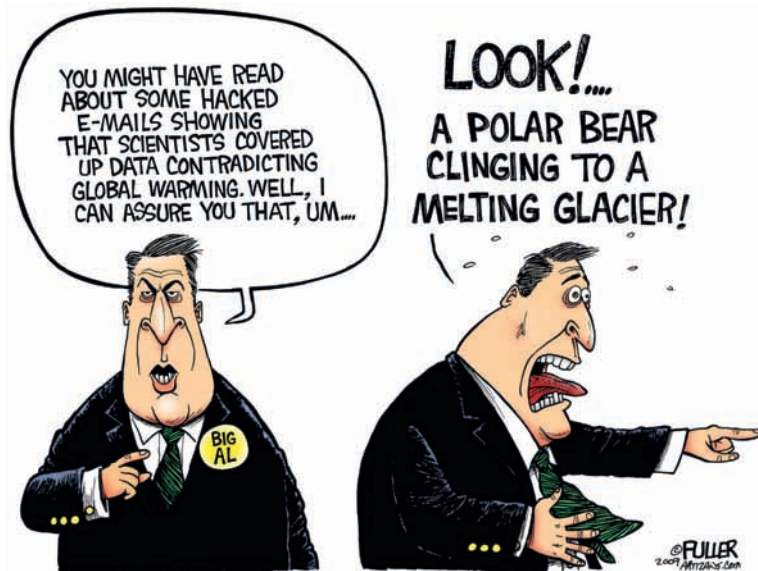
Common sense, Gore tells us, shows us that global warming has got to be true: just look around and see the evidence in the melting ice caps and the rising seas—and a lot more. Gore believes that this artistic appeal will go as far as the hard scientific evidence to convince readers to take action. (Seeing is believing, after all—or is it? See p. 59.) And action is what he’s after. At the end of this long essay, he uses another bit of constructed reasoning to show that if everyday Americans make their position clear, the leaders will follow:

Why do you think President Obama and Congress changed their game on “don’t ask, don’t tell”? It happened because enough Americans



delivered exactly that tough message to candidates who wanted their votes. When enough people care passionately enough to drive that message home on the climate crisis, politicians will look at their hole cards, and enough of them will change their game to make all the difference we need.

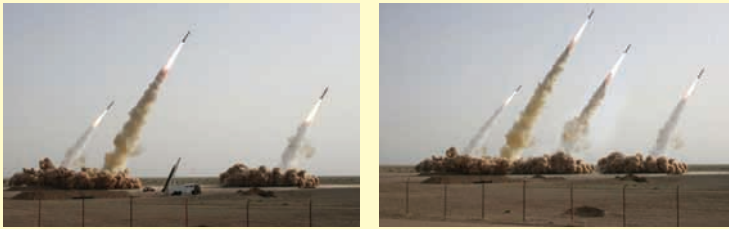
Will Gore and the Climate Reality Project convince global citizens that they are right about what is “true” about climate change? Not if other powerful voices can help it. A quick Google search for “global warming hoax” will take you to weekly updates providing countervailing studies and testimony. And Gore himself has been an often easy target for attack, especially after some leaked scientific email from Britain evoked charges that climate scientists were “doctoring” the facts, though independent critics eventually determined that the email wording was taken seriously out of context and that the email did not undermine the data on global climate change and its causes.



This cartoon suggests that changing the subject is a fallback strategy when the “facts” are inconvenient.

This ongoing controversy surrounding global warming is a good example of how difficult it can be to distinguish the good evidence from the slanted or fabricated kinds and to decide how to make sound decisions based on it.

### IS SEEING BELIEVING?



Some of the debate over climate change centers on photographs, which may be telling “nothing but the truth”—or not. We have known for decades that all photographs in some way shape or interpret what they show, but in the age of Photoshop readers need to be even more careful about believing what they see, and writers need to be especially careful that the images they use are trustworthy. Whole books have been devoted to “digital fakery” and photographic manipulation, and examples are easy to find. In 2008, Iran was caught red-handed manipulating a photograph of missiles, as you see in the two photographs above: where did the fourth missile (in the right-hand photo) come from? So egregious was this example of manipulation that others like Boing Boing soon got into the act, inviting readers to join in by submitting their own manipulations of the original image on the left.

