Alternatives to Agonism

Ethical Approaches to Argument in the Composition Classroom

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A Member of The Pennsylvania Alliance for Design of Open Textbooks

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Chapter One: the Current State of Argument

What Is Argument & the Argument Culture?

When we think of the word "argument," several ideas may come to mind. We might imagine a debate between two opposing sides, a quarrel between friends or family members, a disagreement of ideas in the classroom or workplace, or even a legal matter such as when attorneys make a case on behalf of their client. More often, though, we are seeing argument take root as a *pattern of behavior* in our culture. This pattern, unfortunately, is not serving us well because it keeps us mired in the argument itself rather than functioning as a process which moves us towards a resolution. Ideally, the resolution to an argument would come in the form of new knowledge, a creative solution, a compromise, or a new approach. Instead, we often remain stuck and fixed in a fighting mode, or in what sociolinguist Deborah Tannen refers to as "the argument culture." The argument culture is a concept originally explored by Tannen in the 1990s, specifically in her book *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue*. This concept refers to a behavioral tendency to frame public discourse and discussions as contests or battles to be won. Modern Western culture, particularly in the United States, has become overly focused on approaching discussions, debates, and even everyday conversations in a confrontational and antagonistic manner, leading to deleterious effects on the way we talk and write.

Thesis-Driven vs. Reasoned-Thesis Writing

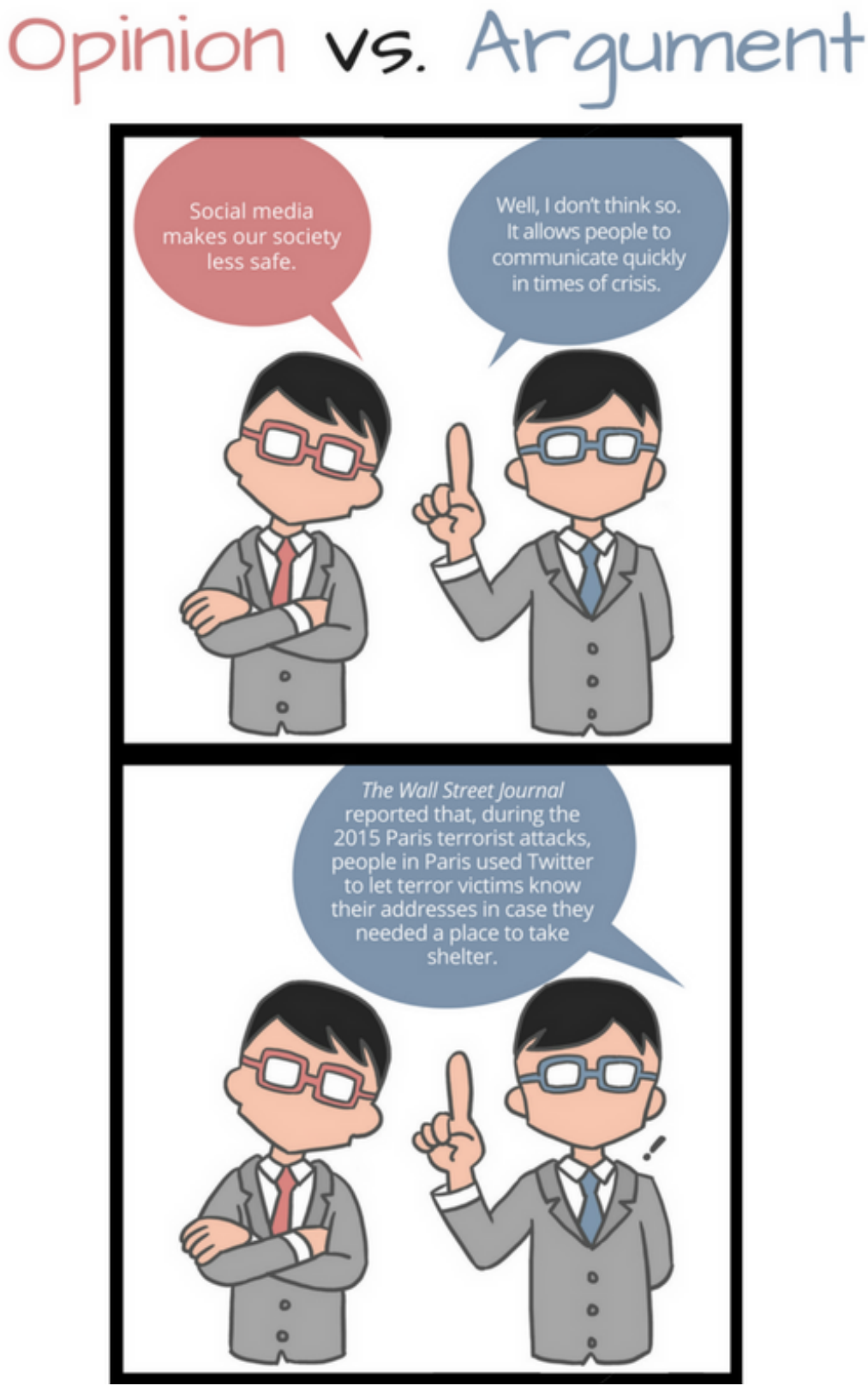
Evidence of the argument culture can be found in our approaches to writing in the composition classroom in which the writer constructs a thesis, provides evidence to support that thesis (usually to the exclusion of other equally compelling ideas), swiftly if not disingenuously considers an opposing view, and finally reasserts one's original point that is confirmed by a superficial justification. Consider the following information provided by The Student Academic Success Center at Carnegie Mellon University on thesis-driven essays. In particular, note the insistence on the goal of such an essay: "The main purpose of a thesis-driven essay is to make an argument or prove a point." Rather than compose texts to simply "prove a point," this textbook invites you to explore the varied other purposes and goals of ethical and non-adversarial argumentation, including: expanding one's knowledge base, pursuing multiple possibilities rather than one opposing side, and identifying points of common ground, to name a few.

While the structure of the thesis-driven essay may prove helpful to you as students who are first learning to participate in academic discourse, what might it look like if you as a *student writer* expanded your skills in composing a thesis that offered both you and your reader the promise of exploration, inquiry, deliberation, and resolution. One model provides a way forward. In his essay, "The Reasoned Thesis," compositionist John Gage defines the implications of a thesis statement more fully, describing it as both a position and a question: "The 'thesis statement' is ordinarily taught as a structural aid but it can function more basically as an argumentative principle if it is seen not as a single reductive statement of a prerequisite 'main idea' but as a multipart statement that contains not only a central claim but central reasons for that claim as well, and that evolves as a response to a 'question at issue' as mutually defined by a writer and that writer's audience." By embodying your role as both a writer and a member of your anticipated audience, you will seek to posit a claim, locate evidence and support for the claim, and practice critical inquiry as a means of investigating the topic. In short, this approach to producing "a multipart statement" resists the argument culture's trap of locking yourself into one narrow argument and defending it at all costs. Rather, the multipart assertion allows for the exploration of critical questions, the consideration of complex claims, the investigation and verification of reasons, and the productive outcome of a more nuanced and reasoned thesis.

Why does *how* we write a thesis matter so much? The answer is due to the reality that much of our argument culture sounds a lot like expressing opinions rather than crafting cogent, well-supported arguments. And while we may be aware of the important distinctions between the two when we sit down to write an academic paper or work on a formal assignment, many of the behavior patterns we have internalized when relying on opinions can potentially interfere with our best approaches to crafting a thoughtful argument.

Consider the graphic below in which the speaker on the left offers a claim that social media makes our society less safe. While this point may contain some truth, the speaker on the right encourages him to consider a different perspective —one that is informed with a credible source and recent example to illustrate how social media can allow us "to communicate quickly in times of crisis." In this regard, the speaker on the right offers a cogent argument with evidence; he makes a successful argument rather than merely asserting an opinion. Yet this exchange is still driven by the "argument culture" mindset because the speaker on the right does not foster a dialogue. Rather than ask questions or begin a conversation about why the speaker on the left sees social media as potentially

harmful and dangerous, he asserts his view, offers reasons, and comes to a conclusion that only reinforces his original point.



"Opinion vs Argument," by Kalyca Schultz, Virginia Western Community College, is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 (CC BY-NC-SA) (See full image transcript).

Breaking from the argument culture entails fostering dialogue, a concept we will explore in subsequent chapters as it relates to non-adversarial approaches to writing. With endless opportunities to argue from a solitary standpoint, we must now seek opportunities *to listen* to a greater representation of multiple, even competing voices. Doing so will allow for a more collaborative, productive, and

reasoned rhetoric—one that reflects collective and considered judgment, rather than only individual opinion.

The goal of non-adversarial rhetoric is to reframe participants as allies rather than as adversaries in a debate. When we treat participants as allies, the goal is not necessarily to come to a unilateral agreement on all points since we know such an outcome is not always possible. Rather, the goal is to arrive at a new perspective informed by the best ideas of the key stakeholders in a discussion. Resisting ad hominem attacks, focusing on one issue at a time, genuinely listening to others, and seeking out cooperation rather than automatically reverting to an agonistic stance can greatly support non-adversarial argumentation. See below for further explanation in the “List of Helpful Vocabulary Terms.” These terms will assist us in better understanding the content and examples of Chapter 1.

Photo by PaliGraficas via Pixabay

List of Helpful Vocabulary Terms

- **AD HOMINEM ATTACKS:** attacking the person rather than addressing the merits of their argument.
- **AGONISM:** assuming an automatic warlike stance in contexts that do not require one; a pre-patterned approach to argument or conflict.
- **AMBIGUITY:** the fallacy of ambiguity refers to the use of a double meaning or an unclear descriptive applied to misrepresent the truth.
- **APPEAL TO TRADITION:** this fallacy relies on tradition to prove a point (i.e., claiming a thesis must be correct because it has traditionally been so without questioning why).
- **ARGUMENTUM AD POPULUM:** translated as "appealing to the people," this logical fallacy presumes that a proposition must be true because many people believe it to be true.
- **ARISTOTELIAN APPEALS:** Aristotle's main modes of persuasion that include logos, pathos, ethos, and kairos. These appeals, whether used separately or collectively, can guide the speaker or writer in a successful articulation of an argument.
- **BURDEN OF PROOF:** the obligation to prove one's assertion or argument.
- **ETHOS:** the appeal to credibility or ethics; shows fairness and trustworthiness on the part of the speaker/writer.
- **FALSE EQUIVALENCY:** a logical fallacy where two opposing arguments appear to be logically equivalent when, in fact, they are not.
- **INCOMPLETE COMPARISON:** when two ideas are compared that are not related (i.e., when someone says, "It's like comparing apples to oranges").
- **KAIROS:** the Greek word for "right time," "opportunity," or "season." Kairos recognizes that the effectiveness of an argument often depends on choosing the right moment or opportunity to make the argument.
- **LOGICAL FALLACY:** a flaw in reasoning that weakens an argument or makes it invalid. Logical fallacies can undermine the credibility and effectiveness of an argument and, by extension, the speaker/writer.

- **LOGOS:** the appeal to logic or reason; presents facts, statistics, and expert opinions.
- **MIDDLE GROUND:** this fallacy refers to compromising for the sake of compromising even though indisputable facts exist.
- **PATHOS:** the appeal to emotion; a very popular appeal in political speeches and advertising when the writer/speaker seeks to form an emotional bond with their audience.
- **RED HERRING:** this fallacy focuses on arguing about an irrelevant topic to distract the audience or participants in the argument.
- **STRAWMAN:** this fallacy occurs when one misrepresents an argument to make it easier to attack.
- **VALUE SYSTEMS:** a set of consistent and enduring beliefs, often guided by moral, cultural, or religious principles.

Models of Argument & Cognitive Gain

Various modes of argument exist: arguments as proofs, arguments as performance, and arguments as war. Philosophy Professor Daniel Cohen's Ted Talk "For Argument's Sake" explicates these models and offers useful information to reconsider how to make arguments yield more positive results.

In his TED Talk, Cohen claims the argument as war model is too powerful; he describes it as "a monster." Media outlets and politics, particularly now, further exacerbate this problem as they often serve as poor models of dialogue and debate, no matter which side of the political aisle you may occupy. The argument culture is antithetical to cooperation, dialogue, and knowledge. Its costs far outweigh the benefits. Cohen asks us to consider the "cognitive gain" in arguments, particularly in academic or philosophical arguments:

> **"If argument is war, then there's an implicit equation of learning with losing. And let me explain what I mean. Suppose you and I have an argument. You believe a proposition, P, and I don't. And I say, 'Well why do you believe P?' And you give me your reasons. And I object and say, 'Well, what about..?' And you answer my objection. And I have a question: 'Well, what do you mean? How does it apply over here?' And you answer my question. Now,**

suppose at the end of the day, I've objected, I've questioned, I've raised all sorts of counter-considerations, and in every case, you've responded to my satisfaction. And so at the end of the day, I say, 'You know what? I guess you're right. P.' So I have a new belief. And it's not just any belief, but it's ... a well-articulated, examined, it's a battle-tested belief. Great cognitive gain. Okay. Who won that argument? Well, the war metaphor seems to force us into saying you won, even though I'm the only one who made any cognitive gain."

Daniel H. Cohen: For Argument's Sake

Watch "Daniel H. Cohen: For argument's sake" on YouTube (closed captioned)

Discussion Questions for Daniel Cohen's Ted Talk

1. What are the three models of argument Cohen explores?
2. Why do we associate gaining a new idea with losing an argument?
3. Why is winning so important in arguments?
4. What do we gain when we "win" an argument?
5. What is a "worthy arguer," according to Cohen? How might you try to become a worthy arguer, not only in an academic sense but also in a personal and social sense?

Even though we may readily identify problems with vitriolic debate and polarized discourse, urgent questions remain. If this method doesn't work, then what is the alternative? How do we move beyond the argument culture? How can we successfully pursue knowledge? This is a question we will fully explore as we seek alternatives to the argument culture, both here and in future chapters.

The Argument Culture in Political Rhetoric

While Tannen's research may seem far removed from our current reality given that her book was published back in 1999, the argument culture has found new room to grow in politics, social media, news and entertainment—vibrant areas of our social and cultural lives that inevitably spill over into our classrooms. These educational spaces, though, are where we expect to encounter new ideas, but we often find ourselves entrenched in preconceived notions based on popular albeit flawed models. Such current models of arguing are marked by a cultural preoccupation with combative discourse. Examples of the argument culture abound in our political sphere. At the time in which this textbook was written, the United States witnessed an assassination attempt on President Donald Trump. Many politicians and media figures cited the increased partisan rhetoric as a cause for such violence. Consider the following headlines:

Headlines

"Trump Assassination Attempt Brings Fresh Scrutiny to Violent Political Rhetoric" (Christian Science Monitor).

"Voters blame 'extreme' rhetoric for contributing to attempt on Trump's life" (CBS News).

"Donald Trump Assassination Attempt: Violent US Rhetoric Comes 'Home to Roost'" (The Economic Times).

These headlines signal the worldwide perception of the U.S. as a culture that engages in, promotes, and consequently suffers from the damage of violent political rhetoric. It is also noteworthy that within this broader category of political rhetoric, we find evidence and examples of racist rhetoric, radical rhetoric, inciteful rhetoric, and partisan rhetoric, among others. Examples of such rhetoric will be explored further in subsequent chapters.

In the years preceding President Trump's assassination attempt, researchers and journalists have charted a noted uptick in the amount of divisive rhetoric. The

following news pieces highlight the political discord in the weeks leading up to the assassination attempt. Indeed, both Democrat and Republican leaders have demonstrated antagonistic rhetoric in which the opposing candidate is framed as an enemy to the American people. For example, in December of 2023, President Trump said that immigrants coming to the U.S. are "poisoning the blood of our country"; he then repeated the word "poisoning" on his Truth Social account, which led media figures and politicians to draw comparisons between Trump and Hitler: Trump says immigrants are 'poisoning the blood of our country.' Biden campaign likens comments to Hitler. (nbcnews.com). President Trump has also focused his attention on women in power, prompting the BBC News to ask: "How Trump Talks about Women—And Does it Matter?" This article illustrates specific comments Trump has made about women and their appearance.

Shortly before the assassination attempt on Donald Trump, former President Joe Biden employed violent rhetoric as well when he noted it was "time to put Trump in the bullseye." Although he later acknowledged this comment was a "mistake," it serves as another example of the way words matter and often carry meaning far beyond what we may think they do when first spoken. Dr. Jennifer Mercieca, a professor of Communication & Journalism at Texas A&M University, notes in her piece for *Time* magazine: "Our political news is dominated by appeals of outrage, accusations or corruption and hypocrisy, and charges of conspiracy. All of that violent rhetoric threatens the fragile trust upon which democracy and political stability thrive."

Even when our most trusted and revered leaders can engage in a cordial conversation, as evidenced by the talks between Biden and Trump in the immediate aftermath of the assassination attempt on the latter, we cannot rely on the media to quell militaristic language. In writing an opinion piece for *The New York Times*, contributing writer Elizabeth Spears wrote: "This is not an election with a wrongheaded but well-meaning Republican. It's an all-out war with an illiberal megalomaniac who will happily destroy American democracy if it buys him one more ounce of power and keeps him out of prison." The refrain of the term "war" recalls Cohen's astute observation that the "argument-as-war model dominates…it's a monster."

The Argument Culture in our Education System

On a more localized level, we find the "argument as war" model within arenas that guide our daily lives. A cursory glance at provocative headlines regarding mask mandates and Critical Race Theory (CRT) initiatives are surprising because the subjects of such news stories are often those we regard as citizens capable of

civility: parents, educators, school board members, and students. Such headlines include the following: "Parents across US revolt against school boards on masks, critical race theory and gender issues" (Fox News); "Teacher fined after quitting over mask mandates, critical race theory" (New York Post); and "School board meetings turn tense with debates over critical race theory and masking" (The Inquirer). Even stakeholders within the fields of public health and education are not immune to the argument culture. According to *The New Yorker's* October 2021 article titled "The Increasingly Wide World of School Board Meetings," the National School Boards Association [NSBA] made an unusual request of the federal government in the fall of 2021: "Threats of violence and acts of intimidation" directed at school officials were escalating across the country. The NSBA asked the Biden Administration to investigate and use "existing statutes, executive authority," and "other extraordinary measures" to address a phenomenon it likened to "domestic terrorism." Then-Attorney General Merrick Garland decried such incidents and ordered the F.B.I. to monitor them.

Mask mandates and Critical Race Theory may seem an unlikely pairing to take center stage in academic environments, yet these two issues speak to a literal and figurative kind of masking in which discussions focused on how to navigate the school year on a practical level (i.e., to wear a mask or not to wear a mask), as well as on a pedagogical level (to implement or eliminate CRT and DEI initiatives). This kind of dual masking seeks to disrupt, silence, and marginalize the voices of passionate and committed stakeholders.

Indeed, our culture is rife with problems and issues that are ever present and unrelenting: the overturning of Roe v. Wade, the eradication of voting rights, pronounced social injustice, gun rights and gun control, and immigration, to name a few. We may know collectively what needs to change, but no one can agree on how to change it. Instead, school board meetings like those illustrated above seem to only mimic the madness all around us. Here, we can think of the word "madness" not merely as a description of our cultural environment but as a way to explore pieces of its actual definition: the state of being mad, insanity, frenzy, rage.

While the fear of loss in COVID times understandably stems from a fear over the loss of life, we now see material and political losses manifested in our daily rhetoric. For those politically aligned on the right, this fear of loss translates to a loss of freedom regarding health decisions, a loss of free speech regarding curriculum, and a loss of democratic ideals in our government. Conversely, for typical left-wing participants, their fears center on a loss of safety and stability (at first regarding safety concerns about the use of masks, but now a more dire

loss of safety in our schools and other public spaces due to gun violence). Both sides resist cooperation, resulting in a loss of shared governance that would likely benefit all. Violent political rhetoric offers few alternatives to seeing argument as anything other than a debilitating act, particularly as aggressive language and behavior dominate school board meetings and related community forums on social media.

The Argument Culture & the Power of Fear

Such madness has given rise to violent rhetoric, a particular kind of public communication shaped by political and social issues that are grounded in disparate value systems and that manifest as fear, specifically the aforementioned fear of loss. As a professor of Sociology, Psychology, and Business at Stanford University, Robb Willer astutely examines another fear of loss associated with compromising, or even giving up, one's value system. He highlights this moral tension between liberals and conservatives in his Ted Talk.

How to have better political conversations | Robb Willer

Watch "How to have better political conversations" on YouTube (closed captioned)

At its core, this talk invites us to consider Willer's central questions: "What can we do to chip away at polarization in everyday life? What could we do to connect with and communicate with our political counterparts?" Through a process called "moral reframing," Willer's research allows us to navigate the fear at the core of possibly relinquishing our belief systems. Willer explains it this way:

> **"People's moral values, they're their most deeply held beliefs. People are willing to fight and die for their values. Why are they going to give that up just to agree with you on something that they don't particularly want to agree with you on anyway? If that persuasive appeal that you're making to your Republican uncle means that he doesn't just have to change his view, he's got to change his underlying values too, that's not going to go very far."**

Moral reframing is one effective approach to counteract the ill effects of the argument culture and, interestingly, it involves learning how to write to appeal to the values held by your "opponent." By exposing ourselves to ideas which we may not initially support but which connect to our value systems, we can move closer towards common ground and away from the perceived fear of loss that often characterizes a great deal of political polarization. Willer reveals: "All these studies have the same clear message: if you want to persuade someone on some policy, it's helpful to connect that policy to their underlying moral values."

Writing Prompts for Robb Willer's TedTalk

1. Research The Polarization and Social Change Lab at Stanford here: About | Polarization and Social Change Lab
   What is their mission? What are their goals? What academic fields inform their work? How can we use this cross-disciplinary approach to foster better arguments?

2. What role can, and should, respect play in arguments, particularly in political arguments?

3. What does empathy mean? What does it look like? How can we become more empathetic listeners and arguers?

4. Think of someone close to you whom you disagree with politically. How might you gain a deeper understanding of their value systems? How can you "cross" that political divide?

5. Consider your own value systems in light of Robb Willer's Ted Talk. Which values matter most to you and why?

6. Research one of the projects below in "Pathways to Democracy." How has the project proven successful in reducing polarization and promoting democracy?

Discussion Questions for "Hot-Topic Issues"

1. What contentious issues currently dominate the news? Why do these issues elicit such strong and at times volatile reactions?
2. What value systems guide us in constructing our arguments?
3. Watch a recent political debate online. How does each candidate make their argument? What rhetorical appeals do they rely on?

The Argument Culture in Popular Culture

As a nation, we tune in regularly and religiously to watch fighting and argument as a form of entertainment. Consider the following examples from popular culture as evidence of our cultural proclivity to fighting. At the height of its popularity, The Jerry Springer Show attracted upwards of 8 million viewers. Why would so many people tune in to a show in which the content consistently featured arguments that ultimately led to verbal assaults, character assassinations, and physical violence? What is the appeal of watching people duke it out—both in an argumentative sense and a physical sense? Other popular shows that feature fighting as a normal, and even essential, part of the plot include *The Jersey Shore, The Real Housewives franchise, The Bachelor and The Bachelorette franchises, Mob Wives, 90 Day Fiancé, Love and Hip Hop, The Real World*, and *Big Brother*, to name a few. Whether such shows highlighted actual physical assaults or verbal epithets, this form of popular entertainment has had long-lasting effects on our cultural psyche by distorting our view of how to treat others.

While critics point out that in many respects these shows (and other examples of reality TV) are staged and scripted, these critics also espouse concerns over how such shows represent the erosion of a moral center. In short, such shows not only exemplify but promote an end to civility, championing violence and shouting as the only way to navigate any conflict, a justified means to an end. Some entertainment writers contend that watching adults spar in casual, everyday settings elicits a sense of schadenfreude, a satisfaction from witnessing another's trouble, pain, or humiliation. Whatever the reason behind these shows' popularity, the ubiquitous nature of such "entertainment" results in two consequences. First, they normalize violence and fighting as the only response to any conflict, whether justified or not. Second, they serve as models that others aspire to emulate in their own lives, something which is bolstered by posts to social media accounts that draw in a separate audience.

Changing the Argument Culture Through the Believing and Doubting Game

So, what can we change? And how should we go about such change? To resist the additional loss of constructive rhetoric, we can redirect our energy in support of **empathy, respect, and ultimately leadership**, starting with our immediate academic communities. For students, this is especially important. How can we use empathy and respect as tools to grow into capable leaders who can successfully navigate arguments and build consensus among participants?

An empathetic and respectful treatment of both the speaker and issue lies at the heart of famed compositionist Peter Elbow's "Believing and Doubting Game," which is defined as "a repeated attempt to believe the ideas of one person after another—to sleep with whatever idea comes down the pike." Elbow's believing and doubting game is a writing-and-thinking strategy designed to help writers engage more deeply with their ideas. It encourages a balanced exploration of perspectives by alternating between two approaches: believing and doubting.

- **Believing Phase:** In this phase, the writer takes a stance of acceptance and openness. They fully engage with the ideas being presented, exploring their strengths and merits without criticism. This encourages creativity and allows for the development of ideas.
- **Doubting Phase:** In this phase, the writer adopts a more critical perspective. They question the assumptions, implications, and weaknesses of the ideas. This helps identify flaws or areas for improvement, ensuring that the final argument or piece of writing is robust and well-considered.

By alternating between these two modes, writers can develop more nuanced arguments and enhance their critical thinking skills. Many academic environments promote the doubting game in order to approach a text or an idea critically. Yet such critical thought can quickly give way to critique, reactive opinions, and skepticism. By contrast, the believing game helps "students learn a model of non-adversarial argument that is conceptually simple and obvious: argue for, not against." This practice does not merely involve the resurrection of dialogue in rhetorical exchanges since dialogue limits itself to any kind of dyad. Instead, the believing game emphasizes empathetic understanding as a community—a community of minds, in fact—to achieve "maximum differentiation." As Elbow explains, "Disagreement doesn't have to lead to fighting or an adversarial process if we cooperate in exploring divergent views."

Divergent views may sound counterproductive to reaching a consensus, but in fact, it marks an important first step in identifying participants' beliefs and values. Understanding those beliefs and values are crucial to validating seemingly opposing ideas. Once such validation is achieved, participants are more inclined to trust and respect each other as they move towards a resolution.

Undoubtedly, resolution requires compromise, negotiation, and even mediation. Practicing the believing vs. doubting game helps us realize we gain more by believing in and trusting one another, rather than finding constant fault with valid ideas and potential possibilities. The more participants practice believing, the more they can minimize the power of opposition and antagonism that manifests itself in the argument culture. As Elbow explains, "this non-zero-sum model of argument assumes that two sides or views that appear to be in conflict or even logically contradictory might, in fact, both be right." Giving equal accordance and space to a variety of competing claims through creative problem solving is at the heart of the believing game.

Despite our best attempts at cooperation, Elbow points out that some students simply do not apprehend another's position: "If someone tries to see something from someone else's point of view, they will often succeed. But it's not always easy with a view we don't like. What if Ken has trouble seeing things from Marna's point of view? What if his every attempt to restate her position shows that he doesn't really get it?" It is quite important for Ken to "get it" because this often marks the turning point in Rogerian rhetoric: "a crucial structure in

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Rogerian persuasion is the turning point, the transition to the presentation of the writer's position. If this transition is not handled well, the audience will likely decide that all the preceding fair-mindedness was just a devious rhetorical trick." Failing to experience the transition thus produces nothing more than what compositionists refer to as "rhetrickery." To avoid this trap, Elbow believes that "the classroom is a particularly apt place to work on this process because, despite our commitment to critical thinking, most of us do want our students to be good at entering into new ideas—particularly ideas that bother them."

One way to avoid rhetorical manipulation and to resist the traditional thesis-driven approach to writing is to consider an assignment like the "Exploratory Essay." This assignment is applicable to a wide variety of disciplines and topics as a way to practice the believing game.

The Exploratory Essay Assignment

In class, we have spent time playing the believing and doubting game, an exercise made popular by composition scholar Peter Elbow. The believing and doubting game is the foundation of dialectic thinking. Dialectic thinking is a method of reasoning and discussion that involves the exchange of opposing ideas or viewpoints to arrive at a deeper understanding or truth. Through this process, we can actively seek out alternative views and test those ideas against one another. Many practices can help improve dialectic thinking: effective discussions, reading logs or journals, and exploratory writing.

For your first essay assignment, you will focus on one of these practices as you write an exploratory essay about an issue of your choosing. This should be an issue that you are open to changing your mind about before arriving at your final conclusion.

Steps to Exploratory Writing

1. Choose an issue to explore. This should be an issue for which you have not yet determined an answer or position.

2. Generate questions to take into account facts, opinions, and examples of your chosen issue.

3. Resist quick, simple answers, choosing instead to wrestle with and explore diverse, complex, and competing perspectives. Consider keeping a reading log to trace where your information starts, what kinds of patterns emerge, and how your comprehension grows over time.

4. Allow adequate space for reflection in order for your thinking to evolve.

5. Test out your ideas with others through interviews and/or conversations. Consider this step part of practicing effective discussions.

Writing Goals

1. To explain your own initial investment or interest in the issue and the position you favor.

2. To introduce different groups or stakeholders interested in your issue and explain their positions.

3. To detail a minimum of four positions informed by multiple sources.

4. To explore the reasons and rationale that each stakeholder uses to maintain their particular position.

5. To analyze each position thoroughly by practicing the believing and doubting game.

6. To make a successful claim about the issue that demonstrates your thorough consideration of multiple perspectives, as well as your evolution of thought.

Conclusion: Civility Now!

If the argument culture has shown us anything, it is that its most damaging effect is the erosion of civility. Civility refers to polite, respectful behavior and communication, especially in social interactions. In fact, research and textbooks on workplace communication emphasize the way in which civility is declining among professionals, affecting not only employees' morale but also the success and profits of businesses and organizations. Thus, civility is not only a preferred practice in theory, but it also impacts the way we thrive and succeed. By treating others and their ideas with basic dignity, we can clamp down on the pervasiveness of the argument culture. Civility is crucial during debates and arguments for several reasons:

1. **Promotes Constructive Dialogue**: Civility encourages respectful communication, which helps participants listen to each other and engage meaningfully with differing viewpoints.

2. **Reduces Hostility**: When discussions remain civil, it minimizes defensiveness and aggression, creating a safer environment for an open exchange of ideas.

3. **Enhances Understanding**: Respectful discourse allows for a deeper exploration of complex issues, fostering better comprehension of different perspectives.

4. **Builds Relationships**: Civility helps maintain and strengthen relationships, even when disagreements occur. This is essential for ongoing collaboration and dialogue.

5. **Encourages Open-mindedness**: Civil discussions create space for individuals to reconsider their positions without fear of personal attack, promoting a more open-minded approach.

6. **Sets a Positive Example**: Demonstrating civility can inspire others to engage similarly, contributing to a culture of respectful discourse in communities and organizations.

7. **Focuses on Issues, Not Personalities**: Civility keeps the focus on the topic at hand rather than devolving into personal insults or emotional attacks, which can derail productive discussions.

In essence, civility is foundational for effective communication, fostering an environment where diverse opinions can be explored and understood. In the next chapter, we will consider how to identify incivility in political rhetoric and social media to gain additional practice in non-adversarial rhetoric.

Chapter Two: the Model of a Town Hall Meeting: Meeting Divisive Rhetoric With a Community of Minds

What Is Divisive Rhetoric & What Does It Look Like?

The argument culture has been amplified by divisive rhetoric that has become a hallmark of many public debates, particularly on issues related to DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), politics, and school boards. For example, in conversations about DEI, some argue that policies promoting diversity in hiring and education unfairly prioritize certain groups, leading to accusations of reverse discrimination. Opponents of DEI might claim that these initiatives lead to "tokenism" or undermine merit-based hiring. Politically, rhetoric is often charged with descriptors of groups, such as "the radical left" or "the extreme right”—characterizations which only heighten polarization and dismiss opposing viewpoints without thoughtful engagement. Similarly, school board meetings have become battlegrounds for divisive rhetoric in which debates over topics like curriculum content, transgender student rights, or mask mandates can quickly escalate into hostile confrontations. In these contexts, terms like "woke indoctrination" or "censorship" often emerge, marking the other side as a threat to individual freedoms or moral values. Nearly everyone is affected in some, way, shape, or form by how these public discussions quickly devolve into personal attacks.

Student Discussion Questions: Divisive Rhetoric

1. List examples of divisive rhetoric.
2. Consider what appears and sounds “normal” about those examples.
3. Consider what kinds of impact divisive rhetoric can have on critical inquiry and reasoned research.

A Closer Look at Agonism

Such metaphorical battles reveal the general public’s preoccupation with adversarial discourse. Given these circumstances, it is crucial to examine how we internalize such “agonism.” If you recall, this term is part of the vocabulary list in Chapter 1. A fuller explanation is thus warranted here as we seek to understand

how we have adopted a broader view of each other as adversaries. Deborah Tannen borrows this term from Walter Ong, an American Jesuit priest and professor of English literature whose research focused on the shift from orality to literacy. He defines agonism as "programmed contentiousness" and describes it as a kind of "ceremonial combat." Tannen uses the term "to refer not to conflict, disagreement, or disputes per se, but rather to ritualized assertiveness." What's important to remember about the term "agonism" is how it points us to identifying *patterns in argument*. Those patterns are built in, "programmed" like a computer; they take place with the kind of frequency that a "ceremony" might have in a given culture. In short, we take part in this "ritual" because it looks and feels so familiar and so normal to us. In other words, we recognize fighting with words as the only form of persuasion, the only way to use rhetoric. This chapter seeks to dispel that notion.

Tannen further speaks to the way in which we have been conditioned to accept argument in this manner, largely because it is structured by power dynamics. Power exists in adversarial argument because it is viewed as a sign of competence or mastery. Perhaps most importantly, such power exists because it is rooted in our ideological framework. As Tannen explains: "warring-camps dichotomies appeal to our sense of how knowledge should be organized. It feels 'natural' and 'right.' It feels right because it reflects our agonistic ideology. But because it feels right does not mean it is right." The question before us is "How can we as writers and critical thinkers move towards a different kind of "normal" in argument?"

Exploring a New Normal

While some readers of this text may approach topics such as DEI or politics with trepidation given their sensitivity, it is important to note that this text's focus is on rhetoric, the art of persuasion, as well as on **the *use* of rhetoric in ethical and effective ways**. While the content of such contentious topics will carry a different significance for each writer, it is the cumulative effect of divisive rhetoric in public spheres that is of greatest importance to better understand why divisive rhetoric matters, how it yields deleterious effects, and how we can reclaim values that are in jeopardy due to the argument culture, **namely empathy, respect, and civility**. Revitalizing these values can help answer the question: "What's the point of argument?" Furthermore, these tenets will be particularly useful to build on in Chapter 3 when we explore non-adversarial approaches to argument writing.

As alluded to above, it's essential to examine why and how such rhetoric is becoming normalized. In addition to power dynamics, part of the reason why divisive rhetoric appears normal is due to the ways in which free speech has conditioned us to believe we can say whatever we want without any consequence. It is important to understand the actual definition of free speech, as well as its practice throughout history, particularly in the context of public spaces like town hall meetings. **The subsequent sections of this chapter will focus on developing student-writers' skills in argument writing by engaging students in activities related to deliberation and an ethical treatment of argument within public forums; these lessons will encourage students to reprioritize the values of empathy, civility, and respect.**

A Definition of Free Speech

What is free speech? Free speech in American culture is a foundational principle enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees individuals the right to express their thoughts, beliefs, and ideas without government interference or censorship. This right is central to our nation's identity, allowing for open discourse, the exchange of ideas, and the ability to criticize government actions. Free speech encompasses not only spoken and written words but also symbolic expressions, such as protests or artistic works. However, while free speech is a cherished right, it is not without limitations. For example, speech that incites violence, defames individuals, or endangers public safety can be restricted. Overall, the concept of free speech in American culture supports democracy by fostering a figurative marketplace of ideas where diverse viewpoints can be heard, debated, and, ideally, lead to a more informed and engaged citizenry.

