Teaching
the
Craft of Argument

Our aim in The Craft of Argument with Readings is to help students integrate the skills of writing, thinking, and arguing so that they learn not only how to read arguments critically, but to craft them clearly, soundly, and persuasively. In Part 1, we discuss arguments along several dimensions, ranging from their elements, to the problems that motivate us to make them in the first place, to their role in organizing the texts that present them, to their importance in critical thinking, to their proper and improper use of emotion. Throughout this discussion, we focus students on what readers expect, or even demand, of their arguments and on how they can accommodate readers’ need to their goals. In Part 2, we give students the experience of reading and responding to the arguments of others. The readings in this part introduce students to a variety of topics and types of argument that not only serve as models of coherent arguments, but also encourage them to approach argument from varying viewpoints.

Key Features of Craft

In addition to teaching students how to craft a well-developed argument, every chapter in Craft with Readings contains seven key elements:

- **Writing Process** sections integrate what students learn about argument with what they need to learn about writing them.
- **In the Readings** boxes appear throughout Part 1, pointing out features of essays in Part 2 that highlight and demonstrate specific concepts.
- **Inquiries** offer a wide range of questions and activities to further assist students in understanding the nature and uses of argument.
- **Focus on Writing** exercises help students apply the principles of argument to the process of preparing, planning, drafting, and revising their own written arguments.
- **In a Nutshell** sections briefly summarize the main points of the chapter and show students how they can utilize those points in their own writing.
- **Going Online** feature prompts students to go to the Companion Website (www.ablongman.com/williams) for additional exercises and Web resources as well as useful tips on analyzing and crafting arguments.
- **Sample Essays** in the rhetoric illustrate some typical uses and abuses of arguments in student writing.
Key Features of the Readings

Drawing from a variety of scholarly and mainstream sources, we have created a thoughtful mixture of readings that cover a variety of issues not usually presented in readers, reflecting a variety of disciplines, from decision science to the culture of drinking, from sociobiology to sexuality. The six thematic sections explore issues familiar to students in their everyday lives—truthfulness and deceit, romantic love, body image—as well as more controversial topics such as family values, risk and risk avoidance, and collective delusion and public hysteria. We have deliberately avoided the standard civic debates—abortion, gun control, affirmative action, animal rights, and so on. Each reading incorporates elements of argument discussed in Part 1 and encourages students to develop their own response to an author’s or several authors’ views. The readings also provide students with some of the evidence they will need in making their own arguments. Each thematic section includes the following:

- Three to six introductory readings that set the stage for the theme of the section. These lay out some typical lines of argument and give students a sense of the of the more specific issues that have been associated with the theme.
- Two case studies with three to five readings in each that take on a specific problem associated with the larger theme.

To help students understand these readings, respond to them thoughtfully, and then construct thoughtful arguments of their own, each thematic section includes four kinds of assistance:

- An introduction sets out the major elements of the theme. It alerts students to some of the key lines of argument that have defined the theme for others and shows them some of the ways the theme touches on problems of our personal and public lives.
- Pre-reading and pre-writing activities prompt students to think about their own understanding of the theme, preparing them to address the arguments and views of others critically and creatively.
- Reflective post-reading questions help students to test their understanding of the readings and prompt them to begin to form their own arguments in response.
- A model analysis of one argument outlines the components of the essay, sentence-by-sentence, so that students can not only see how each element of argument works (and sometimes doesn’t) in the arguments they read, but also see how they too can take apart an argument when they need to.

What Distinguishes Craft from Other Books on Argument?

Our approach to argument is rooted in the rhetorical tradition that began even before Aristotle’s Rhetoric, but it is different enough from most current texts on argument to deserve some explanation. Perhaps the most important difference is our focus on the role of problems in motivat-
ing and shaping arguments. We make arguments not just to gain our readers’ agreement but to enlist them in solving a problem. The nature of the problem determines the kind of agreement we seek, which in turn determines the kind of argument we make. So far as we know, no other book, ancient or modern, puts problem finding, framing, and solving at the heart of planning, drafting, and revising written arguments. From beginning to end, we emphasize that only when we understand the problem we address from our readers’ point of view can we make an argument that they will take seriously.

Our focus on problems lets you help students new to academic argument overcome the special difficulties they often have with academic problems, which can seem to them merely “theoretical”—too abstract to be relevant to their perceived needs and interests. We show students the differences between the kind of problem most familiar to them, pragmatic problems, and the kind of problem that may be less familiar to them, conceptual problems—that most teachers will expect them not only to address, but find and formulate on their own. Throughout, we help students address the demands of finding academic, conceptual problems that first of all they can care about, but that they can also imagine their readers caring about as well.

Unlike many other books on argument, we also place a steady emphasis on ethos. We show students how they project an ethos through every element of their argument: by how clearly they write, how baldly they state their claim, how thoroughly they support it with evidence, how candidly they acknowledge and respond to objections. We emphasize that even when their argument fails to achieve agreement, they can still call it a success if readers think that they made it in ways that seem reasonable, thoughtful, and fair. At some point, what readers remember from the ethos of individual arguments adds up to their lasting reputation, an important force of persuasion in its own right.

