

5 The Basics of Argumentation, Part II: The Greeks

In the last chapter, we looked at an argument from the perspective of how the pieces fit together—how an argument is structured or organized. We looked at this organization:

- 1 Core argument
- 2 Because statements / supporting points / reasons / topic sentences
- 3 Evidence

As we've seen, the core argument is expressed in the thesis, which is usually found at the end of the introduction of our essay.

The because statements become the main points of our paragraphs. They usually begin our paragraphs and are often called "topic sentences."

The evidence is all of the specifics that we include in our paragraphs.

The evidence supports the because statements, and the because statements support our core argument. It all fits into a nice package, doesn't it?

Now let's look a little deeper, at HOW we make those arguments work. Essentially, we're going to look at how exactly these pieces actually *persuade* people.

For example, when was the last time somebody persuaded you to do or believe something that you had not intended to do or believe? And don't say it's never happened, because it happens all the time, to all of us.

For example, I'm sitting at home watching a football game on TV. In the middle of the game, a commercial comes on. The commercial proceeds as follows:

A young man is shown using a certain type of cologne. He walks out of his house and suddenly beautiful women are chasing him down the street. He finally dives into a doorway and the women all rush past him. He sighs with relief, turns around, and sees that the doorway leads into a women's health club, and the doorway is now filled with lust-filled, attractive women. He takes off down the street again, followed by all of these beautiful women. As the man followed by the large group of women disappears around a corner, the TV screen now shows the brand of cologne the man is wearing, along with a catchy phrase of some type: "For the man who knows what he likes" or something corny like that.

I've been watching this from my couch, and I suddenly think, "You know, I don't have any cologne, and I could probably use some..." The next time I find myself in a store where cologne is sold, I toss a bottle of this brand into my basket.

How was it that this TV commercial of a young man using a certain product persuaded me to go and buy that same product? During the entire commercial, no voice explained the qualities of this cologne. No price was mentioned. It was not compared to other brands of cologne. So what happened?

I watched the commercial, saw the young man chased by beautiful women, and even though I'm smart enough to know that this *probably* doesn't *really* happen in real life, somewhere in my brain something said, "Hey, you never know. And what guy wouldn't

want to be chased down the street by beautiful women? What would it hurt to give it a try? I was persuaded.

Later on that week, I'm watching another TV commercial.

This time a famous baseball player comes on the screen to explain how he always wears a certain brand of underwear. As it turns out, when I was a young man, I was convinced that I would grow up to be a famous baseball player. (I became an English teacher instead; go figure.) So I happen to respect this athlete who accomplished what I had always wanted to but never had.

The next thing I know, I'm thinking, "You know, I could probably use a few pair of underwear." And the next time I'm at a store where they sell underwear, I'm tossing a package into my basket.

Again, how was it that nothing but listening to a famous athlete extol the virtues of the brand of underwear convinced me to go and buy some? Somewhere, in the back of my head, I thought, "You know, if I wear the same underwear as this guy, maybe I still have a chance..." Of course that's not true, and of course I know it. But I still bought the underwear.

One final example:

I've just picked my daughter up from school, and I can tell from the moment I see her that he has had a rotten day. Her head is down, her shoulders are slumped, she looks dejected, and I can almost see the weight of the world on her shoulders. When I ask her what's wrong, she tells me that one teacher shouted at her, another gave her an unexpected bad grade, she was picked last for the kickball team during recess, and she lost her favorite pen. Then she looks at me with puppy dog eyes and asks, "Can we stop and get a milkshake?"

I have a strict policy against going out to eat during the week; that's a weekend only treat. But what am I going to say to this poor kid? Of course we stop and I buy her a milkshake.

In each of these cases, I was persuaded to do something that I had no intention of doing before I was faced with the persuading event. The question becomes, HOW? What tools were used to persuade me?

This chapter is really talking about these tools. In the English professor world we often call them "rhetorical tools," but in real-people speak it just means, how did this person persuade me to do or think what I ended up doing or thinking?

ARISTOTLE'S RHETORICAL TOOLS

Aristotle was a Greek philosopher who lived from 384-322 BC. He attended Plato's Academy and was a tutor to Alexander the Great. He wrote about all sorts of subjects, from biology to politics to physics to rhetoric. None of this explains the question I just asked, but you'll see why I told you this in a minute.

Aristotle was also interested in why a TV commercial showing a man running down the street from a group of adoring women could cause me to buy a particular brand of

cologne, and through his studies he found that we can break the tools of persuasion into three “rhetorical strategies” or “rhetorical appeals”:

ETHOS
LOGOS
PATHOS

These translate to the following in English:

ETHOS: credibility
LOGOS: logic
PATHOS: emotion

According to Aristotle, all arguments use one or more of these three rhetorical tools/strategies/appeals. (From now on we’ll just call them rhetorical tools.) Let’s look at our three examples again.

