

Thank You for Arguing

Third Edition



WHAT

ARISTOTLE,

LINCOLN, AND

HOMER SIMPSON

CAN TEACH US ABOUT

THE ART OF PERSUASION

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To Dorothy Jr. and George:
You win.

2. Set Your Goals



CICERO'S LIGHTBULB

Change the audience's mood, mind, or willingness to act

Aphrodite spoke and loosened from her bosom the embroidered girdle of many colors into which all her allurements were fashioned. In it was love and in it desire and in it blandishing persuasion which steals the mind even of the wise. —HOMER

Back in 1974, *National Lampoon* published a parody comic-book version of Plato's *Republic*. Socrates stands around talking philosophy with a few friends. Each time he makes a point, another guy concedes, "Yes, Socrates, very well put." In the

next frame you see an explosive "POW!!!" and the opponent goes flying through the air. Socrates wins by a knockout. The *Lampoon's Republic* has some historical validity; ancient Greeks, like argumentative nerds throughout the ages, loved to imagine themselves as fighters. But even they knew the real-life difference between fighting and arguing. We should, too. We need to distinguish rhetorical argument from the blame-shifting, he-said-she-said squabbling that defines conflict today. In a fight, each disputant tries to win. In an argument, they try to *win over* an audience—which can comprise the onlookers, television viewers, an electorate, or each other.

This chapter will help you distinguish between an argument and a fight, and to choose what you want to get out of an argument. The distinction can determine the survival of a marriage, as the celebrated research psychologist John Gottman proved in the 1980s and 1990s. Working out of his "love lab" at the University of Washington, he and his assistants videotaped hundreds of married couples over a period of nine years, poring over every tape and entering every perceived emotion and logical point into a database. They watched hours and days and months of arguments, of

► **Meanings**

"Debate" and "battle" share the same Latin root. Typical of those pugnacious Romans.

couples glaring at each other and revealing embarrassing things in front of the camera. It was like a bad reality show.

When Gottman announced his findings in 1994, though, rhetoricians around the country tried not to look smug, because the data confirmed what rhetoric has claimed for several millennia. Gottman found that couples who stayed married over those nine years argued about as much as those who ended up in divorce. However, the successful couples went about their arguments in a different way, and with a different purpose. Rhetoricians would say they instinctively followed the basic tenets of argument.

When some of the videotapes appeared on network television, they showed some decidedly uncomfortable moments, even among the happy couples. One successfully married husband admitted he was pathologically lazy, and his wife cheerfully agreed. Nonetheless, the couples who stayed married seemed to use their disputes to solve problems and work out differences. They showed faith in the outcome. The doomed couples, on the other hand, used their sessions to attack each other. Argument was a problem for them, not a means to a solution. The happy ones argued. The unhappy ones fought.

TRY THIS WITH YOUR CAREER

The growing profession of "leadership branding coaches" teaches CEO wannabes how to embody their company. The ideal trait? Not aggression, not brains, but the ability to tell a compelling life story and make yourself desirable. Later on, you'll see how storytelling is critical to emotional persuasion.

Much of the time, I'm guessing that the happy ones also *seduced*. While our culture tends to admire straight shooters, the ones who follow their gut regardless of what anyone thinks, those people rarely get their way in the end. Sure, aggressive loudmouths often win temporary victories through intimidation or simply by talking us to exhaustion, but the more subtle, eloquent approaches lead to long-term commitment. Corporate recruiters will confirm this theory. There are a few alpha types in the business world who live to bully their colleagues and stomp on the competition, but if you ask headhunters what they look for in executive material, they describe a persuader and team builder, not an aggressor.

You succeed in an argument when you persuade your audience. You win a fight when you dominate the enemy. A territorial dispute in the backseat of a car fails to qualify as argument, for example, unless each child makes the unlikely attempt to persuade instead of scream. ("I see your point, sister. However, have you considered the analogy of the international frontier?")

At the age of two, my son, George, became a devotee of what rhetoricians call "argument by the stick": when words failed him, he used his fists. After every fight I would ask him, "Did you get the other kid to agree with you?" For years he considered that to be a thoroughly stupid question, and maybe it was. But eventually it made sense to him: argument by the stick—fighting—is no argument. It never persuades, it only inspires revenge or retreat.

In a fight, one person takes out his aggression on another. Donald Trump was fighting when he said of Rosie O'Donnell, "I mean, I'd look at her right in that fat, ugly face of hers, I'd say 'Rosie, you're fired.'" On the other hand, when George Foreman tries to sell you a grill, he makes an argument: persuasion that tries to change your mood, your mind, or your willingness to do something.