Today, when we can all slant discussions, cherry-pick examples, and alter images, writers need more than ever to be aware of the ethics of evidence, whether that evidence draws on facts, statistics, survey data, testimony and narratives, or commonsense reasoning.

**RESPOND** •

Discuss whether the following statements are examples of hard evidence or constructed arguments. Not all cases are clear-cut.

1. Drunk drivers are involved in more than 50 percent of traffic deaths.
2. DNA tests of skin found under the victim's fingernails suggest that the defendant was responsible for the assault.
3. A psychologist testified that teenage violence could not be blamed on video games.
4. An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
5. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."
6. Air bags ought to be removed from vehicles because they can kill young children and small-frame adults.

**Facts**

Gathering factual information and transmitting it faithfully practically define what we mean by professional journalism and scholarship. We'll even listen to people we don't agree with if their evidence is really good. Below, a reviewer for the conservative *National Review* praises William Julius Wilson, a liberal sociologist, because of how well he presents his case:

In his eagerly awaited new book, Wilson argues that ghetto blacks are worse off than ever, victimized by a near-total loss of low-skill jobs in and around inner-city neighborhoods. In support of this thesis, he *musters mountains of data, plus excerpts from some of the thousands of surveys and face-to-face interviews that he and his research team conducted among inner-city Chicagoans*. It is a book that deserves a wide audience among thinking conservatives.

—John J. Dilulio Jr., "When Decency Disappears" (emphasis added)

When your facts are compelling, they may stand on their own in a low-stakes argument, supported by little more than saying where they come from. Consider the power of phrases such as "reported by the *Wall Street Journal*," or "according to factcheck.org." Such sources gain credibility if they have reported facts accurately and reliably over time. Using such credible sources in an argument can also reflect positively on you.

But arguing with facts can also involve challenging even the most reputable sources if they lead to unfair or selective reporting. In recent years, bloggers and other online critics have enjoyed pointing out the

biases or factual mistakes of “mainstream media” (MSM) outlets. These criticisms often deal not just with specific facts and coverage but with the overall way that an issue is presented or “framed.” In the following highly rhetorical passage from liberal economist Paul Krugman’s blog, he points out what, from his point of view, is a persistent tendency of the mainstream media to claim they are framing issues in “fair and balanced” ways by presenting two opposing sides as if they were equal:

Watching our system deal with the debt ceiling crisis—a wholly self-inflicted crisis, which may nonetheless have disastrous consequences—it’s increasingly obvious that what we’re looking at is the destructive influence of a cult that has really poisoned our political system. . . . [T]he cult that I see as reflecting a true moral failure is the cult of balance, of centrism.

Think about what’s happening right now. We have a crisis in which the right is making insane demands, while the president and Democrats in Congress are bending over backward to be accommodating—offering plans that are all spending cuts and no taxes, plans that are far to the right of public opinion.

So what do most news reports say? They portray it as a situation in which both sides are equally partisan, equally intransigent—because news reports always do that. And we have influential pundits calling out for a new centrist party, a new centrist president, to get us away from the evils of partisanship.

The reality, of course, is that we already have a centrist president—actually a moderate conservative president. Once again, health reform—his only major change to government—was modeled on Republican plans, indeed plans coming from the Heritage Foundation. And everything else—including the wrongheaded emphasis on austerity in the face of high unemployment—is according to the conservative playbook.

What all this means is that there is no penalty for extremism; no way for most voters, who get their information on the fly rather than doing careful study of the issues, to understand what’s really going on.

You have to ask, what would it take for these news organizations and pundits to actually break with the convention that both sides are equally at fault? This is the clearest, starkest situation one can imagine short of civil war. If this won’t do it, nothing will.

—Paul Krugman, “The Cult That Is Destroying America”

In an ideal world, good information—no matter where it comes from—would always drive out bad. But you already know that we don’t live in an ideal world, so sometimes bad information gets repeated in an echo chamber that amplifies the errors.

Many media have no pretenses at all about being reputable. During the 2008 presidential campaign, the Internet blared statements proclaiming that Barack Obama was Muslim, even after dozens of sources, including many people with whom Obama had worshipped, testified to his Christianity. As a reader and researcher, you should look beyond headlines, bylines, reputations, and especially rumors that fly about the Internet. Scrutinize any facts you collect, and test their reliability before passing them on.

