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INTRODUCTION

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What Are Essays?

Some things we accept as givens: that the earth revolves around the sun, that George Washington was the first president of the United States, that it is (or is not) raining. Without argument, we accept well-established scientific principles, matters of historical fact, and things that we can observe directly. Other things—the effect of today's public policy, the implications of past events, judgments concerning art and culture—are not yet known or are matters of opinion. To make a judgment about these things, we must listen to the testimony of other people and review the evidence they use to support their opinions. The way the evidence is presented is called **rhetoric**.

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. Its goal is to change people's opinions and influence their actions. The Greek philosopher Aristotle codified the basic principles of rhetoric in the fifth century B.C.E., but its techniques had long been practiced by Greek lawyers and legislators. Twenty-five centuries after Aristotle, rhetoric remains the bench of judgment and the lectern of deliberative government in free societies.

Each of the essays gathered in this anthology uses rhetoric in one way or another. Some of the essays are directly political and are in-

tended to alter the course of history by persuading people to take (or refrain from taking) action. For example, Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" tried to convince moderate whites all over America that they should march arm-in-arm with African Americans against racists like Birmingham, Alabama's Bull Connor, commissioner of public safety in the early 1960s. Political essays must meet a high standard of logic and evidence if they are to persuade because it's very hard to get people to do things they are not inclined to do. People will not change how they act unless the arguments for doing so are compelling and reasonable. Political essays, then, are excellent models to use in constructing your own logical arguments.

Other essays in this book are less obviously persuasive. These might be called opinion essays because they are not concerned with influencing readers' actions so much as with influencing their opinions. They often rely less on logic and more on emotion and the reader's trust in the writer's good character. A good example is Brent Staples's "Black Men in Public Spaces." Like King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Staples's essay combats racism. But it is not really a call to action. It tries to persuade white readers, especially women, to stop stereotyping black men. Its success depends not on logical argument, but on his readers' sense of kinship to Staples and their outrage at the indignities he has suffered. Rhetoricians call these ethical and pathetic arguments: persuading by the essayist's good character and by stirring up the reader's emotions. Most writing that you will be asked to do in college frowns on ethical and pathetic arguments. The papers you will be asked to write for class will require stricter reasoning and better evidence than you will find in most opinion essays, so you should beware of using these as models for your own work. Nevertheless, studying opinion essays can hone your critical skills and help you to form your own opinions about important and provocative issues.

Still other essays, often called personal essays, seem hardly to be persuasive at all. This isn't to say that they abandon reason entirely, but instead of arguing for or against something, they tempt us into seeing a familiar issue from an unfamiliar angle, adopting the writer's perspective, or simply following the writer along a path of exploratory thought to a surprising conclusion. G. K. Chesterton's "On Running after One's Hat," for example, follows the essayist's

thoughts in response to a flood in England. He adopts the perspective of a child and tries to get readers to treat inconveniences—a stuck drawer, the delay of a train—as opportunities for the imagination. The success or failure of such essays is very difficult to gauge, since they don't try to get readers to do something or to change their minds about some issue. But we can be sure that they depend, to a large extent, on ethical arguments because the writer has to charm her readers if she expects them to adopt her perspective. To some extent, personal essays also use logical argument, at least to the degree that they dissolve traditional prejudices in the acid of common sense, but that is not their emphasis.

How to Read Essays

Rhetoric is an art, and like all arts it involves various techniques that have proven to be effective over the years. No doubt natural talent helps the great orators and writers, but even Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. had to practice their art. Lincoln honed his skills in courtrooms and in legislatures, while King practiced from the pulpit. They might not have known the names of the argument forms discussed below, for many a great artist learns not from books but by imitation. But all great persuaders, no matter the level of their formal training in rhetoric, use these argument forms.

This section is divided into three parts that correspond to each type of argument: **logical**, **ethical**, and **pathetic**. The terminology may seem fairly esoteric, but learning these terms and what they mean can help you analyze an argument—that is, break it down into its parts. And only by analyzing an argument can you evaluate it. Ultimately, evaluation should be your goal in reading not only these essays but any essay. Essays often delight us, and certainly they can be read purely for the sake of enjoyment. No doubt there is pleasure in getting swept up on the wave of emotion propelled by a good rhetorician or in succumbing to the awe inspired by a noble speaker. But reading critically means carefully and artfully evaluating an argument before surrendering to anyone's opinion or bending your actions to someone's will.