Homer Simpson offers a legitimate argument when he demonstrates our intellectual superiority to dolphins: "Don't forget—we invented computers, leg warmers, bendy straws, peel-and-eat shrimp . . . and the pudding cup."

Mariah Carey pitches an argument when she sings "We belong together" to an assumed ex-boyfriend; she tries to change his mind (and, judging by all the moaning in the background, get some action).

Taylor Swift ungrammatically telling

Katy Perry "We got bad blood": fight.

Business proposal: argument.

Bernie Sanders saying Republicans have "declared war on the middle class" (in fact, anyone who deploys the war metaphor): fight.

Yogi Berra saying, "It's not the heat, it's the humility": argument.

The basic difference between an argument and a fight: an argument, done skillfully, gets people to want to do what you want. You fight to win; you argue to achieve agreement.

That may sound wimpy. Under some circumstances, though, argument can take a great deal of courage. It can even determine a nation's fate.

► **Persuasion Alert**

The ancients hated arguing through books, partly because an author cannot see his audience. If I could speak to you personally, I probably wouldn't veer from my son to Donald Trump to George Foreman to Homer Simpson to Taylor Swift. I would know which case appeals to you the most. Still, the wildly varied examples make a point all their own: You can't escape argument.

Ancient rhetoricians dreaded most the kind of government led by a demagogue, a power-mad dictator who uses rhetorical skills for evil. The last century shows how right the ancients were. But the cure for the dark side of persuasion, they said, is the other side. Even if the stakes aren't quite as high—if the evildoer is a rival at work or a wacky organization on campus—your rhetorical skills can balance the equation.

**TRY THIS IN A
POLITICAL ARGUMENT**

If you actually get someone to agree with you, test her commitment to your point. Ask, "Now what do you think you'll say if someone brings up this issue?"

But rhetoric offers a more selfish reason for arguing. Learn its tools and you'll become the face to watch, the rising star. You'll mold the minds of men and women to your will, and make any group yield to the dominion of your voice. Even more important, you'll get them to *want* to yield, to *commit* to your plan, and to consider the result a consensus. You will make them desire what you desire—seduce them into a consensual act.

How to Seduce a Cop

A police patrol stops you on the highway and you roll your window down.

YOU: What's wrong, Officer?

COP: Did you know that the speed limit here is fifty?

YOU: How fast was I going?

COP: Fifty-five.

The temptation to reply with a snappy answer is awful.

YOU: Whoa, lock me up!

And indeed the satisfaction might be worth the speeding ticket and risk of arrest. But rewind the scene and pause it where the cop says "fifty-five." Now set your personal goal. What would you like to accomplish in this situation?

Perhaps you would like to make the cop look like an idiot. Your snappy answer accomplishes that, especially if you have passengers for an audience. Good for you. Of course, the cop is unlikely to respond kindly,

the result will be a fight, and you are the likely loser. How about getting him to apologize for being a martinet? Sorry. You have to set a realistic goal. Johnnie Cochran and Daniel Webster combined could not get this cop to apologize. Instead, suppose we set as your personal goal the avoidance of a ticket. Now, how are we to do that?

To win a deliberative argument, don't try to outscore your opponent. Try instead to get your way.

It's unlikely that your opponent knows any rhetoric. He probably thinks that the sole point of an argument is to humiliate you or get you to admit defeat. This cognitive dissonance can be useful; your opponent's aggressiveness makes a wonderful argument tool. Does he want to score points? Let him score points. All you want to do is win—to get your audience to accept your choice or do what you want it to do. People often win arguments on points, only to lose the battle. Although polls showed that Barack Obama and Mitt Romney scored a tie during their three debates, Romney's popularity spiked. The audience liked Obama's logic, but they liked Romney better—temporarily.

Even if your argument includes only you and another person, with no one else looking on, you still have an audience: the other person. In that case, there are two ways to come out on top: either by winning the argument—getting your opponent to admit defeat—or by "losing" it. Let's try both strategies on your cop.

1. Win the argument with a bombproof excuse.

YOU: My wife's in labor! I need to get her to the hospital stat!

COP: You're driving alone, sir.

YOU: Oh my God! I forgot my wife!

Chances are, this kind of cop won't care if your wife is having triplets all over the living room floor. But if the excuse works, you win.

► **Argument Tool**

THE GOAL: Ask yourself what you want at the end of an argument. Change your audience's mind? Get it to do something or stop doing it? If it works, then you've won the argument, regardless of what your opponent thinks.

