Editorial cartoons like the one above by Ben Sargent often appear in newspapers on the op-ed page (opposite the editorial page). While such cartoons are intended to be funny, at their heart they also represent an effort to persuade people through argument.
Writing an Argument

WRITING TO PERSUADE PEOPLE

About one in four people regularly read newspapers, and among the pages they most often turn to are the editorial pages. These are two facing pages, often at the back of the front or local section that include newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, and editorial cartoons such as the one opening this chapter. The editorial pages of daily newspapers also typically include something called op-ed pieces—short persuasive essays that are literally on the opposite page from editorials, hence the phrase op-ed. Many fine writers have made their mark writing such essays, including Ellen Goodman, William Safire, George Will, Anna Quindlen, and Molly Ivins, to name a few.

At one time or another, you’ve probably read an op-ed piece although you probably didn’t know to call it that. These argument essays are often concise treatments—500 to 1,000 words—of topics meant for a general audience. And they aren’t just in newspapers. Magazines and online publications frequently publish comparable pieces, usually written by the publications’ editors but sometimes submitted by their readers. At their best, argument essays of this sort are written with style and voice, much like this lead paragraph from the following piece by Newsweek’s Anna Quindlen on the impact of recent federal tax cuts:

hours. Cancelled programs. Matters have gotten so bad in the outposts of borrowed books that the reference librarian in Franklin, Mass., which a sign identifies as HOME OF THE FIRST PUBLIC LIBRARY, asked a reporter, perhaps only half kidding, how much the sign might fetch on eBay.1

While we often think of persuasive writing as stiff and formal, Quindlen’s opening isn’t like that at all (although the word “impecunity” might have driven you to the dictionary). She begins her argument about the impact of federal tax cuts by establishing an effect of that action that most readers can relate to—the risks tax cuts pose to neighborhood public libraries. While such essays are often informal, they are still persuasive forms, and as you’ll see later, they often employ the same methods of more formal arguments. However, unlike formal arguments—the kind you might write in a logic or philosophy course—persuasive essays of this kind have a much larger audience. These essays are a great way to participate in public debates that affect your campus and community, and even your nation.

Getting into Arguments
In 1990, the book You Just Don’t Understand became a runaway best-seller. Written by Deborah Tannen, a linguistics professor, the book analyzed the range of ways in which men and women struggle to communicate with each other. You Just Don’t Understand made its author famous, and before long she was on the talk show circuit and the subject of newspaper profiles. Despite the many benefits of this exposure, Tannen became increasingly disturbed by how some of the TV shows were orchestrated. Some producers “insisted on setting up a television show as a fight,” pitting Tannen against the host or another guest. Newspaper reporters aggressively pursued Tannen’s colleagues trying to get them to criticize the book, and some in her discipline obliged, often misrepresenting her work. This experience inspired her 1997 book, The Argument Culture, in which she claims that the pervasive “adversarial spirit” in American culture subverts cooperation and community, and reduces complex issues to opposing sides. “Approaching situations like warriors in battle,” Tannen writes, “leads to the assumption that intellectual inquiry, too, is a game of attack, counter-attack, and self-defense.”

Tannen doesn’t believe that arguments are things to be avoided, but maintains that there are other ways of approaching subjects that deserve more attention. While this seems like a reasonable position, it’s hard to avoid the feeling that being a good debater is what counts most in academia. Yet is argument really “war”?

It sometimes seems that way. It certainly felt that way to me at the dinner table those many years ago when I’d walk away from an argument with my dad and feel angry and defeated. Yet my mom’s side of the family

Writing to Persuade People

is Italian American, and my best friends growing up came from predominantly Jewish households. In many of my relatives’ and friends’ homes, arguments were commonplace, raised voices the norm. At times I would find this upsetting, and wonder, “Why can’t these people just get along?” But they often were getting along because argument and conflict in some cultures is an expression of commitment and caring. For example, Deborah Tannen notes that in many western European countries “agreement is deemed boring.” I’ve often admired, for example, the French and Italian passion for national politics and their eagerness to share political views with each other, particularly disagreements. On the other hand, what Tannen calls “cultures of harmony,” such as those of Japan and China, view open conflict and disagreement as a threat to the group. That does not mean that people always agree, but arguing is indirect, and sometimes undetectable to Western ears.

Obviously, culture influences our response to argument. In the United States, by and large, we argue a lot and in the open. We are a litigious society, and even children in the school yard threaten to “sue” each other. Combat metaphors are among the most common ways of talking about conflict—we attempt to “win” an argument, “find more ammunition” to support our position, “leap into the fray,” or “attack” our opponent’s position. It’s hard for the gun-shy among us to feel comfortable participating in such verbal combat, one reason why some of my students retreat into silence when class discussion becomes the least bit combative.

For many of us, then, argument in civic and private discourse is bound by our feelings about argument—how comfortable we are with conflict, how confident we are in our ability to say what we think, and how strongly we feel about our opinions. These feelings are complicated by our beliefs about the purpose of argument. Sorting through these beliefs can help us discover new, perhaps more productive ways of approaching argument.

**EXERCISE 8.1**

**What Does It Mean to Argue?**

Which of the following statements best reflect your own ideas or beliefs about arguments? Check two.

- The main purpose of engaging in an argument is to win.
- Careful logic and reasoning always makes an argument effective.
- It’s essential to think carefully about your audience and how they feel or think about the issue.
- Ignore your audience and just say what you believe to be true.
- Discussing views contrary to your own weakens your argument.
It’s important to avoid the appearance of uncertainty by never changing your main point.

Arguing is a process of discovery.

Arguments are most effective when the writer or speaker is passionate about her position.

Everything’s an argument: advertisements, short stories, research papers, reviews, personal essays, and so on.

The process of making an argument basically involves picking a side and finding support for your position.

Poll the class on their responses to these beliefs about argument.

- Which are most widely shared? Which are least widely shared?
- Discuss why you believe certain of these beliefs are true. Are they true in all situations or just some?
- Where do these beliefs about argument come from? Which seem most or least helpful as you consider writing an argument?

Making Claims

Arguments make claims, or assertions about which reasonable people might disagree. Argument expert Richard Fulkerson suggests that a claim (or proposition, to use his term) is a statement in which the response “I disagree” or “I agree” is a sensible reply. For example, “I have a headache” is a statement but not a claim because it would be goofy to agree or disagree with it. We’ll talk more about this later, but on inspection it should be evident that any of the statements listed in Exercise 8.1 would seem to qualify as claims.

Obviously, we make claims all the time: “Robert is a narcissist.” “That textbook is boring.” “Osama bin Laden misread the Koran.” It is human nature to make judgments, interpretations, and assertions about the people, things, and events that swirl around us. Since the beginning of this book, you have been encouraged to use evaluation as a way of inquiring as you responded to readings, images, your own work, and the work of others, asking questions such as: What’s my take on this? What do I find convincing? Do I see things any differently? We usually describe this as the process of forming opinions.

But we rarely examine the assumptions that lurk behind these opinions or claims, those often-shadowy ideas that provide the platform from which we make our assertions about the way things are. For example, if Robert is a narcissist, what does the speaker assume are the behaviors that qualify for such a label? In other words, what definition of narcissism seems to provide the basis for the claim about poor Robert? If bin Laden
“misreads” the Koran, what does that assume about the “proper” reading of that holy text?

One way to discover these assumptions is to use the word “because” preceding or following the claim. For example, “That textbook is boring because it spends too much time explaining things and not enough time inviting students to participate in the learning.”

Evaluation is a way of inquiring that is fundamental to all kinds of persuasive writing. In this chapter, however, you’ll learn to use evaluation along with other techniques for analyzing how to best present what you think. You’ll learn to build an argument. And that doesn’t necessarily mean picking a side and then developing your case, as you’ll discover in the next section.

Two Sides to Every Argument?

TV talk shows stage “discussions” between proponents of diametrically opposed positions. Academic debating teams pit those for and those against. We are nurtured on language like “win” or “lose,” “right” and “wrong,” and “either/or.” It’s tempting to see the world this way, as neatly divided into truth and falsehood, light and dark. Reducing issues to two sides simplifies the choices. But one of the things that literature—and all art—teaches us is the delightful and nagging complexity of things. By inclination and upbringing, Huck Finn is a racist, and there’s plenty of evidence in Huckleberry Finn that his treatment of Jim confirms it. Yet there are moments in the novel when we see a transcendent humanity in Huck, and we can see that he may be a racist, but . . . It is this qualification—this modest word “but”—that trips us up in the steady march toward certainty. Rather than either/or can it be both/and? Instead of two sides to every issue might there be thirteen?

Here’s an example:

One side: General education requirements are a waste of time because they are often irrelevant to students’ major goal in getting a college education—getting a good job.

The other side: General education requirements are invaluable because they prepare students to be enlightened citizens, more fully prepared to participate in democratic culture.

It’s easy to imagine a debate between people who hold these positions, and it wouldn’t be uninteresting. But it would be misleading to think that these are the only two possible positions on general education requirements in American universities. One of the reasons that people are drawn to arguing is it can be a method of discovery, and one of the most useful discoveries is some side to the story that doesn’t fall neatly into the usual opposed positions. The route to these discoveries is twofold: initially withholding judgment and asking questions.

For instance, what might be goals of a university education other than helping students get a good job and making them enlightened citizens? Is
it possible that a university can do both? Are general education courses the only route to enlightenment? Are there certain situations when the vocational motives of students are inappropriate? Are there certain contexts—say, certain students at particular schools at a particular point in their education—when general education requirements might be waived or modified?

All of these questions, and more, tend to unravel the two sides of the argument and expose them for what they often are: starting points for an inquiry into the question, What good are general education requirements?

To argue well is an act of imagination, not a picking of sides.

In presenting their arguments, then, the best argument essays make a clear claim, but they do it by bowing respectfully to the complexity of the subject, examining it from a variety of perspectives, not just two opposing poles. And you will come to appreciate that wonderful complexity by keeping an open mind.

**MOTIVES FOR WRITING AN ARGUMENT**

People often have quite strong feelings about arguing. Some of these feelings may originate, like mine, in negative experiences with a parent or other adult who seemed condescending when we expressed naïve or poorly developed opinions. Some scholars maintain that agonistic forms of argument, or those that seem to emphasize the contest between ideas and those who hold them, are particularly masculine approaches because they focus on power rather than cooperation, and proclaiming rather than listening. Yet there are people who have always loved arguing. My father did, and not just because he was confident in the game; my father genuinely enjoyed matching wits and logic, looking for faulty reasoning or indefensible claims.