Town hall meetings are a prime example of such figurative marketplaces with a storied history dating back to the country's founding, specifically in colonial New England. These meetings were originally a way for local communities to gather and discuss issues affecting them directly, often in the open air or in a town hall building. The concept dates to the Puritan settlers in the 1600s where town meetings became a vital democratic practice. The town hall format allowed citizens to directly engage in the decision-making process, with citizens voicing opinions on everything from local governance to taxation and public services. The town hall meeting became a critical feature of American democracy where citizens could participate in the political process without intermediaries. These gatherings allowed residents to openly discuss town budgets, elect local officials, and resolve issues important to their community.

Over time, town halls evolved, but the core idea remained intact—bringing people together to have a say in their local government. Voice is a central tenet in composition studies, and the ability to articulate one's voice through their writing can often provide writers with a sense of agency and freedom. Indeed, town halls represented the best of these pursuits, using one's voice to participate in community dialogue. In the 19th century, the advent of political parties brought more formalized structures to town meetings, though the spirit of open debate continued. In the 20th and 21st centuries, town hall meetings evolved again, with politicians, especially at the federal and state levels, adopting the format as a means of connecting directly with voters. These modern town halls often take place in large venues and are often broadcast via standard media or social media, allowing for greater participation and visibility. Despite these changes, town hall meetings remain a symbolic and practical means of democratic engagement in American political life.

The Model of a Town Hall Meeting as a Learning Tool

When we imagine the model of a town hall meeting within a writing classroom, we can practice a historically sound yet relevant way to craft an argument by focusing our attention on communication and deliberation—essentially, exercising our right to free speech while also remaining attuned to the ethical boundaries and guideposts of constructive argument. Three priorities of the town hall meeting hold particular relevance to the composition classroom. These priorities include the following:

(1) to treat class discussions as a "community of minds" where students bring together as many productive ideas as possible

(2) to adopt the role of a facilitative investigator as a student writer, rather than an autocratic decision maker

(3) to treat writing as an ethically infused process by emphasizing responsibility for and commitment to one's ideas

These priorities support the model of a town hall meeting that can encourage us as writers to move beyond dichotomous argumentation and to view argument as a deliberative process rather than as a purely assertive act.

Composition Classrooms as Town Halls

Composition classrooms have historically been and currently remain prime sites in which to situate arguments as student writers learn how to test out ideas,

debate points of view, question interpretations, and ultimately construct academic prose. In order to improve argumentation and identify new ways to seek out agreement among difference, as well as develop agency rather than passivity for writers as they engage in argument writing, we must consider the town meeting as a rhetorical space that lends itself to the processes of deliberation, coalescent argumentation, and reasoning. Instructors in any course with a writing component—not just exclusively composition courses—could situate the model of a town meeting in their classroom as a way to practice deliberation, reasoning skills, critical inquiry, and reflection as alternatives to traditional argument and debate. John Fiske, Harvard professor and author of *Civil Government of the United States* (1890), identifies ways in which the town meeting can function as an important educational space. Fiske uses the "schoolhouse metaphor" to examine the educational impact of the town meeting: "In the kind of discussion which it provokes, in the necessity of facing argument with argument and of keeping one's temper under control, the town-meeting is the best training school in existence." Adopting the model of a town hall meeting as a supplement to, not an outright rejection of, traditional arguing functions as a way to practice deliberative discourse by considering multiple perspectives and resisting dichotomous thought.

David Mathews, in his book *Politics for the People*, points to the American tradition of town meetings as "public forums" that have kept "public dialogue" alive in various manifestations for centuries. Specifically citing the National Issues Forums, a group of civic and educational organization, Mathews notes the purpose, framework, and value of public forums:

> **"Participants in the forums do the difficult work of deliberation—of moving toward a choice on each issue by weighing carefully the pros and cons of every option. The premise is that the pulls and tugs of having to make choices together will cause people to learn more about policy issues and move from individual opinions toward more shared and reflective judgments."**

What has happened to the promise of the town hall meeting? Indeed, what is taking place at town hall meetings presently? Let's take a look at some examples of town hall meetings which have made headlines recently.

Examples of Headlines About Town Hall Meetings

- GOP lawmakers booed at town halls defend hosting events despite advice from leaders
- Dem leader swings through GOP-held districts after protests shut down town halls | Fox News
- House Republicans hit the brakes on town halls after blowback over Trump's cuts
- Warned Off Meeting Voters, Republicans Who Do Confront Anger and Unease - The New York Times

Examples of Videos of Town Hall Meetings

- Frustration Among New York Voters at Town Hall Meetings | TikTok
- Disaster At The Town Hall: Chuck Grassley Gets Lambasted By Attendees | Watch
- 'Free Speech! Free Speech!': Mike Kennedy And Celeste Maloy Heckled At Chaotic Town Hall | Watch

Such headlines and videos may fill us with great apprehension as we note the ways in which such meetings can mimic the argument culture. Yet the section below will hopefully show the potential and promise of a town hall meeting situated within a classroom space.

Why a "Town Hall Meeting"? The Importance of Imagining a Physical Space

Frank Bryan, in his study Real Democracy, notes the significance of physical space when treating argument as a decision-making process: "[I]n a real democracy, the citizens—in person, in face-to-face meetings of the whole—make the laws that govern *the actions of everyone within their geographic boundaries*" [my emphasis]. Bryan's definition of democracy points us to the significance of space in providing a "locatable context" for argumentation, a term defined more fully by Michael Gilbert in *Coalescent Argumentation*: "[A]rgumentation theorists more and more view arguments as situated or taking place in a locatable context that itself is liable to have an impact on both the arguments and arguers." This "locatable context," like a college campus at large and like a localized classroom space in particular, provides a physical space to house an argument, to structure

its methods, to impact its stakeholders (those who have a vested interest in participating in the argument in the first place) and to determine its outcomes.

Examining and implementing the town meeting in an academic space might not, at first, seem readily applicable to the composition classroom, given the political connotations of a town meeting. Indeed, the aforementioned examples from the press depict local town meetings as chaotic scenes erupting into the same kind of adversarial discourse that leads to further polarization of positions. Looking at such examples, a natural series of questions arises: How does this model serve as a viable alternative to current ways of arguing? Doesn't this context only reinforce and perpetuate antagonistic forms of debate marked by shouting back and forth, aggressive posturing, and a failed attention to listening? The response to such understandable concerns is two-fold.

The Town Hall Meeting as a Means to Avoid Apathy

First, given the current state of debate in college classrooms today, it is important to honestly acknowledge the consequences of apathy (i.e., the fragmentation of knowledge and the lack of collective social action) and do our best to reverse it. In her essay "Debate? Dissent? Discussion? Oh, Don't Go There!", writer Michiko Kakutani aptly describes the apathetic attitude on many college campuses: "Noisy dorm and dining room debates are no longer *de rigueur* as they were during earlier decades; quiet acceptance of differing views—be they political or aesthetic—is increasingly the rule." The question is why? Why do silence and apathy exist?

Perhaps it is out of a sense of respect or politeness that students shrink from actively debating ideas with one another outside of the classroom in order to maintain ties of friendship. But this phenomenon occurs in the classroom as well, because "[d]ebate has gotten a very bad name in our culture," according to Jeff Nunokawa, an English professor at Princeton University. Nunokawa goes on to explain how students miss debate as a crucial opportunity for the production of knowledge by treating debate as "synonymous with some of the most nonintellectual forms of bullying, rather than as an opportunity for deliberative democracy." Deliberative democracy can be exercised by adopting the model of a town hall meeting in composition classrooms, as the rest of Chapter 2 will show.

The Town Hall Meeting as a Means To Resist and Renounce Divisive Rhetoric

The second reason town hall meetings should still be treated as a viable model is due to the possibility that if we do not embrace this model of deliberative democracy as an opportunity for reclaiming persuasion in rhetoric, we risk more than merely producing apathetic students. We risk normalizing divisive rhetoric, we risk minimizing our values of empathy and respect, and we risk the very real impact rhetoric has on our material lives. Reclaiming the power inherent in persuasive rhetoric and empowering students with tools of analysis—not argument—is crucial to our democracy. Additionally, it is important to identify and address those elements that currently do not work in contemporary portraits of town hall meetings (i.e., shouting, insults, disrespect, exclusion, etc.) and seek to develop skills in those exact areas: skills in listening rhetoric, Rogerian rhetoric, feminist rhetoric, and other approaches to non-adversarial argumentation. Remember, too, we are learning such skills in an educational environment, not a political one. The classroom is still our "locatable context" that can ground us in important research, deliberation, and articulation of reasoned positions.

Now that we have hopefully addressed some concerns and fears related to town hall meetings, let's refocus our attention on the three priorities outlined at the start of this chapter:

(1) to treat class discussions as a "community of minds" where students bring together as many productive ideas as possible

(2) to adopt the role of a facilitative investigator as a student writer, rather than an autocratic decision maker

(3) to treat writing as an ethically infused process by emphasizing responsibility for and commitment to one's ideas

Priority #1: Establishing a Community of Minds

Many in our current cultural moment believe that "moral persuasion, rhetoric, is not an effective way to alter how people look at situations and act, that is has no bearing on the fabric of social life, and there are no bases for agreeing or disagreeing over moral matters," according to scholars Daniel F. Collins and Robert C. Sutton who articulate this problematic social belief that results from an absence of different approaches to argument. Rather than give in to a more dismal view of persuasion, we should keep the egalitarian aspect of the town

meeting in sight; the promise of a town hall meeting is crucial to situating it within a composition classroom because this model denotes a *participatory process*. Consider Paulo Freire's problem-posing method, a method grounded in the belief that education should be a dialogical, participatory, and critical process. Unlike traditional "banking" systems of education, in which teachers are seen as the sole givers and students are passive receivers of knowledge, the problem-posing method encourages active engagement, critical thinking, and mutual learning.

Two Extremes of Rhetoric: Passive Alienation and Active Adversarialism

Two extremes often result when considering the role of rhetoric in our public and private life: passive alienation and active adversarialism. The first extreme points to a position of isolation, largely due to feeling a sense of uselessness when you cannot and do not wish to participate in the argument culture. In short, we feel a lack of agency and thus do not feel compelled to engage in argument, particularly when writing about "hot button" topics. What is the point, we ask ourselves, when it's impossible to change anyone's mind? Even more so, we find it impossible to identify a new perspective, common ground, or a course of action within the realm of traditional forms of persuasion. This type of alienation teaches us to silence ourselves while simultaneously shutting out other voices of difference that may offer alternative perspectives. The second extreme of active adversarialism points to the desire to prevail, conquer, and win any point of discussion or debate. Indeed, this is what the thesis-driven approach to writing is all about, as we explored in Chapter 1. Although these verbs—to prevail, conquer, and win—may suggest lively engagement in the act of arguing, the firm theoretical position from which we argue can still result in intellectual stagnation. We may even feel like we are forcing our own set of "facts" on another, or that a controversial set of "facts" is being forced upon us. Such aggressive yet static arguments reveal a kind of ideological contentment masked as intellectual superiority. Pragmatically, neither passive alienation nor active adversarialism offers any ground on which to stand and learn how to see the world in a different way, consider another viewpoint, or explore a new idea. Conventional ways of teaching and learning how to argue thus risk de-emphasizing rhetoric as a persuasive tool. In short, we cannot and do not experience the kind of "cognitive gain" of which Daniel Cohen speaks so highly.

Speaking Freely: a Way to Address Passive Alienation & Active Adversarialism

bell hooks (whose real name was Gloria Jean Watkins) was a renowned American author, feminist theorist, cultural critic, and social activist. Known for her work in exploring the intersections of race, class, and gender, hooks offers us a useful model for how to resist passive alienation and, instead, actively engage in difficult subjects with “openness.”

Consider hooks’ interview with Ken Paulson on the show “Speaking Freely”: Speaking Freely: Bell Hooks (Read transcript).

Consider the discussion questions below that highlight her central arguments about free speech, the expressive voice, and the importance of maintaining a sense of “openness.”

Student Discussion Questions: Speaking Freely

1. In her interview "Speaking Freely," bell hooks discusses the power of the "dissenting voice." How would you define the "dissenting voice" with hooks' ideas in mind?

2. Throughout the interview, hooks discusses the complexity of freedom of speech, noting the distinction between "critical commentary" and "trashing" an idea. Both she and the interviewer discuss various examples of free speech on college campuses. This interview took place over 20 years ago. How would you characterize free speech on college campuses today? How does "cancel culture" and social media inform your characterization?

3. Choose one other idea covered in this interview that you wish to talk about in greater detail during class discussion. Jot down thoughts related to that idea here.

By “speaking freely,” hooks seeks to foster a community of minds among her students and in the broad public and move to a more active rhetorical space, as we will explore in the second extreme of public and private rhetoric. Taking into account hooks’ call to action to “speak freely,” we must remember how intellectual and ideological division silences voices of difference and therefore hinders our full potential as interlocutors. What if we situate hooks’ call to action

to "speak freely" in the model of a town hall meeting—a model that we could replicate in our own classrooms and in our own writing?

The first way to replicate this model in our classrooms is to review and identify issues that immediately affect all members of a community classroom. Please see the in-class discussion exercise below for practice working with this model.

Discussion Questions for Replicating the Town Hall Meeting: Part I

1. What topics or issues do you care about and are invested in?
2. Do you subscribe to Collins and Sutton's view that "moral persuasion, rhetoric…has no bearing on the fabric of social life"? In short, how might rhetoric help us navigate through topics or issues we care about socially, culturally, and/or personally? How might it hinder us?
3. What issues have you spoken up about? How so? In what contexts?
4. Would you identify yourself as passive or active when it comes to argument and persuading others to see your point of view?

Warning: Like-Minded Peers Ahead!

Remember, the task before you with this replication of a town hall meeting discussion is to create a "community of minds" within your composition classroom. Such a space should not function as an automatic "meeting of the minds" in which all readily and immediately agree. Instead, the town hall model offers the space in which to achieve a collective ethos based on deliberative discourse. What is **ethos**? In a broad sense, ethos can refer to the guiding beliefs or ideals that characterize a particular community, culture, or organization. While a classroom community should invite multiple perspectives, it's important to also take into consideration the guiding principles of that classroom within a larger campus community. For composition scholar Kurt Spellmeyer, it's important to consider what would and what could happen if the composition classroom were to embrace "the ethic of mutual understanding." By implementing an ethic of mutual understanding, we are better able to recognize the "shareable contexts, beyond—or better yet, beneath—our conceptual differences." What this means is that we seek to develop a collective lens through which to view key differences in opinion, in experience, and in knowledge. We then use those differences to propel us forward, rather than regress backwards,

so that we can figuratively “stand under” another person, more commonly thought of as “standing in someone else’s shoes.” In this way, Spellmeyer believes in the promise of being able to “share the same ground” even if we are still in different positions on that ground. In short, we are closer in that space of difference rather than further apart in a broader argument culture.

As we put together different ideas, combine various sources of information with our own values and beliefs, and distill solutions from a host of choices, we are actively participating in a process of distinguishing “strong” versus “weak” rhetoric, “good” versus “bad” ideas. Similarly, your identity as a writer, student, and responsible citizen is being “put together,” taking shape in an equitable and respectful pursuit of common ground. This act of combing through ideas supports deliberative discourse as a social act rather than as a purely individual endeavor. Consider philosopher Chaim Perelman who believes we do not argue in isolation because the topics we argue about center on real issues and affect real people: “For argumentation to exist an effective community of minds must be realized at a given moment.” A crucial distinction must be made here between a “community of minds” and a “community of like-minded peers,” to borrow a term from composition scholar Kenneth Bruffee. The former, a community of minds, can be found and nurtured in the composition classroom, and any classroom for that matter, as these are spaces which encourage deliberation and seek out the best ideas that support the best resolution. The latter, a community of like-minded peers, however, verges more on politics than progress and risks what Kakutani describes as “the politicization of subjects like history and literature…ideological posturing that could be reductive and doctrinaire in the extreme.”

A Sample Case Study of a Town Hall Meeting

Take the following scenario as an example. In a March 19, 2025 *Politico* article, writers Ally Mutnick and Brakkton Booker issued what may, at first glance, seem like an unusual headline: “Dems expected to skewer GOP cuts at town halls. Instead, they faced angry constituents.”

‘You’re not fighting!’: Dems run into angry crowds at town halls

The article goes on to reveal how Democratic leaders faced critiques from their own Democratic followers, despite the widespread criticism of Republican leadership: “Congressional Democrats—who were hoping to blast Republicans over budget cuts—instead took incoming from their exasperated constituents when they traveled home to host town halls. In Arizona, Sens. Ruben Gallego and Mark Kelly were confronted at a joint forum Monday by an attendee

demanding to know if they ‘would support removing’ Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer. In Oregon, an audience member told Sen. Ron Wyden and Rep. Janelle Bynum on Sunday that he is ‘so pissed off right now at the leadership in the United States Senate that they are not willing to step up and fight.’” Presumably, these senators expected to encounter a “community of like-minded peers” when returning to their hometown hall meetings. Here is a classic case of conflict visibly manifesting itself over political difference and perceived apathy. In viewing this meeting, a casual observer might describe this occasion as a “community of like-minded peers.” However, just because those in attendance were Democrats does not mean they shared the views of their elected senators, and they especially did not share the views of Democratic House Minority Leader Chuck Schumer: “What many hoped could have been a unifying force—a principle-driven government shutdown—exposed deep cleavages in a party still smarting from widespread losses last fall.” The promise of this “unifying force” collapsed, in part, due to the presumption that Democrats operate as a collective unit. While unity is, of course, a goal in any sort of argument or movement, the presumption of such unity can erase important divergences of thought and opinion.

As the article goes on to explain: “If Democrats were wondering where their 2017-era grassroots resistance army had gone, they’ve found their answer. Schumer’s willingness to vote with Republicans to advance a spending bill—and avoid a shutdown—has enraged the Democratic faithful not just in Washington, but across the nation. The blast radius is spreading throughout the party, far beyond Schumer.” Words like “enraged” and “blast radius” connote strong feelings of hostility and frustration. Such frenzied reactions reflected a deep dissatisfaction with current leadership, as well as a refusal to compromise further: “In testy exchanges, town hall attendees pressed congressional Democrats to stop trying to strike compromises with Republicans, to adopt a stance that matches the gravity of the moment and to cease using court rulings or the midterms as their solution.” In short, the emotional needs of those in attendance at this town hall meeting needed to be addressed before moving on to decisive action. Those feelings were perhaps best captured at a town hall in a Washington suburb when Representative Glenn Ivey (D-Md.) held a town hall: “‘You’re not fighting!’ one woman shouted from the balcony before being escorted out. ‘We are suffering!’” Such ire is understandably due to a lack of leadership among Democrats. At the same time, it also stems from a shrinking of democratic spaces as the House GOP chief urged Republicans to stop holding town hall meetings of their own.

In other words, if you identify as a Democrat, you are frustrated by the lack of accountability from the party you politically oppose—a party who now refuses to even engage in democratic spaces like a town hall meeting; and then you are "enraged" by the party you look to for guidance and leadership, signaling a kind of despair in those democratic ideals promised in our country's founding documents. As the article explains: "National Democratic groups even organized a tour to hold town halls in the districts of GOP Congress members who refused to schedule any themselves. But the congressional recess kicked off with Schumer's announcement that he would vote to advance the GOP bill to fund the government. And so congressional Democrats returned home to voters exasperated not just by Republicans, but also by their own party's leadership." All reason, goodwill, and hope vanish, leaving only vitriolic rhetoric in the dust.

What happens when participants in a town hall discussion ironically do not participate? What should we do when the "other side" does not show up to participate in the process of community dialogue? In some states, local progressive groups have organized 'empty chair' town halls in order to hold their elected officials accountable. The results of these particular town halls prove instructive as we begin to imagine composition classrooms following a similar model. Please see the following links below to gain a better understanding of the rhetorical power of organizing "empty chair town hall meetings."

- District 48 constituents call out Rep. Darrell Issa in "Empty Chair Town Hall" | Watch
- Hundreds show up for 'empty chair' town hall hosted by Indivisible Northeast Indiana

The image of the "empty chair" carries great significance in signaling a *willingness* to still invite participants to the table. The symbolism of "inviting someone to the table" suggests an openness, as delineated above by bell hooks, along with a positive willingness to engage in even the most difficult of discussions. While the refusal to join that table may be interpreted as disrespectful, it is important to remember we cannot control others' actions. Instead, we must advance ourselves rhetorically and continue to foster community dialogue as political activists did in this instance. We must always leave room open at the table for others to hopefully join us.

Priority #2: Adopting the Role of a Facilitative Investigator in the Groan Zone

Even under the best of circumstances, town hall meetings—just like any other large group discussion—will never function entirely smoothly. However, the success of such meetings can be greatly improved with clear procedures. Sam Kaner's seminal text *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* provides excellent guidelines, as it has been a key leadership guide in business communication for decades. Though largely used in business and professional writing courses, this text can also prove beneficial in composition classrooms when incorporating Kaner's concept of the "groan zone" as part of class discussions over contentious issues. The "Groan Zone" refers to a concept Kaner developed to describe a stage in group decision-making and problem-solving processes where participants experience frustration, confusion, or discomfort. This stage typically occurs when a group is trying to solve complex issues or reach a consensus but encounters challenges. It's called the "Groan Zone" because people often express their dissatisfaction, confusion, or frustration—"groaning"—as they struggle with ambiguity or the inability to find a clear solution. Kaner, in his work on facilitation and group dynamics, points out that the Groan Zone is a natural and important phase in group discussions, especially when diverse perspectives are being shared. While it can be uncomfortable, it's often necessary to achieve deeper understanding and eventual breakthroughs. It's important for facilitators to help guide the group through this phase, ensuring that participants stay engaged and that the group does not avoid the difficult discussions that lead to better outcomes.

In short, the Groan Zone is an unavoidable part of creative collaboration and decision-making that signals the group is working through complexity; with effective facilitation, it can lead to more innovative and thoughtful solutions.

Let’s return to the above example of the town hall in which Democrats were surprised by the criticisms from their constituents. Citizens expressed a great deal of anger at those town hall meetings, which Democrats chose to hold in lieu of cancelled GOP events, “but also *critiqued* the Democratic party, according to a review of video, audio and local news reports of town halls in Arizona, Oregon, New Jersey, Maryland, Massachusetts, Illinois and Vermont” [my emphasis]. As Spellmeyer reminds us, “no matter how ‘like-minded’ its members seem, these members will sometimes disagree about fundamental issues.” In this case, those fundamental issues centered on the fate of Schumer’s leadership, President Trump’s actions in the first two months of his presidency, and Elon Musk’s role in the Trump administration. One attendee told Representative Ivey: “Don’t talk to me about the courts, don’t talk to me about the next election … I came here to find out what my congressman is specifically doing.” This example illustrates diverse perspectives even among those who share the same affiliation with one particular political party. As such diverse perspectives are articulated, participants move through the “groan zone” about the initial topic and on to the “divergent zone.”

Competing frames of reference emerge as these constituents each articulate different demands. For example, the demand for action from the aforementioned attendee signals one position among this community. At another town hall in Oregon, calls for unity emerged: “In Oregon, Wyden said he prepared to field questions about Schumer’s future and rose early in the morning pondering his response. ‘Trump would love to be able to bait Americans over various distractions and I would just ask please, please don’t fall for it,’ he said, declining to directly address whether the minority leader should be deposed.”

No matter which course of action a given group ultimately pursues, the aforementioned “critique” of the Democratic party is a crucial part of any deliberative body. While “critique” may assume a negative connotation and seem representative of the argument culture, its definition actually yields a detailed analysis of a topic, the kind of critical inquiry prioritized in academic settings. Without critical reflection and an active investigation into the complexity of a given issue, we risk what Spellmeyer describes as a “fetishizing of community that insulates the status quo from genuine critique” and a “narcissistic appeal to the like-minded.”

Difficult problems demand the difficult work of deliberation! It is not realistic to imagine that every Democrat had gathered at these town hall meetings to achieve the same objectives and to operate under the same set of values. To do so reveals a political party’s own narcissism and hampers sustainable change.

Kaner's model helps us make better sense of why diverse perspectives, competing frames of reference, and even critique are a necessary part of any deliberative process:

> **"After a period of divergent thinking, most groups enter a Groan Zone. It's almost inevitable. For example, suppose a group has just brainstormed a list. In theory, the next task is simple: sift through the ideas, and pick a few to discuss in depth. But in practice that task can be grueling. Everyone has their own frame of reference. Moreover, when people misunderstand one another, they become more confused, more impatient, more self-centered—more unpleasant all around. People repeat themselves, they interrupt, they dismiss other people's ideas and rudely put each other down."**

Yet the most important part of this process hinges on the role of the facilitator, according to Kaner's model. He explains:

> **"The facilitator's main objective in the Groan Zone is to help the group develop a shared framework of understanding. This is anything but easy. Whether the facilitator is helping one person stand up to pressure from others, or helping two people clear up a misunderstanding between them, it takes a lot of careful, responsive listening. At times, the facilitator may be the only person in the room who is listening at all. The classic listening skills—paraphrasing and drawing people out—are all indispensable now. So are empathizing, validating differences, helping people listen to one another, linking, and listening for common ground."**

While Chapter 3 will more fully examine listening rhetoric within the field of composition and rhetoric, Kaner's model serves as a useful starting point to work through the Groan Zone. This process also invites students to adopt the role of a "facilitative investigator," a term I use to merge Kaner's process of facilitating a discussion with the act of critique and investigation that an objective leader of a discussion would undertake.

The role of the facilitative investigator—to treat dissent as a process of sorting through, processing, and testing out each claim against the other—helps reveal a clear directive for students to adopt. To do so, the facilitative investigator must

adopt a leadership role and guide the group with a seemingly simplistic, yet consequential question that allows for a fuller exploration of this dimension of dissent: “All things considered, what should we do about X (X being the problem or issue students seek to address)?” By pursuing this question, we might achieve a new theory of knowledge—one that surpasses the mere role playing inherent in a former theory. The “should” element of this question urges our “best” rhetorical practices: our best guesses, for starters, and ultimately our best choices and decisions. Starting with the premise that we can effect social change, students move to develop what we “ought” to do about a particular issue or situation that they might otherwise simply disagree on. The “should” element is important because it denotes a sense of urgency not captured by terms like “could,” “might,” or “would.” These latter terms are more hypothetical than practical. And yet, “should” claims are not as demanding as “must” assertions and therefore avoid that slippery slope of lapsing back into adversarial argument statements. “Must” claims often make an argument more assertive than deliberative, more agonistic than productive. Realizing the potential power of non-adversarial arguments—arguments that express “what we should do”—is a central goal in a composition course that is based around the model, method, and metaphor of a town hall meeting.

What Should We Do?

One of the more pressing points of this guiding question—"what should we do?” —is the pronoun at work. Even when the facilitator investigator is posing this question, he/she is only do so as a guide. More importantly, the “we” pronoun invites a kind of collective action, a collaborative effort required of the whole group, to gain a deeper understanding and increase participants’ knowledge. “We” includes the personal “I” (of the student) and also functions as a collective first person “I” that takes into account the broader ethos of a given group in which one is an active participant. In other words, this “I” is not exclusively the personal “I” focused on winning an argument but acting in a reasoned way for the good of the whole community. This ethically-minded question operates at the heart of the model of the composition classroom as a town hall meeting by encouraging discourse that moves beyond dualistic thinking. It invites us to rise to a point of cognitive maturity that allows us to stake a commitment—not just assume a conveniently easy relativist position—within a rational framework after a serious investigation into a particular topic of critical inquiry. Students can take turns adopting the role of the facilitator investigator and, in this way, grow more comfortable and familiar with low-stakes leadership positions.

Discussion Questions for Replicating The Town Hall Meeting: Part II

Let's build on Part I of the above in-class discussion assignment. By this point, classmates have identified issues of concern on campus, narrowed their focus around one issue, articulated why they are invested in the issue, and considered ways the issue has been addressed thus far. Additionally, participants in this class discussion have identified the key stakeholders, the root causes of the issue, and the impact experienced on campus. Now they must move to the next step: taking action. Here is where composition classrooms can turn from class discussion to more individual acts of composition through the proposal argument assignment.

Essay Assignment: Working With Proposal Arguments

Directions

For this paper, you will compose a practical proposal addressing a local or national problem. Your proposal argument should offer a specific plan of action that speaks to a significant and pressing issue.

You will choose an issue with which you are personally concerned and wish to explore. You may choose one of the issues we have addressed in class during our discussion of the readings. DO NOT choose the same issue you focused on in your expository essays. Rather, explore something new, some issue that you have recently grown interested in or wish to advocate for. As noted in the text *Writing Arguments*, "The essence of proposal arguments is that they call for action. In reading a proposal, the audience is enjoined to make a decision and then to act on it—to do something. Proposal arguments [much like ethical arguments] are sometimes called should or ought arguments because those helping verbs express the obligation to act: "We *should* do this [action]" or "We ought to do this [action]." Thus, your main goal is to **advocate for change**.

A practical proposal proposes an action to solve some kind of immediate problem. Examples of local or campus problems include parking, cost of tuition, campus safety, dining hall food, dorm-room conditions, relations between students and citizens of Kutztown, presence of guns on campus, roommate disputes, advising, and the like. Examples of national problems include the following: immigration, hate speech/violence, abortion, gun rights, infrastructure,

the death penalty, the legalization of marijuana, racial profiling, gender/racial discrimination, and others we will explore. You may choose any of these or devise your own topic.

You Practical proposals are narrow, local, and concrete; they focus on the nuts and bolts of getting something done in the here and now. Your proposal should have three main sections:

(1) a detailed description of the problem and an explanation of why it matters now

(2) a specific proposed solution that urges the reader to take action

(3) a clear justification that speaks convincingly to why your reader should pay attention to this topic and why they should follow your recommendation to act

Sources

You must use at least TWO sources to support your claims in this essay!

Proposal Argument Brainstorming Exercise

To get students started, consider this guide below to crafting an intro paragraph and thesis:

Intro & Thesis

According to recent research from a University of Michigan study, "Concern over the price of textbooks has risen to the level of national outcry, drawing increasing attention and action from public interest groups, state and federal legislatures, faculty, students, bookstores, publishers, and university leadership." Currently, the average college student in the United States pays $1,200 to $1,300 per year for textbooks and supplies. As a student at Kutztown University (KU), I face an approximate cost of $23,616.00 as an in-state resident for tuition and fees. Given the fact that college tuition continues to rise, it is important that steps are taken to minimize costs in other areas, such as textbooks. To this end, we should pursue a two-part solution that would benefit current and prospective KU students. First, KU faculty should adopt open-access materials and eliminate traditional textbooks. Second, the KU bookstore should provide students with more opportunities to purchase used books or rent textbooks. With this two-pronged approach, students can reduce the burden of paying exorbitant costs for

textbooks and materials they might only use sparingly in the course of their studies.

Audience

Who could/should such a proposal be written to?

- President of KU (someone who oversees everything—faculty more likely to listen to him than to students)
- Faculty
- KU bookstore and other suppliers

Readership

Who would benefit from reading this proposal?

- Current students of KU
- Potential students
- Administrators
- Legislators

Context

What information would be helpful to include?

- What other costs do we have to worry about besides textbooks?
- How often are textbooks used in class (asking students—how often did use your text?)?
- How well do D2L and open-access materials serve the needs of faculty and students?
- What other schools have implemented effective cost-saving measures in terms of textbooks?

Criticism

Who might object to or be critical of such a proposal?

- Bookstore/Book suppliers

- Professors who do not like technology

Sources

Please see the link for a student sample of the proposal argument: Proposal Argument APA 7th Edition.

Priority #3: Treating Writing as an Ethically-Infused Act

Concomitant with such an investigation is deliberation, which requires commitment to one's ideas. Here, we should recall the last of the three priorities of the town hall meeting which hold particular relevance to the composition classroom: **to treat writing as an ethically infused act by emphasizing responsibility for and commitment to one's ideas.** Our investigation and deliberations into a given proposal involve a commitment both to the position we assume in our argument and to the writing, or expression, of that position. The commitment to language, then, functions as the "means [of] sorting through… the various questions and problems and values involved in an issue and coming to a decision you can stand up for," according to Cooper et al. (81). In other words, this kind of commitment to language is the practice of a "questioning relationship" among the student, the issue, the stakeholders, and the decision-makers—all of which are imaginable roles in the context of a town hall meeting model.

We come to understand, then, how pursuing democracy via the town meeting method in a composition classroom is an ethical imperative. Situating the town meeting in composition classrooms possesses ethical implications. We have a duty to listen to each other, remain open-minded, and consider differing perspectives if we hope to equip ourselves with all the knowledge pertinent to the subject at hand. To do otherwise shortchanges all participants intellectually and continues to foster moral bankruptcy on an academic and social level. Most historical accounts and images of town hall meetings erroneously mimic and sentimentalize the Rockwellian portrait of Jim Edgerton. We understand that contemporary town hall meetings, campus protests, and classroom discussions are marked with strife, a spectrum of definitions about "free speech," and often failed attempts at inquiry and unity. Yet we must keep pressing forward with an ethical approach to composition grounded in empathy, respect, and civility. The subsequent chapters will continue to explore these subjects within the context of Rogerian rhetoric, listening rhetoric, feminist rhetoric, and other non-adversarial approaches to argument.

Chapter Three: the Listening-Oriented Writer: How the Expressive Voice, Feminist Rhetoric, & Rogerian Rhetoric Can Teach Us To Listen and Respond

Setting the Stage

Imagine walking into a crowded room where everyone has gathered to address an issue of concern. Perhaps the issue is a local matter for a town, a school, or a club. Its impact has a confined effect on the immediate community, but the consequences also prove immensely important for how others perceive this community from the outside. Perhaps, even, the issue has been presented to this group once before, but recent developments have resurrected the matter again. The degree of concern varies from one individual to the next, but all participants who gather wish to express their views. As the meeting commences, several leaders—or a leader—outline the main tenets of the problem before the crowd. Tension fills the air as the audience prepares itself for a lengthy debate about a problem that seemingly has no satisfactory solution. Heavy sighs, awkward shifting, and an unmistakable unease fill the room. The floor opens for members of the audience to speak, and participants clamor for their turn. At this point, familiar rhetorical structures are put in motion. One by one, those who wish to make their voices heard take their turn with a driving thought in mind: "What do I want to say?" Other participants at the meeting are also thinking, "What do I say once it is my turn to address the audience?" A pause is taken only when someone wishes to interrupt, raise a counterpoint, or escalate their voice so as to overtake the speaker's. The wish to speak— to point out flaws or refute a point— reaches a near fever pitch. Order breaks down as voices rise, and the only sound available to listen to is that all too familiar one of argument.

The Power and Limitations of the Expressive Voice

In composition studies, the term expressive voice refers to the unique and individual way a writer or speaker conveys their thoughts, emotions, and ideas through language. It encompasses the personal qualities and style that emerge in writing, shaping the tone, personality, and perspective of a piece. Expressive voice is about how a writer's identity, experiences, and emotions are woven into their work, making it distinct and authentic. For quite some time, the expressive voice has played a central role in composition studies. Within the realm of

feminist rhetoric, voice has been an important approach to consciousness raising and identifying oneself as separate and distinct from patriarchy. In feminist studies, consciousness raising refers to a practice and process of increasing awareness about gender inequality, social oppression, and the experiences of marginalized groups. It aims to help individuals recognize the social, political, and personal forces that shape their lives and contribute to systemic inequality, particularly in relation to gender. The goal is to empower people—often women or other oppressed groups—by encouraging them to critically reflect on their experiences and understand how personal struggles are connected to larger societal issues.

The concept became prominent in the feminist movement during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in second-wave feminism. One of the key methods was consciousness-raising groups: small, informal gatherings where women would share personal stories, discuss their struggles, and recognize common patterns of oppression. Through these conversations, participants were encouraged to see their personal issues as part of a broader societal problem, such as sexism, patriarchy, and inequality, rather than as isolated, individual experiences.

The purpose of consciousness raising was then and is now to foster awareness but also to create solidarity and a sense of collective action, with the aim of challenging and dismantling oppressive systems. It is also about encouraging individuals to take ownership of their own narrative and identity, leading to both personal empowerment and social transformation. In this way, feminist rhetoric's practice of guiding us to express our voices and raise our consciousness aligns well with non-adversarial approaches to argument.