### Statistics

You've probably heard the old saying that "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics," and, to be sure, it is possible to lie with numbers, even those that are accurate, because numbers rarely speak for themselves. They need to be interpreted by writers—and writers almost always have agendas that shape the interpretations.

Of course, just because they are often misused doesn't mean that statistics are meaningless, but it does suggest that you need to use them carefully and to remember that your interpretation of the statistics is very important. Consider an article from the *Atlantic* called "American Murder Mystery" by Hanna Rosin. The "mystery" Rosin writes about is the rise of crime in midsize American cities such as Memphis, Tennessee. The article raised a firestorm of response and criticism, including this analysis of statistical malfeasance from blogger Alan Salzberg:

The primary statistical evidence given in the article of an association between crime and former Section 8 [housing project] residents, is a map that shows areas with high incidents of crime correspond to areas with a large number of people with Section 8 subsidies (i.e., former residents of housing projects). As convincing as this might sound, it has a fatal flaw: the map looks at total incidents rather than crime rate. This means that an area with ten thousand people and one hundred crimes (and one hundred Section 8 subsidy recipients) will look much worse than an area with one hundred people and one crime (and one Section 8 subsidy recipient). However, both areas have the same rate of crime, and, presumably, the same odds of being a victim of crime. Yet in Betts and Janikowski's analysis, the area with ten thousand people has a higher number of Section 8 subsidy recipients and higher crime, thus "proving" their theory of association.

The *New York Times* suggests an argument about bottled water consumption when it offers visual representation of statistical data.

[LINK TO P. 723](#)

When relying on statistics in your arguments, make sure you check and double-check them or get help in doing so: you don't want to be accused of using "fictitious data" based on "ludicrous assumptions"!

The text in the cartoon says it all.



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### **RESPOND •**

Statistical evidence becomes useful only when interpreted fairly and reasonably. Go to the USA Today Web site and look for the daily graph, chart, or table called the "USA Today snapshot." Pick a snapshot, and use the information in it to support three different claims, at least two of which make very different points. Share your claims with classmates. (The point is not to learn to use data dishonestly but to see firsthand how the same statistics can serve a variety of arguments.)

## Surveys and Polls

When they verify the popularity of an idea or proposal, surveys and polls provide strong persuasive appeals because they come as close to expressing the will of the people as anything short of an election—the most decisive poll of all. However, surveys and polls can do much more than help politicians make decisions. They can also provide persuasive reasons for action or intervention. When surveys show, for example, that most American sixth-graders can't locate France or Wyoming on a map—not to mention Turkey or Afghanistan—that's an appeal for better instruction in geography. It always makes sense, however, to question poll numbers, especially when they support your own point of view. Ask who commissioned the poll, who is publishing its outcome, who was surveyed (and in what proportions), and what stakes these parties might have in its outcome.

Are we being too suspicious? No. In fact, this sort of scrutiny is exactly what you should anticipate from your readers whenever you do surveys to explore an issue. You should be confident that you've surveyed enough people to be accurate, that the people you chose for the study were representative of the selected population as a whole, and that you chose them randomly—not selecting those most likely to say what you hoped to hear.

*Cook's Country's taste test for chocolate chip cookies gave the surveyors a result they did not expect—homemade cookies didn't place first.*

[LINK TO P. 726](#)

**Fathers are more likely than mothers (33% vs. 26%) to say they sometimes play video games with their teens ages 12 to 17.**



By Michelle Healy and Sam Ward, USA TODAY  
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project

*USA Today* is famous for the tables, pie charts, and graphs it creates to present statistics and poll results. What claims might the evidence in this graph support? How does the design of the item influence your reading of it?

On the other hand, as with other kinds of factual evidence, don't make the opposite mistake by discounting or ignoring polls whose findings are *not* what you had hoped for. In the following excerpts from a column in the *Dallas News*, conservative Rod Dreher forthrightly faces up to the results from a poll of registered Texas voters—results that he finds ominous for his Texas Republican Party:

The full report, which will be released today, knocks the legs out from under two principles cherished by the party's grassroots: staunch social conservatism and hard-line immigration policies. At the state level, few voters care much about abortion, school prayer and other hot-button issues. Immigration is the only conservative stand-by that rates much mention—and by hitting it too hard, Republicans lose both the Hispanics and independents that make up what the pollster defines as the "Critical Middle." . . .