► **Meanings**

Rhetoric has a name for debating that seeks to win points: *eristic*.

2. Play the good citizen you assume the cop wants you to be. Concede his point.

you: I'm sure you're right, Officer. I should have been watching my speedometer more.

► **Argument Tool**
CONCESSION:
Concede your opponent's point in order to win what you want.

Good. You just let the cop win on points. Now get him to let you off easy.

you: I must have been watching the road too closely. Can you suggest a way for me to follow my speedometer without getting distracted?

This approach appeals to the cop's expertise. It might work, as long as you keep any sarcasm out of your voice. But assume that the appeal needs a little more sweetening.

cop: You can start by driving under the speed limit. Then you won't have to watch your speedometer so much.

you: Well, that's true, I could. I've been tailgated a lot when I do that, but that's their problem, isn't it?

cop: Right. You worry about your own driving.

you: I will. This has helped a lot, thanks.

Now, what do you think is most likely to happen? I can tell you what *won't* happen. The cop won't order you out of the car. He won't tell you to stand spread-eagled against it while he pats you down. He won't call for backup, or even yell at you. You took the anger out of the argument, which these days is no mean accomplishment. And if he actually does let you off with a warning, congratulations. You win. The cop may not recognize it, but you have just notched the best kind of win. He leaves happy, and so do you.

The easiest way to exploit your opponent's desire to score points is to let him. Concede a point

TRY THIS IN A POLITICAL ARGUMENT
Practice your rhetorical jujitsu with a variation on the rhetorical question "With friends like that, who needs enemies?" Opponent: "The Republicans are the reform party." You: "With reformers like that, who needs crooks?"

that will not damage your case irreparably. When your kid says, "You never let me have any fun," you say, "I suppose I don't." When a coworker says, "That'll never work," you say, "Hmm, maybe not." Then use that point to change her mood or her mind.

In other words, one way to get people to agree with you is to agree with them—tactically, that is. Agreeing up front does not mean giving up the argument. Instead, use your opponent's point to get what you want. Practice rhetorical jujitsu by using your opponent's own moves to throw him off balance. Does up-front agreeing seem to lack in stand-up-for-yourself-ishness? Yes, I suppose it does. But wimps like us shall inherit the rhetorical earth. While the rest of the world fights, we'll argue. And argument gets you what you want more than fighting does.

How to Manipulate a Lover

Having decided what you want out of an argument, you can determine how your audience must change for you to achieve that goal. Maybe all you need to do is alter a person's mood, as in, say, seduction. Or you want to change someone's mind—to promote you instead of a rival, for instance. Or you want your audience to do something concrete for you.

Actually, the seductive argument often entails more than just a mood change. Suppose your goal is a little lovemaking. If both of you are in the mood already, then you need no persuasion. As Lord Nelson said, never mind maneuvers, go straight at 'em.

you: *Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?*

If your partner-to-be shows reluctance, however, the direct approach is unlikely to succeed. You would have a better chance with a mild argument:

► **Persuasion Alert**
Pretty agreeable of me, yes? The ancient Greeks gave a name to this kind of anticipatory concession, agreeing in advance to what the other person is likely to say: *prolepsis*, meaning "anticipation."

► **Tips from the Ancients**
The playwright Aristophanes said that persuasion can make "the lesser side appear the greater." Plato thought that was a bad thing, but throughout history, ninety-pound weaklings have applauded.

YOU: Know what would really liven things up, relationship-wise? If we did that role-playing game. Which one of us should wear the maid's costume?

But easiest of all would be to change your audience's mood.

YOU: Let me pour you some more wine. The music? Oh, just Marvin Gaye. Wow, by candlelight you look like a movie star.

That, at least, is how history's greatest orator, Marcus Tullius Cicero, would say to do it. He came up with three goals for persuading people, in order of increasing difficulty:

- Stimulate your audience's emotions.
- Change its opinion.
- Get it to act.

Sometimes it takes all three goals to get some action. For some reason this reminds me of the tired old joke "How many psychiatrists does it take to change a lightbulb?"

First, the punch line says, *the bulb has to want to change*. How inefficient!

How long will *that* take? Twenty years of therapy? And once the bulb decides to change, what will compel it to carry out the job? A rhetorician would go about this much more simply—by *persuading* the lightbulb. The task would require three persuasive steps:

Start by changing its **mood**. Make the bulb feel how scary it is to sit in the dark. This turns it into a receptive audience, eager to hear your solution.

