

I

Composing a Short Argument

Some General Rules

Chapter I offers some general rules for composing short arguments. Chapter II through VI discuss specific *kinds* of short arguments.

(1) Distinguish premises and conclusion

The first step in making an argument is to ask: what are you trying to prove? What is your conclusion? Remember that the conclusion is the statement *for* which you are giving reasons. The statements which give your reasons are called “premises.”

Consider this quip of Winston Churchill’s:

Be an optimist. There is not much use being anything else.

This is an argument because Churchill is giving a *reason* to be an optimist: his premise is that “there is not much use being anything else.”

Churchill’s premise and conclusion are obvious enough, but the conclusions of some arguments may not be obvious until they are pointed out. Sherlock Holmes has to explain one of his key conclusions in the “*The Adventure of Silver Blaze*”:

A dog was kept in the stalls, and yet, though someone had been in and fetched out a horse, the dog had not barked... Obviously the visitor was someone whom the dog knew well...

Holmes has two premises. One is explicit: the dog did not bark at the visitor. The other is the general fact about dogs which he assumes we know: dogs bark at strangers. Together these premises imply that the visitor was not a stranger.

When you are using arguments as a means of *inquiry*, as described in the Introduction, you may sometimes start with no more than the conclusion you wish to defend. State it clearly, first of all. If you want to take Churchill at his word and argue that we should indeed be optimists, say so explicitly. Then ask yourself what reasons you have for drawing that conclusion. What reasons can you give to prove that we should be optimist?

You *could* appeal to Churchill's authority: if Churchill says we should be optimists, who are you and I to quibble? This appeal will not get you very far, however, since probably an equal number of famous people have recommended pessimism. You need to think about it on your own. Again: what is *your* reason for thinking that we should be optimists?

Maybe your idea is that being an optimist gives you more energy to work for success, whereas pessimists feel defeated in advance, and therefore never even try. Thus you have one main premise: Optimists are more likely to succeed, to achieve their goals. (Maybe this is what Churchill meant as well.) If this is your premise, say so explicitly.

Once you have finished this book, you will have a convenient list of many of the different forms that arguments can take. Use them to develop your premises. To defend a generalization, for instance, check Chapter II; it will remind you that you need to give a series of examples as premises, and it will tell you what sorts of examples to look for. If your conclusion requires a "deductive" argument like those explained in Chapter VI, the rules discussed in that chapter will tell you what premises you need. You may have to try several different arguments before you find one which works well.

(2) Present your ideas in a natural order

Short arguments are usually written in one or two paragraphs. Put the conclusion first, followed by your reasons, or set out your premises first and draw the conclusion at the end. In any case, set out your ideas in an order that unfolds your line of thought most naturally for the reader. Consider this short argument by Bertrand Russell:

The evils of the world are due to moral defects quite as much as to lack of intelligence. But the human race has not hitherto discovered any method of eradicating moral defects... Intelligence, on the contrary, is easily improved by methods known to every competent educator. Therefore, until some method of teaching virtue has been discovered, progress will have to be sought by improvement of intelligence rather than of morals.¹

Each claim in this passage leads naturally to the next. Russell begins by pointing out the two sources of evil in the world: "moral defects," as he puts it, and lack of intelligence. He then claims that we do not know how to correct "moral defects," but that we do know how to correct lack of intelligence. Therefore -notice that the word "therefore" clearly marks his conclusion- progress will have to come by improving intelligence.

Each sentence in this argument is in just the right place. Plenty of wrong places were available. Suppose that Russell instead wrote it like this:

The evils of the world are due to moral defects quite as much as lack of intelligence. Until some method of teaching virtue has been discovered, progress will have to be sought by improvement of intelligence rather than of morals. Intelligence is easily

¹ *Skeptical Essays* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977). P. 127.

improved by methods known to every competent educator. But the human race has not hitherto discovered any means of eradicating moral defects.

These are exactly the same premises and conclusion, but they are in a different order, and the word “therefore” has been omitted before the conclusion. Now the argument is *much* harder to understand: the premises do not fit together naturally, and you have to read the passage twice just to figure out what the conclusion is. Don’t count on your readers to be so patient.

Expect to rearrange your argument several times to find the most natural order. The rules discussed in this book should help: you can use them not only to tell what premises you need, but also how to arrange your premises in the most natural order.

(3) Start from reliable premises

No matter how well you argue from premises to conclusion, your conclusion will be weak if your premises are weak.

Nobody in the world today is really happy. Therefore, it seems that human beings are just not made for happiness. Why should we expect what we can never find?

The premise of this argument is the statement that nobody in the world today is really happy. Ask yourself if this premise is plausible. Is *nobody* in the world today really happy? At the very least this premise needs some defense, and very likely it is just not true. This argument cannot show, then, that human beings are not made for happiness, or that we should not expect to be happy.

Sometimes it is easy to start from reliable premises. You may have well-known examples at hand, or informed authorities who are clearly in agreement. Other times it is harder. If you are not sure about the reliability of a premise, you may need to do some research, and or give a short argument for the premise itself. (We will return to this theme in later chapters, especially in section A2 of Chapter VII.) If you find that you cannot argue adequately for your premise(s), then, of course, you need to give up entirely and start elsewhere!

(4) Use definite, specific, concrete language

Write concretely: avoid abstract vague, general terms. “We hiked for hours in the sun” is a hundred times better than “It was an extended period of laborious exertion.”