This is not going to go down well with the activist core of the Texas GOP, especially people like me: a social conservative with firm views on illegal immigration. But reality has a way of focusing the mind, forcing one to realize that political parties are not dogma-driven churches, but coalitions that unavoidably shift over time.

—Rod Dreher, "Poll's Shocking SOS for Texas GOP"

Dreher's frank acknowledgment of findings that did not please him also helps him to create a positive ethos as a trustworthy writer who follows the facts wherever they lead.

The meaning of polls and surveys is also affected by the way that questions are asked. Recent research has shown, for example, that questions about same-sex unions get differing responses according to how they are worded. When people are asked whether gay and lesbian couples should be eligible for the same inheritance and partner health benefits that heterosexual couples receive, a majority of those polled say yes—unless the word *marriage* appears in the question; then the responses are primarily negative. Remember, then, to be very careful in wording questions for any poll you conduct.

Finally, always keep in mind that the date of a poll may strongly affect the results—and their usefulness in an argument. In 2010, for example, nearly 50 percent of California voters supported building more nuclear power plants. Less than a year later, that percentage had dropped to 37 percent after the meltdown of Japanese nuclear power plants in the wake of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.



**RESPOND** •

Choose an important issue and design a series of questions to evoke a range of responses in a poll. Try to design a question that would make people strongly inclined to agree, another question that would lead them to oppose the same proposition, and a third that tries to be more neutral. Then try out your questions on your classmates.

**Testimonies and Narratives**

Writers can support their arguments with all kinds of human experience presented in the form of narrative or testimony, particularly if that experience is the writer's own. In courts, decisions often take into consideration detailed descriptions and narratives of exactly what occurred. Look at this reporter's account of a court case in which a panel of judges decided, based on the testimony presented, that a man had been sexually harassed by another man. The narrative, in this case, supplies the evidence:

The Seventh Circuit, in a 1997 case known as *Doe v. City of Belleville*, drew a sweeping conclusion allowing for same-sex harassment cases of many kinds. . . . This case, for example, centered on teenage twin brothers working a summer job cutting grass in the city cemetery of Belleville, Ill. One boy wore an earring, which caused him no end of grief that particular summer—including a lot of menacing talk among his coworkers about sexually assaulting him in the woods and sending him “back to San Francisco.” One of his harassers, identified in court documents as a large former marine, culminated a verbal campaign by backing the earring-wearer against a wall and grabbing him by the testicles to see “if he was a girl or a guy.” The teenager had been “singled out for this abuse,” the court ruled, “because the way in which he projected the sexual aspect of his personality”—meaning his gender—“did not conform to his coworkers’ view of appropriate masculine behavior.”

—Margaret Talbot, “Men Behaving Badly”

Personal narratives can support a claim convincingly, especially if a writer has earned the trust of readers. In an essay arguing that people should pay very close attention to intuition, regarding it as important as more factual evidence, Suzanne Guillette uses personal narrative to good effect:

It was late summer 2009: I was walking on a Long Island beach with my boyfriend Mark and some friends. When I saw Mark sit down next

to his friend Dana on a craggy rock, a sudden electric shock traveled straight up the center of my body. It was so visceral it made me stumble. And then my mind flashed to a recent dream I'd had of Dana sitting on Mark's lap as he rode a bike. *Don't be crazy*, I chided myself, turning to watch the surfers. *They're just friends*. But one night nine months later . . . Mark confessed that he and Dana had had an affair. . . . Each time I had a "flash," I realized that listening to it—or not—had consequences.

—Suzanne Guillette, "Learning to Listen"

This narrative introduction gives readers details to support the claim Guillette is making: we can make big mistakes if we ignore our intuitions. (For more on establishing credibility with readers, see Chapter 3.)