Additionally, as we learned from bell hooks' interview "Speaking Freely," voice can serve an important purpose within a cultural studies framework. In such a context, the expressive voice seeks to reclaim or recoup marginalized voices of minority groups previously eclipsed by a hegemonic voice. The development and reclamation of one's voice, both verbally and through one's writing, have occupied a culturally necessary and theoretically sound means of supporting goals within personal writing. When we write to express ourselves or share our own narrative, we not only access our inner voice, but we also discover ourselves via writing.

“Radical openness allows for the fact that you and I might disagree totally about some things.

But there may be other things that we have a resonance and a harmony about…

In the deepest areas of our lives, our intimate lives, we recognise that conflict will be part of trying to have a relationship with somebody who is *not you*.

(But with others we don’t recognise that, when it comes to difficult issues;

And often thats where we start censoring and shutting down…” -Bell Hooks, “Speaking Freely Interview” 2016.

Consider the sample assignment below. This assignment has been used in English and WGS courses for students to reflect on and actualize their personal, academic, and/or professional voices. Additionally, this assignment invites students to consider how they can use their voice, both now and in the future, in campus and community spaces.

Essay Assignment: Personal Voice & Community Vision

Directions

Write a 4- to 5-page essay in which you draw on our readings from Unit I as you consider the role that voice plays in your personal life, as well as how you envision your own participation in a community centered on the central tenets of bell hooks’ work: freedom, the eradication of oppression, and critical consciousness, to name a few.

Part I: Voice

In Chapter 10: Building a Teaching Community, bell hooks clarifies her definition of voice: “One of the most misunderstood aspects of my writing on pedagogy is the emphasis on voice. Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one’s experience. It is using that telling strategically—to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects” (148). In Part I of your essay, you will examine how you have experienced “coming to voice” as an individual. You will examine this experience as a student, worker, family member, friend, or in a variety of different roles that construct your identity. The objective is to examine

how and why your voice matters to you, to explain how you currently use it as a tool (i.e., a tool of freedom, advocacy, education, etc.), and to imagine the ways in which your voice can disrupt patriarchal and hegemonic forces that you confront. While you are invited to draw on work by bell hooks in this section of your essay, I encourage you to center yourself in such reflection and analysis of voice.

Part II: Vision

While we often focus on "big picture" activism via national and international organizations, it is helpful to understand how each of us is situated to learn more about and perhaps even contribute to local groups, organizations, and communities that aim to support marginalized, oppressed, and/or underrepresented populations. To that end, choose a campus, local, or regional organization listed below that you could envision learning more about in order to actively participate in it. Perhaps this is even an organization or group to which you currently belong. I invite you to pursue an option not listed if you believe it would prove a good fit for this assignment. Once you have chosen an organization, you will (1) identify its vision via analyzing its mission and purpose; (2) examine its founders, staff, and participants; (3) assess and describe events conducted by the organization; and (4) envision ways to participate in and/or support its goals.

Additional Context

Throughout this assignment, consider following the lead of Gesa E. Kirsch and Jacqueline J. Royster as they include specific "reflections" in their essay, "Feminist Rhetorical Practices: In Search of Excellence." Remember, throughout all of your work but especially in this course, you are in search of excellence within yourself!

Kutztown University Campus Organizations

- Women's Center
- LGBTQ+ Resource Center
- FMLA (Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance)
- SALSA (Student Alliance for Latino Success and Achievement)
- Allies of Kutztown University

- Association for Women in Mathematics
- Black Student Union
- Her Campus
- Muslim Student Association
- Women in STEM
- Video Vixens
- Commission on the Status of Women
- Frederick Douglass Institute

Local/Regional Community Organizations

- SAFE Berks
- Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center
- LGBT Center of Greater Reading
- Planned Parenthood LGBTQ+ Youth Programs
- Pride of the Greater Lehigh Valley
- Reading Pride
- Mazzoni Center
- Philadelphia FIGHT

The Stakes of Voice for Women and People of Color

Within the context of argument (both oral and written), however, voice has functioned in intrusive ways (i.e., interrupting a variety of voices) and in symbolic ways as a voice that explicitly and/or implicitly dominates other voices by aggressively silencing them. Expressing your own voice assumes a willing audience whereby both sets of participants, both the speaker and the listener, will benefit. In her seminal book *Talking Back*, bell hooks explains: "Awareness of the need to speak, to give to the varied dimensions of our lives, is one way women of color begin the process of education for critical consciousness." As hooks reminds us, the expression of voice is not all that matters; what matters

just as greatly is whether that voice is listened to. When we consider how gender and race intersect in rhetorical situations, we begin to see two forces of oppression at work against an individual speaker and/or writer. More specifically, when the voices of women and people of color are silenced and dismissed, we see the result is the "marginalized voice." In the following passage, bell hooks demonstrates how the marginalized voice can be misused and misappropriated:

> **"Appropriation of the marginal voice threatens the very core of self-determination and free self-expression for exploited and oppressed peoples. If the identified audience, those spoken to, is determined solely by ruling groups who control production and distribution, then it is easy for the marginal voice striving for a hearing to allow what is said to be overdetermined by the needs of that majority group who appears to be listening, to be tuned in."**

Class Discussion Exercise: the Liberatory Voice

Research the news and find examples of voices that dominate and silence those in marginalized groups. Keep in mind how actualizing the "liberators voice" is bell hook' call to action: "The struggle to end domination, the individual struggle to resist colonization, to move from object to subject, is expressed in the effort to establish the liberatory voice." Here, we move forward rhetorically in shifting from the expressive to the liberatory voice. Unlike the expressive or empowered voice, the liberatory voice is an active form of resistance that demands "we learn to talk—to listen—to hear in a new way." Consider the speaker and/or writer who is utilizing that liberatory voice and how their rhetoric is part of the pursuit of social justice. You may consider nationally known the locally known individuals who embody a wide range of backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences.

In this respect, listening functions as a performance, a mere show to appease the speaker; when this occurs, the speaker's power via the expressive voice can be co-opted by a dominant voice. Who are these "dominant voices" in our society today? Where we do we see and hear those voices of domination in political, social, religious, academic, and cultural circles?

To be clear, this textbook has no intention of dismissing or minimizing the power of the expressive or personal voice in composition studies. Perhaps, though, we need to pay more careful attention to bell hooks' treatment of the voice that

affords liberation to refocus speaking as a rhetorical act whose effect is largely determined by those who receive (i.e., listen to) it and interpret it. We need to employ the framework of a town meeting as a means by which we can listen to the liberatory voice in order to change the nature, tone, and expectation of our speech.

Listening as a New Form of Responding

Now that we have considered this very brief history of the expressive voice within composition studies, one that is specifically situated in feminist rhetoric and the liberatory voice, let us consider its primacy and its impact on ways of shaping argument. Why is it so culturally and academically imperative to rely on that expressive voice (i.e., to speak up first) and then listen after, if we even bother to listen at all? Speaking functions as a forceful and often misguided act. Such verbal aggression is an outgrowth of the argument culture, but it also manifests itself in a variety of written contexts, like blogs, where the "anonymous voice" can be as aggressive and insulting as it wants without fear of any rhetorical repercussions. [Chapter 4 will delve more deeply into how voice and argument operate in online contexts, specifically within social media forums and their attendant public comments sections]. As we have seen in previous chapters, prioritizing speaking over listening within rhetoric and composition does not ensure using persuasion in ethical ways; in fact, subsuming the important process of listening can radically threaten an ethical treatment of rhetorical exchanges. How different would the aforementioned town meeting scene look if the guiding and dominant action were to listen, rather than to speak, react, make assumptions, draw premature conclusions, or anticipate the worst possible outcome? What if the basic tenet of such meetings—such arguments—was to secure a solution for the good of the whole determined by the careful consideration of as many productive voices as possible—voices that were all genuinely listened to? Would this approach not support argument in more ethical ways? Such careful consideration would be predicated on attentive, active listening where thoughtfulness would precede judgment. Is such a scene imaginable? If so, might we prepare ourselves in the composition classroom?

By the time you enter college, listening is taken almost completely for granted and subsumed under other teachable and learnable skills such as reading, writing, and speaking. Yet, we are never formally taught how to listen beyond, perhaps, what we learned in pre-school: to be "good listeners" and to "listen to your teachers." Both these directives, however, are meant solely to ensure and reinforce obedience. From the look of today's argument culture, it would appear many, many people missed those lessons in preschool. As compositionist Krista

Ratcliffe observes, “The dominant trend in our field [rhetoric and composition] has been to follow the lead of popular culture and naturalize listening—to assume it is something that everyone does but no one need study.” To listen means more than just hearing sounds or words. It involves actively paying attention to, understanding, and processing the information being communicated. Listening is a conscious, intentional act of focusing on what someone else is saying, with the goal of fully comprehending their message, emotions, and intentions. We may pursue this goal of comprehension when we read. However, Ratcliffe’s view of rhetorical listening is not connected to reading. This is an important point because this textbook will show how reading can, in fact, be a form of listening. This is not to discount Ratcliffe’s extensive research on this topic. Indeed, if you go on to pursue further study in the field of rhetoric and composition, you will undoubtedly encounter Ratcliffe again. Additionally, her view of listening also aligns itself with a way of engaging in social justice: “Listening, I argue, may help us invent, interpret, and ultimately judge differently in that perhaps we can hear things we cannot see. In this more inclusive logos lies a potential for personal and social justice.” Centering listening rhetoric as part of social justice is crucial to pursuing the construction of argument as an ethical means of communication.

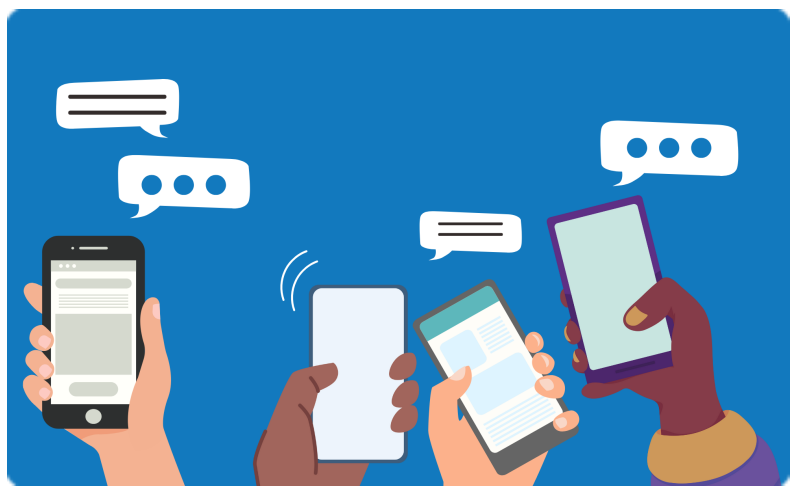
However, her framework of rhetorical listening is markedly different than the purpose of listening in this textbook. For Ratcliffe, she insists: “I am talking about interpretive invention, a way of meaning making with/in language, with two different kinds being reading and listening. For if listening is to be revived and revalued in our field, it must occupy its own niche.” While I do not wish to undermine earlier efforts by those concerned with rhetorical listening, I do wish to highlight how my interest in listening as a teachable tool and as a learned skill differs from previous definitions of rhetorical listening. Ratcliffe focuses on how “rhetorical listening may be imagined, specifically, as what Jacqueline Jones Royster has called a ‘code of cross-cultural conduct.’” Instead of focusing on how listening within this “code of cross-cultural” can afford “interpretive invention,” this textbook is rooted in identifying ways for students to become listening-oriented writers and active readers who respond rather than react to the countless voices they encounter both in person and in online contexts

Please see this link to an interview with Krista Ratcliffe as part of “This Rhetorical Life,” a podcast created by graduate students in Syracuse University’s Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program: Episode 18: Rhetorical Listening with Krista Ratcliffe - This Rhetorical Life (Transcript Available).

Resource

“This Rhetorical Life” focus on rhetorical analyses of contemporary public events and academic trends in the field of writing studies. Consider listening to other episodes that feature topics such as citizenship, academic freedom, queer public cultures, racism, media representation, and more.

The Listening-Oriented Writer



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As noted earlier, the purpose of this textbook is to focus our attention on the myriad ways we listen. While we listen in conversation, in the workplace, and in public forums, we also read significantly in our day-to-day communications via email, social media, and text messages. David Dudley captures the essence of how reading and listening are intertwined when he observes: “We tweet, we text, we email. Everybody’s chatting, but is anybody listening?” Our knee-jerk response may be a resounding “NO!” After all, if we were truly listening when we read and communicate with others in various rhetorical modes, would we argue as much?

We can define the listening-oriented writer as reflective, inquisitive, and curious —one who considers first, asks questions second, and responds last, if at all. The over-arching goal of the listening-oriented writer is to understand other positions and interests cooperatively, not to aggressively convince the audience that their position is right. The composition classroom as a metaphorical town meeting is conducive to developing these skills of self-reflection, critical and sustained inquiry, and intellectual curiosity.

Listening fixes the listening-oriented writer’s attention on a particular task (to accomplish something), while considering a variety of claims and sifting through them for the best possible solution, outcome, or course of action. Listening distances the writer from hot-tempered reactions, impulsive shouting, and

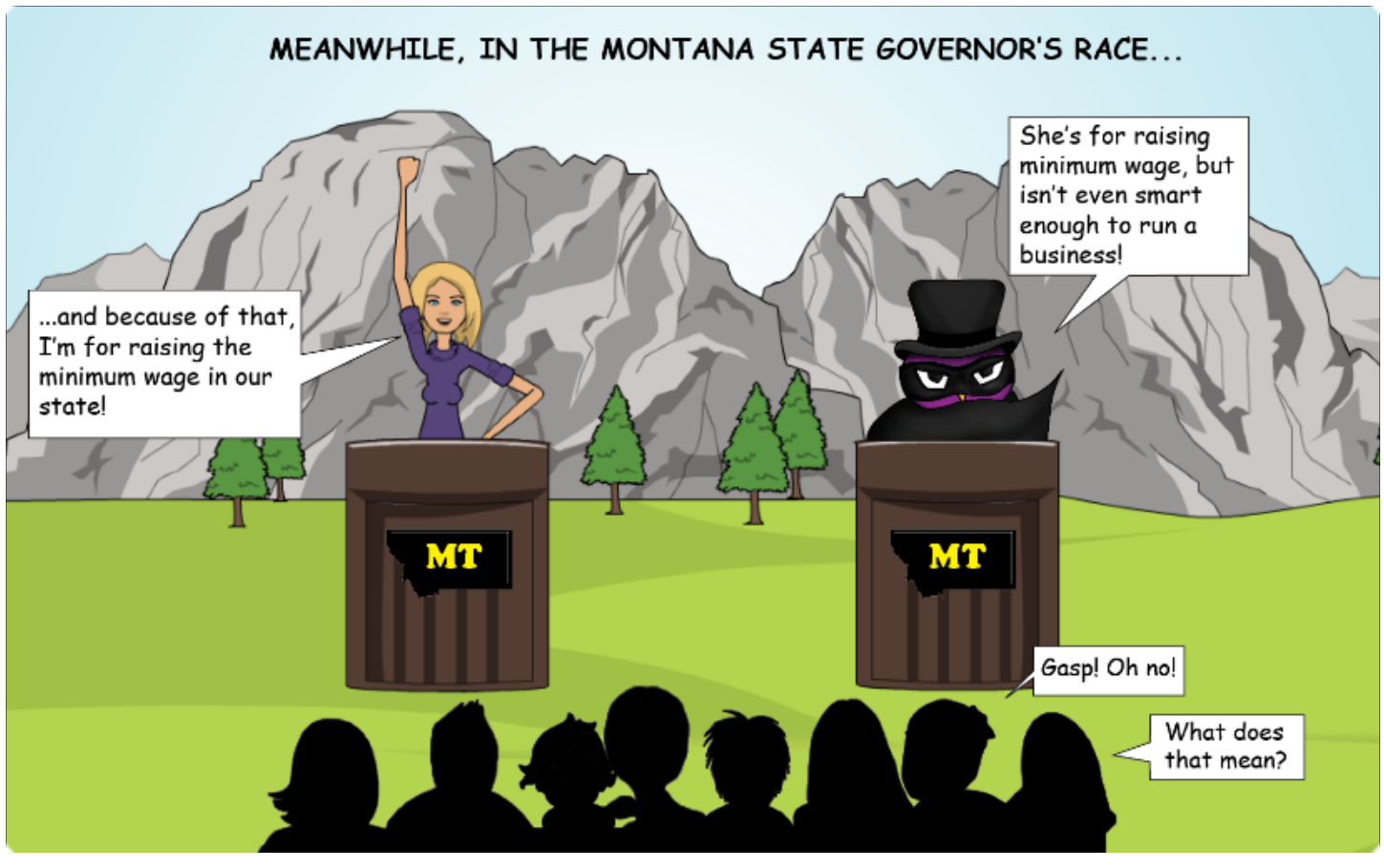
antagonizing tactics. The listening-oriented writer practices such lessons and skills within the framework of a town meeting as an active subject, a co-deliberator, and then extends that model to their writing.

Wayne Booth's Listening Rhetoric

Wayne Booth offers us three different types of rhetoric: win-rhetoric, bargain-rhetoric, and listening-rhetoric. Each one offers us different strategies to navigate arguments and also confers different value systems. Win-rhetoric approaches an issue from a pre-determined stance, grounded in justifications and decorated with intentions of integrity. Here, a premium is placed on winning the argument at whatever cost. There is no evidence of listening in win-rhetoric and if there is, such listening is feigned to appease the speaker that what they have verbalized has been acknowledged. In fact, though, no validation of other views takes place because the speaker wants to win the argument.

Example of Win-Rhetoric

Imagine a politician during a debate using ad hominem attacks to discredit their opponent rather than addressing the issues at hand. Instead of offering a nuanced discussion or a reasoned argument, the politician seeks to undermine the credibility of the opponent with personal insults, thereby trying to "win" the debate through distraction and manipulation.



"Cartoon Image of the Montana State Governors Race" by Excelsior Online Writing Lab (OWL). is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). Read Cartoon Transcript.

Politician A: "My opponent is clearly unqualified to lead, considering their complete lack of experience in the field."

Politician B: "Unlike my opponent, I've actually worked on these issues for years. What do they even know about this topic?"

Here, Politician A uses a win-rhetoric approach by attacking the opponent's personal background, thus sidestepping the actual debate. This rhetorical tactic shifts the focus from policy to the opponent's flaws, aiming to "win" the audience's approval without engaging in a substantive discussion. In this "win-rhetoric" scenario, the goal isn't to enhance understanding or make a case with evidence but to dominate the conversation, often appealing to emotions or biases, rather than reason.

Though bargain-rhetoric may not appear as deceptive as win-rhetoric, it can nevertheless prove just as harmful if the rhetor submits to part of the opposing view in the spirit of compromise or simply relinquishes a kind of power in the hope of producing a productive dialogue. Yet, doing this avoids the difficult work of deliberation (questioning, probing, considering, investigating, etc.). As Booth explains, "Bargain-rhetoric will be judged bad, whether the cause is right or wrong, if the methods, the arguments, the style, are weak and the true purpose concealed or abandoned." We may risk engaging in this kind of rhetoric to satisfy certain academic expectations of producing an argument with "two sides." Yet bargain rhetoric, like the aggressive voice, values writing as a performance, allowing us to demonstrate stylistically sound writing skills without interrogating and relinquishing our beliefs.

Example of Bargain-Rhetoric

Imagine a public health official addressing a community about the importance of vaccination:

"I understand that some of you are hesitant to get vaccinated. The decision is a deeply personal one, and I respect that. But let me offer you something: if you choose to get vaccinated, you are not only protecting yourself but also your loved ones, and the wider community. In exchange for your trust, we, as a healthcare system, commit to being transparent, providing the latest information, and ensuring your safety with every step. This is a partnership, and together, we can ensure a healthier future for everyone. In return for your confidence, we will continue working tirelessly to earn it."

Here, the speaker offers a "bargain" of trust and transparency in exchange for the audience's decision to get vaccinated. There's a sense of reciprocity in the rhetoric: the speaker acknowledges the audience's concerns, offers something valuable in return (trust, safety, and information), and sets the stage for a mutually beneficial relationship. The rhetorical "bargain" frames the issue not as a one-sided demand but as a partnership where both parties have something to gain.

Listening-rhetoric aims at a more specific method of "genuine listening that [does] not naively surrender." Booth describes listening-rhetoric as follows: "both sides join in a trusting dispute, determined to listen to the opponent's arguments, while persuading the opponent to listen in exchange. Each side attempts to think about the arguments presented by the other side…Both sides are pursuing not just victory but a new reality, a new agreement about what is real." Paramount to Booth's scenario is the means by which listening becomes a reciprocal act: I listen to you and then you listen to me out of a shared sense of respect and in the spirit of engaging together in a "trusting dispute." The adjective "trusting" signals a certain level of vulnerability but also emphasizes how an element of trust must exist in any dispute or debate if anything productive is to be accomplished. What proves useful in Booth's definition is his acknowledgement that when both sides come together to listen, to think, and to move towards negotiation, "a new reality" emerges—one that would undoubtedly move more towards personal wholeness and change in perspective. This new reality includes a new way of seeing the world from multiple perspectives, not just from a binary perspective. This new reality emerges by employing listening-rhetoric as a means of cooperation. Listening-rhetoric demands a great deal of rhetoricians and arguers, as Booth demonstrates in his own reflection on the matter: "When I'm quarreling with someone, how do I get myself to listen, really listen, to his or her case, at its deepest levels? How do I get my opponent to listen to me?" The immediate goal, then, is not to change someone else's mind but to remain open to a multiplicity of voices.

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Example of Listening-Rhetoric

Imagine a political candidate delivering a speech on climate change. Instead of just making one-sided, forceful claims about the importance of immediate policy change, the candidate could embody listening rhetoric by acknowledging the concerns of various audience members. Employing listening-rhetoric involves:

Acknowledging opposition or hesitation: The candidate might say, "I understand that many of you might be worried about the economic costs of transitioning to renewable energy. That's a valid concern, and I promise we'll work together to create a sustainable plan that protects jobs while addressing climate change."

Addressing different perspectives: The candidate could also say, "Some of you may think climate change isn't an immediate issue where you live. But let's look at the growing storms, rising temperatures, and the longer droughts impacting even our most rural areas. It's happening now, and we must act together."

In this case, the speaker is attuned to different viewpoints, showing an understanding of the audience's varied concerns, and responding in a way that acknowledges and listens to them. This creates a deeper, more responsive rhetoric where the speaker isn't just talking at the audience but engaging in a sort of "dialogue" that considers how people might feel and think about the topic.

Key Features of Booth's Listening Rhetoric

Empathy: The speaker shows understanding of the audience's emotional state, concerns, and values.

Adaptability: The speaker adjusts their message based on how they anticipate or perceive the audience will respond.

Audience Engagement: The speaker takes the audience's perspective seriously and responds to it in a way that makes the audience feel heard.

In this way, Booth's listening rhetoric emphasizes the importance of mutual understanding in communication, making rhetoric not just a tool for persuasion but a conversation that respects the audience's role in the interaction.

Class Discussion Exercise: Enacting Win-Rhetoric, Bargain-Rhetoric, & Listening-Rhetoric

In small groups, choose an issue that is currently of great national debate. Using the examples above, devise a script in which you frame the issue with "win-rhetoric," "bargain-rhetoric," and "listening-rhetoric." Discuss the key rhetorical strategies used in each. Next, act out each of the scenarios in front of the class without specifying which type of rhetoric you are employing. Classmates should then offer their best guess as to whether your scenario is illustrating win-rhetoric, bargain-rhetoric, or listening-rhetoric.

Resource

Wayne C. Booth's Rhetoric of Assent is a significant work in the field of literary theory and rhetoric, first published in 1974. In it, Booth explores the nature of agreement and assent in communication, particularly focusing on how individuals and groups come to accept or reject ideas. His central argument is that assent—agreeing with a claim, argument, or belief—is not a simple, passive act, but rather an active and complex process influenced by various rhetorical strategies and ethical considerations. Booth argues that rhetoric should not just be about persuasion or manipulation. Instead, he emphasizes the ethical responsibility of both the speaker and the listener. He believes that true assent involves a genuine understanding and agreement, rather than simply yielding to pressure or emotional appeal.

"Rhetoric of Assent": Finding Ground Between Dogmatism and Skepticism

To achieve a more ethical understanding, treatment, and practice of argument, Booth seeks to uncover the "shared ground that would be discovered if opponents really listened to one another." For Booth, this effort lies somewhere between the extremes of dogmatism and skepticism within the "rhetoric of assent." In exploring the extremes of dogmatism and skepticism, Booth encourages students to move beyond holding fast to one position (typical of dogmatists) and beyond doubting everything (typical of skeptics). We might imagine dogmatists as those who engage in active adversarialism (i.e., those who valiantly cling to one position and strive to defend it); and we might imagine skeptics as those who dwell in passive isolation (i.e., those who remain distant and disengaged). Dogmatism devalues authentic listening, Booth explains, as it

tells us, “Don’t bother to listen; you know in advance that they [the other side(s)] have nothing to say worth saying.” Similarly, skepticism views listening as ineffectual because, as Booth argues, “Close listening often leads to doubt, or even hard proof that the opponent is deceptive or mistaken.” Yet when situated in a rhetoric of assent, listening, according to Booth, holds great power in moving beyond both skepticism and dogmatism. Booth articulates the promise of listening in the classroom here:

What do such classroom practices have to do with the conflict between utter skepticism and rabid dogmatism? Well, isn’t it obvious that utter skeptics don’t really listen because they know that no argument can really shatter their skepticism? And isn’t it obvious that rabid dogmatists don’t listen because they already know that the opponent is wrong? Really listening can shatter both extremes.

Great promise exists, therefore, in listening and in cultivating the ear of the listening-oriented writer because the development of listening as a skill can increase free inquiry and trust among participants. The more comfortable participants in a discussion feel about asking questions of each other and probing the issue further, the greater opportunity there is to achieve understanding. Real listening produces the kind of rhetoric that removes or minimizes misunderstanding. Once misunderstanding has been reduced or eliminated, we might imagine the emergence of a clearer understanding. And here is where we can find real rhetorical power that Krista Ratcliffe defines as “standing under—consciously standing under discourses that surround us and others, while consciously acknowledging all our particular and fluid standpoints. Standing under discourses means letting discourses wash over, through, and around us and then letting them lie there to inform our politics and ethics.” This definition of “understanding” harkens back to the principles discussed earlier by feminist rhetoricians, particularly as it relates to power. Listening shifts power dynamics from phallocentric persuasion to the task of gaining clarity and understanding. Further, developing the ability to listen closely paves the way for our increased chances of being listened to in return. Listening is part of assenting to the other person you are arguing with in the pursuit of ethical argument. To be clear, assent is not about a kind of subservience. It is about a clear pursuit of opening one’s mind instead of closing it off.

How Can Rogerian Rhetoric Help Us Listen?

Rogerian Rhetoric is another tool that helps us to open our mind, pursue an ethical treatment of argument, and listen carefully. Rogerian rhetoric is a method of argumentation developed by psychologist Carl Rogers that emphasizes mutual respect and understanding between opposing viewpoints. The goal is not to win an argument, but to find common ground and build a constructive dialogue between people who may hold conflicting beliefs or ideas. In Rogerian rhetoric, the process typically involves the following steps:

Step #1—Presenting the opposing viewpoint fairly: Acknowledging the other side's argument accurately and without bias, showing that you understand their perspective.

Step #2—Finding common ground: Identifying areas of agreement or shared values between both sides. This is crucial for building a foundation for discussion.

Step #3—Presenting your own viewpoint: Introducing your own argument or position after demonstrating that you understand the other side and showing how it aligns with or can help address the shared concerns.

Step #4—Offering a compromise or solution: Instead of aiming to defeat the opposition, Rogerian rhetoric seeks a middle ground or a collaborative solution that respects both viewpoints.

This approach fosters empathy and can be especially effective in sensitive or polarizing discussions where the goal is to reduce conflict and build mutual understanding. Check out this short YouTube video for an illustration of the differences between traditional argument and Rogerian argument: Traditional Vs Rogerian Argumentation Style (Closed Captioned).

The Restatement Rule

The "restatement rule" lies at the heart of Rogerian rhetoric and also at the core of listening. In his seminal work Classical & Rogerian Persuasion, Richard Coe explains: "Rogers' own expertise is as a therapist, and the model for the crux of Rogerian persuasion is the 'restatement rule' he created for group therapy: 'you can't state your point until you can restate your opponent's to his satisfaction.'" Restating the opponent's position does not simply require verbal articulation, however. It requires and relies on the discerning ear of a willing listener—one who is able to identify nuance, motive, interests, and concerns in the speaker and then mirror those back accurately. It requires further inquiry, if necessary, to

clarify points of confusion, request additional information, and further expand upon an idea so that the listener can restate the argument fairly and from a place of good will. This scenario, of course, assumes a willing listener. But we cannot avoid the question: How do you produce a willing listener versus a performative listener? It is seemingly easy to restate what another has said verbatim without demonstrating empathy, compassion, and a willingness to shift your perspective to another's. In other words, it takes a lot of cognitive and emotional willingness to "put yourself in another person's shoes."

The Listening Debate

To work through conflicting points of view, the speaker can benefit by practicing dispassionate evaluation via Booth's activity of a "listening debate." In the spirit of Rogerian rhetoric, Booth uses an example of two students, Ken and Marna, with opposing views to show how a "listening debate" necessitates the question: "Have you understood her, and has she understood you?" Booth explains the consequences of constructing this kind of debate:

After Ken's second try, he turns to Marna again. 'Has he understood you?' If she says no, ask her why not. After she answers, ask Ken if he understands her objection. And so on. Once Ken has convinced Marna that he has actually listened to her well enough to serve as her lawyer in a courtroom, even though he may still disagree with her, turn to Marna and get her to attempt making Ken's case in the same way.

The goal is not only to represent the opposing view accurately and fairly, but to demonstrate a keen understanding of the other person's position.

Class Discussion Exercise: Listening Debate

In groups of three, practice engaging in a listening debate. One student will occupy the role of a moderator, and the other two students will occupy the roles of those directly engaged in the debate at hand (Person X and Person Y). While expressing each side, the listener is not allowed to interrupt or question the speaker until the speaker says, "I am finished." At that point, the listener is allowed to ask questions of clarification.

The moderator will then further the debate by asking: "Has person X understood you? Has person Y understood you?" Person X and Person Y will engage in a reciprocal, back-and-forth exchange until each party is satisfied that the other has a clear understanding of the issue at hand. You may wish to utilize a timer in which Person X and Person Y each have a reasonable amount of time (i.e., 60 seconds) to speak before the other person can pose clarifying questions. The entire exercise should last no longer than 10 minutes to allow for a focused expression and investigation of ideas. Groups will then return to the larger class discussion to share what lessons they learned and to evaluate the success and difficulty of their listening debate.

Rogerian Rhetoric in the Town Hall

Just as I argue that applying the metaphor of a town meeting to a classroom space can support deliberative discourse, so does Elbow concur that "the classroom is a particularly apt place to work on this process because, despite our commitment to critical thinking, most of us do want our students to be good at entering into new ideas—particularly ideas that bother them." Very often, a town meeting serves that purpose: to put challenging issues on a figurative table and delve into the difficult work of deliberation. If the above features of Rogerian rhetoric do not appear compelling enough, it is important to remember what is often lost in many rhetorical spaces, including actual town meetings: a promise. As Richard Coe reminds us: "The Rogerian ending is not a reiteration but a promise; it explains what the audience/'opponent' has to gain by adopting at least some of what the writer advocates." Unlike agonistic discourse that renders traditional argument as a zero-sum game, Rogerian rhetoric promises that something—some tangible result or visible shift in perspective—can be achieved that will point the audience, the listeners, in a new direction. Notice Coe's use of the word "advocate" to describe what the Rogerian writer tries to do: not argue but advocate by appealing to the human desire to simply understand. It is not a de facto argument based on acquiescing or giving into the speaker's position, but rather it unveils the "mutual purpose" between speaker and listener. This purpose highlights what each party, or stakeholder, has to gain from adopting—at least imaginatively—the other's perspective. Imagining the other perspective is at the core of Elbow's believing and doubting game, which we previously explored in Chapter 1. You will recall through those exercises that doubting requires logic, but believing requires the ability to imagine another's experience. We know that we cannot literally experience another's point of view; we cannot relive their actions over or even duplicate them in real life. But we can participate in a story

or narrative told by the speaker. Elbow explains, "Story, narrative, and poetry help with experiencing...When students have trouble entering into a new point of view (perhaps even just understanding it), I find it useful to ask them to harness language in ways like this: tell a story of someone who believes it; imagine and describe someone who sees things this way." If the audience cannot "get it" by listening to the speaker tell the story, narrative still offers the audience a chance to remove themselves from the process by imagining how someone else would engage in the issue. Through narrative, this figurative representation affords a more objective perspective that the listening-oriented writer can more readily consider.

Other Classroom Strategies for Listening Rhetoric

When the listening audience still fails to imagine a perspective different from their own, Elbow reminds us of the importance of listening in classroom activities like working in peer groups and playing with(in) silence and voice. As Elbow explains: "As Booth and Carl Rogers both emphasize, sometimes the central and enabling thing that Ken must do is simply to stop talking and listen; keep his mouth shut." Methods of ensuring such listening include "the three-minute or five-minute rule," "allies only—no objections," and "testimony."

Peer groups that follow a "no arguing" guideline preserve a non-adversarial approach to learning while keeping student writers focused on the text and not the author of that text. Students and instructors can employ the practice of "no arguing" in peer-review workshops where students must offer constructive criticism through posing questions only, not by attacking weak parts of a paper; such questions are aimed to encourage the writer to consider other ideas when revising their prose. Listening and then asking guiding questions can move the writer away from writer-based prose and more towards deliberation with their own writing. Moments of pure silence can also be particularly useful. Silence suspends voice in productive ways that allow one to listen not only to the writing voice of another, but also to listen to their internal voice trying to make sense of competing claims.

The three-minute or five-minute rule can be enacted by a single student who does not believe he/she is being listened to. When this rule is in place, no one can talk for a specified length of time (three or five minutes), allowing the silenced voice to speak while the audience (the class) listens but does not reply.

The “allies only” method gives individuals the opportunity to speak and participate in the discussion only if they are willing to assent to the minority view. Such a technique is popular with the act of brainstorming.

“Testimony” supports an emphasis on personal narrative as a way to communicate values through sharing a particular experience. Lamb encourages narratives within feminist composition to “show who we are and what our values are.” Again, no speaking can take place during testimony, only listening.

Point of Caution, Aka “a Reality Check”

We should be under no delusions that even if we practice Rogerian rhetoric, we may regress back to assertive tactics. Coe shares this concern when he reveals how students “tend to be Rogerian only through the first half, then they breathe a sigh of relief, shift to an assertive tone, present their position as strongly as they can, and thus destroy the Rogerian ethos.” The danger in this reflex reveals an inherent gender dynamic whereby the more dominant voice (typically associated with dominating, patriarchal practices of rhetoric) assumes an assertive tone, placing Rogerian rhetoric in a subservient position.

Yet as this chapter has shown, Rogerian and feminist approaches are compatible in that they reveal a shared set of values:

- moving the writer from object to subject
- re-imagining power through voice and listening
- developing trust in authority and building trust with one’s audience
- treating writing as a cooperative endeavor
- developing empathy in rhetorical exchanges
- exploring varied perspectives that can support collective and cooperative aims.

This value set moves us from monologic argument to non-adversarial argument, foregrounds listening as a teachable and learned skill, and serves as a call to revive the Rogerian ethos to prepare the listening-oriented writer for engaging in coalescent argumentation, an area I will focus on in chapter four.