Arguing is a civic duty. In fact, it is an essential activity in any democratic culture, and it's certainly a major element of academic discourse; academic argument is one of the key means of making new knowledge. Argument is also commonplace in relationships. Who hasn’t argued with a spouse, a partner, a friend? In fact, one Web site on the Internet sponsored by the magazine Psychology Today, http://psychologytoday.psychtests.com/tests/arguing_style_r_access.html offers an arguing style test that analyzes how constructive you are in dealing with relationship conflicts. Therapists and counselors share the conviction that arguing is a natural part of intimate relationships and that much more harm can come from avoiding conflict rather than facing it. It’s all in how you do it, they say.

Knowing how to argue well has practical value, even if you don’t become a lawyer. It might help you make the best case to a local legislator to support the bill providing tuition relief to students, or even bargaining with the used car dealer for a better price on that black convertible Mazda Miata. Understanding argument helps you find the flaws in other people’s
arguments as well. Here in Boise, the local paper’s editorial page routinely includes letters to the editor that are great case studies in logical fallacies and more rarely excellent examples of strong persuasive writing. I’ve learned to read these letters—as well as editorials and op-ed essays—with more care and thoughtfulness as I learned about the techniques of argument. This makes me feel better about the opinions I finally do come to hold because I know that I’ve listened carefully and thought critically.

Finally, the most important motive behind writing and studying argument is that you care about something. Throughout this book, it’s been suggested that the personal motive for writing is the most powerful one of all; in this case, you’re passionate about a question or an issue, and building a written argument channels that passion into prose that can make a difference.

THE ARGUMENT AND ACADEMIC WRITING

Argumentative writing is one of the most common of all academic forms. One reason for this is that the ability to argue well requires some command of subject matter. But there is another motive for mastering argument in academic settings, however, and it has less to do with proving that you know your stuff. Argument is really about trying to get at the truth. This is an open-ended as well as a closed process; it involves suspending judgment and coming to conclusions, hearing what has already been said and discovering what you think. Dialectical thinking—a process you’ve applied to all kinds of writing in The Curious Writer, from the personal essay to the proposal—is just as useful in crafting an argument. It will help you discover what you think, consider other points of view, and shape your work so it’s convincing to others. The dialectical process, along with those habits of mind central to academic inquiry—particularly suspending judgment and tolerating ambiguity—will help you as a writer get to the truth of things as you see it.

In college, the audiences for your arguments are often your instructors. As experts in a particular discipline, professors argue all the time. They’re not simply trying to be contrary but trying to get at the truth. Arguing is the main way that the academic community makes knowledge. Notice I used the word “make.” While it often seems that the facts we take for granted are immutable truths—as enduring as the granite peaks I can see through my office window—things aren’t often that way at all. Our knowledge of things—how the planet was formed, the best ways to save endangered species, the meaning of a classic novel, how to avoid athletic injuries—are all ideas that are contested. They are less mountains than the glaciers that carved them, and in some cases the sudden earthquakes that bring them down. The primary tool for shaping and even changing what we know is argument.
Richard Fulkerson writes that he “wants students to see argument in a larger, less militant, and more comprehensive context—one in which the goal is not victory, but a good decision, one in which all arguers are at risk of needing to alter their views, one in which a participant takes seriously and fairly the views different from his or her own.” This is how I’d like you to approach argument within the persuasive essay. This form will challenge you to make arguments that might be convincing to a range of readers, including those who might not agree with your claims. The argument essay is also an invitation to consider how you feel about local issues and controversies as well as national or even international debates that might have some affect on how you live.

**FEATURES OF THE FORM**

Generally speaking, persuasive writing can take many forms. Indeed, reviews and proposals, two essays addressed earlier in this book, both represent different types of persuasive writing. The argument essay we are covering in this chapter, however, more obviously embodies persuasive writing than either of these two other forms. This essay typically makes explicit claims and backs them up with hard evidence. It also employs the well-established rhetorical devices and the reasoning of formal argumentation in the effort to sway readers to its point of view. However, unlike more formal academic papers, the argument you’ll be writing in this chapter is intended for a more general audience. It’s the kind of piece you might see in your local newspaper, or in a magazine. *Newsweek’s* “My Turn” column is an excellent example. (See Figure 8.1 for a comparison of argument essays.)

Here are some the features of the informal argument essay:

- **Argument essays are often relatively brief treatments of a topic.** Readers of newspapers and many magazines read fast. They want to quickly get the gist of an essay or article and move on to the next story. In addition, space is often limited, particularly in newspapers. As a result, the op-ed or opinion piece rarely exceeds 1,000 words, or about four double-spaced manuscript pages. Longer arguments may be harder to write because you have to provide deeper analysis of your key claims and more evidence, but don’t underestimate the difficulty of writing persuasive essays like the op-ed. They must be concise, direct, and well-crafted.

- **Subject matter often focuses on issues of public concern.** The magazines and newspapers that publish argument essays typically report on news, or events, or issues that might affect a lot of people. Not surprisingly, then, writers of these essays are keen observers of public debates and controversies. While a nationally syndicated essayist such as George Will may write about the federal budget deficit or the need for more troops in Iraq, a locally grounded writer may focus on an issue af-
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<td>How to read</td>
<td>Slowly, thoughtfully</td>
<td>Rapidly, mining for meaning</td>
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**FIGURE 8.1** A comparison of academic and informal argument (from Devan Cook, Boise State University).

...fecting a university campus, city hall, or state government, although sometimes writers will find a local angle on a national controversy.

- **An argument essay has a central claim or proposition.** Sometimes we also call this a “thesis,” a term that’s a holdover from the scientific terminology that dominated American scholarship from the end of the nineteenth century. Classical arguments, the kind many of us wrote in high school, usually state this central claim or thesis in the introduction. But many arguments, particularly op-ed essays that rely on narrative structure or explore the answer to a question or problem, may feature the thesis in the middle or end of the essay.

- **The central claim is based on one or more premises or assumptions.** You already know something about this from the discussion earlier in the chapter. Basically, a premise suggests that something is true because of something else; it expresses the relationship between what you claim and why you believe that claim to be true. This is discussed at greater length later in the chapter.

- **The argument essay relies on evidence that a general audience will believe.** All arguments should make use of evidence appropriate for a particular audience. Academic writers in marine biology, for example, rely on data collected in the field and analyzed statistically because this kind of evidence is most persuasive to other marine biologists. Anecdotes or personal observation alone simply won’t cut it in the *Journal of Marine Biology*. But the persuasive essay’s more general
audience finds a greater range of evidence convincing, including personal experience and observation. The writers of persuasive essays are likely to do the kind of research you use to write research papers—digging up statistics, facts, and quotations on a topic.

- **Argument essays usually invite or encourage a response.** This feature is most obvious in the advertisement, which is a visual argument that asks viewers to _do_ something—buy a Jeep, or change toilet bowl cleaners. But op-ed essays often ask for or imply a course of action readers should take. An op-ed might attempt to change the views and behaviors of political leaders, or influence how people vote for them. It might urge support for a school bond issue, or encourage fellow students to protest against the elimination of an academic program. But even academic articles invite reader response in several ways: They encourage other scholars to examine some part of the question that wasn’t addressed by the present research, or they offer claims that can be contested in other articles. Put simply, most argumentative forms are out to change people’s behavior and attitudes.

- **Readers won’t respond unless they know what’s at stake.** An essential element of argument is establishing why a certain action, policy, or idea _matters_. How will opposition to the administration’s strip mining policies in West Virginia and Kentucky make a difference in the quality of life in those states, but even more important, why should someone in Boise, Idaho, care? The best arguments are built to carefully establish, sometimes in quite practical terms, how a certain action, belief, or idea might make a difference in the lives of those who are the argument’s audience.

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**ARGUMENT**

One of the marvels of the online world is the sensation of witnessing an ever-changing landscape, filled with color, images, sound, and motion; it’s a bit like gazing out a porthole at a kind of alternative universe, one that looks familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. It’s easy to get confused about what’s real and what’s not in cyberspace, and to assume that the usual rules—the ones that govern our behavior in the “real” world—simply don’t apply.

To some extent this is inescapable. Because we travel online in relative anonymity, we can essentially reinvent ourselves, breaking free in some respects of who we are offline. Yet we still do some of the same things online and off. We shop. We hold conversations. We get legal advice. We rent videos. In “Law and Order in the Wild, Wild Web,” writer Amitai Etzioni argues that the growth of the Web, and the tendency to assume that the usual rules don’t apply, has led to online lawlessness that has gotten out of hand. He proposes a “passport” that
users might use as they travel on the Web that verifies their age and identity, among other things.

Etzioni’s proposal is controversial. Even if you don’t agree with the passport idea, do you agree that lawlessness on the Web is a problem? Can we ensure ethical conduct online without some kind of laws to regulate behavior? After all, isn’t the rule of law necessary offline?

LAW AND ORDER AND THE WILD, WILD WEB

Amitai Etzioni

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The spam that I have to plow through to find vital e-mail messages is but 1
the latest sign that we must bring the rule of law to the online world. When 2
my grandchildren are visiting, I fear leaving the room; they may misspell the bookseller Amazon or cue in the wrong White House website address and end up on some porn site displaying bestiality.

One of my law-school colleagues just joined a whole slew of others who believe that Americans have a God-given right to steal “intellectual property” - copy CDs and DVDs - without paying a penny, as long as they do it online. If they did the same at Blockbuster or Tower Records, they would be fined or jailed or both.

Meanwhile, my elderly mother is ordering medications on the Internet, circumventing her physician.

And I fully agree with shopkeepers who bitterly complain that their customers have to pay sales tax while those who purchase the same items online are exempt. It’s high time to apply to cyberspace the same national and international laws by which we all abide.

Once upon a time, cyberspace was a small, exotic territory in which we could tolerate libertarians and cyberanarchists pursuing their fantasy of a world that governs itself. In those faraway days of 1996, John Perry Barlow, the Thomas Jefferson of the online world, authored “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” in which he stated: “You do not know our culture, our ethics, or the unwritten codes that already provide our society more order than could be obtained by any of your impositions.”

