An Introduction to Argument

STEP 1: Getting started

1. Without asking anybody else, write an answer to the question, “What is argument?”

2. Now list as many examples of arguments as you can. You might like to use the following headings as categories under which you can group your examples:
   - spoken arguments (for example, an election speech);
   - written arguments (for example, a letter to the editor);
   - visual arguments that use pictures in some way (for example, a display ad).

3. In groups, compare your examples. Add examples to your own list from the examples other members of the group have written down.

4. In the opinion of your group, what is the difference between an argument and a row?

STEP 2: Finding a focus

In this chapter, we will be investigating the question:

Are there certain characteristics that all arguments share?

In the course of this chapter, we will see whether the following hypotheses are valid.

- An argument needs at least two people.
- An argument needs an issue.
- An argument involves the putting forward of at least two different positions (points of view) on an issue.
- An argument involves the provision of evidence, proof or reasons.
- An argument can always be put in the form of a series of connected statements.

STEP 3: Investigating text

1. An example:

Read through ARGUMENT A. What’s being described here is a verbal conflict between two characters—something that happens quite often in novels.

ARGUMENT A

The following extract is taken from the novel, Space Demons, by Gillian Rubinstein. In this extract, one of the main characters, Elaine Taylor and her father, David, disagree on whether they should stay in their house or move on.

“Dad,” she said, trying to talk calmly. “I really do think we should stay here. I need to do some gym classes. Mr Russell thinks I’m pretty good. I’d like to do ballet, too. I like the school. I’ve made friends. I’ll die if we have to go.”

David was making tea. He handed her a mug. “Elly,” he said, “be reasonable! I need to find work. If I don’t work, we don’t eat. The work here has run out. We’ll have to move on.

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somewhere. We can’t stay in this house—the guy who owns it wants to live in it. And I feel like a bit of sunshine. This cold weather’s killing me. You’ll enjoy travelling on. You always do.”

“I don’t!” she cried. “I just want to stay put somewhere. I want to have a proper home! I’ll never get to be anyone if we’re always racketing around. I’ll just end up a weirdo like you!”

She looked at the mug of tea in her hand, wondered why on earth he was giving her tea at a time like this, and hurled it to the ground. The mug bounced several times on the cork tiles, spilling tea everywhere.

David reached out and smacked her hard on the shoulder. “You watch the way you talk to me!” he shouted. “I deserve a bit of respect from you! I’m your father, remember?”

Let’s check out the statements we made in STEP 2 against this argument. In order to draw the following conclusions, we need to read ARGUMENT A carefully. This process is called close reading and can be quite tricky at first.

- Two people are involved, Elaine and her father.
- The issue being argued here is whether to stay in their house or to leave it.
- Elaine’s position is that they should stay. David’s position is that they need to move on.
- In support of her position that they should stay, Elaine provides the following reasons:
  - she needs to do gym classes;
  - she’d like to do ballet;
  - she likes her school;
  - she’s made friends;
  - she wants a proper home;
  - moving around will stop her making something of herself.

- The argument can be put in the form of a series of connected statements:

  We should stay.
  
  There are good reasons why we should stay.

  But I say we should move on.
  
  And there are good reasons why we should move on.

  Furthermore, you will enjoy travelling on.

  On the contrary, I have strong reasons for staying.

  Furthermore, I don’t want to be like you.

  But fathers should be respected.

To make the connections really clear, we can set out these findings in the form of a table.

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An argument needs at least two people.  
Yes: Two people are involved in this argument.

An argument needs an issue.
Yes: There is an issue here: whether to stay in the house or leave it.

An argument involves the putting forward of at least two different positions (points of view) on an issue.
Yes: David and Elaine put forward different positions on this issue.

An argument involves the provision of evidence, proof or reasons.
Yes: Elaine puts forward a number of reasons in support of her position.

An argument can always be put in the form of a series of connected statements.
Yes: For example, Elaine makes a number of related statements: “We should stay.” “There are good reasons why we should stay.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideas/Hypotheses</th>
<th>Conclusions: Space Demons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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Table 1: Matching hypotheses and findings

Exploring further: Statements

The sentence, “Serious crimes should earn harsher punishment” might be described as a broad statement of position. Perhaps you have heard people say things like this. Maybe you have heard such people disagreed with very strongly by other people. A statement is a sentence which makes a point about something. (You will find that your glossary defines a statement as a sentence in which the subject generally comes before the verb.)

- **Statements for:** List some statements which support the position that: “Serious crimes should earn harsher punishment.” Ensure that you use complete sentences.
- **Statements against:** List some statements which oppose the position that: “Serious crimes should earn harsher punishment.” Ensure that you use complete sentences.

2. Issues? What issues? (Group)

Let’s look at the word “issue” for a minute. It’s a word that can be used of physical happenings. For example, in the sentence “The students issued from the classroom,” we are using the word to mean come out. Let’s switch now to another way in which the word issue means come out.

Recently in New Zealand, four gang members were sent to prison because they murdered a person who was going to testify against them in court. Naturally enough, this incident caused a lot of talk among a lot of people. If you had listened to the talk, you would have learnt that for different people, different themes or ideas came out of this incident.