In the first, where the young man is being chased by women, the commercial is using both PATHOS (emotion: the human sex drive) and LOGOS (logic: “hey, if it works for this guy, logically it could work for you”).

In the second commercial with the famous baseball player, the commercial is using ETHOS (credibility: I admire this baseball player and thus trust him) and LOGOS (logic: and if these briefs make him a better player, it’s logical that the same could work for me).

In the third example with my daughter, this is a purely PATHOS argument: my sad, beaten down daughter needs a milkshake to help her feel better, and who am I to deny her that milkshake? My reaction to her is purely emotional; I pity the poor kid and so break my rule and buy her a shake.

We will see in each of these instances (at least the first two), we’re actually looking at a sort of a “false” version of these tools. However, they work, don’t they? If they didn’t, then the companies putting out these commercials would do something else.

Let’s look at each of these separately, and how they pertain to the three-part system we came to know so well in the last chapter.

ETHOS

The first of our rhetorical tools is credibility. Essentially, this means that we try to persuade through the *character* of the author. In our example of the second TV commercial, I looked up to the professional baseball player, so he was credible in my eyes. The underwear company knows that many men enjoy sports and look up to professional athletes, so they pay these athletes to be spokespersons for their products. In fact, many athletes make far more in endorsements than they do actually playing their sport.

In the academic world, this is actually a weak form of ethos, and when we talk about logical fallacies, you’ll see why this is the case. But just to consider it quickly, does a famous baseball player really know anything more about underwear than I do? He knows more about baseball to be sure, but he doesn’t know more about underwear—and he certainly doesn’t know better than I which brand fits my body better!

In the academic world, we look for credibility in more concrete ways. We look at educational experience, college degrees earned, works published, and if the person in question is seen by others in his or her field as an expert. These help establish a person's credibility.

For example, English and philosophy teachers across the country teach their students about ethos, logos, and pathos. Why? Because Aristotle was a pretty brilliant guy (he tutored Alexander the Great, for heaven's sake!), who wrote some amazing material on a broad range of subjects, and so he has credibility. That's why I gave you all that history about him a few paragraphs ago—to establish his credibility and thus the credibility of the things we're talking about right now.

If YOU are going to write an essay, you want to establish yourself as a credible author. One way you can do this is by writing clear, concise prose (remember that from chapter 2?), as people tend to judge us based on things like spelling and grammar and punctuation. If I write an essay filled with grammar errors and misspellings, I likely will not have much credibility in my reader's eyes.

Another thing I can do is present a fair, unbiased argument. If, for example, I'm writing about gun control and I call those who own handguns "gun nuts," I've likely lost my credibility with many of my readers, because I'm name calling, and unbiased writers don't stoop to that.

Another thing I can do is to present my argument in an objective manner. We will talk more about objective vs. subjective arguments in our section on critical thinking. But as a primer, consider which of these is a stronger argument:

- Spanking children is okay, because I was spanked as a child and I turned out fine.
- Spanking children is not correct, as research has shown that children who were spanked are more prone to become bullies as children and more prone to violence as adults.

You probably selected the second, right? The second argument is objective: it relies on evidence and research instead of personal feelings or experience, which are subjective arguments.

One of the most important things that I can do to establish my credibility is to "borrow" the credibility of others. If, for example, I am going to write an essay about climate change, I have a problem: I am not an expert on climate change, and thus I have little personal credibility on this subject. As I said above, there are things I can do:

- I can write grammatically correct, clear, concise prose.
- I can present my argument in an unbiased, objective manner.

But still, I'm just a guy writing about a topic with no degree or training in that field, and that is a problem. So I borrow the credibility of others. I quote authors who ARE experts in the field. I look for material from PhDs in climatology and paleoclimatology. I look through scientific journals for peer reviewed articles on the subject.

We'll see more of this when we talk a bit about research, but know that one of the best ways to establish your credibility is to quote others who have it. Again, that's why I

made sure you knew that these ideas came from Aristotle instead of me—he has more credibility than I do!

LOGOS

The next rhetorical tool is LOGOS, or logic. Of the three rhetorical tools, this is the one academic writers rely on most. A logical argument is based on facts and statistics, strong evidence, and logical conclusions.

For example, if I say this:

Handguns should be outlawed in the United States because it will lower the violent crime rate. This has been shown over and over again throughout the world. When the UK banned handguns in 1995, the crime rate dropped 50% over the next two years. Similarly, when Canada banned handguns in 2001, the crime rate dropped 25% the first year, and another 10% the next year, and has been falling ever since. Twelve other countries over the past 25 years can tie banning handguns to a drop in violent crime immediately thereafter.

I am making a LOGOS argument. I am listing **facts** and **statistics**:

- When the UK banned handguns in 1995, the crime rate dropped 50% over the next two years.
- When Canada banned handguns in 2001, the crime rate dropped 25% the first year, and another 10% the next year, and has been falling ever since.
- Twelve other countries over the past 25 years can tie banning handguns to a drop in violent crime immediately thereafter.