### **RESPOND** •

Bring to class a full review of a recent film that you either enjoyed or did not enjoy. Using testimony from that review, write a brief argument to your classmates explaining why they should see that movie (or why they should avoid it), being sure to use evidence from the review fairly and reasonably. Then exchange arguments with a classmate, and decide whether the evidence in your peer's argument helps to change your opinion about the movie. What's convincing about the evidence? If it doesn't convince you, why not?

## Using Reason and Common Sense

If you don't have "hard facts," you can support claims by using reason and common sense. The formal study of reasoning is called *logic*, and you probably recognize a famous example of deductive reasoning, called a syllogism:

All human beings are mortal.

Socrates is a human being.

Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

In valid syllogisms, the conclusion follows logically—and technically—from the premises that lead up to it. Many have criticized syllogistic reasoning for being limited, and others have poked fun at it, as in this cartoon:



But few people use formal deductive reasoning to support claims. Even Aristotle recognized that most people argue perfectly well using informal rather than formal logic. To do so, they rely mostly on habits of mind and assumptions that they share with their readers or listeners.

In Chapter 7, we describe a system of informal logic that you may find useful in shaping credible arguments—**Toulmin argument**. Here, we briefly examine some ways that people use informal logic in their everyday lives. Once again, we begin with Aristotle, who used the term **enthymeme** to describe an ordinary kind of sentence that includes both a claim and a reason but depends on the audience's agreement with an assumption that is left implicit rather than spelled out. Enthymemes can be very persuasive when most people agree with the assumptions they rest on. The following sentences are all enthymemes:

We'd better cancel the picnic because it's going to rain.

Flat taxes are fair because they treat everyone the same.

I'll buy a PC instead of a Mac because it's cheaper.

NCAA football needs a playoff to crown a real national champion.

Sometimes enthymemes seem so obvious that readers don't realize that they're drawing inferences when they agree with them. Consider the first example:

**We'd better cancel the picnic because it's going to rain.**

Let's expand the enthymeme a bit to say more of what the speaker may mean:

**We'd better cancel the picnic this afternoon because the weather bureau is predicting a 70 percent chance of rain for the remainder of the day.**

Embedded in this brief argument are all sorts of assumptions and fragments of cultural information that are left implicit but that help to make it persuasive:

**Picnics are ordinarily held outdoors.**

**When the weather is bad, it's best to cancel picnics.**

**Rain is bad weather for picnics.**

**A 70 percent chance of rain means that rain is more likely to occur than not.**

**When rain is more likely to occur than not, it makes sense to cancel picnics.**

For most people, the original statement carries all this information on its own; the enthymeme is a compressed argument, based on what audiences know and will accept.

But sometimes enthymemes aren't self-evident:

**Be wary of environmentalism because it's religion disguised as science.**

**iPhones are undermining civil society by making us even more focused on ourselves.**

**It's time to make all public toilets unisex because to do otherwise is discriminatory.**

In these cases, you'll have to work much harder to defend both the claim and the implicit assumptions that it's based on by drawing out the inferences that seem self-evident in other enthymemes. And you'll likely also have to supply credible evidence. A simple declaration of fact won't suffice.

## CULTURAL CONTEXTS FOR ARGUMENT

**Logos**

In the United States, student writers are expected to draw on “hard facts” and evidence as often as possible in supporting their claims: while ethical and emotional appeals are important, logical appeals tend to hold sway in academic writing. So statistics and facts speak volumes, as does reasoning based on time-honored values such as fairness and equity. In writing to global audiences, you need to remember that not all cultures value the same kinds of appeals. If you want to write to audiences across cultures, you need to know about the norms and values in those cultures. Chinese culture, for example, values authority and often indirect allusion over “facts” alone. Some African cultures value cooperation and community over individualism, and still other cultures value religious texts as providing compelling evidence. So think carefully about what you consider strong evidence, and pay attention to what counts as evidence to others. You can begin by asking yourself questions like:

- What evidence is most valued by your audience: Facts? Concrete examples? Firsthand experience? Religious or philosophical texts? Something else?
- Will analogies count as support? How about precedents?
- Will the testimony of experts count? If so, what kind of experts are valued most?

**Providing Logical Structures for Argument**

Some arguments depend on particular logical structures to make their points. In the following pages, we identify a few of these logical structures.