NO:

For those whose roles primarily involved the performance of services, as distinguished from assumption of leadership responsibilities, the main pattern seems to have been a response to the leadership’s invoking obligations that were concomitants of the status of membership in the societal community and various of its segmental units. The closest modern analogy is the military service performed by an ordinary citizen, except that the

leader of the Egyptian bureaucracy did not need a special emergency to invoke legitimate obligations.²

Yes:

In ancient Egypt the common people were liable to be conscripted for work.

(5) Avoid loaded Language

Do not make your argument look good by caricaturing the opposing side. Generally people advocate a position for serious and sincere reasons. Try to figure out their view, even if you think they are dead wrong. A person who opposes the use of a new technology is not necessarily in favor “of going back to the caves,” for example, and a person who advocated reduced military spending is not necessarily in favor of “giving in to aggression.” If you can’t imagine how anyone could hold the view you are attacking, you just don’t understand it yet.

In general, avoid language whose only function is to sway emotions of your readers or hearers, either for or against the view you are discussing. This is “loaded” language.

Electoral sabotage played an important role in the secret war in Brazil. The CIA invested some \$20 million to finance the conservatives in the ... Brazilian election. The money was used to buy candidates in eight of the eleven gubernatorial elections...³

Here the summary term “war” is itself loaded: military involvement is not alleged. “sabotage” and “buy” are also inappropriate. An election might be truly “sabotaged” if ballot boxes throughout the country were stuffed, and an official might be “bought” if he or she were paid to vote as directed. In this excerpt, however, the CIA is accused only of giving money to conservative candidates in the election. IT is not clear that anyone is “bought” merely by covert campaign contributions –especially if he or she is already committed to the point of view the CIA favors. Thus the opening sentence should read:

The CIA tried to influence the Brazilian election by giving money to conservative candidates.

The neutralized statement does not excuse the CIA’s involvement. On the contrary, it now should be taken all the more seriously. Loaded language preaches only to the converted, but careful presentation of the facts can itself convert.

(6) Use Consistent terms

Stick to a single set of terms for each idea. If you want to argue that Senator Gunderson’s views are liberal, then use the word “liberal” in your premises, not (or not just) words like “left-leaning” or “in the New Deal tradition.”

² This passage is from Talcott Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966), p. 56. I owe the quotation and the rewritten version which follows to Stanislas Andreski, *Social Science as Sorcery* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1972), Chapter 6.

³ “The Secret War in Brazil,” *The Progressive*, August, 1977.

Consistent terms are especially important when your argument depends on the connections between the premises.

NO:

If you study other cultures, then you realize what a variety of human customs there is. If you understand the diversity of social practices, then you question your own customs. If you acquire doubts about the way you do things, then you become more tolerant. Therefore, if you expand your knowledge of anthropology, then you become more likely to accept other people and practices without criticism.

YES:

If you study other cultures, then you realize what a variety of human customs there is. If you realize what a variety of human customs there is, then you question your own customs. If you question your own customs, then you become more tolerant. Therefore, if you study other cultures, then you become more tolerant.

In both versions, each of the sentences has the form “If X, then Y.” In the second version, though, the “Y” of the first premise is exactly the “X” of the second, the “Y” of the second is exactly the “X” of the third, and so on. (Go back and look.) This is why the second argument is easy to read and to understand: it forms a kind of chain. In the first version, the “Y” of the first premise is only roughly the “X” of the second, the “Y” of the second premise only roughly the “X” of the third, and so on. Here each “X” and “Y” is written as if the author had consulted a thesaurus at every opportunity. “More tolerant” in the third premise, for instance is written as “more likely to accept other people and practices without criticism” in the conclusion. As a result, the tight *connection* between the individual premises, and between the premises and the conclusion, is lost. The writer shows off, but the reader—who is not privileged to know the structure of the argument from the start— is left to flounder.

(7) Stick to one meaning for each term

The opposite temptation is to use a single word in more than one sense. This is the classical fallacy of “equivocation.”

Women and men are physically and emotionally different. The sexes are not “equal,” then, and therefore the law should not pretend that we are!

This argument may seem plausible at first glance, but it plays on two different senses of “equal.” It is true that the sexes are not physically and emotionally “equal,” in the sense in which “equal” means simply “identical.” “Equality” before the *law*, however, does not mean “physically and emotionally identical,” but rather “entitled to the same rights and opportunities.” Rephrased, then with the two different senses of “equal” made clear the argument goes:

Women and men are not physically and emotionally identical. Therefore, women and men are not entitled to the same rights and opportunities.

This version of the argument no longer equivocates on “equal,” but it is still not a good argument; it is only the original inadequate argument with the inadequacy no longer hidden.

Once the equivocation is removed, it becomes clear that the conclusion of the argument is neither supported by nor even related to the premise. No reason is offered to show that physical and emotional differences should have anything to do with rights and opportunities.

Sometimes we are tempted to equivocate by making a key word *vague*. Consider the following conversation:

A: Everyone is really just selfish!

B: But about John: Look how he devotes himself to his children!

A: He is only doing what he really wants to do: that's still selfish!

Here the meaning of “selfish” changes from **A**'s first claim to **A**'s second. In the first claim, we understand “selfish” to mean something fairly specific: the grasping, self-centered behavior we ordinarily call “selfish.” In **A**'s response to **B**'s objection, **A** expands the meaning of “selfish” to include apparently unselfish behavior too, by broadening the definition to just “doing what you really want to do.” **A** saves only the *word*; it has lost its original, specific meaning.

A good way to avoid equivocation is to carefully *define* any key terms when you introduce them: then be sure to use them only as you've defined them! You may also need to define special terms or technical words. See the Appendix for a discussion of the process and pitfalls of definitions.