A third difference is that instead of offering an elaborate account of formal deductive logic, we devote considerable attention to informal reasoning. And instead of focusing on fallacies as the only way to think about sound thinking, we integrate sound critical thinking into our discussion of argument and writing in every chapter. To that end, we have not segregated advice about reasoning and arguing from advice about writing, because we believe that the skills of writing support and illuminate the skills of reasoning, and vice versa. The Writing Process section in each chapter shows students how the processes of planning, drafting, and revising can help them not only generate the substance of an argument, but reflect critically on the thinking it represents.

We have also tried to synthesize two aspects of argument that most books on argument keep distinct: dialectic and rhetoric. Dialectic is commonly defined as a process of two people questioning each other in search for as-yet undiscovered truth (a claim that they can support), a topic now pursued by those calling their work “pragma-dialectical.” In contrast, rhetoric traditionally focuses on one person’s finding and arranging support for a known claim in order to persuade another to accept it. In our view, dialectic and rhetoric present two perspectives on the same process. Questioning and being questioned helps students both to discover a claim worth making and to find the support that gives them and others good reasons to accept it. It is a process students engage in every time they have a conversation with friends about an issue they care about. We show students how they can create sound written arguments from those familiar speech genres by imagining questioning exchanges with readers or their surrogates (a thread that may remind some of Bakhtin).
Craft’s Participation in the Rhetorical Tradition

Despite those differences from current books on argument, *Craft* is rooted in the 2,500-year-old tradition of rhetoric and argumentation. We aim at helping students develop a public voice appropriate to written arguments in a variety of civic, professional, and academic forums. We believe that thoughtful readers are likely to assent to a claim only when they see good reasons and evidence, when they understand the logical connections among claims, reasons, and evidence, and when they see their own doubts and questions acknowledged and answered. We believe that argument is fundamentally not a coercive device (though it can be), nor even a product of human rationality (though it is), but the fundamental competence by which rationality is created and shared.

Craft’s Roots in Aristotle

We have been struck by how closely (though unintentionally) we tracked Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. As did he, we begin by identifying the problems that occasion different kinds of arguments. He focused on the oral arguments occasioned by civic events—trials, funerals, and political decision-making—the triad that has led to the familiar categories of forensic, epideictic, and deliberative arguments (or fact, value, and policy). We believe, however, that the division of fact, value, and policy obscures a more basic distinction between arguments that want us to do something and arguments that want us to understand or believe something. We do not ignore values; in fact, we emphasize how the values of both readers and writers shape all arguments, whether the aim is action or belief.

As did Aristotle, we address not just invention and arrangement, but style and ways that the psychology of readers and writers interact. (Those last two topics claim little or no space in most current books on argument.) As did he, we put aside syllogisms, focusing instead on warranted claims. And like his aim, ours is relentlessly focused on “how to,” on answering two pragmatic questions:

- What does an audience expect in a sound argument?
- How do we express that argument to meet their expectations?

As did Aristotle, we also focus on the role of feelings, of emotions in making a sound argument. Far from rejecting emotion as an element of an argument, we emphasize its importance in framing the problem the argument addresses and in choosing the language to express it.

Craft’s Revision of Toulmin

Like many recent books on argument, we have profited from one of the most influential works on argument since Aristotle, that of Stephen Toulmin. We are especially indebted to these three insights:

- Arguments differ in different fields but share a family structure.
- That common structure is based on a logic of question and answer.
- We understand that structure best not in terms of formal deductive logic, but rather of the informal logic of everyday conversation.
Teaching the Craft of Argument

As important as those three insights are, we believe that teachers of argument who embrace Toulmin’s formal layout make a pedagogical mistake. Recall that he represents an argument in a figure of six elements:

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Back ing → Warrant
Grounds [Data] → so → (Qualifier) → Claim
   → Rebuttal
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Students and teachers alike have found it difficult to apply some aspects of Toulmin’s account of argument to the task of producing their own arguments and analyzing the arguments of others. To make Toulmin’s insights more useful to students at all levels, we have modified his layout in five ways.

**We removed the arrows.**

Toulmin may have wanted to represent the movement of an argument, but what he describes seems closer to an alleged process of *reasoning*, a mental movement from one set of beliefs to another. Forms of reasoning, however, are not forms of argument, which is a written or spoken event. Most arguments start not with a statement of grounds but with a problem, followed by a claimed solution, followed by intertwined grounds, warrants, and rebuttals. But even as a model of reasoning, his layout is psychologically unrealistic. But even when we *reason* about a problem, we do not start with grounds, then think our way to a claim (its solution). We begin with the problem that motivates us to search for a solution in the first place, and find a tentative hypothesis based on the facts then available to us. We then use that hypothesis (C. S. Peirce called it a “hypothesis on probation”) to find more data that we hope will confirm or disconfirm it. It’s called *abductive* thinking, a kind of reasoning that Toulmin’s layout cannot represent.