**Degree**

Arguments based on degree are so common that people barely notice them, nor do they pay much attention to how they work because they seem self-evident. Most audiences will readily accept that *more of a good thing or less of a bad thing* is good. In her novel *The Fountainhead*, Ayn Rand



A demonstrator at an immigrants' rights rally in New York City in 2007. Arguments based on values that are widely shared within a society—such as the idea of equal rights in American culture—have an automatic advantage with audiences.

asks: “If physical slavery is repulsive, how much more repulsive is the concept of servility of the spirit?” Most readers immediately comprehend the point Rand intends to make about slavery of the spirit because they already know that physical slavery is cruel and would reject any forms of slavery that were even crueler on the principle that *more of a bad thing is bad*. Rand still needs to offer evidence that “servility of the spirit” is, in fact, worse than bodily servitude, but she has begun with a logical structure readers can grasp. Here are other arguments that work similarly:

If I can get a ten-year warranty on an inexpensive Kia, shouldn't I get the same or better warranty from a more expensive Lexus?

The health benefits from using stem cells in research will surely outweigh the ethical risks.

Better a conventional war now than a nuclear confrontation later.

## Analogies

**Analogies**, typically complex or extended comparisons, explain one idea or concept by comparing it to something else.

Christophe Pelletier's “The Locavore's Dilemma” depends on arguments based on degree as he presents the difficulties involved in the choice to eat only locally grown food.

[LINK TO P. 703](#)

Here, writer and founder of literacy project 826 Valencia, Dave Eggers, uses an analogy in arguing that we do not value teachers as much as we should:

When we don't get the results we want in our military endeavors, we don't blame the soldiers. We don't say, "It's these lazy soldiers and their bloated benefits plans! That's why we haven't done better in Afghanistan!" No, if the results aren't there, we blame the planners. . . . No one contemplates blaming the men and women fighting every day in the trenches for little pay and scant recognition. And yet in education we do just that. When we don't like the way our students score on international standardized tests, we blame the teachers.

—Dave Eggers and Ninive Calegari,  
"The High Cost of Low Teacher Salaries"

### Precedent

Arguments from precedent and arguments of analogy both involve comparisons. Consider an assertion like this one, which uses a comparison as a precedent:

If motorists in most other states can pump their own gas safely, surely the state of Oregon can trust its own drivers to be as capable. It's time for Oregon to permit self-service gas stations.

You could tease out several inferences from this claim to explain its reasonableness: people in Oregon are as capable as people in other states; people with equivalent capabilities can do the same thing; pumping gas is not hard, and so forth. But you don't have to because most readers get the argument simply because of the way it is put together.

Here is an excerpt from an extended argument by blogger Neil Warner, in which he argues that the "Arab Spring" of 2011 may not follow the same pattern as its historical precedents:

["Arab Spring"] is in many respects a fitting name, one that relates not only to the season in which the unrest really began but also captures perfectly the newfound optimism and youthful determination that seems to have embraced the region. Unfortunately, though, "Spring" as a term for popular movements does not have an encouraging history.

The most comparable event with the same title is the so-called "Spring of the Nations" or "Springtime of the Peoples" of 1848–49. In one of the most stunning international events the world has ever witnessed, a wildfire of liberal revolution spread out across Europe following the

overthrow of the restored French monarchy in February of 1848. Traditional reactionary regimes fell like dominos and a sense of unity of purpose and hopefulness very comparable in some ways to 2011 in the Arab World embraced the populace, both working class and middle class, of Germany, Italy, the Austrian Empire, and elsewhere. An uprising in November 1848 even forced the Pope to flee Rome.

But by the end of 1849 it had all fizzled out, reactionary forces reassembled and the revolutionaries split, and the old order in Europe settled back down as if nothing had ever happened. . . .

With respect to the Arab world, we can already see the same pattern developing. After an initial panic following the overthrow of Mubarak, the Arab dictatorships of the region have consolidated themselves and clung on for dear life. . . .

—Neil Warner, “The Anatomy of a Spring”

You’ll encounter additional kinds of logical structures as you create your own arguments. You’ll find some of them in Chapter 5, “Fallacies of Argument,” and still more in Chapter 7 on Toulmin argument.