In those days, it was possible to dream of a cybervillage, in which everybody behaved because they were good citizens. But now we live in a cybermetropolis that has turned into an online jungle, in which all that is socially taboo and illegal is found in abundance and vigorously pushed.
One can argue whether or not the German parliament was right in banning the sale of Adolf Hitler’s “Mein Kampf” (“My Struggle”), or the French government in banning the trade in Nazi paraphernalia. But it is beyond argument that once a democracy has established a law, it is unacceptable for some shadowy creature to preempt national laws and make “Mein Kampf” available or trade Nazi paraphernalia (and everything else) online under the radar.

Once upon a time, the volume of transactions on the Internet was so small that the fact that it was tax exempt did not seriously damage bricks-and-mortar shops, although even then it was screamingly unfair. The volume of transactions in cyberspace, however, has swelled exponentially, such that Internet and phone sales are now responsible for 10 percent of the retail market.

And then there are small matters such as terrorists, drug lords, and pedophiles. They use cyberspace to meet and coordinate their activities, threatening all that is dear to us.

Law enforcement has made some inroads - true. Public authorities can, sometimes, trace the sources of e-mail messages, albeit only with great difficulty, and often they must navigate in a space in which the laws that allow them to proceed are murky, if not altogether antagonistic. Indeed, even when fully armed with a court order, law-enforcement officers find it very difficult to crack encrypted messages, now commonplace online.

What we need, first and foremost, is what Lawrence Lessig, author of “Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace,” has called a cyberspace passport, an authenticated identity, a unique ID number, for all those who seek to travel in it.

They would not be required to present it when they engage in most activities, from sending messages to visiting most Web pages. All those who sell items that are banned for minors, however, would be required to check the age of buyers, as given in their passport. Those who send criminal messages would know that, following a court order, they could be readily identified. Those who ship medications would have to abide by the laws of the jurisdiction to which the drugs are sent, often requiring a prescription. And all those who open shop in cyberspace would be required to collect the appropriate tax and deliver it to the proper state.

The argument that abiding by “all these laws,” which differ from state to state, would be very complicated, has merit. But if we can make do in the offline world, then those equipped with computers should be at least as capable of adjusting.

At the foundation of the law of free societies is the notion that all comers will be treated in the same manner. There is no reason my grandchildren, my aging mother, and all others should not be treated the same way in the online and offline worlds.
INQUIRING INTO THE ESSAY

Explore, explain, evaluate, and reflect about “Law and Order and the Wild, Wild Web.”

1. In your journal, explore the idea that the offline and online worlds are different somehow. Fastwrite for five minutes in your journal, and follow your writing as you explore both the similarities and differences between these worlds. Are you a different person online? Do you behave differently? Do you think people operate under a different code of ethics? Should they?

2. Analyze Amitari’s argument and explain two things: his claims and the premises or assumptions behind each one. To refresh your memory about these terms and what they mean, consult “Features of the Form” earlier in the chapter. What basic argument strategies does Amitari seem to use. (See the box “Inquiring into the Details: Some Basic Argument Strategies”.)

3. How would you evaluate these claims and premises? Which have merit? Which don’t? What might be your own claim about “lawlessness” on the Internet?

4. Do at least one more full reading of the essay, from beginning to end. While you do, pay attention to what you notice in the essay while rereading it that you didn’t really notice in earlier readings. How does your own opinion about an author’s argument influence the way you reread it? Do you read more selectively? Does the rereading reinforce what you already think or challenge it in some way?

INQUIRING INTO THE DETAILS

SOME BASIC ARGUMENT STRATEGIES

Argument from Generalization: What I’ve seen or observed of a particular group is true of the group as a whole. Risk: Are you sure that what you’ve observed is typical of the larger population?

Argument from Analogy: If it is true in one situation it’s likely true in another similar situation. Risk: Are the situations really similar?

Argument from Cause: If one thing always seems present with something else, then one probably causes the other. Risk: Is cause and effect really the relationship between the two things?

Argument from Authority: If an expert said it, it’s true. Risk: Is the expertise of the authority really relevant to the question at issue?
ARGUMENT

With grace and intelligence, conservative columnist George F. Will writes about a range of topics from the federal budget to baseball. In this essay, Will strikes close to home for me—and possibly for you, too—when he sharply criticizes writing instruction in the United States, an approach he calls the “growth model,” one that Will argues offers no “defensible standards” for good writing and emphasizes the “undirected flowering of the student’s personality.” He bemoans the absence of instruction in grammar and style.

You are the students Will is talking about in this op-ed essay. Does he accurately describe your experience in this and other writing classes? For example, do you also sense that process matters more than content in composition? Do you agree with Will’s basic premise that students graduating from high school are “functionally illiterate?”

THE “GROWTH MODEL” AND THE GROWTH OF ILLITERACY

George F. Will

Summertime, and the living is easy. Schools are empty, so the damage has stopped. During this seasonal respite from the education system’s subtraction from national literacy, consider why America may be graduating from its high schools its first generation worse educated than the generation that came before. Particularly, why is it common for high school graduates to be functionally illiterate, uncertain when reading, and incapable of writing even a moderately complicated paragraph?

Heather Mac Donald knows one reason: More and more schools refuse, on the basis of various political and ethical and intellectual theories, to teach writing. Her essay, “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” in the summer 1995 issue of
The Public Interest quarterly, is a hair-raising peek into what she calls “one overlooked corner of the academic madhouse.”

Mac Donald, a contributing editor of the Manhattan Institute’s City Journal, explains how the teaching of writing has been shaped by “an indigestible stew of 1960s liberationist zeal, 1970s deconstructionist nihilism, and 1980s multicultural proselytizing.” Indeed many teachers now consider the traditional idea of teaching to be intellectually suspect and morally offensive because it is tainted by the authoritarian idea that there are defensible standards and by the inegalitarian idea that some people do things better than others.

At a 1966 conference organized by the Modern Language Association and the National Conference of Teachers of English, the “transmission model” of teaching composition was rejected in favor of the “growth model.” The idea of transmitting skills and standards was inherently threatening to the values of that decade—spontaneity, authenticity, sincerity, equality, and self-esteem. Education in the new era of enlightenment was to be not a matter of putting things into students—least of all putting in anything that suggested a hierarchy of achievement—but of letting things out. Nothing must interfere with the natural, undirected flowering of the student’s personality. One interference would be a teacher cast as an authority figure rather than in the role of supportive, nurturing friend.

The “growth model” was, Mac Donald notes, impeccably liberationist: Who was to judge anyone else’s “growth”? And that model “celebrated inarticulateness and error as proof of authenticity.” This was convenient for evolving racial policies. In 1966 the City University of New York began the first academic affirmative action program. Open admissions would soon follow, as would the idea that it is cultural imperialism to deny full legitimacy to anything called “Black English.” Simultaneously came the idea that demands for literacy oppress the masses and condition them to accept the coercion of capitalism.

“Process” became more important than content in composition. Students would “build community” as they taught each other. A reactionary emphasis on the individual was replaced by a progressive emphasis on the collectivity. But, says Mac Donald, there have been difficulties: “Students who have been told in their writing class to let their deepest selves loose on the page and not worry about syntax, logic, or form have trouble adjusting to other classes.” Thus a student at St. Anselm’s College complains that in her humanities class, “I have to remember a certain format and I have to back up every general statement with specific examples.”

Academic fads have followed hard upon one another, all supplying reasons why it is unnecessary—no, antisocial—to teach grammar and style. The deconstructionists preached that language is of incurably indeterminate meaning.
The multiculturalists, who preach the centrality of identity politics in every endeavor, argue that the rules of language are permeated by the values of the dominant class that makes society’s rules and also makes victims. Mac Donald says, “The multicultural writing classroom is a workshop on racial and sexual oppression. Rather than studying possessive pronouns, students are learning how language silences women and blacks.”

As student writing grows worse, Mac Donald notes, the academic jargon used to rationalize the decline grows more pompous. For example, a professor explains that “postprocess, postcognitive theory . . . represents literacy as an ideological arena and composing as a cultural activity by which writers position and reposition themselves in relation to their own and others’ subjectivities, discourses, practices, and institutions.”

Nowadays the mere mention of “remedial” courses is coming to be considered insensitive about “diversity,” and especially insulting and unfair to students from American “cultures” where “orality” is dominant. So at some colleges remedial courses are now called ESD courses—English as a Second Dialect.

The smugly self-absorbed professoriate that perpetrates all this academic malpractice is often tenured and always comfortable. The students on the receiving end are always cheated and often unemployable. It is summertime, and the nation is rightly uneasy about autumn.

**INQUIRING INTO THE ESSAY**

Use the four methods of inquiry to think about Will’s essay.

1. For five minutes, fastwrite about your own experience with writing instruction by telling the story of the teachers or teachers that had the most impact on how you think about yourself as a writer and reader.

2. Describe the argument that Will makes in this essay. Begin with a summary of one of his basic claims, then a reason behind the claim, and then list the evidence he offers to support them both. Compare these with other students in the class and analyze the effectiveness of Will’s argument. What are the strongest elements of his argument? The weakest?

3. Compose a 250-word letter to the editor that responds in some way to Will’s article.

4. Reflect on your own experiences in this composition course. Would Will be scornful of this course—and perhaps this text—and its approach to teaching writing? What have been the most and least effective approaches to teaching reading and writing that you’ve experienced in high school, or perhaps even in this class?
ARGUMENT

The essay that follows is one of a collection by foreign writers who were asked by the editors of the journal Granta to write about what they think of the United States. It’s a fascinating collection for many reasons. Americans are a fairly insular people, less likely than many citizens of other nations to be multilingual and to engage in international travel. We are justifiably proud of our American heritage and to others this pride can seem like indifference to other cultures. More often than not, we are surprised by how we are perceived around the world. Therefore, it’s instructive to hear voices such as that of Doris Lessing, a British novelist, who comments on her perception of America, especially since the events of September 11, 2001, a tragedy that turned the world’s gaze on the United States and our own outward. In this essay, Lessing argues that in America “everything is taken to extremes,” and at one point in the essay she suggests that that might also be said of our reaction to the events of September 11. Do you find her argument convincing? Why or why not?

