Writing Arguments

A Rhetoric with Readings

Ninth Edition

John D. Ramage
Arizona State University

John C. Bean
Seattle University

June Johnson
Seattle University

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Placing Texts in a Rhetorical Context

In the previous section, we suggested strategies for finding issues and entering argumentative conversations. Once you join a conversation, you will typically read a number of different arguments addressing your selected issue. The texts you read may be supplied for you in a textbook, anthology, or course pack, or you may find them yourself through library or Internet research. In this section and the ones that follow, we turn to productive strategies for reading arguments. We begin by explaining the importance of analyzing a text's rhetorical context as a preliminary step prior to reading. In subsequent sections, we explain powerful strategies for reading an argument—reading to believe, reading to doubt, and placing texts in conversation with each other through dialectic thinking.

As you read arguments on a controversy, try to place each text within its rhetorical context. It is important to know, for example, whether a blog that you are reading appears on Daily Kos (a liberal blog site) or on Little Green Footballs (a conservative blog site). In researching an issue, you may find that one article is a formal policy proposal archived on the Web site of an economics research institute, whereas another is an op-ed piece by a nationally syndicated columnist or a letter to the editor written by someone living in your community. To help you reconstruct a reading's rhetorical context, you need to understand the genres of argument as well as the cultural and professional contexts that cause people to write arguments. We'll begin with the genres of argument.

Genres of Argument

To situate an argument rhetorically, you should know something about its genre. A *genre* is a recurring type or pattern of argument such as a letter to the editor, a political cartoon, or the home page of an advocacy Web site. Genres are often categorized by recurring features, formats, and styles. The genre of any given argument helps determine its length, tone, sentence complexity, level of informality or formality, use of visuals, kinds of evidence, depth of research, and the presence or absence of documentation.

When you read arguments reprinted in a textbook such as this one, you lose clues about the argument's original genre. (You should therefore note the information about genre provided in our introductions to readings.) Likewise, you can lose clues about genre when you download articles from the Internet or from licensed databases such as LexisNexis or ProQuest. (See Chapter 15 for explanations of these research tools.) When you do your own research, you therefore need to be aware of the original genre of the text you are reading: was this piece originally a newspaper editorial, a blog, an organizational white paper, a scholarly article, a student paper posted to a Web site, or something else?

In the chart on pages 32–34, we identify most of the genres of argument through which readers and writers carry on the conversations of a democracy.

Cultural Contexts: Who Writes Arguments and Why?

A democratic society depends on the lively exchange of ideas—people with different points of view creating arguments for their positions. Now that you know something about the genre of arguments, we ask you to consider who writes arguments and why.

Genres of Argument

Genre	Explanation and Examples	Stylistic Features
Personal correspondence	▪ Letters or e-mail messages ▪ Often sent to specific decision makers (complaint letter, request for an action)	▪ Style can range from a formal business letter to an informal note
Letters to the editor	▪ Published in newspapers and some magazines ▪ Provide a forum for citizens to voice views on public issues	▪ Very short (fewer than three hundred words) and time sensitive ▪ Can be summaries of longer arguments, but often focus in "sound bite" style on one point
Newspaper editorials and op-ed pieces	▪ Published on the editorial or op-ed ("opposite-editorial") pages ▪ Editorials promote views of the newspaper owners/editors ▪ Op-ed pieces, usually written by professional columnists or guest writers, range in bias from ultraconservative to socialist (see pages 350–352 in Chapter 15) ▪ Often written in response to political events or social problems in the news	▪ Usually short (500–1,000 words) ▪ Vary from explicit thesis-driven arguments to implicit arguments with stylistic flair ▪ Have a journalistic style (short paragraphs) without detailed evidence ▪ Sources usually not documented
Articles in public affairs or niche magazines	▪ Usually written by staff writers or freelancers ▪ Appear in public affairs magazines such as *National Review* or *The Progressive* or in niche magazines for special-interest groups such as *Rolling Stone* (popular culture), *Minority Business Entrepreneur* (business), or *The Advocate* (gay and lesbian issues) ▪ Often reflect the political point of view of the magazine	▪ Often have a journalistic style with informal documentation ▪ Frequently include narrative elements rather than explicit thesis-and-reasons organization ▪ Often provide well-researched coverage of various perspectives on a public issue
Articles in scholarly journals	▪ Peer-reviewed articles published by nonprofit academic journals subsidized by universities or scholarly societies ▪ Characterized by scrupulous attention to completeness and accuracy in treatment of data	▪ Usually employ a formal academic style ▪ Include academic documentation and bibliographies ▪ May reflect the biases, methods, and strategies associated with a specific school of thought or theory within a discipline