Then change its **mind**. Convince the bulb that a replacement is the best way to get some light in here.

Finally, fill it with the **desire to act**. Show the bulb that changing is a cinch, and inspire it with

► **Persuasion Alert**

I risk offending some readers with talk of sex. But like an actor performing a nude scene, I do it for art. Seduction is the rhetorical opposite of fighting, and it's a wonderful tool for teaching rhetoric. Some of the standard topics for practicing speeches in Roman schools were extremely racy.

► **Classic Hits**

BARELY LEGAL

BRIDE: Cicero may have been more seductive in the Forum than in bed. After divorcing his wife of thirty years, the sixty-year-old wedded a teenager. When asked what he was doing marrying a young girl, Cicero smirked. "She'll be a woman tomorrow." Citizens throughout the republic were heard to say, "Ick."

a vision of lightness. This requires stronger emotions that turn a decision into a commitment.

Stimulating emotions puts the other goals within range. When Frank Capra directed *It's a Wonderful Life*, he had a problem persuading a shy Jimmy Stewart to kiss Donna Reed. Stewart kept making excuses to put off the scene. Capra finally threw away the script, which had the two actors listening over separate extensions to the girl's asinine boyfriend. Instead, the director made the couple share the same phone. The physical contact did the trick; you can almost see a hormonal miasma hanging over the World War II vet and the lovely young actress. Stewart did his duty with obvious pleasure, completing in a single take one of the great screen kisses of all time. Capra won over his audience—Stewart—through surrogate seduction. In the resulting consensus, everybody made out very well (so to speak).

TRY THIS IN A SPEECH

You don't need a strong emotion to get an audience to change its mind; attentiveness may be the best mood for a rational talk. Instead of a joke, use mild surprise. "I brought some prepared remarks, but after meeting some of you today I've decided to speak from the heart."

The Seduction Diet

Changing the mood is the easiest goal, and usually the one you work on first. St. Augustine, a onetime rhetoric professor and one of the fathers of the Christian Church, gave famously boffo sermons. The secret, he said, was not to be content merely with seizing the audience's sympathetic attention. He was never satisfied until he made them cry.

(Augustine could not have been invited to many parties.) As one of the great sermonizers of all time, he converted pagans to Christianity through sheer emotional pyrotechnics. By changing your audience's emotion, you make them more vulnerable to your argument—put them in the mood to listen.

Wringing tears from an audience is easy compared to goal number two, making them *decide what you want*. Henry Kissinger used a classic persuasive method when he served as Nixon's

TRY THIS AT HOME

To see whether people actually do the thing you ask them to—whether they desire the acts—create a "commitment ratio": divide the times they do what you ask by the number of "Okays" and "Yes, dears." I achieved a 70 percent rate over three days—a passing grade. (You may do better if you don't have children.)

TRY THIS IN A STORE

Like Kissinger, retailers use the Goldilocks technique all the time, offering lower-priced junk and high-end goods to make their bestselling items seem just right. Next time you buy, say, an electronic gadget, ask the sales staff to show you the midpriced version first. Then go up or down in price depending on your desires and budget.

national security adviser. He would lay out five alternatives for the president to choose from, listing the most extreme choices first and last, and putting the one Kissinger preferred in the middle. Nixon inevitably chose the “correct” option, according to Kissinger. (Not exactly the most subtle tactic, but I’ve seen it used successfully in corporate PowerPoint presentations.)

Usually, since most arguments take place between two people, most of the time you deal with just two choices—yours and your opponent’s. My daughter, Dorothy Jr., makes an especially difficult adversary. Although she enjoys argument much

less than her brother does, she can be equally persuasive. She launches an argument so gently you fail to realize you’re in one.

I once visited her in London, where she was spending a term as a college student. My first evening there, she proposed dinner at a low-price Indian restaurant. I wanted to play the generous dad and take her someplace fancier. Guess who won.

ME: We could still eat Indian, but someplace more upscale.

DOROTHY JR.: Sure.

ME: So do you know of any?

DOROTHY JR.: Oh, London’s full of them.

ME: Uh-huh. So do you know of any in particular?

DOROTHY JR. (*vaguely*): Oh, yeah.

ME: Any near here?

DOROTHY JR.: Not really.

ME: So you’d rather eat at your usual place.

DOROTHY JR.: If you want to, sure.

ME: I don’t want to!

