

How to Form a Good Argument

To begin with, it is important to define the word “argument.” Many people think that an argument means an emotional or angry dispute with raised voices and hot tempers. That is *one* definition of an argument, but, academically, an argument simply means “a reason or set of reasons presented with the aim of persuading others that an action or idea is right or wrong.” Hence, most arguments are merely a series of statements for or against something or a discussion in which people calmly express different opinions. A good argument can be very educational, enriching, and pleasant.

Many people have bad experiences with the “disagreement” type of argument, but the academic version is actually enjoyed by many people, who don’t consider it uncomfortable or threatening at all. They consider it intellectually stimulating and a satisfying way to wrap their heads around interesting ideas, and they find it disappointing when other people become hotheaded during a rational discussion.

An academic argument is a process of reasoning through which we present evidence and reach conclusions based on it. When it is approached as an intellectual exercise, there is no reason to get upset when another person has different ideas or opinions, produces different, valid evidence, or reaches different conclusions. When you understand the rules of logic, or become practiced in debating skills, your discomfort and emotional defensiveness will subside, and you will begin to relax and have more confidence in your ability to argue rationally and logically and to defend your own position. You might even begin to find that it’s fun!

One of the best ways to learn to form a good argument is to become familiar with the rules of logic. The word “logic” literally means “word,” but it has come to mean “thought” or “reason.” People who use logic can think and reason well. A good argument is one where there is a logical connection between the assumptions presented and the final conclusion. If you’ve taken a geometry class, it’s a bit like writing a geometric proof: *Given that this is true, therefore, that must be true.* For example, here is a classic bit of reasoning, from the ancient Greeks, who first developed the rules of logic:

Socrates is a man.
All men are mortal.
Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

You can see how that makes sense; however, there are other statements that might appear logical at first glance but that fall apart upon further examination. For example:

Aristotle is different from Socrates.
Socrates is a man.
Therefore, Aristotle is different from a man.

That doesn’t quite make sense, does it? This is what’s known as a fallacy. Logical fallacies are

arguments where the conclusion does not follow from the premises. A **fallacy** could also be defined as invalid or faulty reasoning. Another definition of a fallacy is, “an argument [or apparent argument] that professes to be decisive on an issue, while in reality it is not.”

Fallacies can be hard to spot and they trick and confuse many people. Not understanding logical fallacies can be one reason why some people find arguments so frustrating. However, there is nothing quite as intellectually satisfying as learning how to spot and refute logical fallacies effectively.

Here are some examples of common logical fallacies:

- Diverting the argument to unrelated issues with an irrelevant distraction
- Insulting someone’s character (*ad hominem* attack – attack the person, not the argument).
- Making jumps in logic without evidence.
- Identifying a false cause and effect.
- Asserting that everyone agrees when it’s not so (bandwagoning).
- Creating a “false choice” that oversimplifies or misstates the issue.
- Making a false claim of another’s argument and then attacking that (straw man).
- Selectively using facts (card-stacking).
- Making false or misleading comparisons (false equivalence and false analogy).
- Making hasty or overbroad generalizations.

It is important to learn to reason well, and to be able to spot errors in reasoning, because this is how we as individuals—and we as a society—make judgments about what we should be doing. Poor reasoning leads to poor conclusions and hence poor results.

To learn more about the rules of logic or logical fallacies, you can check [here](#) or [here](#) or you could take a course on Logic (probably in a philosophy department) or an English course on rhetoric (the subject of Rhetoric is the art of spoken or written logic, wherein a writer or speaker strives to inform, persuade or motivate others using words.)

ADVICE TO HELP YOU ARGUE LOGICALLY

Make sure you are familiar with the subject.*
Stick to the subject.

Know why you have reached your conclusions and the points you would like to make.
A good argument will often have at least 3 main points.
Stick to your points.

It is always helpful, in preparing for an argument or debate, to practice trying to make the argument from the other point of view, and then to consider the appropriate counter-arguments. This is known as

playing the “Devil’s advocate.” This is how lawyers prepare for a tough case. You can’t expect to “win” an argument if you’ve only considered one side of the issue. A good debater should be able to switch easily from one side of the issue to the other.

Don’t let the other person distract you or lead you off topic.

Try to approach an argument the same way you would a sporting match, by keeping the spirit of good sportsmanship in mind. You don’t cheat to win, and in the end, you shake hands and part as friends, having enjoyed the competition.

ADVICE TO HELP YOU AVOID BECOMING EMOTIONAL WHEN ARGUING

In a classroom debate, you will have prepared debate points to make. Being prepared will help you to stay calm. In real life, an argument can spring up on you, unprepared. You can still stay calm, if you follow this advice:

Keep your voice at a normal volume.

Resist the temptation to insult the other person, even if you are becoming frustrated or not expressing yourself well.

Let go of the expectation that the other person needs to be convinced to agree with you. Remember that others have the right to reach their own conclusions.

Philosophically, it might help to bear this quotation from Robert Frost in mind: “Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.”

Have a few safe, exit phrases prepared, if the discussion becomes uncomfortable. Here are a few examples:

- Hmm...I’ll have to think about that.
- You might have a point.
- You’ve made several good points.
- I understand what you’re saying.
- I’m not sure I agree, but I’ll think about it.
- You’ve given me a lot to think about. Thank you.

Don’t allow the other person to make you feel pressured into agreeing with them. You have a right to your own opinion.

Don’t take anything personally, no matter what the other person says. If the other person starts behaving badly, this reflects poorly on them—not you. You stay calm and polite.

Don't allow the other person to rush you or to try to get you to think or speak more quickly than you would like. Sometimes, the other side will speak very quickly and demand a quick answer to attempt to make you feel flustered and to deny you the chance to properly gather your thoughts in order to respond. This is an unfair tactic. You have a right to speak at your own pace, after careful consideration.

Remember that some people are trained in political agitation, and their goal is not to listen or converse, but rather to try to bully people into "agreeing" with them. This is not a sincere, "good faith" debate or argument, and should be exited.

If the other person begins raising their voice, or insulting you personally, use one of your exit phrases and end the encounter (this is hardly a discussion) immediately.

** This sounds obvious if it is a classroom debate situation, but in real life, you can find yourself suddenly drawn into a discussion of a topic on which you have little information. If you are not well informed, it's best to simply admit it and simply gather information through the discussion. If you have reached conclusions without thoroughly considering many sides of an issue, that will be evident, and you might wind up feeling embarrassed.*