So when you read essays you must be active. Fill the margins of your book with your own reactions, observations, objections, and approvals. Enter into a dialogue with the essayist. Your marginal notes will go a long way toward revealing just what strategies the essayist is using to persuade you. If the pages of this book are clean by the end of your course, you're reading too passively.

Learning to recognize valid and true arguments, and learning to resist manipulative rhetoric, takes time and hard work. You might find yourself referring back to these pages again and again before you've mastered the art of reading essays. Logical arguments are particularly difficult to analyze, especially in the often-disguised forms in which essays present them. So do not be discouraged by fitful starts and early confusion. Keep at it.

Logical Arguments

Most logical arguments fall into one of two types, deductive or inductive. Roughly speaking, deductive arguments are top-down: They present general principles from which they draw a conclusion. Inductive arguments are bottom-up: They offer many examples and from these abstract a conclusion of general application.

Deduction

A deductive argument might look like this:

Men are tall.
Bob is a man.
Therefore, Bob is tall.

This is the simplest type of deductive argument. Notice that the argument has three parts. The first is a statement of general applicability: "Men are tall." Rhetoricians call this the **major premise**. It applies to all things within a particular category—in this case, the category "men." The second statement, "Bob is a man," is the **minor premise**. It asserts something about a particular case, not a general category. The **conclusion** follows logically: "Bob is tall." Because Bob falls into the category "men," and because all people in that category are tall, Bob must be tall. If the conclusion follows logically from the premises, the argument is **valid**.

But a valid argument is not necessarily **sound**. You might object to one of the premises. More than likely, you'll object to the major premise in our example, "Men are tall." Not all men are tall. Some men, in fact, are short. The argument might be valid, but it is **unsound**, because the major premise is false. In real life and in real arguments, very few major premises are absolutely true, so most arguments use a few qualifiers—"Most people consider a height of six feet or more to be tall"; "Bob is six-one"—before they draw their conclusion—"Therefore, Bob is tall."

When someone tries to persuade you with a deductive argument, you should break it down into its elements. Figure out what the premises and conclusion are. Only then can you properly evaluate the argument's **truth** and **validity**. Consider this famous example of deductive reasoning:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government. . . . The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. . . . We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress . . . solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States.

Thomas Jefferson proposes many major premises: All men are created equal; men have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; governments exist to protect these rights; governments derive their legitimacy from the people; if a government is not doing its job, the people can abolish it. These statements are categorical. The first few assert truths about men in general; the others assert truths about governments in general. Jefferson expects his audience to share his belief in these truths. He calls them "self-evident" and offers no evidence or further argument to prove them. If you

are a citizen of the United States, you probably believe these "truths."

Jefferson's minor premise considers a specific case: The government of Great Britain is not doing its job of securing the unalienable rights of its colonial subjects in America. To put it more succinctly: King George III is a tyrant. Here Jefferson suspects that his audience might not so easily believe the assertion, so he supplies a lot of supporting evidence. Actually, the bulk of the Declaration of Independence is taken up with a list of the grievances against King George III. The weight of this list is calculated to demonstrate to Jefferson's audience that the minor premise is true.

If we believe that the "self-evident" major premises are true and if the list of grievances convinces us that the minor premise is true, then we must decide whether the conclusion follows logically. Here, the conclusion (that the United States is justified in abolishing its ties to Great Britain and establishing its own government) does seem to follow logically from the premises. So the argument is sound.

The hardest part of evaluating deductive arguments is breaking them down into their component parts. Conclusions are usually pretty easy to identify. Any statement that you could rephrase with "therefore" in front of it is a conclusion. It will take some practice to distinguish major and minor premises, but any statement you can rephrase with "because" in front of it is a premise:

Because "whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of [the people's inalienable rights], it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it", . . . and *because* King George is a tyrant; *therefore* we "solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are . . . Free and Independent States"

After you've broken an argument down into its parts, you can begin to evaluate it. First, decide whether or not the premises are true. Ask yourself, "Do I think people should overthrow governments that don't secure their rights?" and "Do I think King George's government was not doing its job?" If you agree with a premise, you consider it to be **true**; if you disagree with it, you consider it to be **false**. If you think a premise is false, look to see whether the writer has added a supporting argument to change your mind. If after considering all supporting arguments, you still regard a premise as false,

then you evaluate the argument as unsound. If you accept the premises, then the next step is to decide whether the argument is valid. Logicians have tests to evaluate an argument's validity, but they are too complicated to discuss here. You can trust your own common sense to evaluate most of the rhetorical arguments you'll encounter in this book and in life. Ask yourself, "Does the conclusion follow logically from the premises?" If you answer yes, then the argument is probably valid. If the premises are true and the logic is valid, then the argument is sound.