And then I felt guilty about losing my patience, which, though she denies it, may have been Dorothy Jr.’s strategy all along. We ate at her usual place. She won, using my guilt as her emotional goal. Dorothy couldn’t have done better if she had prepared a Ciceronian speech in advance. Cicero might even approve: the most effective rhetoric disguises itself, he said. Dorothy knew this instinctively. She has a biting tongue but knows how

to restrain it to win an argument. Still, Dorothy had it relatively easy. We were going to dinner one way or another. All she had to do was pull me toward her choice.

Goal number three—in which you get an audience to *do something or to stop doing it*—is the most difficult. It requires a different, more personal level of emotion, one of desire. Suppose I didn’t want to go to dinner at all. Dorothy would have had a lot more arguing to do to get me out the door. That’s like getting a horse to drink, to use an old expression. You can give the horse salt to stimulate its desire for water (arousing its emotions, if you will) and you can persuade it to follow you to a stream (the choice part), but getting it to commit to drinking poses the toughest rhetorical problem.

Up until recently, get-out-the-vote campaigns for young people have been notoriously bad at this. The kids flocked to rock concerts and grabbed the free T-shirts; they got all charged up and maybe even registered as Democrats or Republicans—a triumph of persuasion, as far as emotions and choice were concerned. But until such tribal media as Facebook and Snapchat entered the picture, showing up at the polls on election day was something else altogether. Youth turned stubborn at the getting-to-drink part. (I meant that metaphorically.)

Besides using desire to motivate an audience, you need to convince it that an action is no big deal—that whatever you want them to do won’t make them sweat. A few years ago, when I was an editorial director at the Rodale publishing company, I heard that some people in another division were working on a diet book. *God*, I thought, *another diet*, as if there weren’t enough already. Plus, the title they planned for the book made no sense to me. It referred to a particular neighborhood in a major city, a place most Americans probably had never heard of. The author, a cardiologist, happened to live there. But who would buy a book called *The South Beach Diet*?

TRY THIS IN A WRITTEN PROPOSAL

After you outline the document, jot down a two-part inventory of your goal: (1) Have you thought of all the benefits and weighed them against the alternatives? (2) How doable is it? How cheap or easy compared to the other choices? Now check off those points in your outline. Did you cover everything?

► Persuasion Alert

Self-deprecating humor is an acceptable way to brag. Mentioning a moment of boneheadedness at my former company beats the far more obnoxious “I was a high-level manager at a publishing company that had twenty-three million customers the year I left.” The term du jour for this device: **humblebrag**.

So I'm a lousy prognosticator of bestsellers. In retrospect, however, I can explain why the title was not such a bad idea after all. "South Beach" conjures an image of people—you—in bathing attire. It says vacation, one of the chief reasons people go on a diet. The Rodale editors stimulated an emotion by making readers picture a desirable and highly personal goal: you, in a bathing suit, looking great. So much for the desire part. The book's subtitle employs the no-big-deal tactic: *The Delicious, Doctor-Designed, Foolproof Plan for Fast and Healthy Weight Loss*. No suffering, perfectly safe, instant results . . . they hit all the buttons except for *So You Can Eat Like a Glutton and Get Hit On by Lifeguards*. People took action in droves. The book has sold in the millions.

The Tools

This chapter gave you basic devices to determine the outcome of an argument:

- Set your personal goal.
- Set your goals for your audience. Do you want to change their **mood**, their **mind**, or their **willingness** to carry out what you want?

3. Control the Tense



ORPHAN ANNIE'S LAW

The three basic issues of rhetoric deal with time

MARGE: *Homer, it's very easy to criticize . . .*

HOMER: *And fun, too!*

—THE SIMPSONS

You have your personal goal (what you want out of the argument) and your audience goals (mood, mind, action). Now, before you begin arguing, ask yourself one more question: *What's the issue?* According to Aristotle, all issues boil down to just three (the Greeks were crazy about that number):

Blame
Values
Choice

► **Argument Tool**
THE THREE CORE
ISSUES: Blame, values,
choice.

You can slot any kind of issue involving persuasion into one of these categories.

Who moved my cheese? This, of course, is a **blame** issue. Whodunit?

Should abortion be legal? **Values.** What's morally right or wrong about letting a woman choose whether or not to end the budding life inside her own body? (My choice of words implies the values each side holds—a woman's right to her own body, and the sanctity of life.)

Should we build a plant in Detroit? **Choice:** to build or not to build, Detroit or not Detroit.

Should Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt have split up? **Values**—not moral ones, necessarily, but what you and your interlocutor value. Were they just too hot to separate?