WHAT WE THINK OF AMERICA
Doris Lessing

Busily promoting my book African Laughter I flitted about (as authors do) on the East Coast, doing phone-ins and interviews, and had to conclude that Americans see Africa as something like Long Island, with a single government, situated vaguely south (‘The Indian Ocean? What’s that?’). In New York I had the heaviest, most ignorant audience of my life, very discouraging, but the day after in Washington 300 of the brightest best-informed people I can remember. To talk about ‘America’ as if it were a homogenous unity isn’t useful, but I hazard the following generalizations.

America, it seems to me, has as little resistance to an idea or a mass emotion as isolated communities have to measles and whooping cough. From outside, it is as if you are watching one violent storm after another sweep across a landscape of extremes. Their Cold War was colder than anywhere else in the West, with the intemperate execution of the Rosenbergs, and grotesqueries of the McCarthy trials. In the Seventies, Black Power, militant feminism, the Weathermen—all flourished. On one of my visits, people could talk of nothing else. Two years later they probably still flourished, but no one mentioned them. ‘You know us,’ said a friend. ‘We have short memories.’

Everything is taken to extremes. We all know this, but the fact is seldom taken into account when we try to understand what is going on. The famous Political Correctness, which began as a sensible examination of language for

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hidden bias, became hysterical and soon afflicted whole areas of education. Universities have been ruined by it. I was visiting a university town not far from New York when two male academics took me out into the garden, for fear of being overheard, and said they hated what they had to teach, but they had families, and would not get tenure if they didn’t toe the line. A few years earlier, in Los Angeles, I found that my novel *The Good Terrorist* was being ‘taught.’ The teaching consisted of the students scrutinizing it for political incorrectness. This was thought to be a good approach to literature. Unfortunately, strong and inflexible ideas attract the stupid . . . what am I saying! Britain shows milder symptoms of the same disease, so it is instructive to see where such hysteria may lead if not checked.

The reaction to the events of 11 September—terrible as they were—seems excessive to outsiders, and we have to say this to our American friends, although they have become so touchy, and ready to break off relations with accusations of hard-heartedness. The United States is in the grip of a patriotic fever which reminds me of the Second World War. They seem to themselves as unique, alone, misunderstood, beleaguered, and they see any criticism as treachery.

The judgement 'they had it coming', so angrily resented, is perhaps misunderstood. What people felt was that Americans had at last learned that they are like everyone else, vulnerable to the snakes of Envy and Revenge, to bombs exploding on a street corner (as in Belfast), or in a hotel housing a government (as in Brighton). They say themselves that they have been expelled from their Eden. How strange they should ever have thought they had a right to one.

**INQUIRING INTO THE ESSAY**

Explore, explain, evaluate and reflect on Lessing’s essay.

1. Explore your reaction to the essay by playing the believing game and the doubting game. In your notebook, fastwrite for five minutes about the possible merits of Lessing’s argument. How can you understand her thesis that Americans “take things to extremes?” What connections does this have to your own experiences and observations? Then fastwrite for five minutes and play the doubting game. What is she ignoring? Where do you take issue with her claims or her evidence? How might things be seen another way?

2. Presenting an outsider’s perspective, such as the one in Doris Lessing’s commentary on America, is a tough rhetorical position to be in, particularly if you’re writing for an audience of insiders, in
this case American readers. Explain why this is a difficult position from which to argue and also offer your analysis of how well she manages to overcome the challenge.

3. Reread the last paragraph of the essay. Is it true that an American reaction to the events of September 11, 2001, was to feel as if we had been “expelled from [our] Eden?” Evaluate that idea using evidence from your own experiences and observations in response to that event.

4. How difficult was it to play the doubting game and believing game in Question 1? Why might it be important to set aside your own support or opposition to an argument and either try on doubting or believing, a stance you wouldn’t be inclined to take unless forced to?

**Seeing the Form**

**GUEST.COM AD**

If you didn’t happen to know that Guess is a clothing retailer, you might think that the Web ad that follows is selling something else. Maybe good luck? It’s selling both, of course—clothes and a certain kind of good fortune that wearing the clothes seems to promise. This ad has very little
text, relying mostly on the image and what it implies. We rarely stop to analyze the persuasive power of advertisements like this one, but they are extremely well-crafted and can teach us a lot about how to motivate people to do something.

While rhetoric experts turn to Aristotle for the classical foundations of argument, modern advertisers have been researching persuasion for more than seventy years, ever since the rise of the mass media as a means for reaching potential consumers. These studies on behalf of advertisers have produced a wealth of research on what appeals work and when.

Persuasion theory may have begun with Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, but modern researchers have made it a science. Still, Aristotle and other classical rhetors laid the foundation for the study of persuasion. One of Aristotle’s most important contributions to our understanding of argument is shown in Figure 8.2, a variation of the rhetorical triangle you learned about in the beginning of the book.

Each of these terms—ethos, logos, and pathos—represents different kinds of persuasive appeals. *Ethos* refers to the character of the speaker (or writer), and how he or she comes across to the audience. *Logos* is the logic and methods of reason used to make an argument. Pathos is an appeal to the audience’s (or reader’s) emotion. All three appeals may be at work in any argument, but certain kinds of persuasive appeals, like advertising, emphasize one over the other.

Examine the Guess.com ad. Which of the three appeals—logos, pathos, or ethos—does this visual argument seem to emphasize? In what ways does it seem to incorporate the other features of form? For example, is it making some sort of claim? What implicit assumption is the ad making that might motivate you to click your mouse and place something in an electronic shopping cart? If traditional arguments offer evidence to support a claim, what’s the visual evidence here?

![Aristotle’s rhetorical triangle](image)

**FIGURE 8.2** Aristotle’s rhetorical triangle.
INQUIRY PROJECT: Writing an Argument

Now that you’ve explored various approaches to persuasion and argument, try your hand at writing an argument essay. Remember that these are brief (700- to 1,000-word) essays meant for a general audience. Imagine, for example, that you’re writing an op-ed piece for the campus newspaper, the local daily, or The New York Times. Your essay should be lively and logical, with a strong personal voice, and also have the following features:

- It focuses implicitly or explicitly on a question. This is always the starting point for inquiry in any genre. In an argumentative essay, you are providing evidence to support a particular answer to this question.
- The essay makes clear premises and claims, including one central claim around which the draft is organized. In other words, the essay should be clear about what it is asking its readers to do or to believe.
- It provides specific and appropriate evidence in support of the claims, including research when relevant.
- The essay should address one or more of the counterarguments offered by those who take a different position from yours.

Thinking about Subjects

If you haven’t yet figured out a way to make your composition instructor’s eyes roll, announce that you want to write an argument essay on gun control. Gun control, abortion rights, and other hot-button public controversies often make the list of banned topics for student essays. This is not because they aren’t important public debates. Instead, the problem is much more that the writer has likely already made up her mind and sees the chance to ascend to a soapbox. In addition, polarized debates produce such a mass of information that it’s difficult for a writer to locate some territory in the topic that isn’t already filled with voices repeating the same things to each other. There is so much background noise that it’s almost impossible to hear yourself think.

Now, I have my own favorite soapboxes; people with strong convictions do. But as you think about subjects for your essay consider that the soapbox
may not be the best vantage point for practicing dialectical thinking. If you’ve already made up your mind, will you be open to discovery? If you just want to line up ducks—assembling evidence to support an unwavering belief—will you be encouraged to think deeply or differently? Will you be inclined to filter the voices you hear rather than consider a range of points of view?

The best persuasive essays often emerge from the kind of open-ended inquiry that you might have used writing the personal essay. What do you want to understand better? What issue or question makes you wonder? Be alert to possible subjects that you might write about not because you already know what you think, but because you want to find out. Or consider a subject that you might have feelings about but feel uninformed, lacking the knowledge to know exactly what you think.

Generating Ideas

Begin exploring possible subjects for an argument essay by generating material in your notebook. This should be an open-ended process, a chance to use your creative side by jumping into the sea and swimming around without worrying too much about making sense or trying to prejudge the value of the writing or the subjects you generate. In a sense, this is an invitation to play around. Later, you can judge the material you’ve generated and choose a topic that interests you.

**Listing Prompts.** Lists can be rich sources of triggering topics. Let them grow freely, and when you’re ready, use an item as the focus of another list or an episode of fastwriting. The following prompts should get you started.

1. In your journal, make a quick list of issues that have provoked disagreements between groups of people in your hometown or local community.
2. Make a quick list of issues that have provoked disagreements on your college’s campus.
3. Make another list of issues that have created controversy between groups of people in your state.
4. Think about issues—local, statewide, regional, national, or even international—that have touched your life, or could affect you in some way in the following areas: environmental, health care, civil rights, business, education, crime, or sports. Make quick list of questions within these areas you wonder about. For example, *Will there be enough drinking water in my well if the valley continues to develop at this rate?* Or *Will I be able to afford to send my children to the state college in twelve years?* Or *Do new domestic antiterrorism rules threaten my privacy when I’m online?* Or *Will I benefit from affirmative action laws when I apply to law school?*
5. Jot down a list of the classes you’re taking this semester. Then make a quick list of topics that prompt disagreements among people in the field that you’re studying. For example, in your political science class did you learn that there are debates about the usefulness of the electoral college? In your biology class, have you discussed global warming? Or in your women studies class did you read about Title 9 and how it affects women athletes?

**Fastwriting Prompts.** Remember, fastwriting is a great way to stimulate creative thinking. Turn off your critical side and let yourself write “badly.” Don’t worry too much about what you’re going to say before you say it. Write fast, letting language lead for a change.

1. Write for five minutes beginning with one of the questions you raised in Question 4 of the Listing Prompts. Think through writing about when you first began to be concerned about the question, how you think it might affect you, what you currently understand are the key questions this issue raises. Do you have tentative feelings or beliefs about it?

2. In a seven-minute fastwrite, explore the differences between your beliefs and the beliefs of your parents. Tell yourself the story of how your own beliefs about some question evolved, perhaps moving away from your parent’s position. Can you imagine the argument you might make to help them understand your point of view?

3. Choose an item from any of the lists you generated in the “Listing Prompts” as a starting place for a fastwrite. Explore what you understand about the issue, what are the key questions, and how you feel about it at the moment.

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**ONE STUDENT’S RESPONSE**

**BEN’S JOURNAL**

**FASTWRITE**

Why do students seem so apathetic about politics?

We’re in the midst of presidential elections and I can’t seem to get anyone interested in talking about it. I wonder why that is? Are college students more cynical about politics and politicians than other groups? It seems like it to me. I can think of a few reasons right off the bat. First, college students are mostly young (though certainly not all at this school) so they don’t have the habit of going to the polls.