Sometimes writers leave one of their premises out. This is a common and accepted rhetorical practice, and such arguments are called **enthymemes**. For example, a few paragraphs above I reasoned that if you are a citizen of the United States, you probably believe the "self-evident" truths that Jefferson listed in the Declaration of Independence. My reasoning is a deductive argument. The minor premise is this: *You are a citizen of the United States.* (If you are not a U.S. citizen, then the premise is obviously false, but let's suppose that the minor premise is true.)

The conclusion is: *You probably believe in the self-evident "truths" espoused by the Declaration of Independence.*

I left it to you to figure out that the major premise is something like this: *Either you were raised in the United States and attended schools in which you were taught to believe that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights," etc. or you decided to become a U.S. citizen and so must be assumed to have embraced these basic tenets.*

Once you've stated that suppressed premise for yourself, you can decide whether you think it is reasonable or not, and then you can decide whether the conclusion follows logically. But you need to state the suppressed premise before you can assess the argument.

Induction

Induction, bottom-up reasoning, is easier to grasp than deduction. It is based on this idea: If you look at a lot of specific cases, you can reasonably infer the general principle that governs them all. Rather than starting with a categorical statement, as in deduction, you use particular examples to lead you to a statement of general applicability. For example, an inductive argument might go like this:

Kobe is tall. Scotty is tall. Hakeem is tall. Tim is tall. Grant is tall.
Therefore, all men are tall.

The first thing you might notice is that this argument is not very **strong**. While Kobe, Scotty, Hakeem, Tim, and Grant might all be tall (let's suppose that we agree they are), that does not mean that *all* men are tall.

Usually you can't look at every case within a category, so a generalization is almost always an estimate. The conclusion is not going to be *definitely* true or false, but *probably* true or false. For example, proving the conclusion "Men are tall" by looking at every case is impossible. That would mean determining the height of every man on the planet. But we can take a sample of those men and draw a reasonable conclusion. Before you accept the reasonableness of any conclusion, however, you should be sure that the sample is **sufficiently large, accurate, and representative**.

In the inductive argument above, the sample is accurate: All the men I named are tall. But the sample is neither sufficiently large nor representative. (These two criteria often go together.) I took my sample from the National Basketball Association—clearly not representative—and I only included five men. My sample is far too narrow and small to represent men in general. A better sample would include many men selected randomly from the total population rather than from the select groups you might find on basketball courts.

The Declaration of Independence is a good example of an inductive argument. Jefferson's minor premise was, to paraphrase, "King George III is a tyrant." Jefferson thought that his audience might not take this statement as self-evident, so he listed twenty-six examples of George's tyranny, from "He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good" to "He has excited domestic insurrections among us . . ." Let's see whether we are justified in inferring George III's tyranny from this sample.

Is the list accurate? If Jefferson had invented some grievances, we could dismiss the argument for being inaccurate. But they seem to be accurate enough. Is it sufficiently large? If he had listed only three or four, we might conclude that such examples constituted mistakes by the government rather than tyranny. But Jefferson has listed enough to impress most readers. Is the sample representative?

If all twenty-six grievances dealt with abuses of one part of the government's powers—say, the impeding of immigration to America—they would not be representative. But the grievances touch on so many aspects of government—taxation, the support and control of the army, the judiciary, trade, immigration, etc.—that the sample's scope seems sufficiently wide. This long list of grievances, then, offers pretty persuasive support for his inductive argument. We describe such arguments as strong.

Note that Jefferson concludes with an assertion that is the minor premise of his deductive argument. You will find that writers commonly mix their arguments in this way. Very rarely do you find a single argument without other arguments supporting it somehow. Real-life arguments can get pretty confusing and complex. Actually, I chose the Declaration of Independence as an example because it's fairly straightforward. Jefferson was trained in rhetoric, and he laid out his argument quite clearly. Most arguments, even those you'll find in this book, are less carefully and skillfully constructed. Your task as a difficult-to-persuade, skeptical reader is to unravel those complexities and lay them out clearly so you can evaluate them.