Chapter Four: Social Media Writing as Public Sites of Deliberation

"A World of Words"

The form our writing takes in digital spaces significantly shapes our lives and affects the academic writing we produce both in the world and in the classroom. Social media spaces such as blogs, direct message exchanges, Facebook discussion forums, Instagram posts, TikTok videos, and text messages, to name a few, are typically not associated with academic writing. Yet, as research has shown, all of us gain significant rhetorical power via these exchanges. We learn to harness our experiences into words, however brief and fleeting these might be, and are, in turn, shaped by that exchange. When situated within an academic framework, we can begin to use these experiences to think critically, question others' ideas in relation to our own, and arrive at new ideas via social discourse. Though perhaps unknowingly, we practice such skills in these forums on a near daily basis, yet we hesitate to extend these practices to our academic writing since these skills are not as concrete as conventions taught in composition courses, nor are they readily embraced as of yet in many academic disciplines. In fact, many student writers develop nuanced ideas, varied perspectives, and a greater understanding of collaboration in these social exchanges. While many critics (i.e., educators, parents, and academics) point to technology as distracting, isolating, and potentially problematic for today's students, anthropologist Susan Blum, who is also a professor at the University of Notre Dame and teaches intensive writing courses, argues: "In some ways this is the wordiest and most writerly generation in a long while. These students are writing all the time, reading all the time. Some of what they are writing and reading does not measure up to serious academic standards, but they are writing and reading all the same, busily immersed in a world of words."

This chapter seeks to explore two main questions:

(1) **How can we harness and tap into this "world of words" that we are busily engaged in, fanatically attached to, and totally at ease in?**

(2) **How can we develop our skills as "the most writerly generation," so we can more successfully navigate this realm of active social communication and, by extension, nurture a greater investment in academic writing within social situations?**

The model of a town-hall meeting, where participants come together to work out solutions and enact action via deliberative democracy, can be enacted in online writing spaces. Such a model, practiced within the realm of blogs, direct message exchanges, and social media forums, produces not only academic discourse but also fosters writing communities. Specifically, students and instructors alike can practice writing in social media networks that mimic a town-hall model of deliberation and alternative argumentation. This model moves the student-writer from a writing subject to a deliberating agent. This chapter thus serves as a call to action for students and instructors alike to explore the potential of academic writing in social networks in order to foster writing communities and actively practice deliberative discourse.

Photo by Julian Christ on Unsplash

Social Media Spaces as Sites of Contradiction

Compositionist John Clifford introduces the idea of "sites of contradiction" as a way of understanding the complexities and tensions present in the field of composition and rhetoric. These “sites of contradiction" refer to moments or spaces in the teaching and learning of writing where multiple, conflicting ideas or practices coexist. These contradictions might arise from the intersection of different educational philosophies, the diverse needs of students, the expectations of institutions, or the varying goals of writing instructors. These sites can also refer to moments when our individual identities, backgrounds, and experiences may clash with the dominant discourses or expectations in academic

writing, creating tension between personal voice and institutional norms. Recognizing and engaging with these contradictions can lead to more nuanced and inclusive writing strategies.

Indeed, new social media spaces can serve composition instructors and students as productive sites of contradiction. Most importantly, we can and should look to utilize such social media spaces as active starting points to better understanding and participating in argumentative spaces. To be clear, although such spaces are at times fraught with conflict, great potential exists in learning which productive argument skills we can practice and which ones we should actively avoid. For example, although a virtual space, Facebook is still populated by real live participants. Our ability to actually see the faces (hence the name Facebook) of the people with whom you are conversing is one of the closest methods we have on social media to face-to-face interactions. Instagram, TikTok, and others also provide that visibility of participants, but Facebook arguably affords users more opportunities to compose extended written messages. The town-hall model can be enacted in this social media forum in order to produce and support writing communities, but more importantly to foster new ways of academic discourse and argumentation. Specifically, these areas can:

- move the student-writer from a writing subject to a deliberating agent
- revise the way current socio-pedagogical situations "make no attempt to put writers or readers in a concrete social situation" by inviting "dissent, discontinuity, and confrontational discourse," as John Clifford suggests
- cultivate a knowledge base where the deliberative agent is part of a community of minds (to recall an image previously used in Chapter One)—a community more intent on coalescing than arguing

Thus, social media spaces serve as virtual sites of contradiction—social spaces where students can consider and revisit issues of conflict and tension, particularly over the issues that are most important to them. In using this phrase "sites of contradiction," Clifford reflects the conflict—though not necessarily an irresolvable one—between the expressive idea that the "individual writer is free…to be an authentic and unique consciousness" and the structuralist idea that "writers do not simply express themselves…but rather mirror a general and systematic pattern of oppositions common to all narratives, myths, or languages." As Clifford goes on to explain, "[P]oststructuralism, then, decenters writing as well as the self, seeing both not only as the effect of language patterns but as the result of multiple discourses already in place, already overdetermined by historical and

social meanings in constant internal struggle." Viewing the writer as a source of "multiple discourses" engaged in a "constant internal struggle" is certainly an overwhelming view, but we need not see it as a disabling one. Instead, this view promotes the writer as well-equipped, empowered, and engaged.

This chapter does not wish to veer too far into the complex theories Clifford offers, though such research may prove useful for those students who wish to further their studies in rhetoric and composition. Rather, the point of analyzing Clifford's "sites of contradiction" here is to reassure the student writer that it is normal to find ourselves with contradictory feelings towards the writing we produce and the roles we adopt in social media exchanges. And yet, to actualize the potential of the writing we produce in social media exchanges, we must access the ways we can feel empowered by such participation. Here is how we can do that…

Intertextuality & Interanimating

Let's return to our initial question: "How can we tap into that 'world of words' and produce a realm of active communication out of which academic discourse can (hopefully) grow?" The answer, in part, lies in Blum's discussion of the terms "intertextuality" and "interanimating." These two concepts are actively at work in exchanges like those we witness in town hall meetings or in social media networks. First, Blum argues that "all speech—including writing—draws in some way from other texts and speakers. This interdependence of words and ideas on prior sources is what we call 'intertextuality.'" Next, she asserts, "Any detailed look at real-life speech or writing shows that people frequently utter or write words that were first spoken or written by others, 'interanimating'—that is, enlivening and entwining—them with a selection of other voices." To further help us understand intertextuality and interanimating, and to see how these terms prove useful in better understanding public rhetorical exchanges in town hall meetings and in social media exchanges, let's consider a few scenarios.

Scenario #1: Social Media Posts

Given the synchronous and asynchronous nature of public discourse, town hall meetings and social media exchanges illustrate "intertextuality" and "interanimating" where one person's idea is spurred by that of another who animates the idea and infuses it with a new perspective, question, or thought. Take, for example, a typical Facebook status update. Let's imagine three friends: Brian, Cynthia, and Michael. Brian's Facebook status may read: "Brian is going to vote today." Brian's friend Cynthia might then enthusiastically respond, "I am,

too. Let’s go to the polls together!” Michael, a mutual friend, may respond more pessimistically by insisting, “There’s no point to voting. Why bother?” Cynthia may counter with: “Our democracy depends on our participation. Don’t you want to exercise your right to vote? After all, voting is a right guaranteed to all by the Constitution.” Brian responds, “Cynthia is right, Michael. You should really consider it. No matter what your political affiliation, every voice matters and every vote counts.” Michael replies: “I’m still not sure if it will make a difference, but I’ll think about it.” Here, Cynthia references a founding document of our nation, a text that further strengthens the argument of her text exchange with Brian and Michael. This “interdependence of words and ideas” invites Michael not only to listen to his friends’ ideas, but also to potentially consider democratic principles. Additionally, the questions posed by Brian and Cynthia “interanimate” the conversation by vividly illustrating American ideals and democracy to Michael. All participants, though particularly Michael, walk away from this online exchange with a fuller picture of what is at stake and with a better understanding of why participation and the expression of one’s voice via voting actually matter. In short, for many, Facebook is a way of connecting with others through online discourse, serving as fertile ground on which language can be stretched and flexed to afford new avenues for self-expression, self-reflection, and above all, deliberation.

Scenario #2: Town Hall Meetings

Another example of a campus town hall meeting at the California State University Chico campus effectively captures multiple participants at work who illustrate what it means when a conversation is intertextual and interanimating. In the December 2008 issue of the “Bringing Theory to Practice” newsletter, Jennifer O’Brien describes a campus event in her essay “The Town Hall: Research, Reading, Writing and Engaged Citizenship.” Chico’s town hall meeting is the culminating event of the semester, open to the community and the public but specifically designed for first-year students in a course called “Writing for the Public Sphere,” or English 130. As O’Brien explains in further detail: “English 130 is part of the Academic Writing Program (AWP) at Chico that serves 2,500 students each year, and partnering with the First-Year Experience Program, the Town Hall has grown to approximately 600 participants, including students, faculty, administrators, community members, and partners, and experts in the fields of research on which the students choose to focus.” To connect students in more tangible and direct ways with their research, the AWP sought “to give them a real audience and a real purpose for the work that they do.” Thus, the visibility and application of these students’ writing have a profound impact on how they,

and by extension how we as readers of this newsletter, can see the public consequences of our writing.

The students at Chico “fill multiple roles as participants of the Town Hall, using their research and writing experiences in different ways.” O’Brien describes three roles, including (1) those who present to small groups before returning to lead roundtable discussions; (2) those who speak to the larger Chico community in the “free speech area”; and (3) those who act as “indirect participants, serving as informed and productive members of the conversations that unfold at the Town Hall reception with community members and experts.” The goal is increased civic engagement across campus.

From O’Brien’s description of these various roles, we see evidence of participant roles outlined by sociologist Erving Goffman. His “Participation Framework” is a concept from his sociolinguistic work that explores how people take on different roles during conversations and interactions. It helps us understand the nuanced roles individuals play in communication, particularly as these roles relate to power dynamics. While these roles are explained below, refer to this video for more information: Erving Goffman's Analysis of Participation Frameworks (read Goffman’s full video transcript).

Principal, or the originator of the message, in leaders of roundtable discussions—those who reported the information gathered in the small break-out sessions to the larger town-hall.

Animator, the one who performs the message, can be likened to the speakers in the “free speech area,” sending out messages and animating the larger crowd in meaningful ways.

Figure(s) is the one who is animated—either through further dialogue with “community members and experts” or simply via listening. Intertextuality thus abounds in this campus town meeting as students participate in a constant animation of deliberation of ideas, translating their research into practice and theory into dialogue.

Discussion Questions for Analyzing Rhetorical Features of Town Hall Meetings

In small groups, research town hall meetings online. Find evidence of ones that contain short videos to illustrate the rhetorical exchanges at these meetings. See some samples below.

After you have chosen one of these to focus on, consider the following questions:

1. Framing and Agenda Setting

- How do the speakers (politicians or community leaders) frame the issues discussed in the town hall?
- What issues are given the most attention, and why do you think those specific topics were prioritized.

2. Audience Interaction and Engagement

- How did the audience react to the speakers' statements? Were there moments of agreement, disagreement, or strong emotional responses?
- Did the speakers engage with audience members' questions or concerns effectively? How did they manage or deflect criticism, if at all?

3. Tone and Persuasion

- What tone did the speakers use throughout the meeting (e.g., formal, informal, empathetic, confrontational)? How did this tone influence the audience's perception of the issues discussed?
- Were there any rhetorical strategies (e.g., appeals to emotion, logical arguments, or credibility) used to persuade the audience? Provide examples.

4. Inclusivity and Representation

- How inclusive was the town hall in terms of representation? Were any communities or voices noticeably absent or ignored during the meeting? If so, what might be the reasons behind this exclusion?

- Did the speakers make an effort to address the needs and concerns of marginalized or underrepresented communities?

5. Policy Discussion

- How clearly were the policies being discussed? Did the speakers explain their policies in a way that the audience could easily understand, or were there gaps in explanation?
- Were any policy proposals presented as clear solutions to the problems raised by the audience? How convincing were the proposed solutions?

6. Non-Verbal Communication

- How did the speakers' body language, gestures, and facial expressions affect the message being communicated? Did non-verbal cues align with the spoken message?
- Were there any significant moments where non-verbal communication (e.g., a pause, a smile, an angry gesture) seemed to influence the tone or outcome of a discussion?

7. Follow-up and Accountability

- Did the town hall meeting result in any actionable outcomes, such as promises of follow-up or future community events? Were any concrete commitments made by the speakers?
- How do the speakers plan to follow up with the audience on the issues discussed? Were timelines or plans for accountability mentioned?

8. Impact on Public Opinion

- Do you think the town hall meeting had an impact on public opinion or voter behavior? Why or why not?
- After attending or watching the meeting, do you think the public's understanding of the issues has changed in any way? What factors might have influenced their views?

The next section of this chapter will offer another case study in which researchers observed and analyzed a town hall meeting on a college campus. This town hall illustrates the way we can tap into this "world of words" by identifying instances of intertextuality and interanimation. These two concepts are actively at work in exchanges like those we witness in town hall meetings or in social media networks, yet keeping deliberative discourse as a foremost goal will prove essential in order to continue our pursuit from chapter 1 as a "worthy arguer."

The Back-and-Forthness of Rhetoric in Writing Publics & Communities

Brian Jackson, the associate director of composition at Brigham Young University, and Jon Wallin, a graduate instructor of composition at the same institution, recently explored the value of Web 2.0 applications, specifically YouTube, in their essay "Rediscovering the 'Back-and-Forthness' of Rhetoric in the Age of YouTube." Their study confirms the need for both instructors and students alike to tap into the potential of analyzing, participating in, and deliberating within online writing spaces: "As our students spend more time on Web 2.0, we can anticipate new argumentation literacies that will undoubtedly emerge from the hours logged by students when they're off the academic clock." Their study answers the call issued by Kathleen Blake Yancey at the 2004 CCCC conference in which she directed attendees to heighten their awareness of how "students' out-of-class writing extends 'beyond and around the single path from student to teacher' in ways that create 'writing publics.'" Analyzing the type of writing we (both instructors and students) compose in social media spaces allows us to develop these new argumentation literacies with the intent of growing into more ethical and more worthy arguers to harken back to Daniel Cohen's call to action in Chapter 1.

Jackson and Wallin admit that while "the World Wide Web may have been designed as a tool for reading, it is now more than ever a tool for writing, thanks to new media literacy and the bottom-up, participatory, and literate cultures that use emergent technologies to form publics through the back and forth process of online exchange." The emphasis on the word "publics" by these scholars is of particular importance to town hall meetings as models of deliberation because of its connotation with "community": "More recently the word public has replaced community as the metaphor that describes the way students write within conversations to create what W. Michele Simmons and Jeffrey T. Grabill describe as a 'robust civic rhetoric'—a place where 'no document is singly authored, no

speech a solo performance.’” We can examine this “robust civic rhetoric” within the example of a YouTube video comment thread that Jackson and Wallin analyzed. This video captured the arrest and assault of Andrew Meyer, a University of Florida senior, at a town hall meeting with Senator John Kerry.

As they explain:

> **“On September 17, 2007, near the end of Senator John Kerry’s town hall forum at the University of Florida (UF), Andrew Meyer, a journalism major, demanded to ask a few questions after the moderator had nearly closed the forum… Meyer asked three sort of long-winded questions about the 2004 election, the war in Iraq, and Yale’s secret society Skull and Bones before his microphone was cut off. As soon as his mic was cut off, the UF police began to muscle Meyer out of the auditorium…As Meyer was being carted away, Kerry himself encouraged the police officers to let him answer Meyer’s questions, but the back and forth was cut short two minutes later when Meyer was tased for not complying with his arrest.”**

The event gained nationwide attention, largely due in part to the fact that it was captured on video, posted numerous times by attendees at the town hall, and generated thousands of comments across the YouTube platform. Furthermore, the video itself went viral due not only to the inherent violence of campus police tasing Meyer, but also to Meyer’s now famous plea: “Don’t tase me, bro!” which became a rallying cry for free speech. In short, Jackson and Wallin focused on this particular incident because the video provided “an opportunity for ordinary citizens to make arguments about free speech, police force, civility, ethos, and the normative standards of public forums.”

Class Discussion Exercise

As an entire class, consider the following questions after watching Video #1 of Andrew Meyer at the University of Florida town hall meeting and reading the following news articles for greater context. These questions are similar to those in the previous Class Discussion Exercise in which you began to practice analyzing a town hall meeting; they have been tailored for the the purposes of analyzing this particular town hall.

- **VIDEO #1**: UF student Tasered at Kerry forum (new, complete) (read UF student video transcript)
- **VIDEO #2**: University of Florida student Tasered at Kerry forum (read University of Florida student video transcript)

New Articles:

1. Framing and Agenda Setting

- Who are the speakers in this town hall? Specifically, who are Andrew Meyer and Senator John Kerry?
- How did they frame the issues discussed in the town hall?
- What issues are given the most attention, and why do you think those specific topics are prioritized?

2. Audience Interaction and Engagement

- How does the audience react to Andrew Meyer's statements? Are there moments of agreement, disagreement, or strong emotional responses?
- Does Meyer engage with members of the audience effectively? How does he manage the campus police?

3. Tone and Persuasion

- What tone do Meyer and Kerry use throughout the meeting (e.g., formal, informal, empathetic, confrontational)? How does this tone influence the audience's perception of the issues discussed?
- Were there any rhetorical strategies (e.g., appeals to emotion, logical arguments, or credibility) used to persuade the audience? Provide examples.

4. Non-Verbal Communication

- How did Meyer's body language, gestures, and facial expressions affect the message being communicated? Did non-verbal cues align with the spoken message?

- What type of body language, gestures, facial expression, and other non-verbal cues did you detect among others in the audience, as well as from campus police?

5. Follow-up and Accountability

- Did the town hall meeting result in any actionable outcomes?
- How did the speakers (namely Meyers and Kerry) follow up with the audience on the issues discussed and the police tasing and removing Meyers from the town hall?
- Next, turn your attention to analyzing the "back-and-forthness of rhetoric" that Jackson and Wallin define in the following terms:
- "We suggest, then, that one way we can anticipate and complement students' online literacies is to teach the back-and-forthness of rhetoric—the often informal, messy process of exchange that takes place when two or more people argue with each other over public issues. To be clear, we are not talking about the dialectic students assume when they write an essay in the school genres. We are talking about an actual dialectic that requires students to write to other students, respond to other students, and write yet again in an argument that could potentially go on forever, like the comment thread of a YouTube video."

6. Impact on Public Opinion

- Now open the link to Video #2, which includes significantly more comments in response to a shorter clip of Video #1. You are also encouraged to review the comments from Video #1, but just keep in mind that Video #2 offers a great deal more and thus provides more opportunities for analyzing the back-and-forth conversations that Jackson and Wallin take up in their study. After reviewing these comments, locate examples that illustrate the "back-and-forthness of rhetoric" in which "two or more people argue with each other" over Andrew Meyer's experience.
- What "public issues" are these commenters concerned with?
- How do they signal their understanding of the video? How do they respond to each other?

Digital Deliberation

YouTube, Facebook, blogs, X (formerly known as Twitter), TikTok, Instagram, and online learning platforms all function as examples of what Jackson and Wallin term "digital deliberation"—the process by which ideas are produced, transmitted, and responded to in online, virtual spaces. The reciprocal exchange of such ideas brings argumentation as a process more to the forefront of writing publics, as opposed to argument as a product. Jackson and Wallin are careful to distinguish between these two concepts given the former's clearer alignment with procedural deliberation and the latter's emphasis on disputation and agonism. Jackson and Wallin acknowledge that the difference between argumentation and argument "is in the level of direct engagement with one or more interlocutors in a process that resembles the classical dialectic, if only in its back-and-forthness… A procedural argument, on the other hand, 'proceeds' dialectically between or among individuals in a more intimate method of proposition, question, and answer, often in real-time, to arrive at, or at least approach, secure positions."

The Content Analysis

Although many iterations of this video generated thousands of comments, Jackson and Wallin analyzed the first 500 comments and arguments on the YouTube thread, reading and evaluating these responses "much like a content analysis." The subsequent section of this chapter will more fully explore the potential of content analysis assignments in rhetoric and composition classes. For now, here is a brief definition: Content analysis is a research method used to systematically analyze and interpret the content of textual, visual, or audio materials. It involves studying communication (such as books, social media posts, films, news articles, advertisements, etc.) to identify patterns, themes, trends, or biases within the content. Content analysis can be applied to various forms of media and is widely used in fields like communication studies, sociology, psychology, marketing, and political science. The goal of content analysis is to draw meaningful conclusions from the data by organizing and categorizing the content into manageable elements. Perhaps most importantly, a content analysis is designed to be as objective as possible by using clear rules for coding and categorizing content. Researchers like Jackson and Wallin aim to minimize bias during their analysis.

Jackson and Wallin's research follows the definition of a content analysis offered by Thomas Huckin as "the identifying, quantifying, and analyzing of specific words, phrases, concepts, or other observable semantic data" to uncover "some underlying thematic or rhetorical pattern." In analyzing the first 500 comments of

their chosen YouTube comment thread, they used three crucial questions, which you can use and modify in performing your own content analysis:

1. **Did participants actually make an argument—did they respond with a claim plus a reason for supporting that claim?**
2. **Was there a genuine dialogue going on—did participants respond to each other, demonstrating that they were not merely exchanging stichomythic monologues without the "clinching interlocking claws" of engagement?**
3. **Did participants recognize a need to engage critically with each other?**
4. **Were there any gestures towards establishing stasis with other arguers or questioning the reasonableness of previous arguments?**

Their discoveries in analyzing this particular video proved immensely valuable in revealing the potential of online writing: "[E]ven in a casual, anonymous, often frivolous venue such as YouTube, adhocracies can emerge, constituted by the rhetorical back-and-forthness of users who push against each other in a stichomythia of deliberation open to all." Additionally, "These adhocracies can wield real power through the cascades of information they help organize and disseminate through technological and rhetorical means. The Web encourages those who feel disempowered or disenfranchised to make meaningful contributions to 'massive, coordinated digital networks of activists' participating rhetorically in public debates without any state intervention and without having to catch the attention of more traditional mass media." The town hall and the public discussion generated in the YouTube comment threads illustrate how we can practice deliberation (i.e., in face-to-face discussions and in an online back-and-forth exchange) and analysis. This town hall meeting, Jackon and Wallin argue, "should matter to anyone concerned with free speech and public deliberation." Content analysis assignments, as shown below, can decenter us as mere observers and as passive contributors to destructive forms of argument; instead, such assignments invite us to work as active and engaged citizens in public rhetoric.

Content Analysis Assignment: Exploring the "Back-and-Forthness" of Rhetoric in Social Media

Background

In this course, you have developed ways to identify your individual interest in a topic, as well as ways to enter into conversations and debates with others on

widely debated issues. To practice such skills, we have explored key features of the American Dream such as work and education. Now, we will turn our attention to evaluating several definitions of and contemporary arguments about the American Dream.

Compositionists Brian Jackson and Jon Wallin examine public deliberation in their essay "Rediscovering the 'Back-and-Forthness' of Rhetoric in the Age of YouTube" by considering the "procedural, critical, and progressive qualities of dialectic as a means of accounting for what makes public deliberation effective." If you have ever read a comment thread on YouTube, a news outlet, or Facebook, then you have witnessed the kind of "public deliberation" that Brian Jackson and Jon Wallin have studied. Just as Jackson and Wallin explored YouTube comment threads as sites for productive deliberation, so too can we look to online forums to consider ongoing arguments and claims related to the American Dream. By performing our own content analyses of these comment threads, we can consider the potential of arguing differently (i.e., via non-adversarial approaches) and arguing ethically, particularly in online modes of public deliberation. Please consult Jackson and Wallin's essay in our readings. I recommend organizing your essay into three main sections as follows:

Section I

- Choose a topic you are interested in as it relates to the American Dream and find a discussion about it in an online forum. This discussion can be found on YouTube, Facebook, Reddit, a news source, etc.
- In the first paragraph of your essay, make sure to explain why you chose this particular topic and this specific comment thread to analyze.
- Explain how this digital space (i.e., YouTube, news sources, Facebook) functions. In other words, think about audience in terms of who participates and why in such comment threads.
- Be sure to note the number of comments this topic produced in this comment thread.

Section II

- Consider 20-30 of the comments in this particular comment thread.
- How would you describe the tone of these comments, this back-and-forth exchange? Are participants respectful, thoughtful, sarcastic, insulting, etc.?

- QUOTE specific comments which you find particularly useful in advancing the discussion.
- QUOTE specific comments you find to undermine any attempt at civility and dialogue.
- Explain what conclusions you draw from reading this comment thread.

***NOTE**: I recommend quoting at least five comments directly; then, you can categorize the other 15-20 more broadly. For example, you could note, "Out of the twenty comments I reviewed, the majority reflect a respectful tone." Then, you could note, "This comment in particular advances the discussion: (give the quote). However, this comment reflects adversarial argumentation: (give the quote)."

You will only cite the website that contains the comment thread; you do not need to cite each individual comment.

Section III

- How can we use comment threads and social media forums to argue about difficult, sensitive, and timely topics? It's easy to insist that we should not use them and that we should, in fact, avoid debating online (particularly with strangers) at all costs. Yet we know this is not always possible or desirable. Eventually, we will face arguing with someone who holds views that are radically different from our own.
- How, then, will we establish a dialogue? How will we work to produce a healthy back-and-forth exchange that makes us "worthy arguers," to quote Daniel Cohen?
- Will we attempt Rogerian rhetoric, listening rhetoric, or other kinds of non-adversarial approaches?

Writing Goals

- To participate in conversations and debates about "public deliberation"
- To observe and evaluate conversations that take place in digital forums
- To identify audience, tone, and rhetorical strategies at work in digital forums
- To reflect on non-adversarial approaches to argumentation

"Who Are These People?"

Indeed, many of us may be wary and downright distrustful of the potential to find any constructive dialogue online. While Jackson and Wallin's study addresses those concerns in great detail, this NPR podcast also speaks to questions about social media comment forums like: "Who are these people? Why would anyone write stuff like this?" Listen to the following podcast by Jasmine Garsd here: Is Civility Possible On Social Media?: NPR (Transcript Available).

Discussion Questions for Online Arguments
What are the social and political identities of the participants, Tyler and Larry? What kind of context does X (formerly known as Twitter), the platform they routinely converse in, offer to Tyler and Larry, as well as to those who read their exchanges? What conclusions do Tyler and Larry come to about arguing online?

The Lehigh Town Hall Meeting: a Final View of Public Deliberation

Much like the town hall meeting at the University of Florida and at the California State University Chico campus shows, students are most concerned with free speech and deliberating their ideas with others when faced with issues of immediate and local concern—and understandably so. After all, it is of much greater consequence to students when they must confront acts of violence, aggression, and racism in their own community versus engaging in town-hall meetings on national health care, for example, a topic that may prove too amorphous and displaced from their daily lives. Their concerns are more immediate, and their voices heard in distinctly different ways in a town hall meeting on their college campus. This final example of what took place at Lehigh University in 2008 authenticates how the town hall offers a participatory structure with the potential for engaging in and contributing to a writing public.

A live town meeting and its recorded version at Lehigh shows how the town hall meeting can function in pedagogically useful ways. On Tuesday, November 11, 2008, just a week after Barack Obama was elected the first black president of the United States, more than 300 people gathered in Perella Auditorium on campus to discuss recent acts of racism committed on campus. As writer Chris

Knight explained in Lehigh's student newspaper The Brown & White, "At least three racist acts have occurred since Obama swept the election on November 4, according to students at the meeting. Two of the racist acts occurred when people from passing cars yelled racial slurs at black female students." Brown and White Vol. 116 No. 20 — 14 November 2008 — The Lehigh Digital Archives The third act of racism took place when a male student called a black freshman female a derogatory slur after witnessing her excitement over Obama's election. The central question which directly motivated and implicitly directed the agenda of the meeting was similar to the question explored in Chapter 3: "All Things Considered, What Should We Do?" For the Lehigh community, these students included the following questions: "What do we do? What do we do about these most recent acts of racism? What do we do to protect our students? What do we do to eliminate racism on this campus as part of a long-term effort?" As a letter to the editor of The Brown & White confirmed, "many students and faculty shared their views on what to do" at this special town hall meeting. The concern with both response and action occupied the forefront of the meeting.

Shortly after the meeting took place, members of a student organization called "The Movement" posted video clips from the town meeting on a group Facebook page titled "Lehigh Town Hall Meeting Video Clips." By sharing these clips, the ability to continue dialoguing and communicating with one another remained a viable option, both for those who had attended the meeting and for those who had not attended the meeting. In addition, the video memorialized the event and allowed it to serve as a lasting educational resource, a digital artifact. Those students who would follow in subsequent years could always return and view this event if and when future discussions or acts of racism prompted them to revisit such an important issue.

The preservation of the video also invited students to more freely connect with one another by joining the discussion on Facebook and even joining student groups related to dealing with these acts of racism. A virtual community had thus been born from a series of events that had initially proved divisive. Across the Lehigh community, students wrote about the overwhelming topic of racism in the days surrounding these events. Some wrote memos circulated widely around campus, like one called "Reality Check!!!" Others wrote letters to the editor, like Lehigh student Benjamin Mumma. His letter was, in part, prompted by articles he had written as Associate Editor for The Lehigh Patriot, a politically conservative publication on campus. According to Mumma, "[W]e need to look to Lehigh and see how we can prevent similar incidents in the future." Near his conclusion, he declares, "We should be better than this. Lehigh is not and should not be the

liberal paradise many institutions of higher learning try to be. But Lehigh does need to be a place where anyone and everyone can come to learn and grow."

This call to action functions as a deeply compelling argument—one which had not been entirely listened to amid the cacophony of voices at the live town hall meeting, a meeting that many bemoaned had split its focus by calling for a range of actions outside those directly related to the racist behavior of a few students. Acknowledging its research-oriented and engineering-minded student body, Mumma honestly and unabashedly characterized Lehigh as not "the liberal paradise" many colleges espouse to be. Instead, he identified its core purpose as "a place where anyone and everyone can come to learn and grow." Had this letter been written in a composition course in response to a unit on race, social change, or even education, for example, we could qualify this statement as Mumma's thesis. In many ways, a thesis statement serves as the basic tenet of a writer's argument; it can also more specifically function as a statement of action, for it is in this statement that the writer typically asserts his position and influences his audience to consider, adopt, or respond to a particular set of ideas. After making such an assertion—or perhaps even during this process—the writer is also placed in the position of his audience, prompting him (ideally) to wonder: 'Would I be willing to consider this position and follow this course of action, this line of thinking, this reason of argument?' As Mumma's letter indicates, he had asked himself the question, 'Am I willing to practice what I preach?' He spoke of his own role as a writer of The Lehigh Patriot when he admitted the following:

In what amounts to some bad timing, I did write an article which appeared in The Lehigh Patriot poking fun at several courses here at Lehigh, notably a new class titled 'Engendering 'Black' Popular Culture.' I realize in light of recent events that jokes made at the expense of that class could be seen as inflammatory. That was not my intent and I hope that my jokes can be seen as a continuation of friendly banter between different majors at Lehigh. In articulating such self-reflection, the writer took responsibility for his past actions, while revising his perspective and looking towards future ways to healing racial divides here at Lehigh.

This declaration of accountability was no small feat or admission for this student. In this way, the "thesis," or argument, we identified in Mumma's letter was all the more supported by taking responsibility for his actions and considering ways in which those actions had affected his previous audience, the readers of his Lehigh Patriot articles. His call to action, then, for "an open mind and a willingness to get to know a person before you judge them" is a genuine identification with his present audience's need for tolerance and acceptance. By placing himself

simultaneously in the role of both writer and audience, he produced what John Gage calls "the reasoned thesis" and what Daniel Cohen calls "the writer as audience." Let's examine both below.

The Reasoned Thesis

In his essay, "The Reasoned Thesis," Gage defines the implications of a thesis statement more fully, aligning his definition with thesis as both a position and a question: "The 'thesis statement' is ordinarily taught as a structural aid but it can function more basically as an argumentative principle if it is seen not as a single reductive statement of a prerequisite 'main idea' but as a multipart statement that contains not only a central claim but central reasons for that claim as well, and that evolves as a response to a 'question at issue' as mutually defined by a writer and that writer's audience (Emmel et. al 10). In this way, the writer—as both writer and audience—seeks to posit a claim, locate evidence and support for the claim, and practice critical inquiry as a means of investigating the topic to both the satisfaction of the writer and his audience. In short, this approach to producing "a multipart statement" allows the writer to become that "site of contradiction" that Clifford argues we rarely witness. Such "sites of contradiction" manifest in town hall meetings where participants wrestle with difficult issues, seeking resolution but often facing complicated communication.

Digital Deliberation

The YouTube comment thread affords individuals the opportunity to practice the very kind of free speech denied to Andrew Meyer when he was tased by UF police. The significance in analyzing public sites of deliberation is quite simple yet radical, as proven by Jackson and Wallin's succinct summary: "Rediscovering the back-and-forthness of rhetoric [as evidenced in online public deliberation] could help students understand that we analyze so we can argue, and we write so we can be read and responded to." This kind of "civic literacy" appeals to students because, as Jackson and Wallin point out, "This kind of argumentation can be more engaging for a writer than inventing audiences and assuming a dialogue with sources frozen in academic print." The only kind of response students typically receive in these situations is their grade and, hopefully, facilitative comments from an instructor. Though these kinds of writing exercises are obviously important in shaping our understanding of academic discourse, perhaps they are too limiting for several reasons. First, when we know that virtually no one else will read our writing, we are held less accountable and feel a minimum sense of responsibility to treat ideas fairly and equally. Even if our ideas prove mildly offensive, undeveloped, or simply banal, it is of little

consequence since our writing is not exposed to a vast audience that could potentially critique and challenge them. Online discussion forums can demand greater accountability: “The excitement of seeing your writing appear online is surpassed when someone responds with agreement or challenge and a back and forth ensues with each post calling on a writer’s ability to understand, analyze, and invent.” Second, when we produce a written assignment for a class, we often do not have to engage with others’ responses to our work. Thus, we fail to see the larger value of our ideas and arguments; the back-and-forthness of rhetoric is virtually non-existent in this context. Finally, we cannot expand or revise our own perspectives when traditional academic essays invite us to produce a linear thesis that proves our point and our point alone.

Digital deliberation is, perhaps, the most important idea with which to conclude this chapter, since out of deliberation grows a promising sense of democracy. Democracy offers the best institution through which to work through complex ideas, allow for all voices to participate, and arrive at those secure positions that move us from theory to action. And whether we are prepared or not, social media forums are forcing us to examine the effects of democracy as played out in digital realms. Adopting a similar approach with content analyses of public discourse can helps us engage in our own back-and-forth exchanges about what, how, and why we should teach students as participants in public discourse. Furthermore, reviving back-and-forth rhetoric “as a means of fostering civic education” invites the “synthesis of critical thinking, tolerance, listening-rhetoric, answerability, and reason giving,” according to Jackson and Wallin. By looking to the town hall model as a normative ideal for deliberative discourse, we can pursue a model that connects and applies to writing in online social spaces.

Chapter Five: Embracing Leadership: Student Writers as Moderators

In Chapter 2, we briefly examined how the student writer can function as a "facilitative investigator," a term I used to merge Sam Kaner's process of facilitating a discussion with the act of critique and investigation that an objective leader of a discussion would undertake. In that chapter, I noted three priorities of the town hall meeting which hold particular relevance to the composition classroom. Among these priorities is "to adopt the role of a facilitative investigator as a student writer, rather than an autocratic decision maker." The next step, and perhaps the most important one, for the facilitative investigator is to adopt the role of a moderator. Much like how we consider the town hall as a dialogic model for the composition classroom in which ideas are freely and productively exchanged, the role of a moderator serves as a model of leadership for you as the student writer. In adopting this role, you can practice leadership skills, that include the following: mitigating adversarial discourse, promoting a sense of community, exercising deliberative decision-making, and arriving at the best course of action in response to the question, "All things considered, what should we do?"

Moderators as Leaders

The moderator as leader draws on rhetorical skills such as listening, deliberation, and collaboration. The purpose of adopting this particular role of moderator is to exhibit leadership qualities and encourage the tenets of academic discourse; however, the role also extends to reinvigorating writing as an ethical act. To understand the role of the moderator, the goals and values of the moderator, and how occupying this role as a student-writer supports the ethical treatment of writing, this chapter will focus on the role of conversation and collaboration in the model of the town hall meeting.

The Moderator in the Historic Town Hall Meeting

The role of the moderator is often described as akin to that of a facilitator, yet its importance within a rhetorical situation carries much more responsibility and significance. In light of this project's focus on the town hall meeting as a model for deliberative discourse, it is helpful to briefly consider the role of the moderator in this setting first, so as to better understand its applicability to the student writer. The role of the moderator in the context of a town hall meeting is

akin to an administrative role where the work of the meeting is accomplished in a timely and orderly fashion. Moderators call for votes on each item of business, communicate the decisions of voters, and interpret and apply rules governing how the discussion and votes proceed. While these tasks may seem relatively basic, they actually belie the value of the moderator's role in such an important rhetorical exchange. As Frank Bryan notes in Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works, "[T]he office [of the moderator] is the town's most prestigious," particularly when we consider the historical and cultural context of the town hall meeting framework. The moderator must remain focused, attentive to the most pressing tasks at hand, and knowledgeable about procedures to ensure the preservation of democracy and community enacted through the town hall meeting.