(continued)
Whenever a generation loses the habit of voting, I’ll bet the next generation is even more likely to be apathetic. I also think my generation has seen so few effective politicians. My dad talks about being inspired by the likes of JFK but I can’t think of too many national politicians that have inspired me as much as JFK inspired him. I also wonder if there is that basic sense of powerlessness. We just don’t feel like much of anything makes a difference. I wonder if that is also reflected in volunteerism. Do students volunteer less than they used to? Have to check on that. I guess I just find politics kind of interesting. I wonder why? Hmmm... I think it had something to do with my Dad. But I guess I also have this basic belief in voting as an important part of being a citizen. Seems like one of the best ways to be patriotic...

Visual Prompts. Sometimes the best way to generate material is to see what we think represented in something other than sentences. Boxes, lines, webs, clusters, arrows, charts, or even pictures and sketches can help us to see more of the landscape of a subject, especially connections between fragments of information that aren’t as obvious in prose.

Find an advertisement, poster, or other image with a persuasive purpose and create an argument map (see Figure 8.3, which maps the Guess.com ad on page 73). Choose an image that bothers you for some reason. By visually graphing its implicit argument, you might discover ways to offer a critique or a counterargument in your own essay. Use the first box of the argument map to summarize the main claim of the image you’ve selected. In the next box, list the (often implicit) reasons or premises behind the claim. Use the word “because” to tease this out. In the next box put the two together, creating a premise and a claim, and then follow this up by listing the evidence the image provides to support the premises and claim. Now use your map to generate a list of quick responses to some of the following questions: Do you agree with the claim? Do you agree with the premises? Which seems most suspect? Why? What might be a more truthful claim? What might be more accurate premises? Is this an argument you’ve seen elsewhere? Do the claims and premises represent a way of seeing the world typical of a particular social group? How would you redesign the ad to make it more truthful? What is your argument against this argument? Use the lists and fastwrites generated from analyzing your argument map to develop an argument of your own.

Research Prompts. By definition, argument essays deal with subjects in which people beyond the writer have a stake. And one of the best ways to collect ideas about such issues is to do a little quick and dirty research. Try some of the following research prompts:
Claim

Wearing Guess clothes improves your chances of sexual success.

Reason

Since ruggedly handsome young men and sexy young women wear Guess . . .

Claim, Premise, and Evidence

Since ruggedly handsome young men and sexy young women wear Guess, wearing Guess clothing improves your chances of winning the man of your dreams.

- Guess men are risk takers and this excites beautiful women.
- Guess women are sexy and they know it because they don’t give their man their full attention.
- Guess men aren’t formal. They wear unbuttoned shirts and roll up their sleeves when they work and play.
- The odds are that a Guess man will have more women than he can handle, but this doesn’t worry him.

Types of Evidence

- Personal experience
- Observation
- Anecdote
- Analogy
- Data (collected methodically)
- Emotion
- Expert testimony
- Precedent

Claim and Premise

Since ruggedly handsome young men and sexy young women wear Guess, wearing Guess clothing improves your chances of sexual success.

FIGURE 8.3  An Argument Map.

1. Spend a few days reading the letters to the editor in your local paper. What issue has people riled up locally? Is there one that you find particularly interesting?

2. Do a Web search to find op-ed essays written by one or more of the following national columnists: Ellen Goodman, Cal Thomas, George Will, David Broder, Nat Hentoff, Mary McGrory, Molly Ivins, Bob Herbert, or Clarence Page. Read their work with an eye toward topics that interest you.
ARGUMENTS ON THE INTERNET

The arguments you find online can differ significantly from print arguments. For one, the claims, evidence, and credits within an online argument can be linked to other Web pages or sites, meaning that you will also have to explore these links to evaluate the argument (a difficult task if the links are broken or no longer active). You can also find arguments in online discussion groups and Web logs (blogs). Here, multiple participants, not a single author, influence the way that arguments take shape and arrive at conclusions (some arguments never do!). Unlike the arguments you will find in books, journals, and magazines, many of those that you will encounter on the Internet have not been screened by professional editors. The claims of these arguments, then, are more likely than those in print to be based on unsupported beliefs or prejudice—remember, anyone with a computer and an Internet connection can publish online. Carefully evaluate arguments you find on the Internet before you consider them reliable.

Judging What You Have

Shift back to your more critical mind and sift through the material you generated. Did you discover a topic that might be interesting for your argument essay? Did you stumble over some interesting questions you’d like to explore further? Did anything you wrote or read make you feel something? Evaluate the raw material in your journal and keep the following things in mind as you zero in on a topic for your argument essay.

What’s Promising Material and What Isn’t? Let’s take a critical look at the subjects you’ve generated so far; what promising topics might be lurking there for an argumentative essay? Consider some of the following as you make your choice.

• Interest. This almost goes without saying. But you were warned earlier about seizing on a topic if you already have strong convictions about it. Do you already know what you think? If so, why not choose a topic that initially invites more open-ended inquiry? On the other hand, it matters a lot whether you care. What topic might touch your life in some way? Do you have some kind of stake in how the questions are answered?
• **Brevity.** One of the most common flaws of student drafts in all genres is that they attempt to cover too much territory. A more limited look at a larger landscape is always best. Since these argument essays are brief, consider topics that you can do justice to in less than a thousand words. As you review potential topics for your essay, can you see how some aspect of a larger question can be addressed by asking a smaller question? For example, the topic of spending on athletic programs at American universities relative to spending on academic programs raises this obvious question: *Is too much spent on sports?* It’s not very difficult to see how this large question can be focused for an effective argument. For example, *Does Boise State University spend too much on its athletic programs and too little on its academic ones?* You can’t write a short piece about the negative impact of affirmative action policies on the nation’s colleges and universities, but you can write a brief op-ed about the specific impacts on your school.

• **Disagreement.** A topic lends itself to argumentative writing if it is one that leads to disagreement among reasonable people. *Is smoking bad for your health?* was once a question that was debatable, but now pretty much everyone concedes that this question has been answered. *Did the Holocaust really happen?* is a question that only blockheads debate. But the question, *What are the motives of people who deny the Holocaust?* is a question that would generate a range of views.

• **Information.** Is there sufficient information available on the topic for you to make a reasonable judgment about what is true? Is it accessible? One great advantage of choosing a local question as the focus for an argumentative essay is that often the people are close by and the relevant information can easily be had. It’s also essential that you can obtain information from more than just a single viewpoint on the question.

• **Question.** What makes a topic arguable is that it raises questions to which there are multiple answers. Which of them makes the most sense is at issue. But some questions are merely informational. For example, *How do greenhouse gases contribute to global warming?* is a question that will likely lead to explanations rather than argument. On the other hand, *Is the U.S. rejection of the Kyoto accords on global warming a responsible policy?* is an arguable, rather than informational, question.

**Questions about Audience and Purpose**

Persuasive writing is a very audience-oriented form. *To whom* you make your case in an argument matters a lot in *how* you make it, but audience also matters in *whether* one topic is a better choice for an essay than another topic. The argument essay is written for a more general audience.
Your readers are unlikely to be experts on your topic, and they are likely to read your essay quickly rather than slowly and thoughtfully. What does this imply about the best subjects?

- **Do your readers have a stake in the question you’re answering?** The word “stake” can be broadly considered. For example, it’s possible that a topic directly affects the readers of your essay; say you’re writing for fellow college students on your campus, all of whom pay tuition, and your topic addresses whether a 12 percent hike in fees is justified. Sometimes, however, you choose a topic because readers need to know that they do have a stake in how a question is answered. For instance, the argument that new antiterrorist rules threaten online privacy is something you believe your readers, most of whom surf the Web, should consider.

- **Can you identify what your readers might already believe?** One of the key strategies of persuasion is to find ways to link the values and attitudes of your audience with the position you’re encouraging them to believe. Is your potential topic one that lends itself to this kind of analysis?

- **Is your purpose not only to inform readers but also to encourage them to believe or do something?** As you know by now, one of the things that distinguishes argument essays such as the op-ed from other forms of writing is the writer’s intention to change his or her audience. Frequently this purpose is quite explicit and even behavioral: vote a certain way, support a certain policy, or don’t do something like buy a gas-guzzling SUV. Other times, persuasive writing attempts to persuade readers to believe something that may lead to some kind of behavior.

**Research Considerations**

So you want to look into the controversy over oil drilling in the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge? Your gut reaction is against proposals that would allow oil companies to drill test wells. It seems to be a real can of worms—if you allow testing and then there’s momentum for full-scale development, you wonder if the environmental risks will be worth the gain in oil. But you really don’t know very much. What are the risks? Is there a significant promise of oil production? How might it affect your region, your state, or the prices at your local Chevron? This is a big subject, of course, and there is lots of information out there. Where do you begin?

Maybe you believe you already know a lot about your topic—you’ve had enough experience and observations, or perhaps read enough to feel pretty well informed. But if you took my advice to choose a topic about which you might feel something but not really know what you think, then once you have selected your topic your next step in the process is to collect information.

While writing this argument essay does involve some research, it isn’t exactly a research paper. A research paper is a much more extended treat-
ment of a topic that relies on more detailed and scholarly information than is usually needed for an argument essay. In Chapter 12, you'll find information on research strategies that will help you with this project, especially how to conduct effective Internet searches and how to evaluate the sources you find. The section on library research, particularly key references, may also be valuable.

But for the purpose of this essay, you can have a more modest research agenda, and that's when the Web can be especially useful. Because many of the topics ripe for a good argument essay are current, a major source of information will be publications such as newspapers and magazines. As more of these print sources have gone online, the Web has become a central source for topical information. It's a great place to start learning about your topic, but there are hazards. First, the Web can be a trap. Searching and surfing can suck up an enormous amount of time; it can easily become obsessive—"I need just a few more sources and then I'll quit"—or even worse, digressive—"Gee, I just stumbled on a game site . . . it's got Super Mahjong!" Either of these can become an excuse not to write. The other hazard is the reliability of information on the Web, which is uneven (see "Evaluating Web Sources" in Chapter 12).

Address these pitfalls by making your Web research efficient. Magazines and newspapers are key sources for op-ed essays, and it's likely they're the best place to begin looking for background information. National issues such as oil drilling in the Artic National Wildlife Refuge are addressed by national newspapers, which are usually reliable sources of information. Search sites such as The New York Times or The Washington Post for information on your topic if you think that it might have garnered national attention. In addition, a useful site at http://www.refdesk.com/paper.html lists the links for newspapers by state and around the world.