Logical Fallacies

Just as the right ways of constructing an argument have been around for millennia, so have the wrong ways. Often these mistakes result from a lack of training. Sometimes they are deliberate attempts to obscure illogical arguments. Either way, learning to identify common mistakes will help you detect bad arguments.

Deductive Fallacies

In a deductive argument, a logical fallacy makes the argument **invalid**—the conclusion does not follow logically from the premises.

Non sequitur is Latin for "it does not follow." All mistakes in deductive logic are, strictly speaking, **non sequiturs**, because the conclusion does not follow logically from the premises. But in common practice *non sequitur* usually describes enthymemes in which the stated premise(s), although apparently related to the conclusion, is (are) really irrelevant. Take this example:

John wears glasses, so he must be smart.

This is a non sequitur because wearing glasses has no bearing on intelligence. People are not awarded glasses for, say, getting a high score on an IQ test. People wear glasses because they are near-sighted, far-sighted, or have an astigmatism. Some wear glasses to filter sunlight. If we supplied these premises, the argument would look like this:

Major premises: People wear glasses because they are near-sighted, far-sighted, or have an astigmatism. Some wear glasses to filter sunlight.

Minor premise: John wears glasses.

Conclusion: John is smart.

Clearly, the conclusion does not follow logically from the premises, and so the argument is unsound. The logical conclusion would be "John is near-sighted, far-sighted, has an astigmatism, or wants to filter sunlight."

Another, perhaps easier, way to test the enthymeme is to supply a premise that would make the argument valid and then determine whether the added premise is true. If we add the premise "People who wear glasses are smart," then our argument would look like this:

Major premise: People who wear glasses are smart.

Minor premise: John wears glasses.

Conclusion: John is smart.

This argument is valid: The conclusion follows logically from the premises. But anyone who has met someone of average intelligence wearing glasses (and who has not?) would disagree with the categorical statement, "People who wear glasses are smart." Since one of the premises is false, the argument is unsound. If the only premises you can think of to make an argument valid are false, then the enthymeme is unsound.

The **red herring** is similar to the non sequitur—its premise(s) is (are) irrelevant to the conclusion. But in a red herring, the writer purposely introduces unrelated premises to distract the reader from what should be the real issue. Take the following argument:

The CEO of our company ought to be fired. The chief executive officer has to oversee the entire body of personnel, execute current policy, and plan future strategy. Every one of those tasks is beyond the capacity of a figurehead.

Broken down into its parts, the argument might read this way:

Minor premises: The chief executive officer has to oversee the entire body of personnel, execute current policy, and plan future strategy.

Major premise: Every one of those tasks is beyond the capacity of a figurehead.

Conclusion: The CEO of our company ought to be fired.

Logically, the premises lead to this conclusion: *CEOs should not be figureheads.* But that's not what the writer is arguing. So the major and minor premises distract us from the real issue.

The **false-cause fallacy** (often called by its Latin name—post hoc, ergo propter hoc, which means "after this, therefore because of this") presumes a causal link between two consecutive events: Because A happened *before* B, A must have *caused* B. But in fact, the two events might have nothing to do with each other. You might consider this fallacy a non sequitur of events.

Take an argument that incumbent presidents often use to get re-elected:

If you're better off now than you were four years ago, you should vote for me.

Broken down into its parts, the argument would look like this:

Major premises: Presidential policies determine the prosperity of ordinary citizens. Ordinary citizens should vote for those politicians who have increased their prosperity.

Minor premise: Your prosperity increased during the incumbent's administration.

Conclusion: You should vote for the incumbent.

This argument commits the false-cause fallacy. Although presidential policies might influence your prosperity, many other things influence it as well (for example, many people earn more as they get older, so they would be richer now than they were four years ago,

no matter who was president). Just because one event or a series of events ("presidential policies") precedes another ("prosperity") does not mean the first *caused* the second.

Begging the question occurs when a writer uses the conclusion as one of the premises. You might think that no one would ever beg the question because the mistake would be too obvious. But usually the premise is stated in a disguised form, using synonyms to throw the reader off the track.

Take the following example:

New York City should pay for a new Yankee Stadium, because its citizens deserve a first-class ball park.

At first glance you might not notice that "New York City" and "its citizens" are synonymous here, but as soon as you realize that New York City would raise the money to pay for a new stadium from its taxpayers, the citizens of New York, you realize that the premise and the conclusion make the same assertion in disguised form.

