

## VII

# Composing an Argumentative Essay:

### A. Exploring the Issue

We now move from writing short arguments to writing longer ones: from arguments in paragraphs to arguments in essays. An argumentative essay is often an elaboration of a short argument, or a series of short arguments held together by a larger design. But the process of thinking and “designing” an argumentative essay makes it much different from a short argument.

The next three chapters correspond to the three stages of writing an argumentative essay. Chapter VII is about *Exploring the issue*, Chapter VIII sets out the *Main Points of the Argumentative Essay*, and Chapter IX is about actually *Writing the Essay*. The rules in these chapters are prefixed by *A*, *B*, or *C*.

The Introduction distinguished two main uses of arguments: to *inquire* into the merits of a position, and to *defend* a position once your inquiry has led to fruits. The first step is inquiry. Before you can write an argumentative essay you must explore the issue and think through the various positions for yourself.

#### **(A1) Explore the arguments on all sides of an issue**

Some people have recently proposed a “voucher plan” for elementary and secondary schools. Under the plan, the tax money that currently goes to the public school system would be divided equally among children’s parents in the form of “vouchers” which they could transfer to the school of their choice, including private and parochial schools. The government would regulate competing schools to make sure that they all met minimal standards, but people would be free to choose whatever school they wished as long as it met those standards.

Suppose you are assigned the voucher plan as a topic for an argumentative essay. Do *not* begin by pulling up the typewriter and writing out some argument for the opinion that first occurs to you. You are not being asked for the opinion that first occurs to you. You are being asked to arrive at a well-informed opinion which can be defended with solid arguments. It takes some time.

First, find out what each side considers the strongest arguments for its position. Read articles or talk to people with different viewpoints.

The strongest argument for the pro-voucher side is probably “freedom of choice.” The voucher plan, it is claimed, would lead to a much wider range of alternative schools than now exist, and it would not penalize parents for choosing one of them over another (as the present

system does, since everyone must pay taxes to support the public schools even if their children do not attend). The main argument *against* vouchers seems to be that the public schools mirror the real world: we have to learn to live with and appreciate people who are not like us and with whom we might *not* choose to go to school if we had the choice. Public schools, it is claimed, make democratic citizens.

As you examine the issue you will find arguments for and against these claims. You will also begin to formulate arguments of your own. Assess these arguments using the rules in Chapters I-VI. Try out different argument forms, make a good an argument as you can for each side, and then criticize these arguments using our rules.

Consider arguments by *analogy*. Have we tried anything *like* the voucher system before? Perhaps: competing *like* colleges and universities, though not paid for by vouchers, seem to offer a variety of good educations, which suggests that a system of competing primary and secondary schools might have similar results. But be sure that this is a relevantly similar example. At present, for example, many colleges and universities are tax-supported. Would a system without tax-supported public institutions offer good educations to as many people? Would it bring as many diverse people into contact?

Maybe there are more relevant similarities between schools under the voucher plan and the present parochial and private schools. Here you also need some arguments from *examples* and/or from *authority*. How good are the present private and parochial schools compared to the public school system? Do they produce people who are as tolerant of other people? (How good is the record of private schools on racial desegregation, for instance?)

*Deductive* arguments may also be useful. Here is a hypothetical syllogism:

If we set up a voucher plan, then schools would be competing for students.

If the schools are competing for student, then they will use advertisements and promotions to encourage parents to “shop around.”

If parents are encouraged to “shop around,” then many parents will move their children from school to school.

If many parents move their children from school to school, many children will not form lasting friendships or feel secure about their surroundings.

Therefore, if we set up a voucher plan, many children will not form lasting friendships or feel secure about their surroundings.

As section 26 pointed out, hypothetical syllogism can often be used in this way to explain the connections between causes and effects. They may also be used to *work out* what those connections might be in cases where you are not sure whether there *is* a connection.

## **(A2) Question and defend each argument’s premises**

When the premises of an argument are open to question, you must consider arguments for *them* as well.

Suppose you are considering the hypothetical syllogism just sketched. You know that it is a valid argument; the conclusion does indeed follow from the premises. But you still need to be convinced that the premises are *true*. To continue exploring the issue, then, you must go another

step: You must try to come up with arguments for any of the premises of the argument which might reasonably be questioned.

For example, an argument for the second premise (“If schools are competing for students, then they will use advertisements and promotions to encourage parents to “shop around”) might use an analogy:

When stores compete for customers, they try to offer special deals and services to make themselves look more attractive than the competition, and they advertise heavily in order to draw new customers in and old customers back. Then the other stores respond with *their* special deals and *their* advertisements. Customers are drawn from store to store and then back again: they believe that they can get the best deal by “shopping around.” It would be just the same with competing schools. Each school would advertise and offer special deals, and the other schools would respond. Parents would “shop around” just like grocery shoppers or department store customers do now.

Not every claim needs much defense. The first premise of the hypothetical syllogism (“If we set up a voucher plan, then schools will be competing for children”) is obvious enough to assert without much argument: this is the whole *idea* of the voucher plan. The second premise did need an argument, however, and so would the fourth (“If many parents move their children from school to school, many children will not form lasting friendships or feel secure about their surroundings”). You might also have to defend some of the premises of *these* arguments in turn. In the argument for the second premise suggested above, you might go on to offer examples to show that stores do indeed offer special deals and advertise heavily in the face of heavy competition.

The rule is: any claim liable to reasonable question needs at least some defense. Naturally, space will often limit what you can say. Given limited space or time, argue chiefly for your important and/or most controversial claims. Even then, however, cite at least *some* evidence or authority for any other claims which remain debatable.

### **(A3) Revise and rethink arguments as they emerge**

Rules A1 and A2 outline a process. You may have to try several different conclusions –even opposite conclusions- before you find a view that can be defended with strong arguments. Even after you have settled on the conclusion you want to defend, you may have to try several forms of arguments before you find one that works well. Quite probably your initial argument will have to be improved. Many of the rules in Chapters I-VI illustrate how short arguments must be improved and expanded: by adding examples to an argument by example (section 8), by citing and explaining the qualifications of an authority (sections 13 and 14), and so on. Sometimes you will not be able to find enough examples, and so you may have to change your approach (or change your mind!). Sometimes you may go in search of an authority to support a claim you want to make, only to find that most authorities take the opposite view (you probably have to change your mind), or that the most informed people, still disagree sharply with each other (and then you cannot argue from authority at all: remember rule 16).

Take your time. (And give yourself time to take!) This is the stage where revision is easy and experiments are cheap. For some writers it is the most satisfying and creative part of writing. Use it well!