

Learning How to Argue: A Reflection

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Writing and learning about rhetoric certainly grabbed a much bigger portion of my attention throughout the semester than I had expected. I became invested in improving my writing ability, so I worked to overcome the challenges I faced in each of my essays. In doing this, I found that the lines between a “good” essay and a “bad” essay are incredibly blurry. There are probably infinite ways to argue your stance on a topic, and while some strategies are widely agreed to be effective on the largest percentage of people, it can also boil down to subjectivity. This was important to the development of my own personal writing style because it became clearer to me that there isn't just one correct way to write an essay—not two, not three, and not four either. So, I became more comfortable as a writer and learned a lot of interesting information throughout, such as the science of sleep deprivation and the absurd amount of math involved in public transportation analysis. I learned plenty about those topics, but they were ultimately a means to refine a more prominent, broad skill: how to argue.

My first essay of the semester was a narrative titled “Homework Sucks.” This was a paper that included many “firsts” for me as a writer. Most evidently, it was my first paper after a long summer break, so I was rusty. I experimented with a much less formal writing style than I usually use, and I had never implemented alternating dialogue between characters into my writing before. In addition to those challenges was a problem that, while very simple, proved to be the biggest wall for me to climb: the writing prompt itself. I was tasked with analyzing a time, any time in my life, where I argued my stance on a topic. As a person so averse to conflict and so quick to compromise or just “agree to disagree”, this prompt seemed impossible. I never argue for anything, I thought, especially nothing significant enough to write an entire essay analyzing. After days of struggling to



recall an argument to write about, a very vague memory of an argument came to mind. As I started writing, I knew I wanted to incorporate humor and casual language into the essay. As a reader, I tend to prefer writers that are more relaxed and don't take themselves too seriously, so I wanted to write like that too. I definitely succeeded in keeping the language relaxed, but in hindsight, I definitely took it further than I meant to. Throughout my writing process, I found myself trying so hard to write in a casual style that it became even more casual than how I would normally speak. My voice in the paper isn't completely genuine, and going forward, I began to make it a priority to write in my own voice, while staying appropriate to the academic context of my essays.

In my second essay, I analyzed the rhetoric used by Matt Walker in his presentation "Sleep Is Your Superpower." Just like in my narrative essay, choosing what I wanted to write about was the most time-consuming part of the process. Struggling to pick a topic has always been a challenge for me when writing, but writing this paper posed new challenges as well. A lot of my time writing my rhetorical analysis was spent re-watching the presentation over and over, trying to decide which pieces of the presentation to discuss. The presentation was nearly twenty minutes of study results and statistics proving the dangers of unhealthy sleep, and I certainly couldn't write about every one of his persuasion methods in a short essay. I began to filter my possible writing points to things that are most likely to concern an average person, such as the reduced ability to learn or work and the detrimental health effects. These are things that seemed most likely for an average person to understand and

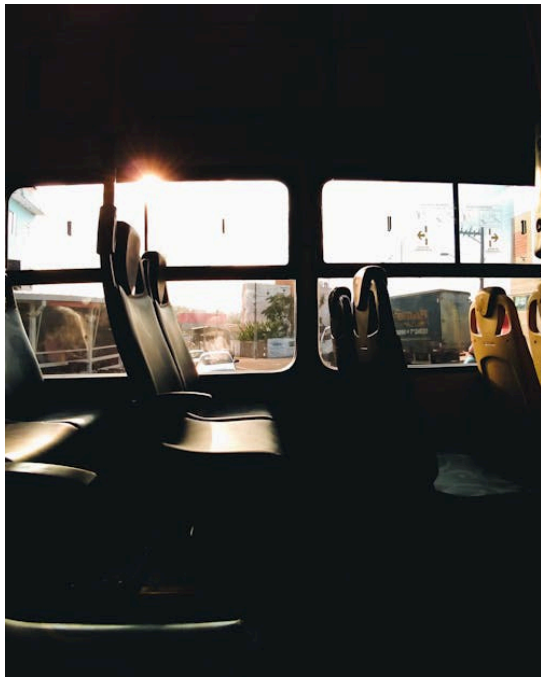


sympathize with, so they became my priority to discuss in the paper. While analyzing his strategy to convince people of these things, I was surprised to notice weaknesses in the argument. In my opinion, his argument is very strong overall. In fact, I became terrified to pull an all-nighter after watching the presentation. Although, the only solutions he proposed seemed to exclude a massive portion of the audience that don't have the ability to use the solutions. No argument can be perfect, and analyzing a seemingly flawless argument made me much more aware of the potential weaknesses.

My third paper, the annotated bibliography, was less challenging than my previous papers. Researching and annotating sources to use in a future paper felt a lot like multiple mini essays, which was much easier for me to do over time. With a typical

essay, I often get very overwhelmed because I feel that I need to know everything that I'm going to write before I even start writing. I think of it like foreshadowing in a way; I want to know what I will say in later paragraphs so that I can create a nice flow of thoughts where everything ties into itself. This makes actually beginning to write very difficult, but when writing the annotated bibliography, that problem wasn't there. I didn't need to worry about a consistent flow of thoughts, as each annotation was mostly independent of the others. The primary challenge of this essay was choosing the types of sources I wanted to use. This didn't present itself as a large problem immediately, but it quickly became apparent when I began writing my research paper.

My research paper, "The Growing Need for Public Transit Improvements: Nashville, TN" was the culmination of everything I learned about rhetoric all semester. This was certainly the most time-consuming project for me, with the biggest difficulty being a result of my poor planning. Before even writing my thesis statement, I realized that some of the sources I had chosen and annotated for my bibliography were not going to serve as the best support for my claims. The sources were amazing, but not necessarily for the points I wanted to make. I failed to adequately plan the specific



points I would discuss in my paper, so I ended up searching for sources all over again when I began the essay. This made the already large project even bigger, resulting in my attempt to try to split the essay into smaller parts to make it seem like multiple small assignments, as opposed to one huge assignment. To do this, I brainstormed a template for the first time ever, writing a brief guideline for each paragraph, and later using them to write each paragraph independently. Writing the research essay was the first time I overcame my stubbornness and budged from my typical writing process of trying to mentally organize and plan the entire paper and write it all in one sitting. I am happy with the results, so it is definitely a strategy I will use going forward.

Writing all of these papers and attending the lectures in between subtly altered my view of what exactly an "argument" is. Thinking back to my first essay of the semester, the narrative, it took me so long to recall a time I argued over something. Just remembering an argument I participated in took longer than the writing itself, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't on the verge of coming up with a fake story to write

about. My struggle was due to the negative connotation I associated with “argument.” What my three-month-ago self didn’t realize is that an argument doesn’t need to involve hostility or hard feelings; an argument can simply be any of my efforts to persuade someone to agree with my stance. Dropping the negative connotation helped me learn about the ins and outs of arguing with a different mindset, which I found to be a great factor in improving my later essays beyond technical and grammatical improvements.