The **either-or fallacy** (often called the false dilemma or false alternative fallacy) unreasonably limits the choices available, usually to two diametrically opposed options. For example, a popular slogan in the 1960s was "America: love it or leave it." Put less succinctly, this meant that you must either accept all U.S. policies or emigrate. You might break this argument down as follows:

Major premises: Loyal Americans do not challenge governmental policies. Only loyal Americans deserve to remain in the United States.

Minor premise: These protestors are not loyal Americans.

Conclusion: These protestors do not deserve to live in the United States.

By putting the argument into its deductive form, we can see that the first premise unreasonably limits the definition of "loyal." Most Americans—liberal and conservative alike—would probably agree that citizens have a right and a duty to challenge policies they disagree with. The definition of "loyal" in the first major premise unreasonably excludes other ways of being loyal. Thus, the admonition

"love it or leave it" is revealed as a false choice. You should become automatically suspicious whenever someone proposes an either-or choice. Nearly every situation allows other alternatives.

Inductive Fallacies

Different problems weaken inductive arguments. One example is **hasty generalization**. Writers make **hasty generalizations** when they base inductive conclusions on too little evidence. Someone might argue, for example:

I grew up in the 1960s, and I can tell you that the streets were much safer then than they are now. There was much less crime.

This type of personal testimony is called **anecdotal evidence**. It can lead to a faulty inductive argument because one person's experience is too limited a sample from which to generalize. This one person's experience is unlikely to be representative. Social scientists usually dismiss anecdotal evidence, but the looser standards of rhetoric allow it: You'll find a lot of anecdotal evidence in the opinion essays in this book, but you should be skeptical of any claim based *solely* or *largely* on such evidence.

A **false analogy** is a comparison of things that are really so dissimilar that examining one gives no insight into the other. Take, for example, the following account of an argument:

During the late 1990's/early 2000s, many politicians argued that we should not use economic sanctions to undermine Slobodan Milosovic's reign in Serbia; after all, they said, we've used them for forty years in Cuba, and Fidel Castro is still in power.

Unfortunately, for those making this argument, the differences between Serbia and Cuba are plentiful, and to undermine the argument all one had to do was to begin pointing them out: Serbia is in Europe, Cuba is in the Caribbean; Serbia has a long history of independence, while Cuba was a slave colony; Serbia is Slavic, Cuba, Hispanic. It was foolhardy for those using this analogy to assume that a policy which failed in Cuba would necessarily fail in Serbia. (This is another case of generalizing from too small a sample.)

Special pleading is the suppression of evidence that contradicts the conclusion in an inductive argument. You often find it in the bickering between political parties. One candidate will point to every good thing that's happened during his incumbency and conclude that he's a great leader. The challenger will point to only the bad things and conclude that the incumbent is incompetent.

Ethical Arguments

Ethos is the writer's or speaker's self-presentation, especially her moral standing. Within the course of a speech, certain cues will help an audience form a picture of the speaker's character. How the speaker dresses, how she carries herself on the podium, the tenor of her voice, her gestures, what she says about herself, how she treats her opponents—all contribute to the audience's view of her character. A high school student applying for an evening job at KMart shouldn't show up in elephant jeans sliding down his boxer shorts because most employers would interpret such clothes as symbolic of a disrespect for authority. A candidate for the U.S. Senate who is addressing a meeting of dock workers probably does not want to come dressed like an executive because it might seem to her audience that her interests are those of management, not labor. Dress, posture, vocal tone, gestures, and the like are tools of rhetoric: They help us persuade. We call these tools **ethical arguments**.

Writers cannot persuade with the visual or aural cues that a speaker can use, because a reader cannot see or hear the writer. Even so, whether you're aware of it or not, every essay produces a picture of the writer. Personal essays, as you might expect, often do so explicitly, and opinion essays depend on such self-presentation. For example, Brent Staples presents himself to the readers of *Ms.* magazine as "a softy who is scarcely able to take a knife to a raw chicken." This self-portrait contributes to our sense of injustice when white women assume that this six-foot bearded, bushy-haired black man is a mugger. Even his diction convinces us that Staples is an educated, respectable, unthreatening citizen. Consider this passage:

I entered a jewelry store on the city's affluent Near North Side. The proprietor excused herself and returned with an enormous

red Doberman pinscher straining at the end of a leash. . . . I took a cursory look around, nodded, and bade her goodnight.