Genre	Explanation and Examples	Stylistic Features
Legal briefs and court decisions	▪ Written by attorneys or judges ▪ "Friend-of-the-court" briefs are often published by stakeholders to influence appeals courts ▪ Court decisions explain the reasoning of justices on civic cases (and often include minority opinions)	▪ Usually written in legalese, but use a logical reasons-and-evidence structure ▪ Friend-of-the-court briefs are sometimes aimed at popular audiences
Organizational white papers	▪ In-house documents or PowerPoint presentations aimed at influencing organizational policy or decisions or giving informed advice to clients ▪ Sometimes written for external audiences to influence public opinion favorable to the organization ▪ External white papers are often posted on Web sites or sent to legislators	▪ Usually desktop or Web published ▪ Often include graphics and other visuals ▪ Vary in style from the dully bureaucratic (satirized in *Dilbert* cartoons) to the cogent and persuasive
Blogs and postings to chat rooms and electronic bulletin boards	▪ Web-published commentaries, usually on specific topics and often intended to influence public opinion ▪ Blogs (Web logs) are gaining influence as alternative commentaries to the established media ▪ Reflect a wide range of perspectives	▪ Often blend styles of journalism, personal narrative, and formal argument ▪ Often difficult to determine identity and credentials of blogger ▪ Often provide hyperlinks to related sites on the Web
Public affairs advocacy advertisements	▪ Published as posters, fliers, Web pages, or paid advertisements ▪ Condensed verbal/visual arguments aimed at influencing public opinion ▪ Often have explicit bias and ignore alternative views	▪ Use succinct "sound bite" style ▪ Employ document design, bulleted lists, and visual elements (graphics, photographs, or drawings) for rhetorical effect
Advocacy Web sites	▪ Usually identified by the extension ".org" in the Web site address ▪ Often created by well-financed advocacy groups such as the NRA (National Rifle Association) or PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) ▪ Reflect the bias of the site owner ▪ For further discussion of reading and evaluating Web sites, see Chapter 15, pages 362–363	▪ Often contain many layers with hyperlinks to other sites ▪ Use visuals and verbal text to create an immediate visceral response favorable to the site owner's views ▪ Ethically responsible sites announce their bias and purpose in an "About Us" or "Mission Statement" link on the home page

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Genre	Explanation and Examples	Stylistic Features
Visual arguments	▪ Political cartoons, usually drawn by syndicated cartoonists ▪ Other visual arguments (photographs, drawings, graphics, ads), usually accompanied by verbal text	▪ Make strong emotional appeals, often reducing complex issues to one powerful perspective (see Chapter 9)
Speeches and PowerPoint presentations	▪ Political speeches, keynote speeches at professional meetings, informal speeches at hearings, interviews, business presentations ▪ Often made available via transcription in newspapers or on Web sites ▪ In business or government settings, often accompanied by PowerPoint slides	▪ Usually organized clearly with highlighted claim, supporting reasons, and transitions ▪ Accompanying PowerPoint slides designed to highlight structure, display evidence in graphics, mark key points, and sometimes provide humor
Documentary films	▪ Formerly nonfiction reporting, documentary films now range widely from efforts to document reality objectively to efforts to persuade viewers to adopt the filmmaker's perspective or take action ▪ Usually cost less to produce than commercial films and lack special effects ▪ Cover topics such as art, science, and economic, political, and military crises	▪ Often use extended visual arguments, combined with interviews and voice-overs, to influence as well as inform viewers ▪ The filmmaker's angle of vision may dominate, or his or her perspective and values may be more subtle

In reconstructing the rhetorical context of an argument, consider how any given writer is spurred to write by a motivating occasion and by the desire to change the views of a particular audience. In this section, we'll return to our example of illegal immigration. The following list identifies the wide range of writers, cartoonists, filmmakers, and others who are motivated to enter the conversation about immigration.

Who Writes Arguments about Immigration and Why?

- **Lobbyists and advocacy groups.** Lobbyists and advocacy groups commit themselves to a cause, often with passion, and produce avidly partisan arguments aimed at persuading voters, legislators, government agencies, and other decision makers. They often maintain advocacy Web sites, buy advertising space in newspapers and magazines, and lobby legislators face-to-face. For example, the immigrant advocacy group La Raza defends immigrant rights, whereas the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) fights to end illegal immigration and rallies people to pressure businesses not to hire undocumented workers.