Deliberation as an Ethical Appeal

The preservation of democratic principles and community ideals hinges on the process of deliberation—a process deeply connected to the art of conversation. One particular definition of deliberation refocuses our attention on the role of conversation that is central to the town hall meeting. In his study "Forms of Conversation and Problem Structuring Methods: A Conceptual Framework," author L.A. Franco asserts that "the need for action is the main motivation for deliberation." Keep that word in your mind throughout this chapter: ACTION. If you recall this textbook's guiding question "All things considered, what should we do?", you will be all the more attentive to the need for a practical, pro-active outcome of any deliberative body. Prioritizing action, rather than merely theorizing or talking ad nauseum, will help to prepare you not only as successful professionals but also as engaged citizens, active community members, and future leaders. For example, in college, while we may only practice writing about ideas in our classes, you as the student writer will one day be called upon to put those ideas into action. To be successful, those actions must have a firm basis in deliberation.

Franco defines deliberation as:

> **"a form of conversation [in which] participants collectively seek to reach agreement on how to carry out an action which is of concern to them. Each party exposes their preferred courses of action and priorities. These provide the grounds for discussing the possible future consequences of particular courses of action. This type of conversation may (or may not) have well-organized rules of conduct, and may**

involve debate, persuasion, dialogue or negotiation as part of the process. The goal of deliberation is to act on an informed and thoughtful base."

As evidenced by this quote, conversation is crucial to the successful outcome of any deliberation. Furthermore, most successful deliberations emerge from forums with effective leaders. The moderator offers a prime example of this kind of effective leadership. Although the duties of a moderator vary within and among political, business, community, and academic contexts, many of those duties include the following:

(1) to facilitate cooperation among participants

(2) to make good use of resources, including time, effort, and attention of participants

(3) to present opportunities for participants to voice their concerns and to be heard by other members of the meeting

(4) to establish and maintain a non-hierarchical sense of order and community

(5) to bring together as many disparate voices as possible to move towards common ground

(6) to encourage decision-making and collective action that satisfies the needs and interests of participants.

Since other duties may seem worthy of inclusion in this list, it is important to treat these duties as flexible and expandable. Equally important is the task of examining the goals and values of the moderator situated within an ethical framework now that this list has captured the practical framework of deliberation. The figure of the moderator in a deliberative or community context decenters any kind of organization where one individual functions as the primary decision-maker who is unaccountable to anyone. Further, it challenges notions of power that have traditionally reflected the idea of the text where only the author's voice is represented.

The Moderator as an Authority Figure: Considering Authority, Power, and Trust

The role of the moderator is marked by a position of authority, power, and trust. Since the moderator must embody a leadership role without overseeing some type of hierarchical organization, the moderator can actively promote shared leadership as a core value. Further, the attention to time, agenda items, and the effective flow of the meeting entrusted to the moderator all promote the town hall model as a cooperative structure. Allowing for multiple and conflicting voices to be heard equalizes the power structure. Finally, among the moderator's varied duties, gaining the trust of participants is of primary importance. Exhibiting a commitment to listening and to including as many diverse viewpoints as possible in the conversation is crucial to building trust among participants. By remaining mindful of authority, power, and trust, the moderator can ethically guide participants to arrive at some kind of consensus or equip themselves with the ability to make well-informed decisions that necessitate action.

A Closer Look at Authority at Work in the Town Hall Meeting

In his essay "Deliberative Democracy and Authority," author Mark Warren explores the tricky but necessary role of authority in deliberative democracy, urging participants in such a democracy to treat authority "as a necessary evil." To support this claim, Warren astutely points out that an "ethics of accountability" remains largely absent from other alternatives to deliberation, such as "coercion, manipulation, acquiescence, unthinking obedience, or decisions left to markets" — all of which are steeped in patriarchal and/or rigid hierarchical organizations. To that end, effective leaders must demand and hold themselves accountable. An ethics of accountability is a moral framework that emphasizes responsibility, transparency, and answerability for one's actions — especially when those actions affect others. As the student writer adopts the role of moderator in composing arguments about controversial and polarizing subjects, they can seek to uphold the following actions embedded in an ethics of accountability:

- Acknowledge their decisions and behaviors
- Take responsibility for the outcomes
- Justify their actions to those affected

- Accept consequences if harm or injustice occurs.
- This ethical approach is often invoked in contexts like the following:
- Leadership and governance (e.g., public officials being answerable to citizens)
- Corporate responsibility (e.g., businesses being accountable for environmental impacts)
- Social justice (e.g., acknowledging and addressing historical harms or systemic inequality)

Unlike ethics, which is focused solely on intention or rules, an ethics of accountability prioritizes relational responsibility—how one's actions affect others and what one owes them in response.

Instructors and Students: a Symbiotic Relationship

The question before us then is: how can and how should the moderator best use their power and authority while upholding an ethics of accountability? Warren answers this question, in part, in his general argument that "authority has a necessary and symbiotic relationship to deliberative democracy." The word "symbiotic" is particularly important within the classroom model of the town hall meeting. In terms of class discussion and conversation, we can view the instructor initially in the role of the moderator, presiding over the "meeting" in which a symbiotic relationship exists between that instructor and her students. Amy Shapiro offers a compelling portrait of this kind of symbiotic learning relationship when "the student becomes the text" and when "we create a conversation in the classroom." In this approach, the authority of the instructor shifts, according to Shapiro: "The teacher becomes a model in the sense that she must be the ultimate learner." Just as the moderator guides the discussion or meeting along a productive path, so, too, does the instructor as co-learner "assist the students in articulating the texts to themselves and each other. Her work, therefore, is not to tell the students the meaning but to create an environment through her choice of works and classroom activities in which the student is reminded of her efficacy as a member of the classroom environment." By decentering her own authority, the instructor can gain the trust of her students to pursue knowledge alongside of her, rather than subscribe to the "banking model" noted earlier in the text. Remember, this model, as explained by Paulo Freire, involves "depositing" information into students' minds; such students are treated as passive vessels who simply receive, memorize, and

repeat information. The instructor as co-learner establishes a shared sense of governance and trust in the pursuit of knowledge.

Although this is a shared endeavor, the instructor of the town hall style classroom still maintains the kind of authority necessary for a functional, deliberative democracy. Warren explains more on this point here: "[D]eliberative democracy requires authority but of a specific kind, an authority that simultaneously complements and reinforces deliberative decision making." By witnessing the deliberative instructor in this dual role as authority figure and co-learner, students visibly see true deliberation modeled and can adopt those same qualities and skills as student writers in their acts of composition.

Close Reading and Analysis: Shifting the Student Writer to Moderator & Co-Learner

A paired exercise on close reading and analysis of literary texts can further extend these aims and support you as the student writer in the role of ethical collaboration with your peers. Many of us assume we are paying adequate attention to the text already. Often, however, the kind of attention we devote to a text translates to plot summary or a cursory treatment of the text's significance. This step-by-step process in which you will first work individually, then in pairs, and finally within a larger class discussion, proves helpful in guiding you through an academic conversation where your writing voice reflects multiple perspectives, not just your own.

Since we have not considered the role of literature in composition courses thus far, it's important to do so with the understanding that analysis of a variety of texts is an important skill to hone at the college level. Furthermore, given the fact that many composition and writing courses are still housed within English departments, you may encounter literary analysis from time to time. Consider this particular writing workshop as an example for how you can practice working with quotes from a literary text. In this case, we will be analyzing Arthur Miller's play Death of a Salesman.

Close Reading & Analysis Exercise Part I

Step 1: Choose from a list of quotes you could potentially use in your essay to support your claims.

Step 2: Establish the context of the quote by communicating to your reader exactly where this quote is situated within the larger plot, which characters are involved, and any other pertinent information about the scene.

Step 3: Circle or underline key words or images that appear significant. Next, generate a list of these words' meanings and connotations, understanding that not all these associations may pertain to Death of a Salesman but are still essential to unraveling and investigating various interpretations of the text.

Step 4: Now, determine which meanings or connotations best apply to Death of a Salesman and to your specific reading of a particular theme in this play. This process aids in generating an analysis of a particular passage.

Step 5: Write at least four to five sentences of analysis in which you highlight the chosen words from the passage, and you communicate their significance to furthering our understanding of the plot, characters, themes, etc.

Throughout this exercise, the student will write entirely on their own with no guidance or interference from instructors, peers, online resources, critical essays, etc. The reason for this solo endeavor is because, in this part of the exercise, the student writer is practicing the processes of brainstorming, expressive writing (i.e., what the passage means to the student writer exclusively), and generative thinking — all of which are helpful and valuable practices, but which should not be treated as end goals. The next exercise will focus on sharing and testing out the student writer's ideas with others. Here, the student can stay invested in their own ideas but open themselves up to other points of view. Such evolution in thought can also occur in one-on-one conferences with an instructor about multiple drafts, and especially in peer tutoring sessions through a university writing center.

Within the classroom environment, peer feedback is essential, as well. In the next stage of this exercise, you as the student writer will choose a different quote and work with a classmate.

Close Reading & Analysis Exercise Part II

Step 1: Student A will read their chosen quote aloud and then go on to specify which words/images they will focus on in his analysis.

Step 2: Student B then serves as a scribe who diligently takes note on whatever thoughts, ideas, and meanings Student A generates about his chosen quote. The rationale behind this exercise is to allow Student A to engage in generative thinking uninterrupted and undistracted by the simultaneous act of thinking and writing.

Step 3: Student B can then pose questions or offer additional insights that Student A may take into consideration.

Step 4: Students A and B then share the outcome of their paired exercise with the rest of the class and the instructor, who supply additional feedback.

There is thus a shared investment in generative thinking, in the deliberation of potentially competing and conflictual interpretations, and finally in arriving at a consensus about which meaning of the text is most accurate and best suited to the requirements of the assignment and tothe needs of the audience.

Once Student A and Student B share their work with the rest of the class, your instructor can further serve as a moderator to this discussion by inviting additional voices in from the rest of the class to synthesize the most productive and applicable ideas. This part of the process ensures that students “slow the conversation to a point where an adequate rhythm can be reestablished or the proper semiotic width can be developed,” as Jason Kosnoski advises in his article “Artful Discussion: John Dewey’s Classroom as a Model of Deliberation Association.” Kosnoski demonstrates such modulation by using Dewey’s model of the “ideal classroom”: “Dewey’s classroom ensures that when moving between the different activity rooms, students must pass through the recitation room and the library, visually stressing the reiterative nature of classroom discussion.” We might imagine the library/recitation room as a town hall meeting whereby participants (i.e., students) revisit ideas continuously, even though they move in

and out of different perspectives afforded by the other "rooms" (i.e., texts, peers, and other participants in the conversation).

As Kosnoski explains, the deliberative instructor or student writer can demonstrate leadership by "rhythmically encourag[ing] the class to alternate investigating and discussing the 'old and the new' aspects of their common problem" or text. Once students have practiced this process on their own, they are better equipped to tap into conversation as a collaborative learning tool. Enacting such conversation in their own prose allows them to fully embody the role of the moderator whose writing reflects "internalized conversation re-externalized," to recall Kenneth A. Bruffee's earlier principle. The role of the moderator thus offers both the instructor and the student-writer an alternative to traditional political and pedagogical situations since the moderator operates and evaluates arguments from a more collective mindset.

Reviving the Decay of Conversation

A key task for the moderator, specifically for the student writer as moderator, is to facilitate conversation to stave off adversarial discourse and to reach a more productive common ground. As Warren observes, "politics emerges when common ground is lacking." To resist the argument culture, the moderator must remain neutral and seek to prioritize common ground, or a sense of shared investments and points of agreement as opposed to dwelling on points of conflict. Bryan's study returns us to democracy as an ideal through his analysis of the town meeting as "an American conversation." He sheds historical light on the romantic and sentimental view the town meeting has garnered over the years, while also exploring the promise inherent in this image. Despite robust criticisms against town halls, Bryan adamantly professes his belief in the town meeting as a form of "real democracy—where the people make decisions that matter, on the spot, in face-to face assemblies that have the force of law." Perhaps it is difficult to find such value in contemporary town hall meetings that move away too easily from reasoned conversation and a rational exchange of ideas. Yet this crisis we face in public deliberation now is not the first moment in history that "the institution has fallen on hard times"; in fact, A.G. Sedgwick, a writer for Nation, used this phrase in the article "The Decay of Town Government" in 1897 to describe the decay of the town meeting.

If the town hall meeting suggests an unstable democratic function in our history, why examine it now within the realm of the humanities, specifically in the field of rhetoric and composition? What value can we find—rhetorical, ethical, or otherwise—in this hallmark of American democracy? As noted simply and

succinctly by Bryan, the town meeting functions as a space “where the people make decisions that matter.” As students and future leaders, you will be called upon to make such decisions in whatever discipline you pursue, whatever profession you follow. Specifically, both conversation and collaboration prove essential to the success of any moderator, whether that moderator is presiding over a town meeting or business meeting. Embodying the role of the moderator allows you as the student-writer to successfully navigate adversarial discourse and embrace the practice of true leadership by using conversation

and collaboration as techniques that encourage inquiry, develop shared agency, focus on problem-solving rather than divisiveness, support a non-hierarchical power structure, and move towards common ground by synthesizing disparate points of view.

Class Activity & Exercise: Seeking Common Ground in “12 Angry Men” via Conversation and Collaboration

Directions: The 1957 film 12 Angry Men is widely regarded as an excellent teaching tool for developing skills in conversation and collaboration because it showcases a range of real-world interpersonal dynamics in a high-stakes, enclosed setting. Watch the film and actively take notes on the following ways in which this film can show us how to become better arguers.

1. Active Listening and Respectful Disagreement

The jurors in the film frequently interrupt, challenge, or question each other — but as the story progresses, several characters demonstrate how active listening and respectful disagreement can lead to deeper understanding and progress. This models how to collaborate effectively even when opinions diverge sharply.

- Which jurors listen actively and which do not?
- How does listening (or failing to listen) affect the group's progress towards reaching a unanimous verdict?
- What strategies does Juror 8 use to encourage others to speak up or reconsider their views?

2. Critical Thinking and Persuasion

The central character (Juror 8, played by Henry Fonda) uses reasoned argument, evidence-based analysis, and thoughtful questioning to challenge assumptions. This demonstrates the power of dialogue over confrontation, encouraging participants to reflect and reconsider rather than react emotionally.

- How does Juror 8 use conversation to challenge the others without becoming confrontational?
- What kind of rapport does Juror 8 seek to build with the other jurors? What tone of voice does he use with them? Why is this approach so important to the deliberation process?

3. Managing Group Dynamics

The film portrays various group behaviors—dominance, conformity, peer pressure, and prejudice—giving viewers insight into how personalities and power dynamics shape conversations. It highlights the importance of creating space for quieter voices and managing dominant personalities in group collaboration.

- How do group dynamics shift throughout the film? What moments are key turning points?
- What roles do personality types (e.g., aggressive, quiet, rational, prejudiced) play in the group's decision-making process?

4. Building Consensus

Rather than forcing agreement, Juror 8 patiently builds a case and persuades the group one by one. The film shows that consensus-building is a process, requiring persistence, openness, and strategic communication.

- On what points do the jurors reach consensus?
- What evidence and testimony do they re-examine in order to move closer to consensus?

5. Moral Responsibility and Empathy

Beyond logic, the film underscores empathy—looking beyond stereotypes and considering others' perspectives. It encourages thoughtful, human-centered communication, a key skill in collaborative settings.

- How does the film challenge viewers to consider their own assumptions or biases?
- Cite specific examples in which jurors uncover or disclose these biases. How do these moments inject empathy into the deliberation process?

The Role of Conversation

To extend our practice of productive and empathetic dialogue, we can look to compositionist Rebecca Moore Howard as she examines the role of conversation in her essay "Collaborative Pedagogy." Here, she cites Kenneth Bruffee's three principles of collaborative learning:

1. **"[B]ecause thought is internalized conversation, thought and conversation tend to work largely in the same way.**
2. **If thought is internalized public and social talk, then writing of all kinds is internalized social talk made public and social again. If thought is internalized conversation, then writing is internalized conversation re-externalized.**
3. **To learn is to work collaboratively to establish and maintain knowledge among a community of knowledgeable peers through the process that Richard Rorty calls "socially justifying belief."**

Not only does this kind of collaboration denounce the kind of hierarchical power structure at work with the "solitary author," but it also focuses on the reflexive and discursive forces of thought and discussion highlighted previously in the peer review workshop on close reading and analysis. The first principle points to you as the student writer coming to consciousness for the first time about a particular subject, interpreting and apprehending various sources and ideas, and trying to sift through them and determine your own perspective in relation to others. Indeed, many of you as students experience those "aha" moments, whereby you

reach an important insight or make a specific discovery that is new to your experience. Yet these are never solo endeavors, as the second principle shows. The assertion that "writing is internalized conversation" points to ways in which students, texts, instructors, and peers all influence and shape your internal thought process before those ideas are "re-externalized" in your prose. Compositionist Erika Lindemann describes this process as participating in a discourse community, a community that reflects process-centered writing: "To portray writers as solitary individuals is to divorce them from the social context in which language always operates. Language is a form of social interaction, a process of shaping our environment even as it shapes us. We write to make meaning, but we also write to make a difference."

The Student Writer as a Collaborative Leader

Understanding the social context of writing is crucial to understanding the role of the writer as moderator. Even though they appear to act as independent leaders, moderators are much more collaborative, navigating others and themselves through the intricacies of a complex web of ideas. As Lindemann elaborates: "Because many students have learned to be individual competitors, the teacher deliberately fosters collaboration so that students must help one another learn and may share in the group's achievements." In this way, the instructor models the role of the moderator as a facilitator of meaning-making. The responsibility of this role can and should eventually shift to you,the student, as Lindeman explains: "In this model, students are always members of a stable writing group, working together for the entire term so that they develop trust in one another, accept responsibility for one another's successes and failures, and come to appreciate the diverse abilities they bring to the community." As moderators of our own writing, we are accountable to others who may read and benefit from our work. Once a writer embodies the role of the moderator, the writer gains the trust of their audience and fairly represents the diverse perspectives with which they have been dialoguing in their research and study. Thus, this role offers no room for adversarial discourse.

When you approach a writing task, you must consider a multitude of ideas: those of the text, those who have written critically and extensively before you about the text, those ideas which have emerged from your peers and instructor in class discussions, and finally those which you yourself have grappled with along the way. Other analytical lenses—feminist, historical, psychological, scientific, sociological—might also bear on this process. To embody the role of the moderator, you as the student writer must engage in an imaginative enactment of all participants' viewpoints, drawing on all available rhetorical skills covered in

this textbook and beyond. As Bruffee explains, "The range, complexity, and subtlety of our thought, its power, the practical and conceptual uses we can put it to, and the very issues we can address result in large measure directly from the degree to which we have been initiated into what Oakeshott calls the potential 'skill and partnership' of human conversation in its public and social form." This "skill and partnership" hinge on the writer as moderator practicing deliberative discourse by considering a range of ideas before presenting their own "proclamation," so to speak, in the form of an academic argument. Such an argument is strengthened by the awareness and recognition of multiple voices at work, voices which you as the writer must ultimately coalesce or synthesize on your own, but which also reflect the disparate viewpoints of all stakeholders.

Class Discussion Exercise: Leading Through Disagreement

Assignment Overview

In this assignment, students will take on the role of emerging leaders tasked with resolving a divisive issue within a fictional organization, team, or community. They will engage in a structured argument process—researching, articulating, defending, and revising positions—while demonstrating key leadership skills such as active listening, empathy, negotiation, and ethical reasoning.

Objectives

- By the end of this assignment, students will be able to
- Demonstrate how argument can be used constructively in leadership.
- Practice persuasive speaking and writing grounded in research.
- Exhibit leadership traits including empathy, adaptability, and ethical decision-making.
- Reflect on how disagreement can build stronger, more inclusive teams.

1. Choose a Scenario

- A university is debating whether to divest from fossil fuels.
- A community center must choose between expanding youth programming or senior services.
- A company's leadership team is divided over implementing a 4-day workweek.

2. Role Assignment

- Generate a list of potential stakeholders invested in this issue
- Select roles representing those different stakeholders
- Prepare a position based on the interests and values of their assigned stakeholder

3. Research & Argument Construction

- Research the topic and stakeholder perspective
- Prepare a formal position paper or speech (3–5 minutes if oral)
- Develop counterpoints to opposing views

4. Debate / Structured Argument Forum

- Engage in a moderated debate or roundtable, aiming not only to "win" but to lead the group toward consensus, compromise, or deeper understanding.

5. Leadership Reflection Paper (2–3 pages)

- What leadership qualities were required during the argument?
- How was conflict navigated or resolved?
- What did you learn about leading in situations of disagreement?

Application to Professional Leadership

Sam Kaner's *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* is the published outgrowth of an organization called Community at Work. As per their website:

> **"Founded in 1987, Community at Work is a consulting firm, a think tank, and a provider of world-class training. We specialize in participatory approaches to system change. Our clients usually need help solving complex problems that cannot be solved by traditional hierarchical structures."**

For several decades, Community at Work has established itself as a credible and highly sought-after organization committed to improving professional skills in participatory problem-solving and decision-making. As their text concludes, "[T]housands of people have strengthened their facilitation skills at workshops offered by Community at Work." One of their most popular workshops, "Leader As Facilitator," provides "group facilitation skills for managers." The description reads much like the exercises you are tasked with in your college courses and which you will surely be tasked with in your profession, regardless of which field you pursue: "The course emphasizes methods for balancing the responsibilities of leadership with the goal of reaching decisions that everyone owns and supports. Participants have ample opportunity to practice and receive feedback." Please see the following video to gain a preliminary understanding of how you can approach argument and decision-making in any rhetorical situation as a form of leadership: Sam Kaner - Gradients of Agreement Tool (Read Kaner's Full Video Transcript). Now, try this exercise as way to practice what you've learned.

Class Discussion Exercise: Understanding the Gradients of Agreement Tool

What is the purpose of the Gradients of Agreement tool, and how does it differ from a simple yes/no vote?

Which of the gradient levels do you think is the most commonly misunderstood or misused in group settings? Why?

Application and Practice

- Think of a recent team decision. How might using the Gradients of Agreement have changed the outcome or the group dynamic?

- In what types of decision-making scenarios (e.g., brainstorming, strategic planning, conflict resolution) is this tool most valuable?
- How can facilitators encourage participants to be honest when using the gradients without fear of judgment?

Group Dynamics

- What does it mean for a group to move forward with a proposal that many people "can live with" but few people "fully support"?
- How might the Gradients of Agreement support psychological safety in group discussions?
- How can this tool help bring to light hidden concerns or passive resistance in a team setting?

Challenges and Limitations

- What are potential drawbacks or challenges of using this tool in fast-paced or high-stakes environments?
- How can overuse or misuse of the Gradients of Agreement lead to decision paralysis or ambiguity in commitment?

Personal Reflection

- When have you found yourself in the "I can live with it" category during a team decision? What influenced your position?
- How comfortable are you expressing partial agreement or disagreement in a group setting? What helps or hinders your openness?

Conclusion

Compositionist Rebecca Moore Howard aptly devotes an entire section of her article to acknowledging that collaborative learning does not automatically equate to consensus or conflict-free analysis. Instead, she warns her readers to "prepare for dissent within the groups, and prepare to manage it in two dimensions: the instructor and the students. Neither should attempt to suppress dissent or enforce consensus." Indeed, the role and duties of the moderator, as outlined in this chapter, are to explore disparate views as a way of identifying

what common ground they share. A reasonable number of conflicting views is a healthy and natural result of any kind of deliberation. To conclude with discerning remarks from Warren: “it is not necessary for individuals to have a confidence that deliberation can produce consensus. It is only necessary for individuals to believe that talk is better than the alternatives, such as fighting or coercive imposition, and then design institutions in such a way that recourse to these alternatives is difficult for deliberation.” Indeed, the town hall serves as a viable model to more fully access deliberative discourse. It staves off adversarial discourse, invites you to participate in meaningful collaboration, and joins instructors and students together as co-learners. The model of the town hall meeting can serve as exciting pedagogical ground on which to enact listening rhetoric, Rogerian rhetoric, feminist rhetoric, deliberation and collaboration, and, perhaps most importantly, conversation. This, above all else, has been absent from our classrooms and democracy for far too long.

Chapter Six: What Does It Mean To Be a Worthy Arguer?

This final chapter serves as a collection of reflections about what it means to be a worthy arguer. There is only so much information one individual can communicate in any textbook. As the author of this textbook, I would be remiss in my duty if I only offered my view—indeed, my argument—on what it means to be an ethical and productive arguer. In her seminal work The Feminine Mystique, author Betty Friedan wrote of "the problem that has no name":

> **"The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—'Is this all?'"**

Today, in thinking about rhetoric, persuasion, and argument, we might imagine a similar scene for students, writers, and instructors:

The problem lay buried, unacknowledged, though familiar, for many years in the minds of students, writers, and teachers. Bit by bit, a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, occurred in the early twenty-first century in the United States. Each student and writer struggled with it alone. As they perfected their thesis statements, meticulously researched their topic, dutifully wrote their papers, anticipated the opposing view, and successfully shot their opponent's point down to elevate their own, they began to ask, 'Is this all there is to arguing? Is this all there is to rhetoric and persuasion?'

The alienation and adversarialism noted in the imagined scenario above is analogous to the extremes experienced by women in Friedan's work. Students and instructors alike have suffered from and identified with "the problem" in rhetoric and composition and with argument writing specifically, yet have not been able to successfully make such a problem visible. Our cultural emphasis on conflict and opposition extends to many pedagogical approaches in the teaching

of argument writing. Metaphorical battles are routinely staged on talk shows, political debates, and blogs, revealing the media's preoccupation with and perpetuation of adversarial discourse.

Given these circumstances, it is crucial to examine how students internalize agonism and normalize it as part of their discursive selves. It is important to examine the effect of Deborah Tannen's aptly-named "argument culture" on student writers who are often left wondering: what's the point of argument? The reflection pieces which follow not only seek to answer this question, but also to investigate how we might become a "worthy arguer" as philosopher Daniel Cohen describes in his Ted Talk. These reflections encompass a wide range of perspectives and disciplines, including: women, gender, and sexuality studies; poetry; linguistics; secondary education; communications; writing center theory and practice; journalism; and religion and spirituality. Written by professors, alumni, and other esteemed figures from Kutztown University's community, these essays do, indeed, reflect varied experiences and diverse backgrounds. And yet, perhaps most importantly, these essays elevate human voices that seek to express the possibility of imagining what an ethical arguer could do and should do in order to infuse argument with meaning and purpose once more. For this reason, I am incredibly thankful to them for sharing these viewpoints, and I am honored to include their work in this textbook.

Kutztown University Faculty, Student, & Staff Reflections

The following ten reflections appear below. They are arranged in alphabetical order according to the author's last name.

Reflection #1: "a Personal Perspective on Argumentation: Strategy in Using One's Voice To Unify People on Divisive Topics"

AUTHOR: *Alison Bender is a senior Communication Studies major at Kutztown University; she is also pursuing two minors in Bioethics and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She is passionate about Science Communication, Philosophy, empowerment, feminism, and engaging in productive argumentation. Regarding her essay, Alison says, "I hope my personal academic experience helps to illustrate the importance of respecting one another and the positive outcomes that can be generated from engaging in productive argumentation. I encourage everyone to use their voice for the good of society or the purpose of understanding and bringing people together."*

A well-rounded and composed arguer is needed to uphold duality in this world, a concept that is wholeheartedly not represented given today's political polarization. To be an ethical arguer, one needs to be able to embrace empathy and a willingness to listen. Through my Biology, Communication, Philosophy, and English courses at Kutztown University, I have been able to craft these skills that entail being an ethical arguer. These traits of being empathetic, willing to listen, and upholding duality have allowed me to be a purposeful and attentive arguer. However, in majoring in Communication Studies and minoring in Bioethics as well as Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, I have been able to utilize these skills in amplifying my voice in argument, especially regarding the interconnected relationship between the environment and public health. In these courses, a lot of people agree with what I convey, however, there are outliers. Hence, I have learned to have intention with argumentation.

As a senior in college, I have four reasons why someone should engage in argumentation. These reasons are to enhance understanding, connect ideas or concepts, establish truth from lies, and bring people together. Given these reasons, I have to express that unification rather than division should be at the forefront of an ethical arguer's mind when engaging in argumentation. The purpose of engaging in argument should not be to dominate or "one-up" someone, but rather to bring people to self-reflection, understanding, or further contemplation, a practice in Philosophy that should be illustrated by every rational agent. Overall, an ethical arguer should always seek to uphold these ideals because if not, then productive argumentation will not be achieved. Productive argumentation is achieved when these ideals are upheld, but also when there is a respect for each party engaged in the argumentation. In the college classroom, this is vital. Since everyone comes from a different walk of life, preconceived notions, and has their values or beliefs, recognizing that each person involved in the argument is still human and deserves a basic level of respect is necessary to address.

In my Medical Ethics class with Dr. Lizza, we discuss a variety of problematic issues worthy of argumentation. Thus, I put into practice what I conveying now every single day of this class. One specific instance I recall is when we were discussing abortion. Most people in the room agreed that it should be the woman's choice, but despite having a consensus, there were a few against abortion. Going into the argument, I recognized that the person vocally opposing abortion did not realize the implications and the adverse effects of outlawing the medical practice. Handing me the floor, Dr. Lizza allowed me to be an ethical arguer. Responding to this individual with utmost composure and respect, I

conveyed to them that what I am about to illustrate is to broaden their understanding and to make them engage in contemplation, not an attack on them and their beliefs. Prefacing this argument with this statement completely changed their nonverbal communication. They turned to face me, opened up their bodily position, and maintained eye contact with me the entire time I spoke. Doing this made the person receptive to a challenging viewpoint, which allowed them to actively listen and reflect on the facts and statistics I was telling them. After demonstrating that most abortions happen within the first trimester, preventing access to abortion puts women's lives in danger, as seen in ectopic pregnancies, and that in our country, women are currently dying due to sepsis and complications from medical professionals feeling like their hands are tied, the person happily replied to me. They sighed and uttered, "I never fully understood the life and death issue that accessing abortion is. I commend you for making me see that there is a true medical need for this practice to maintain women's health and well-being. I was never told this by my parents." Therefore, by engaging in this argumentation or rebuttal to this person's preconceived notions and beliefs, I was able to make them engage in self-reflection, a meaningful goal or purpose of argumentation. Prefacing the rebuttal with an establishment of respect, I was able to bring us together on this issue rather than divide us.

Ultimately, because I was able to identify this person's humanity in that they are growing and evolving into a mature adult, I was able to get further and have a productive conversation rather than a heated argument that ended in a "win-lose situation." The only thing resulting from a win-lose argumentation style is division, something that should be avoided at all costs. Furthermore, if we are going to have a society that respects people, values various viewpoints, upholds duality, and embraces diversity, these skills, intentions, and goals should be at the forefront of every ethical arguer's mind. In the college classroom, these insights should not only be considered but also applied to ensure a respectful, empathetic, purposeful, and productive argument can be had. As we all grow and evolve as communicators, the goal in using one's voice should be to raise awareness, seek change in the world, and bring people together. Use your voice and writing to educate and advocate, not attack, so that a broader societal understanding of respectful argumentation can be demonstrated on a college campus.

Reflection #2: “the Curious Nature of Argument”

AUTHOR*: Dr. Colleen Clemens writes and teaches in Pennsylvania where she lives with her family and pups. She teaches English at Kutztown University where she is Director of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She publishes widely in both academic and creative venues.*

The more I think about writing in such tumultuous times, the more I think about the importance of curiosity. If we are ever going to engage in challenging conversations in writing or in conversation, we are going to need to enter such spaces with curiosity. Mainly I find myself asking more and more: “why does someone think that way?” Not: “what is wrong with that person? why are they stupid?” (which makes my heart hurt just typing).

For writers, curiosity means seeking out as many voices as possible on a subject, especially those who on the surface seem to disagree with your perceived premise. In trying to understand another perspective, a writer is forced to clarify their own thinking. It means we do not get to dismiss someone because their argument differs from ours. When we clarify our own thinking, we can present a better argument to those wishing to bring their own curiosity to their work. And when we can in good faith engage with those ideas and present an understanding of the counterargument, we show our readers that we have done the due diligence of taking our ideas and putting them in dialogue with others—especially those who don’t agree with us.

But I want to be clear in my curiosity: it does not lead me into the hands of those making lazy, misinformed arguments about the human rights of others. Someone who argues that someone different from them does not have the right to exist safely and authentically is someone who is not bringing curiosity to the rhetorical situation. As a professor who teaches non-western literature and directs Kutztown University’s Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, I am interested in how people get to that place so that I can better understand my work in dismantling such thinking. However, I do not think writers—unless they are literally studying the form of racism, transphobia, etc. and how it works—need to bring those inherently adversarial voices to the table because such voices are disingenuous. There is nothing to be curious about when someone is arguing for the annihilation of someone because of their identity. And someone making that argument is certainly not showing any curiosity about the experiences of others.

A great example of when I found curiosity to be of benefit was when I was on a talk show about gun violence, something I care deeply about, and I think most

people do. It takes a lot for me to breathe and listen, but I remind myself that I want to understand, that only in that shared space will we ever make some progress. The person on the "other side" of the argument was arguing for the rights to have guns, and I was there discussing how guns affect education. And then I brought up that we should be talking about masculinity. And he agreed. We agreed on the possible "why" of gun violence, and to show an audience how a moment of shared concern could create a path to a new conversation instead of watching two un-curious people stay entrenched in their own arguments. Neither of us left the conversation having a different thinking about guns in our society, but we did leave with some common ground on the why. We needed to be curious and open to each other's positions in order to advance a conversation.

I do not expect people not coming from a place of privilege to enter conversations with curiosity. If someone is going to be unsafe in a rhetorical situation, then curiosity will not protect them. But I have privilege and I want to use that power to have those conversations to create more safety in the world for others. Knowing how to use my voice ethically to shape the world is one of my primary concerns when engaging with others in rhetorical spaces.

Reflection #3: "When Words Are Worthy; a Case for Poetic Craft"

AUTHOR*: Dr. Robert Fillman is an Assistant Professor of English at Kutztown University, where he teaches courses in composition and American literature. His literary criticism has been published in ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment, College Literature, and CLAJ: The College Language Association Journal, among other journals. Fillman is also the author of two poetry collections, House Bird (2022) and The Melting Point (2025), as well as the chapbook November Weather Spell (2019). He serves on the board of Poetry-in-Transit and as poetry editor at Pennsylvania English.*

When I was asked to contribute an essay about how poetry can help a person become a "worthy arguer," my first thought was: I go to poetry to avoid argument altogether. Poetry isn't about explicitly stating a position, nor is it about justifying a conclusion through evidence and reason. I also thought about the trap many English instructors fall into—the way poetry is often treated in the classroom as a kind of puzzle, valued mainly as an exercise in explication. In many high school and college English classes, poetry is used to teach argument: What does this poem mean? Can you support your argument with textual evidence? This approach not only diminishes the emotional and experiential aspects of poetry but can also encourage students to "guess" at meaning, to try

and “solve” the poem, as if it were a problem or some test of their intellect. As a result, students frequently come to see poetry as little more than a frustrating classroom tool—something to be picked apart and analyzed. Teachers, too, often treat poetic expression primarily as a means to teach analysis and critical thinking, especially as a way to evaluate figurative language. And it certainly can do that. But that's not all it does.