Robbers do not *bid* people goodnight. Similarly, by whistling "sunny selections from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*" when he walks down streets at night, Staples convinces white women that he is, like themselves, a cultured member of society, and so he's hardly likely to attack them.

Staples's essay would be much less persuasive to his white readers if he presented himself as an enraged victim of racism. This is not to say that he was never enraged. In fact, he admits that he "learned to smother the rage I felt at so often being taken for a criminal." He smothers his rage because to expose it would alienate and perhaps frighten his readers. So Staples writes in calm prose that is at times dispassionate and often funny. He comes across as a thoughtful, reasonable, likeable person. He might lose a bit of urgency in that self-presentation, but white readers are more likely to trust his story and share his sense of injustice. Instead of feeling accused, the readers of *Ms.* will identify with Staples.

Even essays that rely largely on logical arguments use ethical arguments as well. For example, Thomas Jefferson was careful to give readers a picture of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence. The very first sentence admits that "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that [a people overthrowing their government] should declare the causes which impel them to the separation." In that sentence, Jefferson presents the American rebels as reflective men eager to win the approval of other governments, even monarchies, like France, who might otherwise view the rebellion as a sign of anarchy. They are not anti-authority rabble rousers, whose enthusiasm might threaten the governments of other nations. The style of the Declaration of Independence does the same thing: No maddened anarchist would begin such a declaration with a calm subordinate clause, "When in the Course of human events . . ." The signers of the Declaration of Independence present themselves as slow-to-act, prudent men who "are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms [of government] to which they are accustomed."

When you're evaluating someone's ethical argument, you should ask yourself questions like these:

- What authority does the writer claim?
- Does she know more about the subject than I do?
- Why should I listen to what she has to say?
- How does the writer's personal testimony affect her arguments?
- Is the writer trustworthy?
- Is she reasonable?
- Do I like the writer? Would I be happy to meet and talk with her?

The headnotes to each essay might help you answer some of these questions, and some famous writers can count on their celebrity to contribute to their ethos. But the writer who makes good use of ethos will answer these questions in the essay itself.

The good writer will also establish connections between herself and the reader. Any rhetorical situation presumes a division between writer and reader. Otherwise, there would be no need for persuasion. So a writer needs to give a reader a sense that the two of them are, despite their differences of opinion on particular issues, part of one community working toward a common goal. When you evaluate a writer's ethos, you should ask yourself whether she's established that common ground with you, and you should decide whether she is sincere.

Ethical Fallacy

The only fallacy associated with ethos is the **ad hominem** (literally, "to the person") fallacy, which means criticizing the person making the argument, rather than the argument itself. Imagine a wealthy presidential candidate touting a plan for an across-the-board, flat income-tax rate of 10 percent, which would cut his own taxes drastically. His opponent argues:

It's no surprise my opponent is promoting a flat tax: he'll save millions if Congress passes it.

The opponent is claiming that the plan must be no good because its advocate has selfish motives for proposing it; she is not criticizing the plan itself.

In real life, we would be rightly suspicious if we found out that a tax plan put millions of dollars into the pocket of its most vocal

supporter. But the selfishness of the plan's advocate is not really a criticism of the plan. We need to examine closely the plan's benefits and detriments to ourselves and the nation as a whole if we are going to evaluate it properly. As a skeptical reader or listener, you should identify ethical arguments, give them some weight, but not let them overbalance logical arguments.

Pathetic Arguments

Pathos refers to the emotional state of the audience. It includes their senses of pity and loathing, fear and delight, happiness and sadness, and all the emotions that can be excited by words. When you read you should be wary of your emotions. This is not to say that you should disregard them altogether. Rather, you should learn to recognize and evaluate **pathetic arguments** by asking yourself,

- At what point in the essay did I feel anger, outrage, relief, affection, and so forth?
- How did the writer elicit these emotions from me?
- Are these emotional appeals fair, or are they dishonest?