There is also an implied logic to these statistics: “if banning handguns in these countries lowered the crime rate, *it is logical to assume that the same would work in the United States.*”

Does that make sense? I have used direct evidence to show how one thing caused another to happen, and then made the case that the same would work again in a new location.

The bulk of your evidence you use in your essay will be created using the LOGOS appeal. Again, remember our three pieces:

- 1 Core argument
- 2 Because statements
- 3 **Evidence**

Remember, evidence is the foundation upon which your essay stands and falls. You use logical **evidence** to support your because statements, which in turn will support your core argument in your thesis. You shoot, you score!

If we wanted to get creative here, we could follow this LOGOS paragraph:

Handguns should be outlawed in the United States because it will lower the violent crime rate. This has been shown over and over again throughout the world. When the UK banned handguns in 1995, the crime rate dropped 50% over the next two years. Similarly, when Canada banned handguns in 2001, the crime rate dropped 25% the first year, and another 10% the next year, and has been falling ever since. Twelve other countries over the past 25 years can tie banning handguns to a drop in violent crime immediately thereafter.

With a nice ETHOS paragraph:

In fact, George H. Antigunner, PhD, who is a professor of criminology at West Georgia State University, points out that every state in the U.S. that has increased gun restrictions has seen an immediate drop in the violent crime rate. For example, Antigunner points out, when Maryland banned handguns in 2006, violent crime fell to a 20-year low within two years. The same happened in Virginia and Maine.

This paragraph is similar to the first, and certainly contains elements of LOGOS (the statistics on violent crime rates). But did you see the inclusion of George H. Antigunner? The reason he was mentioned, along with a fairly long description of educational credentials and his job, was to establish the credibility (ETHOS) in the argument. What you're saying to the reader is, "Hey, it's not just me saying this stuff; this expert also says it!" Now you have used both ethos and logos to make a strong argument.

PATHOS

Pathos means emotion. Arguments that are based in PATHOS are emotion-based. Remember that there are lots of emotions, so this doesn't necessarily have to mean that these arguments are all based on pity or sorrow.

For example, remember the first TV commercial we discussed above, of the young man being pursued by beautiful women after splashing on some cologne. The emotion involved there is the human sex drive. What man wouldn't want to be chased down the road by a bunch of beautiful, lust-crazed women?

Emotion can also be humor. Many commercials are based on humor. The idea in these commercials is the following:

1. The viewer will laugh at the commercial
2. That laughter will make the viewer feel good
3. The viewer will equate the product with feeling good
4. The next time the viewer sees that product, he or she will feel good
5. The viewer will buy the product because it makes him or her feel good

To those who don't understand the strength of academic arguments, appeals to emotion are strong arguments. The next time you watch TV, pay close attention to the commercials and notice how many say almost nothing about the product (it's high quality, it's a good value for the price, etc.) but focus almost entirely on emotion—often

sex appeal and humor. You will be amazed. The scary part is, these WORK, because people don't realize how they're being persuaded.

In the academic world, PATHOS is the weakest rhetorical tool in Aristotle's toolbox. Consider which of these is the stronger academic argument:

- Handguns should be outlawed because research shows that outlawing handguns will lower crime rates.
- Handguns should be outlawed because little Jessica was shot with a handgun. Do it for Jessica!

Again, outside the academic world, people fall for the second of these all the time.

Have you ever watched commercials showing pathetic looking animals while in the background some sad song is playing, and then you are asked to donate to some animal shelter? It's the same thing.

But in the academic world, we know that, while little Jessica being shot is a tragic thing, in and of itself it does not provide objective evidence that we should outlaw handguns.

This is not to say that you should never use PATHOS in your arguments and your essays. It does mean, however, that the bulk of your argument should be based on LOGOS and ETHOS, the strength of academic argumentation.

Now that we've finished our two-chapter discussion on argumentation, you know much of what you need to know in order to write a decent college essay:

- You know that essays do just two things:
 - Make an argument
 - Defend that argument
- You also know that to do those two things, you use three separate pieces:
 - A core argument
 - Because statements / reasons / supporting points
 - Evidence
- And finally, you know that the evidence you give will fall into one of three categories:
 - Ethos
 - Logos
 - Pathos

That's it. That's how ANY academic essay is written. See how much you've learned already?

We're not done, of course. We still have a few topics to cover, such as a process that you can follow to make writing much easier (and I mean MUCH easier), some tips on doing quality research, ideas about thinking like a college student (instead of thinking like some guy sitting in his underwear watching TV commercials), and some final tips and tricks to help you avoid dumb mistakes as you write your essays.

But you're on your way. If you know about the basic qualities of good writing and you know how an argument works, then you are already on your way to not having a panic attack the next time you start a new term and discover that you have to write a research paper before the semester is through.

You can thank us later.