Magazines online are good sources as well, but access to their archives may be limited to subscribers. The university library is useful here because it not only subscribes to many magazines but allows you to search them; you may be able retrieve full articles electronically or read them on microfilm. Access to your college's database of magazines is likely online, too, so check the library Web site for more information.

A general search engine such as www.google.com will help you find newspapers, magazines, Web sites, and other online publications for background on your topic. Be ready for an avalanche, however. For example, a Google search on the Artic National Wildlife Refuge turned up nearly 3,000 links. If you're writing about a campus or community issue, the Web can still be useful, particularly if your campus or local newspapers have sites. State and local governments also post information on the Web (for information on sites visit “State and Local Governments on the Net” at http://www.statelocalgov.net/index.cfm). But campus and local issues often call for a different kind of research: basic footwork. The best way to become knowledgeable is to talk to people who are affected by the topic, perhaps people
you’ve identified with particular points of view about it or even other students in your class who may have some knowledge. The local public library, as well as the campus library, can be a valuable source of information on local issues as well.

THINKING GLOBALLY, ACTING LOCALLY

Your concerns may be broad; for instance, how can we improve race relations? In a short essay, the key is to anchor big questions to something smaller, more concrete. For example:

- Is there a local angle on a larger issue?
- Is there a smaller question under a bigger one?
- Is there a case study or other specific example that could anchor the essay?

Narrowing the Question

I’ve been vaguely aware of the crisis in Medicaid funding—federal health care support for the poor—but the issue really came home when officials told Dorothy Misner, a 92-year-old woman in nearby Nampa, that she would have to gum her food because the state refused to pay for dentures. Probably the best way to make a larger controversy a manageable writing topic is to find a local angle. In this case, for example, the larger question—Should the national Medicaid program do more to support the poor without health insurance?—becomes a much narrower question—Is the state’s Medicaid program failing people like Dorothy Misner? Whenever possible, make big issues smaller by finding some connection to the local.

That isn’t always possible, however. Unless you live in Alaska, for instance, the debate over development of the Artic Wildlife Refuge is hard to cut as a local issue. Then it becomes important to find a narrower question, something that may not be possible until after you’ve done a little research. For example, the question, Should the Artic Wildlife Refuge be open to oil development? could be narrowed by asking, Are oil company claims about the potential of recoverable oil in the refuge reasonable?

Finally, another way to narrow the focus of an argument is to find a useful case study, anecdote, or example that somehow typifies some aspect of the issue you want to examine. Suppose you want to write about the impact of oil development on native subsistence hunting in the wildlife refuge. The story of one family, or one local native community’s reliance on the nearby caribou population can provide an anchor for an extended discussion of the risks oil development poses to people like them. George Will’s approach to many of his op-ed essays is to use a newly released
The Writing Process

study, report, academic article, or interview with an expert as the anchor for his piece. He then takes off on his own from there.

Writing the Sketch

Now draft a sketch of roughly 500 to 600 words with the following elements:

• It has a tentative title.
• It makes at least one claim and offers several reasons that support the claim.
• It presents and analyzes at least one contrasting point of view.
• The sketch includes specific evidence to support (or possibly complicate) the reasons offered in support of the claim, including at least several of the following: an anecdote or story, a personal observation, data, an analogy, a case study, expert testimony, other relevant quotations from people involved, or a precedent.

STUDENT SKETCH: “How to Really Rock the Vote”

Inspiring young voters isn’t easy. In my own classes, I almost never hear younger students talk casually about elections. On the rare occasions that I actually see a button on a backpack for one candidate or another, I’m always a little surprised. Are young voters apathetic? And if they are what should be done about it? Those were Ben Bloom’s questions, both of which arose from a fastwrite. Here is his sketch on the topic. Where should he go from here? What should he research before the next draft? What should he consider that he doesn’t consider here?

MTV sponsors “Rock the Vote.” Presidential candidates swing through college campuses wearing blue jeans and going tieless. There’s even an organization called “Kid’s Vote” that tries to get high school students involved in the political process. It’s pretty clear that student vote matters but are these efforts paying off?

It doesn’t seem so. On my own campus, fewer than a few hundred students vote in the annual elections for the Student Senate. I can’t even get my roommate to talk about the Presidential election, much less who’s running for student body president.

What seems typical is the following comment from a college-age columnist: “On the issue of voter apathy, I look at myself first. I’m not even registered to vote, which is as apathetic as it gets. I do, however, educate myself about presidential candidates and their proposed policies—I just never have
thought my one, lonesome vote could matter. I’ve neglected registering because it has never seemed logical to inconvenience myself, through the registration process, only to give another drop of water to an ocean (to add one vote to millions)."

“Never seemed logical to inconvenience” yourself to participate in the most basic part of the democratic process? Has it gotten this bad?

The student journalist above was responding to a survey that came out two years ago from a group called Project Vote Smart. It found what I suspected from my own experiences: young voters are staying away from the polls.

According to the study, there has been a decline in the numbers of 18 to 25 year olds voting by 13% over the last twenty five years. Actually, I think the situation is worse than that. The main reason they cite is that young people don’t think their votes make a difference.

What should be done about this? How can we convince young voters to believe in the power of their vote? Are organizations like “Rock the Vote” or “Project Vote Smart” going to convince students like the guy who finds voting “inconvenient” that it’s worth the effort?

In my opinion, celebrities and rock stars won’t make a difference. The key is for political candidates to find a way to talk about issues so that young voters overcome their apathy and actually feel something. In the sixties, it was the draft. I’m not sure what the issues with emotional impact are these days. But the people who want students to vote have got to find them.

Moving from Sketch to Draft

A sketch is often sketchy. It’s generally underdeveloped, sometimes giving the writer just the barest outline of his subject. But as an early draft, a sketch can be invaluable. It might hint at what the real subject is, or what questions seem to be behind your inquiry into the subject. A sketch might suggest a focus for the next draft, or simply a better lead. Here are some tips for finding clues in your sketch about directions you might go in the next draft.

Evaluating Your Own Sketch. You’ve read and written about an issue you care about. Now for the really hard part: getting out of your own head and into the heads of your potential readers who may not care as much as you do. At least not yet. Successful persuasion fundamentally depends on giving an audience the right reasons to agree with you, and these are likely both logical and emotional, involving both logos and pathos.

We’ve already talked about another element of argument—the writer’s ethos—or the way he comes across to readers. What’s the ethos of your sketch? Imagine that you don’t know you. How might you be perceived by a
stranger reading the sketch? Is your tone appealing, or might it be slightly off-putting? Do you successfully establish your authority to speak on this issue, or do you sense that the persona you project in the sketch is unconvincing, perhaps too emotional or not appearing fair?

As we develop convictions about an issue, one of the hardest things to manage in early argument drafts is creating a persuasive persona. Another is finding ways to establish connections with our audience; this connection is not just between writers and readers but creating some common ground between readers and the topic. There are many ways to do this, including,

1. Connecting your readers’ prior beliefs or values with your position on the topic.
2. Establishing that readers have a stake, perhaps even a personal one, in how the question you’ve raised is answered. This may be self-interest, but it may also be emotional (remember the advertiser’s strategy).
3. Highlighting the common experiences readers may have had with the topic and offering your claim as a useful way of understanding that experience.

As you look over your sketch, evaluate how well you create this common ground between your topic and your intended audience. Might you revise it by exploiting one or more of the strategies listed above?

Finally, is there enough evidence to support the reasons you’ve provided in support of your claims? It’s pretty common for initial drafts to lack enough specifics. Do you see places in the sketch that could be developed with specific information in the next draft?

Questions for Peer Review. Because the argument essay is such an audience-oriented form, these initial peer reviews of your sketch are invaluable in helping you get your bearings. Much of what you might have felt about how you managed the ethos and connections with readers can be confirmed or challenged by this first public reading. Ask your workshop group some of the following questions:

- How is the ethos of the sketch? Do I come across in the sketch as an advocate for my position? For example, am I passionate, preachy, reasonable, one-sided, sympathetic, overbearing, intimate, detached, objective, subjective, uncaring, empathetic, humorous, serious, angry, mellow, contemptuous, approachable, patronizing, respectful, thoughtful, presumptuous, fair, or judgmental?
- In your own words, what do you think was my central claim?
- Which reasons did you find most convincing? Which were least convincing?
• What do you think was the best evidence I offered in support of my reasons? Where exactly did you feel that you needed more evidence?

**Reflecting on What You’ve Learned.** Spend a few minutes following your peer review workshop to generate a list of everything you heard, and then begin a five minute fastwrite that explores your reaction to these suggestions and your tentative plan for revision. In particular, what will you change? What will you add, and what will you cut in the next draft? What problems were raised that you don’t yet know how to solve? What problems weren’t raised that you expected might be? Do you still need to worry about them? End your fastwrite by writing about what you understand now about your topic, and your initial beliefs about it, that you didn’t fully understand when you began writing about it.

**Research and Other Strategies:**

**Gathering More Information**

Here’s a mortifying thought: You’ve completely changed your mind about what you think about your topic and what you want to say in your argument. That’s unsettling, but it’s also a sign that you’re willing to allow things to get a bit messy before they get sorted out. This is good because it’s much more likely to result in an essay that gets at the truth of what you feel than if you doggedly stick to a particular point of view, come what may. If you have changed your mind, you have a lot of collecting to do. Return to the Web sites of current publications and search for information that might be relevant to your emerging idea.

There’s another research strategy that can be helpful whether you change your mind or not: the interview. People who are somehow involved in your topic are among the best sources of new information and lively material. An interview can provide ideas about what else you should read or who else you might talk to, and it can be a source of quotations, anecdotes, and even case studies that will make the next draft of your argument essay much more interesting. After all, what makes an issue matter is how it affects people. Have you sufficiently dramatized those effects?