We do not intend our layout to represent any “real time” process, not of reasoning, drafting, reading, or analyzing an argument. It represents only the five elements required in every argument and some formal relationships among them. We intend it as a tool for understanding and discovering arguments, for planning and drafting them, and for thinking about the arguments of others.

**We dropped “backing.”**

Toulmin needed backing to explain how arguments differ among different fields, but that is not our major concern. Moreover, *backing* refers to the grounds that support a warrant viewed as a claim in its own argument. We can more usefully analyze that arrangement as two distinct arguments, one embedded in the other. So backing is redundant.

**We dropped “qualifier” as a distinct element.**

Qualifications such as *probably*, *most*, and *may* are crucial not just to the accuracy of an argument, but to our experience of its writer’s ethos. But qualifiers are not a singular element of an argument like a claim or a reason; qualifiers color every element—claims, reasons, evidence, warrants, and rebuttals. Far from ignoring qualification, we show its crucial role in projecting a thoughtful ethos in every element of an argument.
We divided the single element “grounds” into two: reasons and evidence.

Careful readers accept a claim about a contested issue only when they see two distinct kinds of support: reasons and the evidence on which those reasons rest. This distinction reflects a psychological and social imperative: We consider a contestable claim only when it rests on something more “solid” than the arguer’s mere confidence in it; we ask for support, for reasons. But reasons provide only the logical structure of that support; evidence is the basis on which that structure of reasons rests, something brought in from “outside” the argument. An argument consisting only of a claim and reasons can seem unsubstantial, but it would seem opaque if it consisted only of a claim and raw evidence such as numbers or quotations. Readers need reasons to help them understand the logic and organization of an argument; they need evidence to understand the basis of those reasons in something they can think of as “external” reality.

We replaced “rebuttal” with “acknowledgment and response.”

Many have noted that Toulmin’s notion of rebuttals is a problem. He defines rebuttals as limits on the scope of a claim:

Since Harry was born in Bermuda, he is a British subject, claim unless he renounced his citizenship, or unless one of his parents was a diplomat, or unless . . . rebuttal

But in ordinary language, what we call a rebuttal responds to objections of any kind—not just to the scope of a claim, but to the source or sufficiency of its support, to the soundness of logic, to the definition of a problem, to alternative solutions. Rebuttals are essential to every thoughtful argument because they acknowledge and respond to a reader’s predictably different beliefs and interests. So as have some others, we expand Toulmin’s rebuttal to refer to responses to any anticipated alternative, objection, or criticism. We believe, however, that the term rebuttal can encourage responses that are too aggressive, so we substitute something more amiable and accurate: acknowledgment and response. This term encompasses two actions: first we acknowledge readers’ views by presenting them fairly; only then do we respond to them, and not always to refute them, since mature arguers concede the force of viable alternatives.

In addition to those five modifications, we fill two gaps in Toulmin’s account. First, we explain the dual nature of evidence, which exists both inside and outside an argument. Readers are led by our prototypical image of evidence to want “external” evidence that is concrete, palpable—a smoking gun, fingerprints, bones. But writers must recognize how that differs from the representations they can offer in its stead—a description of a smoking gun, an image of fingerprints. If students learn to distinguish between the evidence “itself” and the reports of evidence used in arguments, they will be better prepared to read others’ reports of evidence critically and, when they write, to report their own evidence so that their readers can know where and how they obtained it. No one asks where anyone found a reason; we must all ask where someone found evidence.

The second gap is in Toulmin’s account of warrants. So far as we know, no book on argument has explained how a warrant that is true can nevertheless fail. For example,

You should eat fish, claim because it does not raise your cholesterol, reason As we all know, everyone should eat foods that provide roughage, warrant

Each of those three propositions is arguably true, but the warrant fails as a guarantee of the relevance of the reason to the claim. We offer what we think is the first intuitively satisfying explanation of how a warrant soundly establishes the relevance of reasons and evidence to a claim, and of how it can fail.

We hope that this book can help students do more than write plausible academic papers. We hope that it encourages students to think about argumentation as a subject in its own right, as something at the
heart of their public experience in their neighborhoods and workplaces as well as in larger civic arenas. Since argument is central to what it means to be not just a rational individual but a socially rational citizen, and since irrational persuasion has never been more widely used, we believe that there are few matters students need to know more about than how to make—and judge—sound, rational arguments.

Instructor’s Resources

You’ll find specific advice about teaching with this book in the Teacher’s Guide, including classroom activities for discussing issues, identifying questions and problems, generating and testing answers, and then developing the elements of argument needed to support them. We urge you to design your class meetings around activities like those, not around the chapters in this book and not even around the readings. Students already know a great deal about arguments. So if they read chapters after a class that activates that knowledge, it will help them organize, consolidate, and apply it to the task of writing formal arguments.