While I am an English professor who routinely teaches poetry, in this essay, I would like to speak more as a creator than an educator, (though I acknowledge it would be spurious to separate these two perspectives completely: after all, producing content and facilitating learning go hand in hand). But I return to my initial statement: I go to poetry to avoid argument altogether. In fact, when I sit down to write a poem, I am never thinking of the end result. I am never thinking of appealing to an audience. I am never thinking of persuading someone to behave, think, or feel differently—which any qualified teacher of rhetoric would suggest is necessary when crafting a sustainable argument. Certainly, I want readers to respond to my work. Whether they smile, sigh, nod in agreement, shake their heads in disbelief, or simply sit with their eyes closed, letting the words resonate in their minds—I value this exchange. All of this said, I would never—and would not want to—articulate the goal of a poem while writing it. I do not want to direct the poem; I want the poem to direct me to some space I might not otherwise have gone. And this, I think, is where poetry can help a person to become a “worthy arguer”—not by teaching how to argue, but by teaching how to be quiet, to listen inwardly, to wait for, as poet Linda Pastan says, in “Consider the Space Between Stars:

instants when the mind is inventing

exactly what it thinks

and the mouth waits

to be filled with language.

Here is what poets do: deliberately try to make a space in the day to contemplate, to pause and reflect. There seems to be a part of our minds that is always producing and processing language. And I suspect that, to a degree, poets attend to that part of the mind that other people may ignore or allow to remain dormant. What other people might pass by or drown out—through distractions like music or a television humming in the background—we attune ourselves to. In short, poets pay attention. We listen to the subtlest of cues, which are often ordinary or seemingly unimportant.

When I write a poem, I suppose what I am actually doing is searching for a "worthy" argument. It is likely one that I don't know exists but nevertheless wants to worm its way into the world. Maybe it is an argument lodged somewhere in my subconscious, and it wants to announce itself, but it has yet to cross the barrier of language. Only after I have written the poem is the argument able to become legible—to me, and, later, to anyone else who reads it.

The beauty of sitting down to write a poem is not initially knowing where the poem is going to begin, and likewise, having no clue where it is going to end—just following an idea, or an image, or a phrase until it reaches some natural conclusion. (I often say: writing your way out of a poem is one of the best feelings a person can experience.) And while the act of writing is willed—there are techniques and strategies that enable us to get into the poetic space we need to be productive—the poetic argument that is formed is not willed. With traditional arguments, we will something to happen: to persuade someone or change someone's mind or direct someone's next course of action. Poetry allows us to pause and reflect, to pace ourselves with language and ideas and images that coalesce into communicating a message that we invite, not demand, others to pay attention to. I cannot speak for everyone, but in my case, it is just me trying to write the next line, the next phrase, the next word, the next syllable. There is something very liberating about just following a thought and not needing to have it necessarily make sense. You hope, of course, that it does. And eventually, after enough work, it will.

Another beauty of writing poetry is that the poem, once it is written, exists in the world. And while I may have written it, the poem is not me, so I do not own it. I do not have to apologize for its content. I do not have to be embarrassed by the insights that it presents. It does not represent anything other than where my mind was at a specific moment. It is an external artifact that, after it has been created and brought into the world, takes on a life of its own. This is where, I think, argumentation comes in as well: Once the poem is in the world, and no longer a part of me, I can begin to look at it with detachment, with distance, and hopefully with some objectivity. And I can ask: What does the poem insist? What does it argue? Is the sentiment worthy? And that is when I can apply the tools of analysis, which are useful not only in academia, but in almost all forms of human interaction—as in simple conversation.

By now, it is a cliché to say that writers should surprise themselves. After all, in the early part of the twentieth century, in "The Figure a Poem Makes," Robert Frost famously said: "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." And what he means by that is—how

can you hope to move your reader into a different state of being if you, the writer, didn't share in that same experience? But this too relates to the shaping of a "worthy arguer," because if the ordering of language has given the writer a change in mood, a revelation, a new way of approaching the world, a more informed understanding of some phenomenon, then it is also saying those words are fitting—that each part of the expression belongs, and is "worthy" of being stated.

Writing a poem is a little like writing this sentence: as I write, I don't know where it will necessarily end; I just know that it is going somewhere. Now, the composition instructor in me would go back and revise it, make it more concise, make the verbs stronger, improve the syntax. And, of course, as writers of poetry, we do that same thing through the revision process. We discover things that don't work. We find that we have mixed a metaphor. We find that an image is not as particular or striking as it could be. We find that we have muddled the sounds or denied a lyrical moment that a different word would otherwise enhance. So, of course, editing takes place the same way that we edit to strengthen our arguments. But ultimately, we are trying to find the language to say the thing that we want to say but don't quite know how to communicate—or say the thing that we don't want to say but now feel compelled to bring into the world regardless of how it might be received. This endeavor can be agonizing. It can be pleasurable. It can be these two feelings simultaneously. And in this way, writing a poem is a way toward becoming a more "worthy arguer."

Bringing a new perspective into the world—one that connects people and fosters empathy and openness—is also something poetry and the aesthetic imagination can encourage. We may disagree on an interpretation. We may quibble over the ambiguity of a line or an image. We may unearth more questions about a poem than arrive at tidy conclusions. But in the safe realm of art, we are able to connect, to be civil, and to see the humanity in one another. And this reminds me that, as a poet, what I have to say is no more important, more interesting, or more valuable than what anyone else has to say. But when I encounter a poem that moves me, what I am really saying is: this is an argument I wish I had written myself.

In the end, when I write a poem, I am writing on faith. (I know many composition instructors would argue that personal belief does not qualify as a valid argument). But my suspicion is this: that language can bear something true, that writing shapes experience, and when offering your purposefully-shaped words to someone else—a friend, a colleague, even a perfect stranger—it provides an opportunity for them to see themselves inside that language. A

poem's argument is not meant to convince; it is meant to connect. And that, to me, is one of the main requirements of making an argument "worthy"—it leads to openness, to listening, to dialogue.

If I did not believe that, I would not write. I would not write if I did not feel compelled to attune myself to the quiet parts of the world—or try to tell the truth, even when it's inconvenient, embarrassing, or painful. Without a way to acknowledge the "worthy," I would not have any reason to write at all. Writing a poem is a way of saying: This moment matters. These words are worthy. Please share in this with me. And that is how the poetic craft becomes an argument in itself—and, I think, a generous one.

It was the great poet Milton who once said that, in his lifetime, he would have liked to have written one item of note—bearing the hope that the world "should not willingly let it die," although knowing full well that the world probably will. (After all, what lasts forever?) And I would venture a guess that most poets share this hope. When we write, we hope that our poem might honor a feeling, or tell a story, or bear witness and validate an experience that resonates with others. We want to make that "thing" permanent. It may be ego, but that is the dream of the poet—to say something that the world latches on to and sees as true, whether emotionally or philosophically. We want to say something "worthy." And if you were the one to say it—if you were the one who filled that empty space with language, who treated every word as "worthy" of inclusion, then by that logic: you have been doing the work of a "worthy arguer."

Reflection #4: "On 'Worthy Arguing': Disarmament and Dignity"

AUTHOR: *Reverend Matthew J. Kuna is a priest of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Allentown, serving as Catholic Chaplain of Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. Father Kuna received a Bachelor of Science in Education (2016) from Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, and a Master of Divinity (2021) and a Master of Arts in Systematic Theology (2022) from Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary, Philadelphia. He attributes much of his appreciation for robust, worthy argument to the state university education he received and to the opportunity he has to work with college students in campus ministry.*

In one of the first speeches following his election, Pope Leo XIV chose to address journalists and global media representatives about the dignity of discourse. He echoed the call of his predecessor Pope Francis to "disarm communication" and "purify it of aggressiveness."1 Drawing on the ancient image of the Tower of Babel, Leo described our present communicative space as sometimes flooded

with “the confusion of loveless languages that are often ideological or partisan.” He urged those present to chart a different path:

[L]et us disarm communication of all prejudice and resentment, fanaticism and even hatred; let us free it from aggression. We do not need loud, forceful communication, but rather communication that is capable of listening and of gathering the voices of the weak who have no voice. Let us disarm words and we will help to disarm the world. Disarmed and disarming communication allows us to share a different view of the world and to act in a manner consistent with our human dignity.2

Notice that his words not only address the harmful role that extremist ideologies play in argumentative breakdown, but also the loudness created by multiple clashing sides that are incapable of listening to and encountering the other. Notice further that the pope directs this counsel to the communicator and the commentator, not the politician or the philosopher at a debate’s source.

In reflecting on what constitutes a ‘worthy arguer,’ I believe that the university student, especially the student-writer, should take this global leader’s words seriously. Now is precisely the time for the author to lay aside arms and, instead, to see the opportunity to transform this communicative space from an echo chamber into a place of encounter, even in the seemingly silent task of writing. It is an opportunity to consider that your interlocutor — either the person who reads your composition or the person against whom you argue — has dignity, the capacity to formulate perspectives, and the ability engage the world with his mind, soul, and heart. While this might seem like an erudite way of encouraging a writer to simply ‘assume the best’ about the other side, it actually goes much deeper. On the converse of our most heated and passionate arguments is not a hindrance or a social ill; instead, there is a person with a face, a voice, and a story. Perhaps the person’s logic is undoubtedly flawed. Perhaps this person’s ideas are so terribly misguided that they could have serious social ramifications, resounding from the page like a clanging gong of doom. This alternative approach does not ignore realities. Instead, it dignifies the person by asking serious questions in the writing process: are the words I choose in arguing against him contributing to a clash of noise? Do they tear her down, as if she is merely an opponent for me to beat? Must I think of this person as my adversary? Instead, what if I believed that this person deserves a considerate, truthful, and logical articulation of my perspectives, regardless of the gravity of his errors? Could my writing make a difference in this person’s perspective?

I do not intend for this noble proposition, however, to sound like an elusive utopia or a suggested exercise in gentility, whereby we kindly 'agree to disagree' and halt before hurting feelings. There is no excuse for a superficiality that only serves the supposed good of 'being nice.' Instead, this measured, disarmed, persuasive approach is intellectually rigorous and demands authentic engagement with principles, experiences, and persons. In order to dignify our interlocutors with a good and worthy argument, we must be ready to roll up our sleeves to do the hard work. Seek out the sources of your own perspectives and digest them, allowing yourself to compose the fullest response to the question at hand. Digest the sources that have shaped your interlocutor's viewpoints, such as the dense text of that philosopher who has been deemed the 'antagonist' of your cause, the popular podcast this person regularly consumes for commentary, or the dissent of that Supreme Court decision that you consider to be a true victory. Engage these texts and media not to abandon your principles or perspectives, but rather to shape the way you argue and understand the vantage-point from which your reader or your challenger comes.

Ultimately, the worthy arguer, as this chapter sets out to describe, is principled, articulate, and charitable. I am reminded of the words of the beloved children's show host Mister Rogers at his induction into the Television Hall of Fame, when he remarked: "The space between the television set and that person who's watching is very holy ground."3 His words apply as much to the stream of educational programming as they does to the words of a persuasive composition. The world has muddied the 'holy ground' of our communicative space with malicious words, loud disagreements, and aggressive tactics. We cannot add to the mess. Instead, the ground between your writing and its reader can be a space where new ideas are considered, dialogue begins, and even new appreciations are fostered. The prose you craft with attention to detail, deliberate form, and dignity can give your reader hope that ideas can be exchanged in a deeply human way and, might I say, convince your reader that you have something actually worthwhile to say. Why not choose to be a worthy arguer, a disarmed and dignified writer?

Reflection #5: "an Invitation, Not a Battle"

AUTHOR: *Melanie McHugh is a graduate student studying Clinical Mental Health Counseling at Kutztown University. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Psychology with minors in Communication and Women & Gender Studies. Her interests include mental health, community care, and the intersections of identity and well-being.*

When I was growing up, arguing was viewed as “talking back.” The people in power, my parents, were the ones who wanted to have all the say, all the time. They were the ultimate deciders of right and wrong in my life. Despite this, I argued with them a lot and always got in trouble for it. To them, and traditional parenting overall, my arguing was not advocacy; it was seen as a sign of disrespect. Arguing, in my young mind, wasn’t about winning or losing. When I was “talking back,” I was trying to reason, to learn, to be heard. Rather, it was about understanding. But in the eyes of those in control around me, argument became a test of power, where only one voice was allowed to be right.

High school both reinforced and challenged that narrative. I met students and teachers who echoed the idea that argument was disrespectful and unwelcome. But I also found those who, like me, wanted to question everything. College became the first place where that tension began to shift for me. In college classrooms, arguing was often encouraged. For the first time, I was actually invited to use my voice as a means of inquiry and exploration. Argument took on what I believed it should be, a form of educational learning.

Beyond just classroom debate, using my voice became a deeper process of learning how to tell my story, while also learning how to value it. Throughout my studies of psychology, I was taught that good research must be peer-reviewed, grounded in data, and presented within strict academic frameworks. While I understand the value of those methods, I have always believed that lived experience is just as valid, if not more so, when it comes to understanding the world. Personal narratives offer something that many academic texts cannot, unfiltered truth from those directly impacted. Information from the source, if you will.

My passion for personal narratives fuels my desire to become a therapist. Academic spaces often undervalue experiential knowledge and instead opt for what they consider as “professional” or “scientific.” This leaves out so many voices that do not make it into the cut of what they see as worthy. For me, coming to voice means refusing to silence parts of myself to fit institutional expectations or stereotypes.

The real power of argument is not domination, rather it is invitation. Argument can be used as tool to say, “This matters to me, do you see it too?” Or maybe, “Have you thought about it from this perspective?” Some of the most important arguments that I have had were with the people I love, in those moments when we are willing to stay in the conversation even when it’s challenging. Not to win, but to better understand each other. I’ve learned that argument can be a form of

intimacy, an opening, not a shutting down. When it’s rooted in care, it becomes less about who’s right and more about what truths we’re each carrying, what needs are beneath the surface, and what we might learn by staying with one another through discomfort. That’s the kind of argument that transforms.

I know I am still learning how to fully step into my voice and use it in the ways I desire. I envision using my voice to ignite something in others. A fire that pushes them to demand more from their lives and recognize the power they hold, even if they were never taught to see it. I want to invite others to consider how they, too, can use their own voices in transformative ways. I envision using my voice by withholding it and creating space for others to be heard rather than centering myself. I want to learn when it is the right time to speak and when it is the right time to be silent, when to take up space and when to step aside. Someone I love once said to me, “Would you like to react or respond?” That question stays with me. It reminds me that voice is not just what I say, but how and when I say it. I want to spend more time responding and not reacting to the world. I want to speak with intention, to listen deeply, and to create spaces where others can do the same.

I am drawn to the ways that argument can show up within storytelling, reflection, collaboration, and listening. These alternatives to confrontation allow for care and curiosity, rather than combat. And while I truly wish that they worked all the time, I know they don’t. There are times when you will only be heard when you argue boldly. Letting your fire ignite through argument is sometimes necessary to break through to adversarial voices. But even then, strive to argue in a way that invites others to hear your message without metaphorically “fanning the flames” even further.

My studies at Kutztown University have helped shaped my approach to communicating in profound ways. Psychology had taught me the power of observation, data, and evidence. My Women & Gender studies minor has empowered me to argue for justice, equality, and for systematic change. It also has connected me to the generations of people who have used their voices to fight oppression before me. And my Communication minor has made it so that when I express my ideas, I do so in a way that is clear and persuasive. I no longer yell just to yell; I speak to be heard, and more importantly, to be understood.

In the classroom, the most powerful moments of learning have come from the open dialogue, not debate, that occurs between students. Essays have helped,

yes, but so has just simply witnessing students pass the baton, taking turns to speak their peace and find their voices.

Today, my voice is stronger because it's not speaking alone. It echoes alongside friends, mentors, family, and community members who also want change, connection, and healing. My voice is part of a chorus.

Reflection #6: "Placing Your Voice in Conversation With Others: a Case for Ethical Argument"

AUTHOR: *Daniela Mortorano is an English majors with minors in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; Professional Writing; and Social Media Strategies. Her focus in writing is editing and revision. In her free time, Daniela likes to experiment with cosmetics, listen to music, and browse the web. She is passionate about social reform.*

At 21 years old, I am still unsure if I have truly found my voice. I grew up in a conservative environment surrounded by religious schools and a strict family. It wasn't until I came to Kutztown University that I started to find my voice. Admittedly, I do not use my voice for activism as much as I would like to; because of my family's opposing beliefs, I fear the repercussions if I were to use my voice to enact change about issues that are important to me. I'm afraid of being ostracized from my family or jeopardizing my safety. It's hard for me to write about my voice when I feel like I hardly have one. However, I've been working on myself. Throughout my course of study at Kutztown, my confidence has changed and, in turn, so has my style of communication. I'm now comfortable having difficult conversations with my peers. This is thanks to the positive environment that Kutztown University has provided me, along with the friends I surround myself with. Socially progressive classes in the discipline of Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies (WGS) have also given me opportunities to use my voice in a secure setting without risk to my safety. The lessons I've learned both in and out of the classroom have allowed me to cultivate a stronger voice, one that can cultivate a conversation rather than fuel an argument and one that can enact positive change rather than incite more anger.

I'm an English major with minors in Professional Writing, WGS, and Social Media Studies. Personally, writing is my best asset to project my voice. I find more comfort in writing than speaking because, when writing, I can research and craft my voice in a more careful manner. Using your voice to write rather than speak can help your words to come across as less of an argument and more of a conversation. In writing, there is less ambiguity and emotion than there is in

speaking. The method I have found best when using my voice is to research support for my claims. Typically, people that disagree with your arguments will find more validity in your claims if you provide thorough research. This is why college campuses and classrooms are the ideal environments for forming an argument and using your voice. I use my voice in small ways. In classrooms, clubs, events, and friend groups, I feel confident enough to be an activist. Many people use social media platforms or attend protests as ways to use their voice, but I fall short on those public accounts. I prefer to pursue social justice efforts through the WGS minor and through opportunities such as presenting at student conferences. Additionally, learning about feminist advocates makes me feel hopeful that I can project my voice one day on a larger scale, too.

According to feminist scholars Briony Lipton and Elizabeth Mackinlay, “The term ‘voice’ conjures a particular public expression of a certain type of perspective on self and social life.” Furthermore, “The concept of ‘voice’ carries with it assumptions of choice, that individuals have specific rights to ‘choose.’” I fully acknowledge the privilege of having a voice as I understand many do not. As Lipton and Mackinlay explain, I have specific rights; however, I also have the right to choose whether or not to use my voice. While growing up and developing my voice, I have always chosen silence over social justice. This choice was justified by my safety at home. On the Kutztown college campus, however, I can use my voice to the extent I desire. The classroom is where my voice began to form. bell hooks’ Teaching to Transgress highlights the importance of classroom settings for improving democracy among young generations. Chapter One, “Engaged Pedagogy,” explains that progressive education begins with educators who care deeply about their students: “Teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (15). Younger generations of students develop their feminist beliefs in the classroom, thus giving them confidence to go forth into the world and craft cogent arguments that put those feminist theories into practice. hooks goes into further detail in her third chapter, “Embracing Change,” when she writes that “making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy” (39). Working together in an academic setting such as a university classroom is the foundation to creating a safe space where voices can be heard.

Classrooms are not the only place where I use my voice. Although safe educational spaces are vital to the development of my voice, I can really project my thoughts by pairing my voice with my writing skills and by pursuing various

opportunities. For example, Kutztown is one of the many universities that participate in the Her Campus organization. This website publishes work by female college students about entertainment, news, politics, or other trending topics. Through Her Campus, I can use my voice to call out specific injustices that can occur on college campuses across the nation. For example, I would be able to expose certain problems that I've witnessed such as gendered wage gaps, sexual assault, and biases in the classroom. Her Campus, as described on their webpage, was "founded by and for college women" to "navigat[e] the unique experiences that come with this transformative stage in life." While there is no formal mission statement for this organization, Her Campus explains that they are "a community that uplifts, informs, and connects college women on topics like pop culture, wellness, style, politics, health, and more… Our team of college contributors spans across hundreds of campuses worldwide, providing articles, advice, and real-life stories that encourage you to develop your authentic self during some of the most exciting years of your life." Some recent articles cover managing stress, discovering local artists, finding work over the summer, dealing with relationships, and preparing for future semesters. Contributing to this evolving publication offers me and others an exciting opportunity to assert our voice and argue for positive change, not just argue against an issue in isolation. For example, some issues that need to be addressed on Kutztown's campus include food insecurity, the job market, and discrimination. My voice can be used for these and other topics. Instead of composing arguments in response to such issues within the confines of a college classroom, I can share my voice on a broader platform and, hopefully, connect with other writers who are seeking to enact similar change

My voice has been silenced for most of my life. It doesn't need to be anymore. My voice could cause havoc through writing traditional arguments, but I want to use my voice to thoughtfully address and critically question misogyny, racism, and power. While I am grateful to Kutztown for providing me a safe space to develop my voice, I hope to continue connecting with others by carving out my own writing space—a space that will continue to provide a safe home for my voice.

Reflection #7: "Argument Through the Lens of a Journalist"

AUTHOR: *Professor Melissa Nurcynski teaches professional writing and composition classes at Kutztown University and her articles have appeared in multiple print and online publications, including Newsweek, Budget Travel, Hemispheres Magazine, The Rough Guides and Atlas Obscura.*

In journalism, we're not supposed to make arguments. Journalists are supposed to stick to the facts and, in traditional journalism, remain unbiased. Nevertheless, my background in journalism has informed my teaching of composition and argument in a way that has not only been helpful, but it has become a cornerstone of my approach to composition.

This might seem counterintuitive, but in a culture that often values feelings over facts, teaching composition students to observe, recognize, describe and interpret real world situations has over and over proved to give them an edge when it comes to making an argument. For example, a student once wrote an essay based on her anger over lack of gluten free options in the dining halls. Her valid feelings arose not from her own needs but that of her best friend who suffers from celiac disease. Her argument was based on the idea that it wasn't fair that people with gluten sensitivities had no options and how sick they could become because of this.

I suggested she go to the cafeteria and observe, looking for reasons why serving any specialized options might be difficult. Upon returning with a list of observations, including the chaotic nature of individual food stations and the many overworked employees trying to service hundreds of students at once, I asked her how she would approach gluten free options in a way that was cost effective and wouldn't overtax an already overtaxed staff.

The student came up with the idea of an individual station that contained food options for those with gluten sensitivity as well as other allergens. While one subpoint of her essay still addressed the importance of gluten free options from an emotional perspective, the rest of the essay argued for a pragmatic solution to the identified problem. Make no mistake, I never wanted her to abandon her idealism or her passion for her cause. As the professor, I just wanted her to observe facts and organize them in a way so that her essay was not an abstract cry for justice but a solid argument that a solution could be found that respected the needs of all sides. And I wanted her to do it via her own observations. In journalism, we call that reportage. In composition, we call it original research. In either discipline, it boils down to getting up, getting out in the world and doing some legwork.

Her observations took her from "the people who run food services are insensitive jerks" to "the people who run food services have a difficult job and if we want to solve the problem of gluten free options, we need to find a workable solution." Her argument was a success, and she was confident enough in it to send it to

food services. More importantly, she had learned that legwork gives you an edge, and that is a fact.

Reflection #8: "Everything's an Argument: Rhetorical Tools for Non-Adversarial Arguments"

AUTHOR: *Dr. Patricia Pytleski is an Associate Professor of English/ Composition and Rhetoric and Director of the Kutztown University Writing Center; she teaches courses in writing and secondary English education and supervises English student teachers in secondary education classrooms/ field placements. She is the author of "Contact Zones and Contingent Faculty: An Argument for Conversion," "Crossing the Ideological Borders of Writing: The Fundamental Nature of Personal Writing (and Academic Discourse) In the First Year Writing Classroom, "From Walls to Whiteboards to Webpages to Tutoring: The Writing Center as an Artistic, Student- Centered Campus Hub," and "Writing Center Reflections: The Impact of Tutor-to-Tutor Teaching." In her spare time, she likes to spend time with her family, pets, and friends, read, and travel.*

The main purpose of the chapters in this textbook is to help you as student writers pursue productive alternatives to traditional argument, first as you write within the classroom and then perhaps more importantly when you use these methods in your real-life arguments. As a first-year composition instructor, writing center director, and educator of secondary English student teachers, I agree with the importance of helping my students create and contend with non-adversarial arguments in collaboration with their peers and eventually within their personal lives, for argument is present everywhere in everything we do.

In Andrea Lunsford's text, Everything's an Argument, now in its ninth edition, she shares that "arguments occur in every medium, in every genre, in everything we do" (52) from the t-shirts we wear, stickers on our cars, computers or Stanley cups, and even to the class syllabus/ first day handout. In wearing a shirt with an American flag on it, we are making an argument and sharing it about our patriotism, our political views, our belief systems, etc.; a professor's syllabus

argues how to be a good student in that course, do well, be ethical and not plagiarize or use AI, and why the course subject is important; a COEXIST bumper sticker makes an argument about the driver's perspectives.

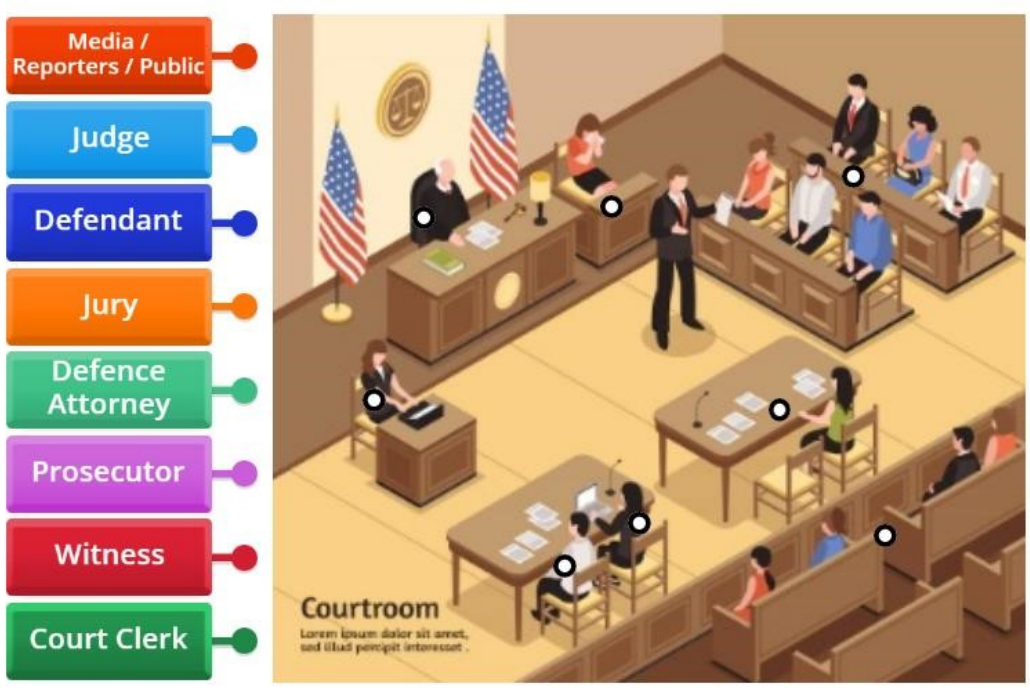
Sharing this symbol on clothing, car bumpers, etc. can carry extensive meanings; the coexist symbol, originally created by a Polish graphic designer, carries varied arguments about the environment, politics, religion, etc. "The coexist bumper stickers are intended to spread a message of peace among humans irrespective of their race, religion, or gender. This seems straightforward but noble, and the coexist symbol has been around for a long time… many people recognize it as a great symbol of global unity." What Do The "COEXIST" Bumper Stickers Mean? (Explained) – Motor & Wheels Thus, intentionally or not, this bumper sticker implies perspectives on and arguments from the car owner.

Discussing how everything is an argument is essential in our composition classrooms and writing centers and helps to familiarize you as students with the fact that you have actually been making arguments successfully for years, even if unintentionally or without being asked to. Starting off these discussions by looking around the classroom at your peers' choices in clothing, backpacks, books, etc. solidifies this concept as does asking you to reflect on your choice of car, bedroom décor, and a college major.

Journaling about these choices, as well as about your peers' choices, and the inherent meanings behind them, helps introduce you to writing persuasively and non-argumentatively, reflecting on these choices as not being right or wrong but being images related to varied perspectives. For example, in a first-year writing class, you might reflect on your professors' clothing choices and the potential meaning behind them—a great conversation starter and on which also models non-divisive argument. Comparing the professor in the slacks, dress shirt, and tie to the one in jeans and a music t-shirt demonstrates the presence of non-traditional arguments in our everyday lives and the meanings we attribute to one's choices. You could share how the more professionally dressed professor arguably knows the subject better, conducts himself and the class in a more professional manner, and is a stickler for grades whereas the music-loving, casually dressed professor will create a more comfortable class environment, sharing a subject that he loves with students. Whether these interpretations are factual matters not to the discussion of implied arguments based on choices as simple as our clothing. Our internal views on these clothing choices, and also perhaps the professors' own intentions, serve as an illuminating frontloading of non-traditional arguments we see and make every day.

Discussions about the arguments we make based on these everyday assumptions can reflect empathy, respect, and civility, by not allowing the argument culture to restrict us to right or wrong, good or bad, agree or disagree as our only choices. Juxtaposing these arguments with more divisive ones demonstrates that oppositional argument is not the only one that exists and that there is benefit in not only sharing your views but in also considering those of your peers and others. To discuss more divisive, traditional arguments in class, we can highlight a traditional argument's alignment with court case proceedings. Such court cases model the traditional arguments we first think of since only one side is validated by a court ruling. Differentiating these traditional arguments with non-traditional arguments we make all the time is the first step towards realizing the importance of being able to discuss arguments in a non-adversarial manner.

In a court case, there exists a judge and jury (to decide the fate of the defendant), the prosecutor (arguing for the guilt of the defendant), the defendant/ defense attorney (arguing for their innocence), witnesses (sharing arguments for one side or the other), and the audience/ public/ media (to later offer their viewpoints and summations).



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When learning to compose traditional arguments, we learn about the parts of the persuasive essay in ways very similar to a court case: the opening statement (introduction), evidence sharing (body paragraphs), witness testimony (hearing from outside authorities and sources, which are then evaluated as well for validity), and the closing statements (conclusion and call to action for the judge and/or jury). The outcome of the trial reinforces the right/ wrong focus of traditional arguments. Discussing these elements in class, and juxtaposing them

against arguments where both sides consider the other's views, helps us to cultivate empathy and consideration of the entire issue and of our peers' views.

Another essential element of both traditional and non-traditional arguments discussed in writing classes is the presence of bias. Bias is "a particular tendency, trend, inclination, feeling, or opinion, especially one that is preconceived or unreasoned" ("Bias") and exists everywhere as does argument. Bias can be shown in obvious and subtle ways, intentionally or unintentionally. Identifying and understanding the presence of bias in the world, in media, and in our own perspectives benefits you as student writers when creating all argumentative writing or speaking, again encouraging you to examine varied viewpoints in opposition to each other and potentially in opposition to your own beliefs. Extending the bias discussion to specific media outlets helps to be critical in our intake of news and also to research varied viewpoints. Sharing and discussing the media bias chart visually demonstrates how varied news outlets can treat/ analyze the same news events in extremely different ways, depending on their bias and political leanings. Sharing charts such as the The AllSides Media Bias Chart™ makes bias transparent so you can get the full picture, avoid manipulation and misinformation, and think for yourself. [This] bias chart is based on over 2,400 AllSides Media Bias Ratings that inform our balanced newsfeed and are powered by people like you. We rate bias by balancing input from thousands of everyday Americans across the political spectrum and a politically balanced panel of experts. Everyone is biased, but hidden bias misleads and divides us. AllSides makes bias transparent so you can easily identify and consume different perspectives. (AllSides)

Researching news events and reading widely helps us to understand bias, make educated and informed decisions, and to acknowledge divergent viewpoints, thus making our own perspectives stronger. The AllSides media bias chart, version 10.2 below, demonstrates which news outlets lean left, right, or remain central, encouraging students to consider this when reading and researching.

Also, discussing the need for media bias charts and analysis in class gives us the important opportunity to leave our own echo chambers and to consider varying viewpoints, all of which moves us more towards non-traditional arguments where more possibilities exist than simply a right and wrong answer. AllSides shares its intent and raison d'etre as the following:

News media, social media, and search engines have become so biased, politicized, and personalized that we are often stuck inside filter bubbles, where we're only exposed to information and ideas we already agree with. When bias is

hidden and we see only facts, information, and opinions that confirm our existing beliefs, a number of negative things happen: 1) we become extremely polarized as a nation, and misunderstand or hate the "the other side," believing they are extreme, hateful, or evil; 2) we become more likely to be manipulated into thinking, voting, or behaving a certain way; 3) we become limited in our ability to understand others, problem solve and compromise; 4) we become unable to find the truth. Our bias ratings power our balanced news so you can get a broader view, spot bias, and find the truth. (AllSides)

Acknowledging bias and examining the media bias chart (and thus in extension researching varied news sources) helps us find “balanced” news while analyzing varied viewpoints. The Media Bias Chart originated in 2016 in response to “an ever-growing partisan media landscape, with the belief that an informed public is a better public.” More information about the creation of the Media Bias Chart and its creator, Vanessa Otero, can be found here: Political media's bias, in a single chart (Read Transcript). Even in traditional arguments, the best of them consider opposing viewpoints in order to demonstrate their extensive knowledge of the subject and refutation of those opposing perspectives. In making any argument, all sides of the issue should be examined to step outside the echo chambers and reflect on all considerations, thus making their arguments stronger.

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As demonstrated in earlier chapters, when helping to understand and make nontraditional arguments, peer collaboration is beneficial, thus helping them understand the views of their peers and learn/ show empathy. Considering all sides of a subject and its varying viewpoints collaboratively helps us to make arguments in the classroom and in our writing, but also helps us to work productively with others and to better navigate our worlds full of divisive rhetoric.

When thinking about arguments and the collaboration in making/considering them, it is essential to not only hope for consensus but also acknowledge the essential role of difference, as analyzed by John Trimbur, who also references Kenneth Bruffee. In “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning,” Trimbur shares that

collaborative learning may be distinguished from other forms of group work on the grounds that it organizes students not just to work together on common projects but more important to engage in a process of intellectual negotiation and collective decision-making. The aim of collaborative learning, its advocates hold, is to reach consensus through an expanding conversation. This conversation takes place at a number of levels-first in small discussion groups, next among the groups in a class, then between the class and the teacher, and finally among the class, the teacher, and the wider community of knowledge. In Bruffee's social constructionist pedagogy, the language used to reach consensus acquires greater authority as it acquires greater social weight: the knowledge students put into words counts for more as they test it out, revising and relocating it by taking into account what their peers, the teacher, and voices outside the classroom have to say. (Trimbur 602)

Collaborating while working with arguments helps us to see and appreciate the differences in the perspectives and to empathize with peers. Trimbur envisions consensus in a different way: to open up conversations about argument and to help students work together not to always agree but to be able to work together regardless of their differences.

Through examination of non-divisive arguments, collaboration, acknowledgement of difference over consensus, and rhetorical listening, you can examine and produce nontraditional arguments both within and outside the classroom. Rhetorical listening, as discussed in Chapter 3, should be taught as well as modeled in the classroom, showing you how to listen to your peers and others to understand and empathize, not only to respond back to and refute. Sharing your voice and views is not the only goal here; active listening to others’ viewpoints and trying to understand them is the ultimate goal. As shared in Chapter 5, the “evolution in thought” of you as a student= after collaboration occurs through the use of the writing process, peer review, one-on-one conferences, and in university writing center writing sessions.

For instructors, modeling and encouraging in-class writing workshops and/ or writing center sessions help students to empathize, collaborate, interact, and contend with others’ perspectives in a conflict-free environment. Students and

writing center tutors who have learned about the importance of empathy in discussing, collaborating on, and reading each other's writing are well educated in using these skills in their lives outside of academia to contend with and discuss opposing views. Educators are doing a disservice to students if not teaching them about bias and modeling and sharing examples of nontraditional arguments, for these discussions, activities, writing assignments, and collaborations benefit all of us in our everyday lives and in future interactions well beyond the English and composition classrooms, making us engaged and invested citizens. As a student, know that you have the tools to pursue non-adversarial argument if you actively pursue these important rhetorical tools within your university.