For more information on face to face interviewing, see Chapter 5, “Writing a Profile,” as well as Chapter 12, “Research Techniques.” The Internet can also be a source for interview material. Look for e-mail links to the authors of useful documents you found on the Web and write them with a few questions. Interest groups, newsgroups, or listservs on the Web can also provide the voices and perspectives of people with something to say on your topic. Remember to ask permission to quote them if you decide to use something in your draft. For leads on finding Web discussion groups on your topic, visit the following sites:

- **Listz**, the mailing list directory, [www.liszt.com](http://www.liszt.com). Organized by subject, Listz includes a database of more than 50,000 discussion groups on countless subjects.
The Writing Process

Catalist, the official catalog of listserv lists, [www.lsoft.com/lists/listref.html](http://www.lsoft.com/lists/listref.html). This site has a database of about 15,000 discussion groups.

One of the most useful things you can do to prepare for the draft is to spend forty-five minutes at the campus library searching for new information on your topic. Consider expanding your search from current newspapers and periodicals to books or government publications (see Chapter 13 for more information about searching for government documents). In addition, almanacs such as the InfoPlease Almanac ([www.infoplease.com](http://www.infoplease.com)), the CIA Factbook ([www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/](http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/)), or statistical information available from sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau’s Statistical Abstracts of the United States ([www.census.gov/statab/www/](http://www.census.gov/statab/www/)) can be valuable sources of specific information relevant to your argument. For example, it wouldn’t be difficult using an almanac to find out what the Medicaid budget was last year.

Composing the Draft

As always, it’s best to work from abundance rather than scarcity. If you don’t have enough evidence to support your argument, find more. But if you’re feeling reasonably well prepared to develop your argument essay from a sketch (or proposal) to a longer draft, then begin by crafting a strong lead. There are so many ways to begin an essay like this one, which is best? As always, think of a beginning that not only might interest your readers in your topic but that hints at or states your purpose in writing about it. Through tone, your beginning also establishes your relationship with your readers. Here’s instructor Andrew Merton’s lead in “The Guys are Dumbing Down,” a piece that argues that students’ baseball caps in class indicate something other than studiousness.

Here is the big social note from the campus of the University of New Hampshire, where I teach: Dumbing down is in. For guys.

Merton’s tone is a strong element of this lead. He begins casually—“Here is the big social note . . .”—suggesting some friendly, almost chatty relationship with his readers. This lead also does what many argument essay beginnings do: it states the writer’s main claim. You may assume it is always the case to state your thesis in your introduction, but this isn’t true at all. Some argument essays, especially op-ed pieces, may have a delayed thesis, in which the writer works methodically toward her point. Which approach should you use in your draft? In part, that depends on your method of development.

Methods of Development. What are some of the ways you might organize the next draft?

Narrative. Telling a story is an underrated way of developing an argument. One of my favorite persuasive essays is George Orwell’s “A
Hanging," a piece most don't consider a persuasive essay at all. I've included it in the personal essay chapter of *The Curious Writer* because it is a personal narrative, but like much of Orwell's work, it has a persuasive purpose. "A Hanging" argues against capital punishment by focusing on about eight minutes of the event—the most dramatic eight minutes obviously—and it's only in the middle that Orwell breaks with his story to state his position on the issue. The story is so compelling it's hard to even notice that Orwell is trying to persuade the reader to believe something. Can you imagine a way to turn your topic into an extended story, perhaps by focusing on the experience of a particular person or group of people, in a particular place, at a particular time? Somehow the story must, like Orwell's, be logically linked to your claim; obviously, just any old story won't do.

There are other ways to use narrative, too. Anecdotes, or brief stories used to illustrate an idea or a problem, are frequently used in argument essays. One effective way to begin your essay might be to tell a story that highlights the problem you're writing about or the question you're posing.

**Question to Answer.** Almost all writing is an attempt to answer a question. In the personal essay and other open forms of inquiry, the writer may never arrive at a definite answer, but an argument essay usually offers an answer. An obvious method of development, therefore, is to begin your essay by raising the question and end it by offering your answer. This can work in a number of ways. For example, an Ellen Goodman essay on recent proposals to bring back publicly funded single-sex schools is organized around what she thinks are some of the key questions this raises. She asks those questions throughout her essay, and answers each before moving on to the next. Following a beginning that provides some background on the proposal, Goodman asks, *How did we get here?* She then explains the "odd coalition" that supports the proposal, describes their arguments and methodically rebuts them. By the middle of her essay, Goodman asks a second question, *Can you have separate but equal schools?* The remainder of her piece examines the answer to this question, and by the end she arrives at her main claim: The solution to poor schools is not an end to coeducation but innovation in teaching.

Are there several key questions around which you might organize your draft, leading, as Goodman does, to your central claim at the end?

**Problem to Solution.** This is a variation on the question-to-answer structure. But it might be a particularly useful organization strategy if you're writing about a topic readers may know very little about. In that case, you might need to spend as much time establishing what exactly the problem is—explaining what makes it a problem and why the reader should care about it—as you do offering your particular solution. That's what George Will did earlier in the chapter in his argument on the failure of writing instruction. He spent a fair amount of time explaining what he
believed were the indefensible current theories of teaching students to write, ideas most of his readers would know little about.

**Effect to Cause or Cause to Effect.** At the heart of some arguments is the *relationship* between two things, and often what is at issue is pinpointing the real causes for certain undesirable effects. Once these causes are identified, then the best solutions can be offered. Sadly, we know the effects of terrorism, but what are its causes? If you argue, as some do, that Islamic radicalism arose in response to U.S. policies towards Israel and the Palestinians, then the solution offered might be a shift in foreign policy. The international debate over global warming, for some participants, is really an argument about causes and effects. If you don’t believe, for example, that U.S. contributions to atmospheric carbon dioxide in the next ten years will match contributions from the developing world, then the U.S. refusal to sign the Kyoto treaty—one proposed solution—may not matter that much. Some arguments like these can be organized simply around an examination of causes and effects.

**Combining Approaches.** As you think about how you might organize your first draft, you don’t necessarily have to choose between narrative, problem-to-solution, or cause-to-effect structures. In fact, most often they are used together. We can easily see that in Doris Lessing’s essay earlier in the chapter on how she views America. The piece begins with a narrative account of a recent visit, and then shifts to an exploration of an effect (American extremism) and speculation about its cause (Americans’ faith in the sanctity of their “Eden”).

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**Inquiring into the Details**

**What Evidence Can Do**

Usually we think of using evidence only to support an idea or claim we’re making. But evidence can be used in other ways, too. For example, it can:

- **Support** an idea, observation, or assertion.
- **Refute** or challenge a claim with which you disagree.
- **Show** that a seemingly simple assertion, problem, or idea is really more complex.
- **Complicate** or even contradict an earlier point you’ve made.
- **Contrast** two or more ways of seeing the same thing.
- **Test** an idea, hypothesis, or theory.
Using Evidence. All writing relies on evidence, usually some specific information in relationships with general ideas (see the box “Inquiring into the Details: What Evidence Can Do”). Evidence in an argumentative essay often has a particular relationship to ideas; most often it is offered to support ideas the writer wants the reader to believe. What kind of evidence to include is a rhetorical question. To whom are you writing, and what kind of evidence will they be more likely to believe? Generally speaking, the narrower and more specialized the audience, the more particular they will be about the types of evidence they’ll find convincing.

For example, as you write more academic papers in your chosen major the types of evidence that will help you make a persuasive argument will be more and more prescribed by the field. In the natural sciences, the results of quantitative studies count more than case studies; in the humanities, primary texts count more than secondary ones. The important thing for this argument essay, which you’re writing for a more general audience, is that you attempt to vary your evidence. Rather than relying exclusively on anecdotes, include some quotes from an expert as well.

Workshopping the Draft

If your draft is subject to peer review, see Chapter 15 for details on how to organize workshop groups and decide on how your group can help you. The following journal activities and questions should help you make the most of your opportunity to get peer feedback on your work in progress.

Reflecting on the Draft. After you’ve finished the draft, prepare for peer review by making a journal entry that explores your experience writing the essay.

• What proved hardest?
• What most surprised you about the process?
• What did you find particularly gratifying? What was especially frustrating?
• How did your process for writing this type of essay differ from writing the personal essay or some other form?
• If you were going to start all over again, what would you do differently?

Discuss the insights that might have emerged from this open-ended writing in class or in your workshop group. After your draft was discussed, make some notes in your journal in response to the following questions:

• What most surprised you about your group’s response to your essay?
• What did you hear that most made you want to write again?
• What specifically do you think you need to do in the next draft?
**Questions for Readers.** Here are some questions that might prompt members of your workshop group to offer helpful advice on your argument draft.

1. What was the most interesting part of the draft? What was the least interesting?
2. What did you believe about my topic before you read the draft? What did you believe after you read it?
3. What reason most strongly supported my main point? What reason seemed the weakest?
4. What was the most convincing evidence I offered? What was the least convincing?

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**Inquiring into the Details**

**Ten Common Logical Fallacies**

An important way to evaluate the soundness of an argument is to examine its logic and, in particular, look for so-called logical fallacies that may lead writers' reasoning astray. Aristotle was one of the first to point out many of these, and a quick search on the Web using the term "logical fallacies" will reveal dozens and dozens of them that plague public argument. Many of them have indecipherable Latin names, testifying to their ancient origins.

Here are ten of the most common logical fallacies. I think they cover about 90 percent of the ways in which writers stumble when making an argument.

1. **Hasty Generalization:** We're naturally judgmental creatures. For example, we frequently make a judgment about someone after just meeting them. Or we conclude that a class is useless after attending a single session. All of these are generalizations based on insufficient evidence. Hasty generalizations might be true—the class *might* turn out to be useless—but you should always be wary of them.

2. **Ad hominem:** When arguments turn into shouting matches, they almost inevitably get personal. Shifting away from the substance of an argument to attack the person making it, either subtly or explicitly, is another common logical fallacy. It's also, at times, hard to resist.

3. **Appeal to Authority:** We all know that finding support for a claim from an expert is a smart move in many arguments. But sometimes it's a faulty move because the authority we cite isn't really an expert on the subject. A more common fallacy, however, is
4. **Straw man:** One of the sneakiest ways to sidetrack reason in an argument is to misrepresent or ignore the actual position of an opponent. For example, one way I might criticize George Will’s earlier essay on writing instruction is to point out that he conveniently misrepresents the actual goals and practices of what he calls the “growth model” of teaching writing. Therefore he creates a “straw man” that is easy to knock down. When writing critically about the ideas of another, we must always be careful to represent those ideas as accurately as we can.