You might wonder what I mean by *honesty* when I talk of emotions. What's the difference between an honest and a dishonest emotion? Take, for example, Martin Luther King's explanation of the effects of prejudice on his young daughter:

you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people. . . . —then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

He elicits our sympathy with the father and the child so powerfully that we are tempted to suspend judgment and accept whatever

proposition will end this girl's suffering. A dishonest use of pathos would ask us to do just that: substitute emotion for logic. A dispassionate evaluation might lead us to dismiss King's appeal because it is a tearjerker. After all, anyone who has a child knows that sympathy for a child's tears cannot be allowed to overcome judgment or children would eat nothing but candy. King surrounds his heartrending story with dispassionate, logical arguments, so his audience need not be swayed solely by feeling. Pathos should complement logic, not replace it.

It would also be dishonest to single out an unusual, emotionally provocative case in an attempt to sway rather than persuade. Take the example of a convicted felon who, after serving a few years in prison, is released on parole only to commit a bloody murder. Assume that this case is highly unusual: that 99 percent of convicts are successfully rehabilitated in prison, and that criminals convicted of violent crimes are rarely paroled. It would be dishonest for a candidate for district attorney to use photographs of the smiling victim or tearful interviews with the victim's parents to attack the incumbent. Such a strategy would stir up voters' emotions while not indicating just how miniscule the risk to public safety really is.

Be cautious. Be sure that when your emotions are triggered reason is not left behind. There is no formula by which you can do this. You must make yourself aware of emotional appeals and then simply use your common sense. And study the pathetic fallacies. With that caution raised, let me add that, as writers, emotions are sometimes our best aid. The vignette about King's daughter justly engages sympathy and arouses outrage; perhaps King could not overcome his readers' long-held prejudices without jerking a few tears.

Pathetic Fallacies

The **pathetic fallacies** are abuses that attempt to persuade dishonestly. Each is really a misuse or exaggeration of the responsible eliciting of emotion. They are amplifications, so to speak, of legitimate pathetic strategies.

The **bandwagon** appeal plays on the human desire to fit in. This desire to be accepted by others can keep us from behaving selfishly, sacrificing the good of the group to our own desires. So wanting to fit in can be a good thing. But when a writer tries to get you to do

or believe something *merely* because a lot of other people do or believe it, a warning light should go on. The right opinion or right action should be embraced for its own sake, not out of fear that its rejection would be unpopular. That this strategy is so often used by advertisers should give you some idea of its untrustworthiness.

Similar to the bandwagon appeal is the **appeal to tradition**. The appeal to tradition is also based on a respect for public opinion, although not so much respect for the opinions of our fellows as respect for the opinions of those who have come before us. In and of itself, respecting tradition can often effect good things, like helping to create a sense of identity and stability. Thomas Jefferson acknowledges these positive powers when he states that "[p]rudence indeed will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes." We should respect the forms of government inherited from our ancestors if for no other reason than that stability is generally good. But prudence is not necessarily a virtue, and respect for those who have gone before us cannot substitute for our own judgment. Men and women bequeath us traditions, and men and women are fallible, so the forms they hand down could be bad. If someone erects the main structure of her beliefs on tradition, you should suspect that her beliefs have little merit. We should never so venerate tradition that we close ourselves to honest dispute, and we should not tolerate tradition when it violates our own sense of reason and right.

Rhetoricians also warn against the **appeal to pity**. Imagine that you are in charge of a division of a company and that an employee you must evaluate comes to you with a sob story. He tells you how difficult his home life has been. His teenaged sons were both arrested for drug possession, and his wife was just diagnosed with breast cancer. He's been too distracted to do his job. Logically, this employee's problems have nothing to do with your evaluation of his performance. Even so, I hesitate to advise you to disregard your natural sense of pity altogether, for it is the basis of sympathy and fellow feeling. Instead of ignoring his appeals, be sure to find out whether his sufferings are real. In short, be careful that no one abuses your trust or your predilection to compassion.

Conclusion

These are the tools of rhetoric. With them, you will be able to analyze any essay, examine its parts, and evaluate its soundness and its strength. But you should also read these essays with an eye to their literary or aesthetic features. We have chosen these selections not only for their exemplary arguments and their historical value, but also for their beauty. There is a lot of good writing in these pages. Even the most formal, documentary prose, like that of the Declaration of Independence, resonates with a power only beauty can supply.

Abraham Lincoln closes his first inaugural address with these ringing words:

The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearth-stone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

This quotation distinguishes itself by its stateliness, dignity, beauty. Not every essay attempts stateliness. But each does strive for aesthetic effect. Without such effects we'd find reading essays a dreary business. So while you'll need to analyze the arguments these essays contain, don't forget to enjoy.

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