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Reflection #9: "on Becoming Worthy Arguers"

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To be a worthy arguer is to recognize, first and foremost, the most challenging reality of argumentation: You are probably wrong. Brown (1963) acknowledged over fifty years ago that "[m]ost people want to feel that issues are simple rather than complex, want to have their prejudices confirmed, want to feel that they 'belong' with the implication that others do not, and need to pinpoint an enemy to blame for their frustrations" (p. 26). In this way, we prevent ourselves from walking in the philosophical and rhetorical footsteps of the great thinkers of the past. If for no other reason than to satiate my own curiosity, I have always been a voracious reader, leading me to follow in those footsteps. Walt Whitman, Ray Bradbury, and Fyodor Dostoevsky were my friends in upper primary school. Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Noam Chomsky were my companions in high school. Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, René Descartes, Émile Durkheim, and Carl Jung were my associates at Reading Area Community College. Ferdinand de Saussure, Lev Vygotsky, Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, M.H. Abrams, Terry Eagleton, Stephen Greenblatt, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Edward Said, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sigmund Freud, Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel Foucault, and Slavoj Žižek were my tutors at Kutztown University. Innumerable others in general and applied linguistics accompanied me during my graduate education at Tulane University, in addition to those of the Arab and Persian rhetorical traditions during my post-graduate education. These names might not all be familiar to you yet; in fact, they were all unfamiliar to me until I allowed myself to wander aimlessly through bookstores and university libraries, but some of them make an appearance here.

As a scholar of linguistics and rhetoric, I have come to understand that what it means to be a worthy arguer has perhaps as much to do with what we undertake as much as with that which we avoid. When we eschew a facility with the Trivium[1] in favor of entrenched, emotionally reactive stances, democratic deliberation is rendered unfeasible.[2] When logic and reason result in discomfort, sophistry and cancel culture[3] take control. When the very concept of truth is

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[1] The Trivium is the collective manifestation of logic, grammar, and rhetoric, each of which nourishes and is nourished by the others. This is not to suggest that an appeal to emotion is always ineffective. Indeed, to connect on an interpersonal level is to engage openly and emotionally with one another; however, subjective interpretations are always idiosyncratic and, thus, not reproducible. Near-death experiences, for example, might reflect a shared set of finite traits (e.g. 'seeing the light'), but this is most certainly a consequence of human anatomy alone.

[2] Roberts-Miller (2017) examines the signs and symptoms of demagoguery in contrast to democratic deliberation. For a more traditionally academic approach to ideological formation, van Dijk (1998) offers a linguistically-informed perspective. More recently, Montell (2021) expands these conversations through a sociolinguistic approach to a range of prototypical cults.

[3] For interested readers, more recent discussions of cancel culture in the USA are found in Haidt and Lukianoff (2018) and Lukianoff and Schlott (2023), among others.

subjected to perpetual revisionism, demagoguery[4] becomes a viable means to an end. When compromise is viewed as a sign of weakness, the appeal of Rogerian argumentation may become unrealized. When one believes that his or her side is inherently 'better' than another, the possibility of charitable interpretation is diminished.

Many have traded rationalism for a twenty-first century tribalism fueled by ideologies that they may not fully understand and which may not even be fully conceptualized yet, transforming us into predators and prey for one another. In this way, we may resort to common bifurcations between Us and Them—and, in doing so, remain constantly in a state of ideological war without a ceasefire in sight. As President George W. Bush remarked over twenty years ago, "You're either with us, or you're with the terrorists." As such, we have eschewed the knowledge and will that distinguish us from the lower animals, following the received wisdom of al-Ghazālī, voluntarily opting to reduce ourselves in stature by promotion of the beastly and the brutal at the expense of moderation, compassion, and understanding.[5] When one "fails to obey the dictates of reason, these three other attributes prevail over him and cause his ruin [...] What a pity it is that those who would find fault with those who worship stones do not see that on their part they worship the pig and the dog in themselves" (Ali, 1921, p. 46). As such, my objective is to assist you in limiting the dominance of one over the other while validating your beliefs without stifling rigorous debate—in short, to avoid becoming part of the problem. The increasingly ubiquitous cornucopia of illogical, undemocratic, religious 'argumentation' metastasizes; for this reason, we will examine the salient symptoms of this disease to ensure that you can also become a worthy arguer.

First, cognitive dissonance—(un)knowingly adopting positions or adhering to beliefs that contradict one another—enables us to condemn slavery in selected portions of history while conveniently forgetting about those affected by its

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[4] It has become fashionable to insist that we are in need of our own Sumerian flood to wash away the unsavory parts of the Western Canon while retaining those to which we are agreeable. Although it is true that canonical works are not representative of the many multilingual, multiracial, and religiously pluralistic societies in existence today, the people of the past were not nearly as concerned with individual identity as we are today. Still, we do not need to throw out the baby or the bath water; rather, we can expand the size of the tub. In fact, where writers from the Harlem Renaissance once overshadowed those of the interstitial period, we now find representation of those from the Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem, a period I first discovered while an undergraduate student at Kutztown University.

[5] These include the beastly (the pig), the brutal (the dog), the satanic (the devil), and the divine (the saint). The third and fourth control the first and second. To analogize these to the rhetorical tradition, activation for personal benefit of the beastly results in deceitful and dishonest speech; the brutal, slanderous and cruel speech. This system, of course, is not fully rational but, instead, reflects the thinking of the time; as such, I would encourage you to understand this composition as allegorical, not metaphysical.

contemporary manifestations; to recognize the horrors of the Holocaust and the Rwandan Genocide without ameliorating the plight of the Palestinians, the Uyghurs, and the Rohingya, among countless others; to acknowledge that 'sex' and 'gender' are not perfectly overlapping concepts while also proclaiming that they are entirely distinct from one another; to offer land acknowledgments for Indigenous Americans at events while neither inviting them nor returning their land; to concede that ethnic and racial tensions in the USA remain imperfect while understating the significant progress made since the introduction of chattel slavery; and to state unequivocally that parity between men and women is the ultimate objective while decrying as misogynistic even good-faith discussions on the unique struggles presently faced by boys and men.[6] Such inconsistency creates a barrier between us and our ability to effect real change. As Ivan Illich (1968) so aptly noted, "It is quite possible that this hypocrisy is unconscious in most of you." Becoming conscious of our own cognitive biases and inconsistencies is an important and necessary step toward becoming a worthy arguer.[7]

Second, truthiness—holding steadfast to beliefs even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary—prevents us from having a conversation or debate grounded in reality.[8] Polygraph tests are unreliable at determining whether someone is lying; one is not more likely to be gay if he or she has gay parents; trigger warnings are generally not beneficial in preventing further traumatization; an increase in vaccines does not cause an increase in autism; most abortions do not take place during the third trimester; non-standard forms of English are not broken and are, to the contrary, as rule-governed as any standard variety; most people shot by the police are not victims of racial discrimination; the planet is not

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[6] Richard Reeves (2022) convincingly demonstrates that boys and men are struggling across education, employment, parenthood, and healthcare, noting that the issues they face are compounded by race, class, policies, politics, and a general pathologization of prototypical male behavior. He does so not by engaging in whataboutism and downplaying the obstacles faced by women; instead, he writes that "[w]e can hold two thoughts in our head at once. We can be passionate about women's rights and compassionate toward vulnerable boys and men" (p. 114).

[7] For instance, my own students brought attention last year to the fact that, when reacting to students' comments on RateMyProfessors, I responded almost exclusively to those that were negative. I am not too arrogant to admit that my students were correct in identifying my hypocrisy. Likewise, I joined many others while in graduate school in protesting against the arrival of David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the KKK, at Dillard University, an HBCU located in New Orleans, Louisiana. If I am so committed to free speech, why did I not want to grant him the opportunity to speak? Following the guidance of Mill (2002 [1859]), I should not denounce that which has not yet been articulated or considered if I am to engage in effective argumentation. We can illustrate this with a thought experiment: Imagine a woman who enters the hospital to give birth. The doctor says that there is a serious problem that prevents the possibility of saving the lives of both the mother and child. There are three other options—can you spot them? One is particularly unsavory and ill-advised.

[8] This is 'untangled' with far greater clarity in McWhorter (2021), among others.

only six thousand years old; the earnings gap, when adjusted, cannot be solely or primarily attributed to widespread, systemic disenfranchisement of women; and Haitian immigrants never converged on local parks in Ohio to eat local pets. All of these claims have been thoroughly debunked, yet many people are unwilling to acknowledge the truth. Whether this is a consequence of ignorance, arrogance, or both, we cannot admit illogical positions as valid in a debate that requires rationalism. Indeed, it is far easier to support that which already confirms our own beliefs, prophetically offering the confirmation bias we so fervently desire. Instead, the present epoch calls for a liberalism in the truest sense of its etymology. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) so eloquently described, shielding ourselves from the full picture is reductive: "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (13:11-13:24). Allowing ourselves to confront inconvenient truths is incumbent upon us in our quest not only toward identifying and remedying actual problems, but also toward becoming worthy arguers.[9]

Third, religion enables us to establish and maintain in-group and out-group membership, forge friendships, and develop shared norms. Though the extent varies based on socioeconomic status, geography, and history, the USA has experienced a decline in traditional religiosity in recent years. However, if we understand 'religion' in the broader sense articulated in Durkheim (1912), we become more receptive to rhetoric espousing litmus tests designed to bifurcate society into 'good' and 'evil' at the hands of self-proclaimed, Messianic figures. Yet others frame their struggles in pseudo-religious terms, likewise engaging in character assassination by portraying immigrants as Satanic figures who want to 'steal' their jobs, women who want to 'destroy' their families for pleasure, educators who want to 'indoctrinate' their children, and atheists who want to 'kill' God. For example, as reflected by the social media trend asking women if they would rather be in the forest with a random bear or with a random man and asking men if they would rather share their feelings with a random tree or with a random woman, we need to recognize that neither group is unequivocally wrong. If women feel physically threatened by men, we should take that seriously; if men feel emotionally abandoned by women, we should take that seriously, too. There are reasons for both and enough culpability to be shared. Acknowledging this reality should not result in excommunication or shunning under an

[9] Consider, though, that nobody is perfectly immune from truthiness. I have spent almost my entire existence believing that we adjust our clocks solely to assist farmers in their work. Sometimes we share the myth frequently enough for us to believe that it is the truth.

accusation of heresy. We all have reasons for our beliefs, but no belief should be free from scrutiny if we intend to become worthy arguers.[10]

Finally, unwavering faith in our perception enables us, none the wiser, to march down a remarkably deceptive, dangerous path. In a striking display of naïveté, however natural it may feel, many blindly trust the accuracy of the information and representations they encounter.[11] For example, television shows and movies impact our perception of law enforcement, communities of color, marriage, and poverty. Media reports offer sensationalized depictions of only the most grotesque events of everyday life—everything from natural disasters to school shootings to human trafficking.[12] Equally impactful is the lack of representation, as Vergès (2019) rightfully notes, which renders invisible what otherwise could have been visible. How do we discuss those whose presence remains unseen or whose very existence is manipulated for propagandistic purposes? Thus, a healthy dose of skepticism, coupled with serious interrogation, are essential in distinguishing—yet not fully divorcing—reality from perception. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues, "[O]ur capacity to confront the world creatively is dependent on how those images correspond or not to that reality, how they distort or clarify the reality of our struggles" (p. 15). Mr. Rogers' neighborhood simply does not capture our attention the way it historically did—and for good reason: We trust our 'gut' like the pig and 'bark' like the dog, failing to recognize as worthy arguers that others might do the same while projecting confidence from a place of limited knowledge, as so many of us often do.

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[10] I am invariably reminded of this point every semester when students approach me during office hours for a meet-and-greet. In discussing their musical preferences, many state quite plainly, albeit in a hushed tone, that they enjoy country music. Thinking after the first few instances that these were exceptional cases, I found the courage to ask and received a common refrain: "People will say I'm not really black if they know I like country. They look like your people, not mine." For a slightly dated example, recall the comedic remarks delivered by Chris Rock (1999): "Everybody wanna save the environment. Shit, I see trees every fucking day. I don't never see no Indians [sic]. I went to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade this year. They didn't even have enough Indians in that shit. They had a bunch of Pilgrims. When it came time for the Indians, they had three real Indians, and the rest was a bunch of Puerto Ricans with feathers on their head" (38:32-38:51).

[11] If we recognize, following René Descartes (1998), that our senses do not immediately impart truth, and if we understand, following al-Ghazālī, that the imperfection of our own hearts impedes truth (cf. Skellie 2010), then where should we seek it?

[12] I would strongly encourage you to undertake your own research. Is Brent Staples' (1986) experience truly so surprising when almost half of those arrested on COPS were black men (cf. Monk-Turner et al. 2007)? Similarly, do we really believe that current depictions of fathers and husbands are never internalized? Bivins (2016) explains that "[i]n recent years, images of the manly man, hero, breadwinner, and outdoorsman have been displaced by images of men as bumbling husbands and dumb dads. The usually humorous portrayals of men, particularly in home settings, show them as confused, incompetent, and in need of rescue by a calm and reasonable mom" (p. 65). To address the elephant in the room: Yes, depictions of women are not always great, either, but at least we talk about those.

I will leave you with one parting thought, though the larger admonition arrives from those possessing far greater intellect than I. Can you stand humbly like a tree, devoid of leaves in the winter, and adapt, as Charles Mungoshi (1998) writes? Can you allow yourself to receive wisdom, piece-by-piece, as Anaïs Nin (qtd. in Stuhlmann 1976) advises? Can you place aside superstition and dogmatism even momentarily, as Steven Pinker (2018) urges, to employ logic and reason? Can you prevent yourself, as Flannery O'Connor (1955) explains, from ignoring the truth simply because you cannot 'stomach' it? If you can, you may uncover the truth if you remain open to the possibility. But we will end where we began: Perhaps I have become yet another willing participant in this war through oversimplification. Perhaps I have overestimated the benefits of reason and objectivity at the expense of the human experience. In short, perhaps I am just wrong. I am willing to make such a concession—are you?

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Reflection #10: "Argument: a Secondary Education Major's Perspective"

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As a Secondary Education major for English and Social Studies, I pay a lot of attention to the teaching styles of my professors. Specifically, I note what pedagogical techniques I may want to implement in my future classroom. Often, I notice the way my professors have more trust in their students' skills and give them more freedom, compared to my high school teachers. Although this makes sense as college students are more mature and tend to be more engaged in their classes, I think such freedom of thought can and should extend to high school classrooms as well, especially when it comes to crafting arguments. Through my time at Kutztown, I have observed professors who emphasize the importance of collaboration and nuance in argument. I have also learned a lot about arguing that I can apply in my personal life outside of the classroom.

Collaboration

In high school classes, full class collaboration is often only utilized through Socratic seminars, where students sit in a circle and take turns answering their teacher's opinion-based questions. Socratic seminars are often contradictory, as they are presented as being collaborative, (students are told to listen to and debate with their peers, and are required to summarize their classmates' points before speaking), but actually focus on individualism, (as each student's grade depends on the quality of their individual answers). This practice sets students against each other, determined to prove their classmates wrong or to argue their classmate's point better than they did, in order to get a good grade. Although the concept of collaboration, (and even Rogerian rhetoric), is present in having student's repeat what their classmates said, the spirit of it is not, since the students are not actually encouraged to work with their peers. Additionally, most students do not fully listen to what their peers are saying, as they are too busy mentally preparing their own statements, in order to earn a good grade. These

Socratic seminars are also often pretty rare, happening once a month at best. As a result, they do not truly encourage collaboration in a classroom.

My classes at Kutztown were very different. One class that serves as a great example of this was a Shakespeare class I took during my sophomore year. Similar to a Socratic seminar, our desks were arranged in a circle; in fact, we sat that way every single class. The entire semester was fully discussion based, as we read the plays and supplemental materials at home. When we came in to discuss them, two priorities guided our conversations. The first was to make sure that everyone understood the play. Our professor often began the class by asking someone to summarize the previous act or two that we had read for homework. In giving their summary, students would inevitably mention an aspect or two of the reading that they were confused on, since Shakespearean language can be difficult to follow at times, even for college students. A second student would then clarify that part of the play. Sometimes a third or fourth student would speak up to elaborate on something that the second student had said. This would then repeat until all misunderstandings were sorted and explained.

Once we were all on the same page, the second priority for the class was to answer the professors' discussion questions regarding our thoughts on the plot, characters, and quotes. Again, this discussion offered us practice in collaboration. One student would give their opinion and everyone would really listen before agreeing or disagreeing for their own reasons. This class accomplished what Socratic seminars aim, and often fail, to do. I think the main reason for this success was that our discussions were only graded on participation, not on the quality of our responses. This meant that we were not overthinking our answers to try to make them perfect, we just said whatever we were thinking at the time. My classmates and I were honest if we were unsure about our answer to a question, and we all had time to listen to our classmates' opinions, instead of just focusing on what exactly we were going to say next. Additionally, the first part of the class, with its focus on summarizing the play, had already encouraged us to see each other as a resource for understanding. In short, we trusted each other more. Working together to understand more fact-based information prompted us to then take each other's opinions and interpretations into account on analysis questions.

In my future classroom, I hope to find a balance between these two approaches. High school classes often require more structure than just being entirely discussion based, and I would want students to have class time to write papers and work on other assignments. As a result, I think I would have one class period a week, (or half a class period, if my school used block scheduling), be

discussion-based, on whatever we are reading at the time. Like the Shakespeare class, this discussion would only be graded by participation and effort. Students would spend the first third of the discussion time just working together to summarize the text, as that would encourage them to collaborate. The second two thirds would be dedicated to questions, and I would encourage them to listen to and think about each other's opinions. This way, the discussions would serve as frequent and low-stakes opportunities to test out ideas, allowing students to really hear each other and get used to considering their classmates' thoughts while forming their own.

Nuance

In addition to collaboration, most of my college professors emphasize the importance of nuance, especially in argumentative papers. In many high school classes, students are encouraged to pick one side of an issue, and to only acknowledge the other side in a counter-argument paragraph; the goal of that paragraph is to introduce the counter argument, but then dismiss it, to further support the student's side. There often seems to be no room for nuance. At Kutztown, professors tend to encourage the exact opposite, preferring papers that argue one perspective, but with exceptions or qualifying statements. One of my professors refers to this as "yes, but…" argumentation. This may look like presenting an argument supported by past scholars that you mostly agree with, but then stating a few aspects of the argument that you think may be improved. It can also be applied to original arguments, such as arguing that Miss Congeniality is a mostly neoliberal-feminist movie, but that it does have some feminist aspects. Arguing with nuance is better as it involves more complexity and higher-level thinking. It also means the writer is not just seeing their topic in black and white. I think some high school teachers do not believe that their students are ready to cultivate this type of complexity in their arguments, but I disagree. Many students already see issues from multiple sides, and they should be encouraged to write what they think, not just to pick one side or the other. Although it would make a paper more complex to argue two different points, teachers should show their students how to do so effectively so as to resist a binary argument. Exposing students to non-adversarial arguing skills would push them to see the world through multiple perspectives and to think critically, which are important life skills that encourage students to be more likely to listen to others.

Outside the Classroom

Collaboration and nuance can be really important inside of the classroom. With the right encouragement, students can work well together to increase their understanding and discuss the texts that they are reading. Sometimes they may come to the same conclusions and sometimes they may not, as there is no one right way to understand a text, just as there is no one right way to write a paper, and often multiple interpretations can be true at the same time. That being said, outside of the classroom, sometimes finding common ground can be harder. People can agree to disagree on whether Daisy from the Great Gatsby is a redeemable character or not, but many people are less willing to agree to disagree on political topics such as abortion, taxes, or immigration. So, what happens then?

This question was something we talked about a lot in a course called Women, Writing, & Rhetoric with Dr. Fennelly. In our increasingly divisive political climate, it is getting more and more difficult to find common ground. Furthermore, how do you argue with someone who does not want to hear you out, especially if that person is working from untrue, biased information? My current answer is that you don’t. Having conversations focused on collaboration and understanding only works when both parties agree to that quality of conversation. In other words, if one person is looking for a debate, if they are refusing to have a collaborative discussion, then there is nothing the other person can do. The best solution then, is to set boundaries, either to not talk to that person, or to not talk to them about that topic. As I have learned in class, this is not the same as giving up. It just means pivoting, taking the same energy you would have used in that discussion, and turning it towards somewhere else, somewhere productive. This may look like volunteering for an organization or even just having those conversations with someone who is more willing to listen to and consider what you have to say. Regardless, it is always important to remember that the best conversations are not arguments at all, but thoughtful discussions in which participants are more interested in what others have to say than they are about being right.

Conclusion by Dr. Fennelly

As the contributors above have noted, crafting an argument often requires a delicate balance of appeals, approaches, and mindsets. After reading this textbook, you will be equipped with those tools to pursue arguments in a fair-minded and reasonable manner. Given such tools at our disposal, why does ethical argumentation continue to prove so elusive? Why do scholars like

Deborah Tannen, Daniel Cohen, and Robb Willer, among many others, still insist the argument culture prevails and that the argument-as-war model persists because "it's a monster." Statistics bear these claims out. According to the Pew Research Center, "4% of U.S. adults say the political system is working extremely or very well; another 23% say it is working somewhat well. About six-in-ten (63%) express not too much or no confidence at all in the future of the U.S. political system." Indeed, our attitudes lean towards pessimism, and our trust in democratic institutions is tanking.

How do we bridge these divides? One familiar refrain is to seek middle ground. However, as we have seen in previous chapters, compromise can sometimes feel like "giving up something" that we would prefer to hold on to. In her Ted Talk "When to Take a Stand, and When to Let It Go," (Closed Captioned) Ash Beckham offers us a way to bridge these divides by embracing duality over polarity. Choosing duality over polarity in ethical argumentation is helpful because it encourages a more nuanced, inclusive, and realistic understanding of moral issues. Here's why this matters:

1. Polarity Oversimplifies Complex Issues

Polarity divides the world into strict binaries: right vs. wrong, good vs. evil, us vs. them. Beckham defines "polarity" in this way:

"We are taught right now that we are living in a world of constant and increasing polarity. It's so black and white, so us and them, so right and wrong. There is no middle, there is no gray. Just polarity. Polarity is a state in which two ideas or opinions are completely opposite from each other. Diametrical opposition. Which side are you on? Are you unequivocally and without question anti-war, pro-choice, anti-death penalty, pro-gun regulation, proponent of open borders, and pro-union? Or are you absolutely and uncompromisingly pro-war, pro-life, pro-death penalty, a believer that the Second Amendment is absolute, anti-immigrant, and pro-business? It's all or none, you're with us or against us. That is polarity."

This black-and-white thinking leads to the following undesirable ends:

- **Ignores context and nuance.**
- **Forces people into opposing camps, stifling dialogue.**
- **Often leads to moral absolutism, which can justify harmful actions in the name of "righteousness."**

For example, a more polarizing view might claim that free speech is always good or always dangerous, ignoring the complex tensions between expression and harm.

2. Duality Embraces Complexity and Coexistence

Duality, by contrast, acknowledges that seemingly opposing forces or values can coexist and be interdependent. Again, Beckham offers a useful definition of "duality" to show why and how expanding our approach to argumentation through duality can achieve more productive results:

"Now, duality is a state of having two parts, but not in diametrical opposition. In simultaneous existence. Don't think it's possible? Here are the people I know. I know Catholics who are pro-choice, and feminists who wear hijabs, and veterans who are anti-war, and NRA members who think I should be able to get married. Those are the people I know, those are my friends and family, that is the majority of our society, that is you, that is me. Duality is the ability to hold both things."

Duality offers more productive ends:

- **Recognizes that ethical decisions often involve competing values (e.g., justice vs. mercy, autonomy vs. safety).**
- **Encourages balance and synthesis, not domination of one principle over another.**
- **Supports humility—acknowledging that we may not have all the answers and that moral reasoning requires ongoing reflection.**

For example, in the realm of medical ethics, respecting patient autonomy must be balanced with beneficence. Duality allows us to value both rather than pitting them against each other. Yet Beckham challenges us with these questions: "can we own our duality? Can we have the courage to hold both things?"

As you conclude this textbook, I invite you to deeply consider those questions yourself.

- **Can you imagine adopting this approach to duality and reject polarity?**
- **Can you own such duality within yourself by embracing a complex stance towards seemingly contradictory positions?**
- **Can you accept duality in other people, particularly on issues you might be unequivocal about?**

- **Can you muster the courage to try?**

Beckham gives us hope in doing so, and she even takes duality a step further to answer these questions. She asserts: “You don't learn how to hold two things just from the fluff, you learn it from the grit. And what if duality is just the first step? What if through compassion and empathy and human interaction we are able to learn to hold two things? And if we can hold two things, we can hold four. And if we can hold four, we can hold eight. And if we can hold eight, we can hold hundreds. We are complex individuals, swirls of contradictions. You are all holding so many things right now. What can you do to hold just a few more?” The answer returns us to empathy.

3. Duality Promotes Empathy and Inclusive Dialogue

Embracing duality helps us better understand others’ perspectives, especially when those perspectives differ from our own.

Duality helps us to achieve the following:

- **Recognize that people may hold conflicting but valid ethical concerns.**
- **Reduce the tendency to demonize or dismiss opponents.**
- **Open space for ethical pluralism, where multiple viewpoints can be engaged without requiring consensus.**

4. Choosing Duality Over Polarity Reflects How Real-World Ethical Dilemmas Function

Ethical questions in real life are rarely binary. Beckham illustrates this point when she relates the story of taking her niece to meet Anna and Elsa from Frozen at a local bookstore. The clerk mistaken her for a man, leading her to feel shame and embarrassment. In that moment, she feels forced to choose whether or not she should be an aunt and remain present for her niece, or if she should be an advocate and speak up for herself. At the end, Beckham reveals: “I realize in that moment that I don't have to be either an aunt or an advocate. I can be both.” Such duality reflects Beckham’s respect for herself but also her kindness to the clerk who apologizes and shows compassion, as well; furthermore, it respects her commitment to her niece, whose experience she does not want to spoil. In short, embracing this duality reflects Beckham’s humanity, as well as the humanity of all involved. Beckham reminds us: “the problem with polarity in absolutes is that it eliminates the individuality of our human experience, and that makes it contradictory to our human nature.”

So how can duality more accurately reflect our reality and our deeply complex sense of individuality and humanity? Complex situations often require balancing short-term vs. long-term consequences, intent vs. outcome, or individual rights versus the collective good. Duality helps in crafting solutions that honor multiple moral commitments. In ethics, embracing duality leads to richer conversations, more compassionate engagement, and decisions that better reflect the messy, interwoven nature of real human lives. Polarity will only fuel that monster that drives the argument culture, and duality allows us to hit pause on the echo chambers that can consumer us and oversimplify issues we value. Duality allows us to pursue complexity, foster empathy, and use critical reasoning skills even in the face of those who seek power, supremacy, and authoritarian control.

In short, rhetoric matters. The way we choose our words, the way we frame our arguments, and the way we approach and interact with the real human beings behind that rhetoric must be handled with care. We are on a slippery slope if we acquiesce to those forces that seek to quell deliberation, cooperation, and our basic sense of humanity. Not every argument will prove satisfactory to you as a writer, as a thinker, or as a speaker. Perhaps even more crucially, not every argument with a friend, family member, or colleague will "go your way." The mental and emotional effects of those interactions can be of great consequence. However, with the tools in this book, I encourage you to go forth with the clear-eyed understanding that you are capable of becoming a "worthy arguer." Know you have valuable ideas to contribute. Trust your instinct to treat others with the same kind of decency and respect you hope others will reciprocate to you. And pursue a rhetorical path that you know is marked with those tools and values that will serve a greater purpose for yourself as an individual and for a more collective sense of humanity.

Appendix

“Opinion vs. Argument” Image Transcript

Opinion vs. Argument

Top Panel (Two characters):
Left character (red speech bubble):
“Social media makes our society less safe.”

Right character (blue speech bubble):
“Well, I don’t think so. It allows people to communicate quickly in times of crisis.”

Bottom Panel (Same characters):
Right character (blue speech bubble):
The Wall Street Journal reported that, during the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, people in Paris used Twitter to let terror victims know their addresses in case they needed a place to take shelter.

(Return to Chapter 1 text)

“Speaking Freely: Bell Hooks” Transcript

Speaking Freely: Bell Hooks

I'm Bell Hooks, and I'm speaking freely. What this is all about is your right to freedom of speech. What made America great is an independent, vigorous press. If a jerk burns a flag, America is not threatened. Political speech is the heart of the First Amendment. They're expressing their religious beliefs. Now is the time to make social reality for all the poor children. Welcome to Speaking Freely. I'm Ken Paulson.

Bell Hooks is a noted author, scholar, and social critic. She's written 22 books, all of which are in print, including this thoughtful and thought-provoking Communion, the Female Search for Love. I'd like to read to you from your own book a line that says, This book is testimony, a celebration of the joy women find when we restore the search for love to its rightful, heroic place at the center of our lives.

Tell me about that. We've always thought of our heroes as having to do with death and war. And, you know, when we think of Joseph Campbell and the whole

idea of the heroic journey, it's rarely a journey that's about love. It's about, you know, deeds that have to do with conquering, domination, what have you. And so part of what I wanted to say to people is that living as we do in a culture of domination, to truly choose to love is heroic. To work at love, to really let yourself, you know, understand the art of loving.

You say in the book there were revelations for you after the age of 40 about love, that there were insights you gained that you wished you'd had earlier. Well, absolutely, because I think that, like so many other people in our culture, I had very, very confused ideas about love. In the first book, All About Love, one of the ideas that was really hard for people to accept was that if somebody is abusing you, they're not loving you.

I mean, you would think that would be a basic understanding most of us would have, but in fact, so many of us have been wounded in some way in our childhoods that we really need to cling to the idea that if someone hurts you, they can also be loving you. And I tried to make a big distinction in that book between care and love, like saying that my parents cared for me deeply, and care is important. A lot of children don't receive any care, but it's only one ingredient of love. It's not love.

Love is a topic that many people have written about, and now recently you've written three very well-received books about it. What is your take on love that's different from others? I always think that part of the genius of bell hooks, such as it is, is that I bring together standpoints that are often not brought together in our nation. I bring together thoughtfulness about race, gender, class, when I'm writing about love. I'm one of these fanatic readers. I read a book a day, a nonfiction book a day, and I'm a fanatical mystery reader, and I may read two mysteries a day.

So I'm always bringing together, not unlike speaking freely, diverse ways of knowing, and I think that that has been kind of the mark of a bell hook's book, that you may be reading all about Buddhism, then you may read about gangster rap, there may be a whole combination of ideas. I believe that in our deeply anti-intellectual society, most people read along very narrow lines and think along very narrow lines. So I think that the excitement many people feel when they come to a bell hook's book is, God, she's brought together these things that just seem like you would never have put them together.

I mentioned that you've had 22 books in print. That's extraordinary. That just doesn't happen. That's just a shelf life that most authors don't enjoy. But do you

ever sit down and say, you know, I really want a bestseller. I want this one made into a movie. I want all of my books made into movies. Because you know what? I think that, I believe that I am, Ken, the embodiment of that sort of classical idea of the intellectual as someone who really wants to be whole. And to me, part of wholeness is, I really do like the people, the mass.

I really want to be able to write books that are touching the pulse of a diverse audience. So to me, the only exciting aspect of having a bestseller is that you have that capability, that you're spread across a wide body of people, cross-class, cross-race. I think that's incredibly exciting, the idea of that.

There's not a temptation to water down your message, to broaden it in a way that everyone will find it appealing, sort of like who moved the cheese? What I think is, in these real deep and profound times and I don't want to make light in any way, because for the past few years I have just been so concerned about the question of censorship, and a censorship of the imagination that begins even before people are censoring what we write. I think that when I look at my career as a thinker and a writer, that what is so amazing is that I have a dissenting voice and that I was able to come into corporate publishing and bring that dissenting voice with me.

I mean, the fact is that it may seem to people that the love books, which are easier to read, unlike all the other bell hooks books, I did write them with a mass audience in mind, mindful of my language, mindful of a lot of things, but in them there are ideas that drive people wild because they feel that they're so dissenting. That idea I mentioned to you earlier, that care isn't love. I mean, I can't tell you how many talks I went on where people were up yelling. How dare you say that Mom and Dad didn't love me because they gave me that beating every week that I needed.

I'm curious about your take about the marketplace of ideas, speaking freely about all those ideas floating around and the need to hear all of them and to share viewpoints. And yet it seems that in recent years, especially on college campuses, we've seen a different take on freedom of speech. I know that you teach, you see college students up close. Do they have the same feel for freedom of speech that you may have had when you were going to school?

Well, I think that the key word that you used, Ken, was the marketplace. And I think what's really tragic about education, particularly at a higher level in our nation right now, is that it has become to be something that is about the marketplace, so that there's a lot of repression that students begin to do because

they want to prepare themselves for the marketplace, for, you know, getting the money and getting the power and getting the status and getting the fame. And, you know, that means that, you know, you can't always say, you know, what you want to say.

You know, you have not hesitated to question projects, programs, or individuals that, frankly, a lot of the African-American community embrace with pride. You've raised questions about Kwanzaa, the Million Man March, and not least of all, Oprah. What is... Is it difficult to speak out on those topics? I think, you know, it's difficult when you're misunderstood, you know? It's difficult when people stand up and say, you know, why do you hate Spike Lee so much? And I say, you know, actually, there are moments in Spike Lee's films that I think are incredible, that I love, but that doesn't mean that I don't have a real critical commentary about his work.

And I know that as a teacher, I'm constantly encouraging my students to recognize the difference between a critical commentary about something that can illuminate it for you, that can help you to see it in a different way, and something that's just trashing. Because I think that part of the danger for free speech in our society is the deep longing people have, both in our personal and public lives, to avoid conflict, to avoid hurting someone's feelings, to not, you know, be polite.

And I think that, you know, if you think about all the work that's been done by Cecil Abak and others about how as a nation we're lying more and more, I think we have to connect that to an absence of free speech. Because when you live in a country that makes truth something that is associated with the painful, that should not be spoken, it becomes hard to get people to value speaking freely. Because, you know, there are things that we have to say that will be wounding.

Like, for example, in my latest book that I'm talking to you about, about black people and self-esteem, there are things that I have to say about black children and how they're parented that would sound harsh to a lot of people. But those things have to be said if we're going to address in any way what is happening overall collectively with black children and self-esteem. So to me, you know, a lot of what I do in the classroom is to try to teach that kind of courage that allows you to speak freely.

I mean, recently, you know, I'm a big Martin Luther King fan, especially of the later sermons. And when I go back, you know, in Strength to Love, he talks about standing in the shadows of fascism. And he talks so much about the importance of protecting free speech, our democracy, and yet, you know, I think

that people don't realize how radical much of what he was saying. I mean, he was talking about we're going to see a day of terrorism, we're going to see all of these things.

And I think that that's a really amazing... I mean, here's this man, for example, that most people remember by, you know, what is a very poetic, you know, I have a dream speech, but not by the deep penetrating social and political analysis he had about imperialism. And why? Because in a sense, we censor that Martin Luther King. Even like a Martin Luther King holiday is constructed to make him more palatable, to make him be this guy who was just about peace and love, but not about the fact that he was an incredibly sophisticated thinker about peace and love.

And to me, the dangers of censorship in our nation and the forms it takes, the very subtle forms it takes, is that people don't get to that Martin Luther King, that that Martin Luther King disappears. I think that about a bell hooks that, you know, I noticed that as... I was telling you when we talked last about how as a dissident intellectual, you know, there was a time when black intellectuals got a lot of press, and, you know, but now you hardly ever hear about bell hooks in the press. You know, newspapers don't call me anymore to say, well, what do you think about... Because I was seen as the bad girl, the girl who says the things that people don't want to hear.

And again, I have such a subculture of readers that I certainly can't complain, but I am ever cognizant of the fact that a lot of things like the New York Times, a lot of places never review bell hooks books. Last year I came out with a book on class, Where We Stand, Class Matters, and luckily these books sell, but they don't get reviewed. And I think, again, things that are not seen as topical, clever, you know, witty in a shallow sense, we often don't hear.

And I don't want to just talk about bell hooks. I think dissident speech is not valued in our nation, whether it comes from white men, you know, rich white men or poor white men. I think the real issue is we are in danger as a nation of silencing any form of speech that goes against what is perceived to be the status quo.

If in your classroom your students came to you and said, you know, there's a Nazi coming to campus to speak, he's clearly a racist, there's no question about it, and a local organization decided to recruit them to recruit this individual to stir things up. And they want to enlist you to fight the appearance. What's your take on that? How do you respond?