5. **False analogy.** Analogies can be powerful comparisons in argument. But they can also lead us astray when the analogy simply doesn’t hold. Are A and B really similar situations? For example, when a critic of higher education argues that a public university is like a business and should be run like one, are the two really analogous? Fundamentally, one is nonprofit and the other is designed to make money. Is this a really useful comparison?

6. **Post hoc or false cause:** Just because one thing follows another doesn’t necessarily mean one *causes* the other. It might be coincidence, or the cause might be something else entirely. For example, if you’re really keen on arguing that losing the football coach was the cause of the team’s losing record, you might link the two. And it’s possible that you’re right, but it’s also just as possible that the injury to the quarterback was one of the real reasons.

7. **Appeal to popularity:** In a country obsessed by polls and rankings, it’s not hard to understand the appeal of reasoning that argues that since it’s popular it must be good or true. Advertisers are particularly fond of this fallacy, arguing that because their brand is most popular it must be best. In fact, this might not be the case at all. The majority can be wrong.

8. **Slippery slope:** I love the name of this one because it so aptly describes what can happen when reasoning loses its footing. You might start out reasonably enough, arguing, for example, that a gun control law restricts the rights of some citizens to have access to certain weapons, but pretty soon you start sliding toward conclusions that simply don’t follow, such as a gun control law is the beginning of the end of gun ownership in the country. Now you might really believe this, but logic isn’t the route to get there.

9. **Either/or fallacy:** In a black and white world, something is right or wrong, true or false, good or bad. But ours is a colorful world when we cite an expert to support a claim without acknowledging that many experts disagree on the point.
with many shades. For instance, while it might be emotionally satisfying to say that opponents of the war in Iraq must not support the troops there, it is also possible that the war’s opponents are against the war because they’re concerned about the lives of American service people. Rather than either/or it might be both/and. We see this fallacy often in arguments that suggest that there are only two choices and each are opposites.

10. **Begging the question:** This one is also called circular reasoning because it assumes the truth of the arguer’s conclusion without bothering to prove it. An obvious example of this would be to say that a law protecting people from Internet spam is good because it’s a law, and laws should be obeyed. But why is it a good law?

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**Revising the Draft**

You’ve been revising all along, of course, beginning with the work you did to find a topic and then narrowing it down to something interesting and manageable in a sketch. You were revising when you shared your sketch with peers and used what you learned to compose the next draft. You even were revising when you talked about the essay to your roommate or best friend. Revision involves “re-seeing” your subject, and there are many ways to do that as you go along. For more on new ways to think about revision, read Chapter 14, “Revision Strategies.”

Draft argument essays have some typical problems at this stage in the process. Do any of these apply to yours?

- Is your central claim or thesis stated clearly?
- Do you employ any logical fallacies? See the earlier box “Inquiring into the Details: Ten Common Logical Fallacies.”
- Do you have sufficient evidence or information to make your assertions convincing? Do you need to gather more facts?
- Have you considered any counterarguments in your essay? This is especially important if you think the audience for your essay might not be inclined to initially agree with your position.
- Have you clearly established what stake your readers have in the issue you’re writing about?
- Does the draft use *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos* effectively?

Chapter 14, “Revision Strategies,” can help you address most of these problems. Refer to the table below to find specific strategies for ideas on how to revise your draft following your workshop. Remember that a draft may present problems in more than one category.
Polishing the Draft

After you’ve dealt with the big issues in your draft—is it sufficiently focused, does it answer the *So what?* question, is it well organized, and so on—you must deal with the smaller problems. You’ve carved the stone into an appealing figure but now you need to polish it. Are your paragraphs coherent? How do you manage transitions? Are your sentences fluent and concise? Are there any errors in spelling or syntax? Section 5 of Chapter 14 can help you focus on these issues.

Before you finish your draft, make certain that you’ve worked through the following checklist:

- Every paragraph is about one thing.
- The transitions between paragraphs aren’t abrupt or awkward.
- The length of sentences varies in each paragraph.
- Each sentence is concise. There are no unnecessary words or phrases.
- You’ve checked grammar, particularly verb agreement, run-on sentences, unclear pronouns, and misused words (*there/their, where/were, and so on*). (See of the handbook at the back of the book for help on all of these grammar issues).
- You’ve run your spell checker and proofed your paper for misspelled words.

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**GUIDE TO REVISION STRATEGIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROBLEMS IN THE DRAFT (CHAPTER 14)</th>
<th>PART</th>
<th>PAGE NUMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unclear purpose</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Not sure what the paper is about?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear thesis, theme, or main idea</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Not sure what you’re trying to say?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of information or development</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Need more convincing evidence? Need to check for logical fallacies?</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disorganized</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Doesn’t move logically or smoothly from paragraph to paragraph?</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear or awkward at the level of sentences and paragraphs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Does draft seem choppy or hard to follow at the level of sentences or paragraphs?</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
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STUDENT ESSAY

Many Americans are fond of talking about our country’s native people in the past tense. We admire the tribal cultures as they existed a century or two ago, and borrow freely from them, engaging in “vision quests” and drumming circles. We feel the tug of nostalgia for these lost tribes, and yes, guilt for the sad history of relations between the mostly white immigrants who dispossessed the tribes and the Indian people who were confined to reservations. It’s convenient to assume that the problems were in the past because contemporary Native Americans are largely invisible to us—except if you happen to drive through a reservation as Kelly Sundberg would on her way to visit friends at a nearby university.

Confronting Native Americans in the present tense forced Kelly to examine her own prejudices, and in the op-ed essay that follows she argues that the route to understanding begins at school.

I AM NOT A SAVAGE

Kelly Sundberg

Salmon, Idaho, is named after the river that runs through it, a river that is filled with turbulent whitewater punctuated by deep and calm pools and shallow riffles. In the spring, I have looked into these riffles and seen waves of silver and red moving gently just underneath the surface of the water.

We call them “reds”—spawning salmon. Nowadays, they are diminished in numbers, but at one time the river was full of them, and full of abundance as well for the Lemhi Indians who once lived on the banks. For the Lemhi, the salmon was not solely for sustenance, but also an integral part of their culture and spirituality.

Today there are few “reds” and almost no Lemhi left in the valley.

The initial influx of Mormon settlers followed by migrations of Californians and Midwesterners forced Native Americans out of the valley. Still, upon entering the Salmon city limits from Highway 28, a large sign proclaims, “Welcome to Salmon, Idaho. Birthplace of Sacagawea!” In a time when anything related to Lewis and Clark means profit, the city of Salmon, my hometown, has now chosen to capitalize on this marketable heritage, even though they once ignored it or treated it derisively.

My high school mascot is the “Salmon Savage.” The marquee in front of the school has a picture with an Indian warrior on it, and when the football team scores a touchdown a white girl wearing war paint and a “made in China” headdress will ride a horse around the track in celebration.
I never questioned the integrity or intent of these symbols until I was a sophomore at the school. For Civil Rights Day, the school invited Rosa Abrahamson, a Lemhi Indian, to speak to the students. She cried as she spoke about the injustice of the name “savage.” “My people are not savages,” she said. “We are peaceful and do not take pride in that name.” When she finished speaking the applause was polite but subdued.

The next speaker was a rancher named Bud, who lit into a tirade about the government subsidizing “lazy Indians.” As he finished with fists raised into the air, he was greeted by a standing ovation. For the first time in my life, I felt ashamed to be a part of the community.

It wasn’t that those of us in the gym had consciously made the decision to be racist. It was simply ignorance. Despite the history of the Lemhi in the valley, our ideas of their culture are shaped from drives through the reservation on the way to campus visits at the University of Idaho. Our perceptions were safely gleaned from inside of an automobile and never involved real interaction with Native Americans.

Once, when asked to write our opinions about reservations in a U.S. government class, I wrote that I thought the government was making it “too easy on the Native Americans and they had become apathetic and unmotivated because of subsidies.”

I got a better glimpse at my Lemhi neighbors recently reading Sherman Alexie’s novel *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Alexie, a member of the Spokane/Coeur d’Alene tribes, conveys the opposition between contemporary and traditional Native American culture. His characters are torn and struggle to reconcile the two: “At the halfway point of any drunken night, there is a moment when an Indian realizes he cannot turn back toward tradition and that he has no map to guide him toward the future.”

My own community struggles to reconcile two conflicting ideas as well—we embrace the symbols of savagery to inspire the football team, yet in order to make a profit we proudly claim Sacagewea as one of our own. Still, when the Lemhi wanted to build a school near Sacagewea’s birthplace, the county refused to sell them the land, claiming it would become a “mini-reservation.”

Ironically, Salmon shares more than it cares to admit with its neighbors on the reservation. Poverty, alcoholism, and depression are a way of life for many Salmon residents. Yet the perception in the community is that an alcoholic white man is somehow superior to a “drunk Indian.”

In Salmon, all students are required to take an Idaho history class, yet this class makes almost no mention of Native American history in the valley. None of the readings in Advanced Placement English classes are by Native American authors, and government classes don’t address Native American issues at all.

Is it any wonder that racism persists?
The local school system needs to lead. English teachers should require readings by authors like Alexie, they should provide field trips to local and national archeological sites, and they should bring in Native American interpreters to speak about local history. By letting go of negative and outdated ideas, the city of Salmon and the Lemhi can take the first step toward healing.

EVALUATING THE ESSAY

Discuss or write about your responses to Kelly Sundberg’s essay using some or all of the following questions:

1. What is the thesis of the essay? Where in the piece is it most clearly stated?

2. Refer to the box that lists ten common logical fallacies and reread Sundberg’s essay. Do you suspect there are any logical fallacies in “I Am Not a Savage?”

3. Consider the ethos of this essay. How does the writer come across? Is her persona effective?

4. What do you think is the most effective paragraph in the essay? Why? What is the least effective?

USING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

You’ve read published op-ed essays and a student draft. You’ve also worked on your own argument essay, a genre that may be new to you. Take a moment to consider how you might use what you’ve learned.

1. Reflect on how your thinking about argument and argumentative writing may have changed because of the reading and writing in this chapter by finishing the following sentence in your journal at least four times: Before I began this chapter I thought _____, but now I think _____.

2. The personal essay (discussed in Chapter 4) and the argument essay might seem at first to be fundamentally different kinds of writing. Do you see any connections between the two genres now?

3. Examine the letters to the editor or the editorial in your local newspaper. How do you read these pages differently after studying and writing an argument? Clip a letter or editorial that might best demonstrate what you’ve learned.