You know, my response is always on behalf of free speech because basically I always tell my students, if you look at the history of silencing, ultimately the people that get silenced are the dissident radical voices that any time we try to shut down people, it in fact ends up being something that causes us to suffer more. I think that people need to know how to hear information and think critically about it, not to... And that's usually my whole thing is to say, what does it mean for us to hear something that we have to think critically about and that we can make a choice about, as opposed to the idea that we should eliminate people saying certain things, people thinking certain things, take certain books out of the library. Well, let's talk about those books. Let's talk about those ideas.

If you listen to conservative talk radio, two of the phrases you hear most often are liberal elites and political correctness. And I have to tell you, initially I thought political correctness was a pretty good concept just in terms of it's about showing respect for other people, and that's a good place to be. And yet there seems to be, it seems to have been an evolution where political correctness has become more of a code.

Well, it's become more of a tool of censorship, of silencing, that all you have to do to silence someone is to say they're politically incorrect. And frequently it's a tool that conservatives use to silence or belittle the voices of liberal and radical people. I like the fact that gangster rappers used to have this phrase, come correct. And that's exactly what it meant. To come correct was to be mindful, to be respectful, to be aware of who you're speaking to, and that was the initial positive thrust of political correctness, which was to be mindful of who you're talking to.

And I talk about this in Communion, the female search for love, that women often will talk about men in an extraordinarily hateful way that is considered quite normal. But in fact, if men talk about women in that extraordinarily hateful way, we often get up in arms. And I think that all of those issues, to me, political correctness, simply said, be mindful of how you're talking about groups. Be mindful of what you do and say.

And what is really tragic is the way conservatives and right-wing forces have made political correctness something so negative that there's the kind of backlash now where people feel like, well, I shouldn't have to be mindful. I shouldn't have to think about what I'm saying. And that's too bad, because I think, you know, the real freedom of democracy requires of all of us that kind of civility and courtesy where we are mindful, where we think about what we say, because we live in a nation that is incredibly diverse, and yet our language is

incredibly binary, incredibly either-or, so that we really have to work to be inclusive.

You know, when I'm talking about white people who are racist, I have to work to make sure that my language isn't bringing all white people into that, because I know that's not so when I'm talking about men who are misogynist and patriarchal. I have to work to use a language that doesn't just make it seem like this is who all men are.

You mentioned gangsta rap, and I know that you received phone calls, especially when it was the stuff of headlines. They expected you to denounce gangsta rap to be a voice that says this is hurtful to women and hurtful to the culture, and yet you, in a way, defended gangsta rap. Can you talk about that?

Well, again, I think that, you know, one of the ways that censorship takes in our culture is the censorship of manners, where we assume that we know who Ken Paulson is, we know his opinions that he's going to take. People assume, oh, bell hooks is a feminist, these are the opinions that she's going to have, and to me, that kind of compartmentalization and labeling is very, very anti not just free speech, but the whole sense of recognizing that as individuals we can hold very different opinions about things, you know, that I can, like, for example, I grew up in Kentucky.

I learned how to shoot. Guns are not something that scare me, and, you know, I went to the university where I teach most frequently now is in Texas, and they have a gun exhibit in a building, and all the feminist people thought I was going to look at it and say how horrible, and I said, well, you know, actually because I like guns, I don't find this horrible, but there are people here whose families maybe have been wounded by guns or who come from countries where they've been wiped out by guns, maybe they don't want to see guns every day.

So I personally would put this kind of exhibit in a gallery so people could choose to see it or not, but I wasn't saying what people thought that as a feminist who is very much anti-violence, I would say. So I think that part of what I hope for us as a nation, and particularly in our educational institutions, is that we will teach what I use in a phrase in my books, radical openness. Radical openness allows for the fact that you and I might totally disagree about some things, but there may be other things that we have a resonance and a harmony about, and when we compartmentalize each other in such a way that, you know, it's like when someone says, oh, he's really sexist, or then it's like the shutting down of the

idea that the person might be really sexist but have some other thought, idea, that might be useful to hear.

How do we hold those differing senses of who we are? That's one of the reasons I like writing about love, because when people love people, they never think they're going to just think the same. I say to people, will say to me, when we try to get our group together to talk about race, there's going to be conflict. And I said, well, have you ever had a love relationship with someone where there's no conflict? Why do we expect that we're going to get together and talk about race and racism and not have perhaps anger or conflict? When we don't expect that in the deepest areas of our lives, our intimate lives, we recognize conflict will be a part of trying to have a relationship with somebody who is not you. And we don't recognize that when it comes to difficult issues, and often that's where we start censoring and shutting down.

You know, I thought I'd read a great deal about bell hooks. The phrase, I like guns, never came up in any of those interviews. Where is that from? How do you have an appreciation of guns? Well, just because I think of growing up in rural areas where, I mean, I do think that when we talk about gun violence that we do have to look at areas of our nation where people have always had guns, but used them wisely, courteously, and not where just the fact of having a gun meant that you will be violent.

So I like the artistry of guns, and all of that I learned as a child, you know, starting with having a BB gun and those kind of things. But when I was introduced to guns, I was also introduced to the reality of guns and how you should deal with them so that you don't endanger yourself or others.

You're a tough social critic, and one of the observations that struck me was your sense that a majority, I don't want to misquote you, a majority of white Americans believe themselves to be superior. Oh, absolutely, but I think the worst part of that is that there are lots of black people who believe ourselves to be inferior. I mean, that's the kind of stuff that I'm talking about in this Black People and Self-Esteem book, which is called Soul to Soul, but I think that that's how deep white supremacy is in our nation.

And often, you know this, Ken, that often white people will meet a black person who completely challenges every racial stereotype that they've ever had. Rather than giving up the stereotype, they create a special category for that person and say, well, you're not like other black people, or instead of saying, my ideas of black people were too narrow or too... And I think that's the tragedy of any kind

of prejudicial thinking, that when we confront the circumstance that tells us it's not so, we frequently don't enlarge our sense of things. We actually come up with new ways to protect and defend that way of thinking.

Is language part of the problem? You use the word white supremacy, and I know there was an incident in which you were on a panel with two black men who sort of mocked you for using that phrase. And I find it such a helpful phrase because what I like about white supremacy is I think it does encompass black self-hate. It encompasses... How do you call a little kid who's dark-skinned, who's washing themselves with bleach? You can't say this kid is a racist in the classical sense of prejudicial views against people of color or black people, and yet somewhere that child has learned that there is something wrong about themselves, and they should correct it.

And to me, white supremacy is a useful term because it encompasses the fact that we can have a 5-year-old who's looked at enough television in our nation to have an understanding that white is better.

I've got one final question for you, probably an unfairly broad question. You've written for years about the challenges we face as a society in terms of gender and race and class. In that period, have you seen encouraging signs? Well, I think that the fact that Abelle Hooks can have the incredible readership I have tells us... I want to say to you, Ken, I think people are hungry for dissent. I think people are hungry for provocative voices that go to the heart of the matter because people want to have answers to the things that they are in crisis about.

So, I mean, there's an irony that on one hand we have a mass media and a publishing industry particularly that tells us keep it mellow, don't say anything, but what I find is people are really hungry for truth. And that hunger, as I said in my book Yearning, I think is something that unites us across class, race, sexual preference and practice, religion. And I see the hope, the hope that I feel within my own self and with other people is that hunger for truth and for ways to live our lives more fully in a manner that's more fulfilling.

And it's that hunger that keeps a place for the dissenting voice, that keeps the place for speaking freely because that is both an endangered space and a space, on the other hand, where we have more people than ever before who are hungering to hear that dissenting voice. And I think that that's the paradox, that on one hand there were moments in our recent history as a nation where I felt truly frightened.

You know, for the first time in my life my mother called me and said, you must be really careful what you say when you get up on stages because you, you know, could be assassinated. And I think that certainly if nothing else, the September 11th events around the World Trade Center brought into focus that we are a nation where many people are afraid of free speech and want to silence people. And if we cannot acknowledge that that will to silence is growing, that's what King meant when he talked about standing in the shadows of fascism.

So on one hand, I experienced for the first time ever as a citizen of this nation, feeling that I was taking grave risk in standing before audiences and saying the things that I believed. And at the same time, you know, I had audiences that were eager to hear, well, what do you think about this? Audiences of people who may or may not have agreed with me. So that's the paradox that we live within.

A society that is full of promise and possibility and a society that on the other hand will close things down if people feel they need to to protect the lifestyles or the belief systems that they think are the only important belief systems. And that's the difficulty. But I'm one who believes in the outrageous pursuit of hope.

Your entire career has been about free speech, and we thank you for joining us today on Speaking Freely. Bell Hooks. And I thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak freely. Join us next time as we continue our discussion on free expression and the arts. For more information about Speaking Freely, visit our website at www.speakingfreely.org.

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Cartoon Image of the Montana State Governors Race Transcript

Text at top:
MEANWHILE, IN THE MONTANA STATE GOVERNOR'S RACE...

Left candidate (woman at podium labeled “MT”):
“…and because of that, I’m for raising the minimum wage in our state!”

Right candidate (dark figure in top hat at podium labeled “MT”):
“She’s for raising minimum wage, but isn’t even smart enough to run a business!”

Audience (silhouetted figures at bottom):
“Gasp! Oh no!”
“What does that mean?”

(Return to Chapter 3 text)

“Erving Goffman's Analysis of Participation Frameworks” Transcript

In this video, I'm going to talk about all the different ways in which people can participate in a social interaction. And in particular, I'm going to talk about sociologist Irving Goffman's concept of participation frameworks. I'm Bruce Lambert from HowCommunicationWorks.com. This is a channel where I teach you about communication skills so you can improve your relationships, succeed at work, and be more confident.

When we think about social interaction or communication, we normally think of the sort of most typical case, which is two people face-to-face talking to one another. But in fact, Irving Goffman, in his discussion of the idea of participation in social encounters, recognized that there were many, many different ways for people to participate in social encounters, and that the sort of directly participating in a face-to-face interaction, two people talking, is, although the most typical and is the prototype of social interaction, is not the only way in which we can participate. And in fact, participation is a complex concept in communication.

It's useful to understand it in more detail. Goffman says an interaction or an encounter is any occasion where people come together to be involved in a common activity. And he says at minimum, there are two types of interactions, what he calls focused and unfocused interactions.

A focused interaction is one in which there is one central purpose to the interaction, in which the participant roles and rules are fairly rigidly defined, and in which any activity other than the central main purpose of the interaction is seen as a distraction. That's a focused interaction. Classic examples of a focused interaction would be something like in a courtroom.

So in a courtroom, there is one singular purpose to do the business of the court. Any extraneous discussion or activity outside of the court's main purpose is unwelcome and sometimes even unlawful, and you can get in trouble and be in contempt of court if you deviate from the main purpose of the interaction. Something like a classroom or an interview might also be thought of as a focused

interaction where there's one main purpose, where the participant rules are rigidly defined, and where any departure from the main purpose is seen as a distraction or digression from that focused interaction.

The second kind of interaction is an unfocused interaction. An unfocused interaction is one which is characterized by no central purpose, freely flowing participant rules and roles, and no real notion of a distraction or digression because there's no central purpose to begin with to be distracted from or to be digressed from. I think the classic example of an unfocused interaction would be something like in a bar room, where there's just free-flowing talk between all sorts of different people and people talking across boundaries of social interactions and so on.

Maybe lots of street scenes or street talk is also relatively unfocused interaction. Or maybe the interaction that goes on students before class starts would be another example of a relatively unfocused interaction compared to the courtroom or the classroom when it's in session or a job interview or something like that, which would be focused. So this is the first distinction that Goffman makes about participation, that there can be two kinds of interaction, focused and. unfocused.

The second point that Goffman makes about participation is this idea of ratified and unratified participants in an interaction. Now in order to understand this distinction, I want to tell you a story. I was once driving down the street on a summer day and I had my windows open and I saw a couple on the street, a man and a woman, arguing.

And it was a pretty heated argument and it looked like maybe the man was going to do something physical or violent to the woman. And so just as I was watching this, a third person, I was driving, but a third person walked by this couple and started to try to say something to the couple, especially to the man, to get him to cool down and not hurt the woman. And he had not been a part of this interaction before.

And so the man, who was yelling at his girlfriend, turned to the man and said, you ain't in this. And I thought, ah, he is an unratified participant in this interaction. So Goffman has this notion of ratification.

And ratification means whether you are kind of officially included in the interaction or not. And he says in any given interaction, especially in a focused interaction, there will be some participants who are ratified participants, that is, who have access to the floor, who have official rights to speak. And then there will be unratified participants, people who are passers-by or are merely

observers, but don't normally have the right to speak or the right to participate in any formal way.

And I think this is an interesting and important concept because it talks about, it allows us to draw distinctions between all the different people in interaction and what their participant roles might be. Now, unratified participants, it doesn't mean they can't participate. It just means their participation isn't ratified.

So that guy walking down the street and trying to intervene in this argument between a man and a woman, he was not ratified, but he could still participate. He was a ratified participant in the argument with his girlfriend. He said, you ain't in this, meaning to say, you are not a ratified participant in this interaction.

You are sort of interrupting and getting into an interaction where you don't belong and you don't have any rights. The most important thing about ratification is that ratification structures participation. For the most part, unratified participants don't have the opportunity to participate, or they have far fewer opportunities to participate.

And when they do participate, they risk having it pointed out that they are not ratified participants. So even if they do participate, their participation sort of isn't as valid as the participation of those people who are ratified participants in the interaction. In addition to this, the participants in the interaction who are ratified are sensitive to the ratification status of all the other participants.

So sometimes you might be talking to somebody at work, for example, and a third person walks by and overhears you and begins to interject something. And you might go, who is this person? What right do they have to interject something? And then the person who you were initially talking to might say, oh, this is Mary. Let me introduce you to her.

She's a colleague of mine who's an expert in this thing that we're talking about. And in that way, your counterpart can ratify this other participant and say, oh, and then you'll invite them into the conversation. They become a ratified participant with the same rights and access to the floor that you might have.

The third idea that Goffman talks about is what he calls participant roles. We normally think about, well, the main ways of participating in interaction would be just like the speaker or the listener. And there's just sort of two roles.

If you're a ratified participant, you're going to be either the speaker or the listener. But as usual, Goffman is more sensitive than that. And he says, no, there's many more roles than that.

There are actually multiple production roles, more than just speaker. And there are multiple reception roles or audience roles, more than just kind of hearer. And I want to describe each of those in turn.

So in terms of production roles, Goffman says there are three, the animator, the author, and the principal. And so these, I think these are really interesting ideas. So the animator of the message is the one who's actually doing the talking normally, although obviously animator is a metaphor.

And we can think of the animator as being like literally the animator, like the guy who drew Mickey Mouse or Scooby-Doo or some other cartoon or who draws Homer Simpson. There is an animator who's doing the drawing, even though that person might not be writing the words that Homer is saying, it might not be responsible for the words that Homer is saying on The Simpsons. So the animator is the one who actually produces the words.

Normally we think of as the one doing the talking. That's the first production role. The second production role is the author.

And that's the one who actually composed the words. So in this case, the writers on The Simpsons are the ones who write the words that Homer says, even though they're not the ones who draw the pictures of Homer and they're not the ones who do the voiceover of Homer Simpson. The voice of Homer Simpson is actually the actor Dan Castellaneta.

So he's the animator, but the writers on The Simpsons are the authors. There's a third production role that Goffman identifies, what he calls the principal. So the principal is the one who is responsible for the words, who is sort of officially accountable for the words being said.

And in this case, maybe that's Matt Groening, the creator of The Simpsons, or Sam Simon, the producer of The Simpsons, something like that. The people who are ultimately responsible for what the writers write and what the actor says. Another way of thinking about author, animator, and principal is something like a corporate spokesperson.

So a corporation, they might hire a PR company. And so a professional PR person speaks the words, that person is the animator. Someone in the marketing department or the PR department wrote the words, that person was the author.

And then the CEO or the company, the president of the company is the principal, the one who's responsible for the words being said. You can see the same thing in politics, where the press secretary is the animator of the words. Somebody in the press office or a speechwriter or somebody like that is the author of the words.

And then the president of the United States is the principal, the one who presumably stands behind the words. So these are the three production roles, animator, author, and principal. So in terms of reception roles, there are at least two.

There are what Goffman calls the addressees, the people who are being officially addressed in any communication. That is the person that you're talking to, that you're intentionally talking to, who you intend to be the recipient of your message. The person who you are addressing, they are the addressee.

But then Goffman says, whenever you're in a social interaction, there's also the possibility that there's lots of other people around. And that although there may be one person who you're addressing, there are lots of other people around who might hear you. They are the unaddressed.

So these two categories of reception roles, the addressee or the addressees and the unaddressed, and both may hear you. And among the unaddressed, there's at least a couple of different typical reception roles that we can think of. And those are overhearers, people who simply overhear us when we're talking in public.

You may be at a bar or at a restaurant and you're talking or in public and you talk and people can overhear you. Or you're at the office and you're talking on your cell phone and people can overhear you, even though the people who can overhear you are not the one who you're addressing. The person on the other end of the phone is the one you're addressing, but there are unaddressed people who can overhear you.

And then a sort of special category of overhearers are eavesdroppers. So people can intentionally try to overhear you. So you can think of unaddressed people as unintentionally overhearing you.

So people are on the train, they're talking on their phone, you're like an unintentional overhearer. You wish you didn't have to listen to this conversation, but you do. And then there's eavesdroppers, which is you're in public and you're intentionally trying to overhear someone else's conversation.

So in any social interaction, we can sort of manage these boundaries between those people who are addressed and those people who are unaddressed. And we can use posture, gesture, facial expression, volume to indicate who's addressed, who's unaddressed. And we can indicate to those people who might be overhearing that we don't want to be overheard, that they are unaddressed and unratified, and we don't want them in the interaction.

So I'll add one last concept before finishing this video on Goffman's idea of participation. And that is the idea of the state of talk. And Goffman said there are at least two states of talk in any social encounter.

There is, on the one hand, the dominant state of talk. This is the talk involving ratified participants in standard production and reception roles. So the dominant state of talk in a courtroom, for example, is that talk that occurs between the judge, the attorneys, and the witnesses, and maybe the bailiff and the transcriptionist.

These people are the only ratified participants, the only ones who really get to talk. The jury doesn't get to talk. The people in the gallery don't get to talk.

So the only ratified participants are the judge, the lawyers, and the witnesses. And so the dominant state of talk is any of the talk involving those participants. Now, occasionally, the judge might make a joke to the bailiff, might make a joke to the attorneys.

And these things are departures from the dominant state of talk. So the dominant state of talk is really only talk that is focused on the main purpose of the interaction. So this example I gave of the judge talking to the bailiff, or the judge making a joke to the witness, or to one of the lawyers, or even to the jury, is what Goffman would call bi-play.

This is the subordinate state of talk. Remember, the dominant state of talk is talk between ratified participants that's on the focused topic of the interaction. So when two ratified participants engage in subordinate talk, Goffman calls that bi-play.

So that's the joke that the makes to one of the lawyers, that's the talk that the students make to one another in class. In class, the students are ratified participants, but when they talk to one another, and it's not about class, this is what Goffman would call bi-play. It's a certain kind of subordinate state of talk.

Cross-play is when one ratified participant talks to someone outside the interaction, an unratified participant. So this might be something like, you know, you're in a meeting at work, and a lot of these meeting rooms at work now have glass walls, so everybody can see you in the meeting room. I guess maybe this isn't so we can't go into the meeting room and sleep or something, but there's no privacy.

So let's say you're in a meeting room, and you catch someone's eye. A colleague of yours is walking outside the meeting, or they walk by an open door of a meeting, and they say something to you, and you say something to them. That's cross-play. They're not a ratified participant in the meeting. They're just kind of walking by, and you say something to them. That's cross-play, talk between a ratified and an unratified participant.

And finally, Goffman talks about side play, when two unratified participants begin to have an interaction about something other than the main purpose of a focused interaction. So this might be something like, you're in a meeting at work, and two participants in the meeting just start to have their own conversation about some topic other than the topic of the meeting. Maybe they stand up and move into a corner and start to have some conversation about an unrelated topic.

This is side play. All of these are subordinate states of talk. So what's important about Goffman's idea of participation framework? I think it enriches our understanding of how social interaction works, or how communication works, the name of this channel.

It helps us understand that there's more to any social encounter than simply a speaker and a hearer in face-to-face conversation, that production roles are more complicated, that reception roles are more complicated, that states of participation are more complicated. So then, when we analyze communication situations, especially if we want to improve them, if some communication situation is performing sub-optimally, as it often is, for example, in health communication, which is what I study, you can begin to study the participation framework. And maybe there's a way of improving participation as a way of improving the outcomes of the interaction.

So I think this is one of the main reasons why the idea of participation frameworks is important to understand. If you like this kind of video, I'd be so grateful if you'd go down below and like the video, give us a comment, subscribe to the channel, even, if you think you might like to see more videos like this one. And if you do subscribe, click that bell icon so YouTube can let you know next time we upload a video.

Come on over to HowCommunicationWorks.com, which is our website and blog. As soon as you go to the website, you'll be offered an e-book about empathy if you give us your email address. I'd love for you to give us your email address so we can stay in touch via email.

I'll send you that PDF e-book about empathy, which I think you'll find very useful and interesting. Thanks so much for watching this video. I know you have a lot of other videos you could be watching other than mine.

I'm grateful for your time. We'll see you next time.

(Return to Chapter 4 text)

"UF Student Tasered at Kerry Forum (New, Complete)" Transcript

I first and foremost want to thank you for your time. You spent a lot of time talking to us here today. I want to thank you for coming and being open and honest. You recommended a book to us earlier; I wanted to recommend a book to you. It's called Mark Madhouse by Greg—yeah. He's the top investigative journalist in America. I've already read it, and he says you won the 2004 election. Isn't that amazing? You won in 2004! In fact, there were multiple reports on the day of the election of the disenfranchisement of Black voters in Ohio.

"So, what's the question?" Well—ask my question. I'm going to practice it. He's been talking for two hours. Thank you very much. I'm going to ask you my question; I'm going to inform people, and then I'm going to ask you my question.

"So there are multiple reports of disenfranchisement of Black voters on the day of the election, 2004, right? There were also electronic voting machines in County Florida that counted backwards. So, amidst all these reports of phony voting stuff going on, how could you concede the election on the day when this

book said there were five million votes that were suppressed? You won the election—didn't you want to be president?"

I have two more questions. "If you were so against my race, you're not saying 'Let's push now—Peace Now; we can. Why don't we—peace with peace for what? All right?' Also, were you a member—were you a member of Rose Bush? Were you in the same secret society, 'Heat'? Heat?"

[Applause]

What have I done? What have I done? Get away from me, man! Get away from me! Get off of me! What did I do? What did I do? Your hand—what did I do? What did I do? Help! Help! Put your hand on my back. Get off of me! I didn't do anything. Help me! Help me! They're arresting me.

"You only go out here and, you know, unfortunately, he's not available to come up here and swear as president. Why are they arresting me? Can someone do something here? Because it's a very important question. What did I do? Get off me! Get off now! Get off me, man! I didn't do anything. Don't chase me, bro! Don't chase me! I didn't do—"

[Applause]

"—anything. Oh my God! What did I do? What did I do? Can I sit? Can I sit? Anybody—anybody want to follow along, just come with us. Make sure they don't kill me. Anybody? I want to ask you all down—what is going on? Honestly, you know, they gave him a lot of chances. They're like, 'Don't act—very perform.' They gave him several opportunities to, you know, submit himself to arrest, and he refused, and they teased him. Um, he honestly didn't seem to be that in—um, I don't know if this was procedure, but it did seem like they acted professionally. According to—they read him as… you think what happened to him was fair?

"Uh, I think— I think he was… I think his close parties are at fault. I mean, he shouldn't have been yelling. Um, but I also don't think it shook me to no end, and I mean, like, hearing tas—I understand, uh, during this event there was the utilization of a Taser, basically in the dry-stun mode. There are two different ways it can be used, where it's not the projectiles actually shot from the weapon that reach a subject. This was actually where that cartridge was removed, and the Taser was applied directly to the person, where it doesn't cause any external prong use or anything. Uh, that was utilized today. But, again, like any other use-of-force issue the University Police Department faces, we will review that case like any other. Um, again, if someone was handcuffed, it's not a typical use

of force with a Taser, but at this point, it's too early to determine whether or not that was the case.

"Again, what level of handcuff are we talking about? Sometimes there have been situations where a handcuff is attempted to be applied—one handcuff is placed on one wrist, and before the subject's completely handcuffed they can snatch away. At that point, you have a deadly weapon attached to the other end of their arm as they're flailing it around. So, again, it depends on, you know, by definition, if someone's properly handcuffed, it is not normally standard procedure that you would utilize a Taser at that point.

"At this point, the investigation into the actual event is ongoing. We're interviewing witnesses as well to find out exactly what went on. There are, as we understand, videotapes of the incident. We'll be looking at that as well. So there will be a further investigation while the subject has been arrested and is in Transport Lodge County Detention Center."

(Return to Chapter 4 text)

"University of Florida Student Tasered at Kerry Forum" Transcript

"We impeach Bush, all right? Also—are you a member—were you a member of Skull and Bones in college? And Bush—were you in the same secret society? That's all right. I mean, answer the question.

Excuse me, what are you—est—whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! Is anybody watching this? I'm not doing—"

[Applause]

"Are you kidding? They're arresting me! What have I done? What have I done? Get away from me, man! Get away from me! Get off of me! What did I do? What did I do? What did I really do?

Help! Help! Put your hands on—your— Help me, man! Get off of me! I didn't do anything! Help me! Help me! Help—they're arresting me!

You'll be—Tased—you— No! Can you let me go? I'll walk out of here. Let me go! On your stash— I think everybody—Op— I'll answer the question!

And, you know, unfortunately he’s not available to come up here and swear me in as president. Why are they arresting me? Can someone do something here? Let me—arrested—because it’s a very important question!

What did I do? Get off— Get the f*** off me, man! I didn’t do anything!

Don’t Tase me, bro! Don’t Tase me! I didn’t do anything!

Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!"

[Applause]

"Ow— God! Oh my God! What did I do? What did I do? What did I do?"

(Return to Chapter 4 text)

“Sam Kaner - Gradients of Agreement Tool” Transcript

Sam Kaner - Gradients of Agreement Tool

With this next point that is continuing to integrate, which is, once you start understanding that a diverse group is a real challenge for people who have to talk across all of these different frameworks, and that there's going to be a struggle trying to understand consensus agreement with that in mind, then it enriches the question of, what do we do about it? So here's what it's not. If I ask you what's wrong with this picture, you could probably give me a lot of answers. But OK.

But I obviously chose it partly for the cultural provocations also, so I could acknowledge that. But I want to illustrate even something just technical about what you're seeing right now that is not the cultural dimension, just one small thing, which is the question itself. Is everyone OK with that? Or some variation, you know? That question sets, it's a closed-ended question. It sets people up to think in a yes-no thing. And the problem is that yes and no, in response to how am I with an issue at hand, the yes and the no have to do a lot of work. The yes to no is a continuum.

It's not a bifurcation. Yes could mean, I love this idea. If we do this, I will stay late. I'll come in weekends. I'll work six days a week for this. This is really important to me. Or yes could mean, OK, if I have to go with it, all right, but I'm really not crazy about it. Or everything in between. It could mean, I basically like it, but there's some things I still don't understand.

Same thing with no. No could mean, I hate this. If we do this, I'm going to start circulating my resume. But no could also mean, can we just talk about this for another 15 minutes? I really don't get the point yet. And everything in between. So that's, among other things, the language of the mechanics of reaching agreement is its own problem.

Now, this is a tool that was referenced this morning by MidCityCan, and some others of you may have seen it. This is the gradients of agreement scale. It's been translated into many languages. Not by me, but we've been shown it. And we get requests two or three times a month for people to publish this in many places. And there's some things I want to teach you about it.

But what do you notice right away when you see this? Is that if the facilitator or the person in charge or whoever's asking the group, how are people with this proposal? People get to respond at a level that is closer to what they really mean. Now, I'll show you a couple things about this. First of all, this is a variation.

Different words. There's no veto. There's only six points. There's no abstain. This particular version was developed by one of my clients, Pierre Omidyar. He's the founder of eBay. He's still the chairman of eBay. But in his own philanthropy organizations called the Omidyar Network, when he was doing the high-end strategy and reorganization, he used this scale. And the thing I want to point out right now is I start out by showing my clients or colleagues the generic one that you saw a minute ago.

And then I teach them some stuff like I'm teaching you. And then I ask them, how do you want to change it to make it work for you and your group and your culture? And rarely does a group stay with the same points that I showed them. Much more commonly, they tweak it. They make it their own. Many groups bring it down to five. I'm telling you this for your own application.

Five is the minimum, by the way. This is research from the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, Likert scale. Less than five points on a scale, you can't get reliable data. People mean different things by the same point. So here's a hypothetical group. I'm using the six-point scale.

Here's a hypothetical group asked a question after a bunch of discussion, how do you feel about this proposal that's now in front of us after our discussion? If you saw this level of support for a proposal, how much would you trust the implementation? Reasonable? OK, it may not be perfect. You may not be able to

get perfect given time, people, who knows what. But I'm going to make a contrast.

So let's just call this enthusiastic support as a label. I want to contrast it with a different spread. Let's say same proposal, but now let's say this was the spread. Now notice a couple things. There's nobody over on the right-hand side. Also, the one, two, and three, there's seven of them, and there's only three of the others.

So if this was a vote, you have a super majority on the side of go for it. How much would you trust the implementation of this spread? This is a very powerful use of gradients of agreement to be able to see the difference. These are both unanimous agreements.

So now, when is this good enough, though? If you were making a decision as a group, like should we start next week's meeting half an hour later, and you got this spread, maybe that's good enough for that issue. What circumstances is this good enough for? Sorry? Low stakes is a key one. What else? Small number of options.

Sorry? Small number of options. Maybe, maybe not. But what if the options were drop a nuclear bomb on somebody? I'm kidding. But here, I'll answer my own question. I'll answer my own question, because I just, whoops, I won't answer my own question. I will, I'll recite an answer for you.

Small stakes is one time. Another time is when most of the people in the room aren't even affected by it, and in those situations when people come in to report what they're doing, and if the two people on the left are the two people who are the implementers, that might possibly be another time. A key time is issues that have a very short lifetime, where you can do pilots, small bets, where you can get something done fast, fail it, learn from it, move on to something better. So small, not just low stakes, but small time frames. You don't have to be perfect. I just want to get to this next page.

There's some mechanics to reach closure in a consensus group. I want you to see how it works. One is make sure everybody understand we're stepping back from the discussion for long enough to take a poll. Get the proposal down some way so everybody can see it. It's not enough if a secretary writes it in the minutes. You need people to, in a collaborative process with diverse stakeholders, there's going to be diversity of opinion about what's getting agreed to.

Get it in front of them. It's another transparency issue. Take the poll that I showed you, and then, well, let me show you how this works. Let's say you take

a poll early. The leader has obtained input. They now state a proposal. They take a poll. You don't know if there's agreement or not. You haven't had a struggle, and you get this result early.

How many of you, as the leader, would say, how many of you would say, OK, it's enough. I'm going to go forward. How many of you would say, no, we need to talk more. How many would go forward? I see the sign. How many of you would go forward? OK, a small handful. How many of you would kick it back for more discussion? OK, a larger handful, and about 50% of the room didn't raise your hand, but that's OK.

In this case, though, I want to just use this as an example of, let's just say the stakes were small, and it wasn't a perfection decision. It's really important. Let's just say that it was a decision that you can make now, move ahead, fail with it, learn something from it, and make a better one in action rather than trying to get it perfect in print before you act. Let's just say it's one of those. So the leader decides to go ahead, make the decision. Then in that case, here's what the story was.

The leader can focus the discussion, bring the group to closure. And now, at this point, what we're saying is that this was a consultative process. It leads to a leader's decision. It's not a participatory process, or it's a point within a larger collaborative activity where a conclusion was reached. It's not worth it to this group of people to have to be perfect on every single issue. So that decision was made, and then you implement that idea, whatever it was.

But supposing the support is not adequate, supposing this was the support. And now, instead, you have the call, the group should discuss it further. Now, what this means, and this is part of my response to a couple of your questions. What this looks like in group process is you're kicking it back for more discussion. Guess what you're doing. You're basically, once you've uncovered that a group does not have a lot of easy agreement, you basically prepare yourself, because you're going to go into the groan zone.

Now, at that point, what we're talking about now is you're going to take those disagreements and deal with them. And your objective, when you're working with them, is if you're helping people to resolve their misunderstandings, it means you're putting in the time to help them understand each other. OK, so after some discussion, try again. Take a poll. Maybe not. Maybe you still need more discussion. Again, stay in the groan zone. At a certain point, when the support

reaches a critical mass, now you can bring the group to closure. And that's a participatory process with a shared decision.

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“Political Media's Bias, in a Single Chart” Transcript

A couple of years ago, patent attorney Vanessa Otero ran into a problem that just about anyone who's active on social media will recognize.

Vanessa Otero: It really started in 2016, in the run-up to the last presidential election. I just started becoming very alarmed about the quality and bias of the information that people were using to support their arguments to their friends on Facebook.

Narrator: So it might be helpful to just kind of map it—like better/worse, left and right.

Vanessa Otero: So I just started piecing it together on my own, just to explain to my friends. We’ve had this overabundance and proliferation of online news sources, and most of it is in the area of analysis and opinion. If people understood that the sources they're consuming are actively making them angrier and polarizing them, then they may choose to consume less of that.

Narrator: Otero's chart categorizes the media landscape using two domains: facts versus editorializing, and left versus right-leaning views.

Vanessa Otero: It’s a two-dimensional taxonomy. So the vertical axis is quality—in general, the best quality stuff is at the top, and the lowest quality stuff is at the bottom. The horizontal axis is bias, so you have your neutral or balanced stuff in the middle.

Narrator: Viewers will recognize big names like CNN and Fox News, but Otero says she’s starting to get requests to add smaller outlets too. Extreme partisan sources like Breitbart and Wonkette appear at the ends of the axis. As a whole, the chart provides a frame of reference for a news industry that is growing increasingly partisan.

Vanessa Otero: So much of the content that we consume right now is telling you how you should feel about a subject. The stories—like, when they break—and then what they are 24 hours later, the spin on them, are really revealing.

Narrator: Believe it or not, social scientists don't think the polarized media climate has done much permanent damage to democracy—yet. But it's not exactly harmless either. An analysis of Nielsen data from the Knight Foundation shows a widening gap between liberals—who say they trust the media—and conservatives—who say they don't. The Pew Research Center finds that the most partisan among us are more likely to be steering the broader political conversation. A comprehensive chart of political media, then, could serve as a sort of guide for those who want to make up their own minds. Or, to hear Otero tell it, what the Media Bias Chart is…is an anchor.

Vanessa Otero: Of course, I'm just one person with my own biases and blind spots. I've taken into account certain criticisms. I have actually made adjustments to certain sources—especially from some of the really earlier versions. If the sample was really unfair that I selected, then I can go back and look at that and take those comments into account—especially if I get those comments from a lot of the readers of that source and other sources.

Narrator: Until now, Otero has mostly managed the project herself. But she recently finished crowdfunding more than $32,000 to hire more analysts, vet more sources, and make her charting process more transparent.

Vanessa Otero: Right now there are 104 sources. We'd like to expand to 200, 300, 400 sources pretty soon on an interactive, web-based version.
But there's a limit to what I can do on my own. I've developed really robust methodologies—really granular methodologies. The headlines, the picture, graphic, the lead or the chyron—I mean, the individual sentences—for quality and bias. I've just started recruiting a team of analysts to help me do that.
I just really felt a responsibility to improve it as much as I could, because people are relying on it. And I just fundamentally feel that if you're going to put out information that influences people—which this does—then you have a responsibility to make it as good as you can.

Narrator: In the future, Otero hopes her chart could be a sort of Consumer Reports for media ratings—both in terms of its comprehensive reach and its reputation as a reliable guide.

Vanessa Otero: I want to make the news consumers smarter, and the news media itself better. And those things are both really lofty, but I think it's doable. There are folks who just—if they had this information—would make better choices as consumers of media first, and then citizens.

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