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Some people said: “This incident raises the issue of violence in society. We should make the punishment for such criminals harsher.” Others said: “This incident raises the issue of the safety of witness. We should pass laws to ensure that witnesses can testify without their identity being revealed.” Still others said: “This incident raises the issue of self-esteem. We should teach these people ways of valuing themselves and others.” (Notice how the word “issue” is used with the word “raise.”)

In your group, discuss an incident that has occurred in your school or community recently and which caused a lot of talk.

- Identify the different issues that came out of this incident for different groups of people.
- Identify the different positions taken by these groups with respect to these issues.

You may find it helpful to use for each group the formula: “This incident raises the issue of … We should …”

Compare your findings with the findings of other groups in your class.

3. Investigating examples of argument

a) Read ARGUMENTS B, C and D. These extracts are all from written genres.

ARGUMENT B

This is a letter from an advice column in Dolly magazine. Dolly is a magazine targeted at teenage girls, but in this column, girls are invited to get “a guy’s side of the story.”

Dear Blake
I’m a 13-year-old girl who only enjoys the thrill of the chase. When I like a guy I flirt, but if he starts to like me I go off him. Heaps of guys hate me because of this, what can I do?

Flirt

Dear Flirt
I know a couple of girls just like you and you’re right, us guys do find it hard to take. Guys can hate these types of girls because they give the impression that they’re too good for everyone. The fact that you realize you have a problem tells me that it isn’t too serious. Maybe it’s just that you’re young and are afraid of committing yourself at this stage. As to what you can do, find a guy that you really like and try to stick with him. We’re not all that bad. Trust me!

ARGUMENT C

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast
Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet

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ARGUMENT D

Mum and me were pretty close, all right. I mean, after Dad shot through you’d have to say that all we had was each other. He certainly didn’t leave us with much to come and go on. Mum had a little bit stashed away, but you could never say we were living in the lap of luxury.

Every Sunday we’d go to church. I didn’t mind that so much, since me and my mates often met together afterwards. The real problem was my mother’s blue floral dress. She always referred to it as her floral dress. It was mainly blue but it was covered all over with large, white four-petalled flowers. It was awful, but I could never tell my mother that.

My mates would have me on about it. ‘Where did your mother get that dress?’ they’d say. ‘From a Pacific Island Salvation Army shop?’ And they’d all collapse in fits of laughter.

I didn’t know what to do. It was getting unbearable. Sometimes, I found myself making excuses not to go to church. Then I wondered if I should say something to her. But I knew it would hurt her feelings. And I knew she couldn’t really afford to splash out on a new dress.

b) Find at least two additional examples of argument. You might refer to the list you compiled when you were doing STEP 1. One of these should be an example of spoken argument, and one should be a visual argument.

c) Test each of these arguments, B, C, D, and your own samples, against the five hypotheses set out above by attempting to:

- say who the participants are;
- say what the issue is;
- identify the different positions being represented;
- identify examples of proof or reasons given by at least one of the participants;
- convert the argument to a list of connected statements.

d) Use the example provided in Table 1 as a guide as to how to go about this task. You will notice how the “Findings” column contains brief reasons for saying “Yes” or “No.”

e) Record your findings in chart form using the format in Table 2. (Your teacher may provide you with a worksheet for this task.) To achieve a neat record of your findings, you should make notes before filling in the blanks on your chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Argument B (Letter)</th>
<th>Argument C (Poem)</th>
<th>Argument D (Anecdote)</th>
<th>Your first example</th>
<th>Your second example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An argument needs at least two people.</td>
<td></td>
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An argument involves the provision of evidence, proof or reasons.

An argument can always be put in the form of a series of connected statements.

Table 2: Recording your investigation findings

**STEP 4: Drawing conclusions** (Individual or group)

You now have to decide which hypotheses you can accept and which ones you want to reject or modify. You will be able to do this by studying your findings as set out in Table 2. Do this in two steps:

- **Step 1:** Put a tick next to the hypotheses that are supported by your findings.
- **Step 2:** Put a cross next to the hypotheses that are not supported by your findings. Find a way of rewriting these hypotheses so that they do fit your findings.

**STEP 5: Reflection** (Individual or group)

The following definition comes from an English textbook about argument.

> [Argument can be taken to be a process of argumentation. | a connected series of statements | intended to establish a position | and implying response to another (or more than one) position. | sometimes taking the form of an actual exchange in discussion and debate. | and usually presenting itself in speech and/or writing | as a sequence or chain of reasoning.]

Richard Andrews, *Teaching and Learning Argument*

This definition from an expert has been broken up into parts (shown by the use of square brackets).

Which parts seem to support the characteristics of argument which you have established in **Step 4**?

What else does this definition say about argument?

What do you think of this definition?

**ARGUMENT E** is a cartoon by Tom Scott which appeared in a New Zealand daily newspaper.

- What issue do you think this cartoon is concerned with?
- What do you think Tom Scott’s position is on this issue?
- How many different statements does this cartoon appear to be making about the issue you identified?

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• Would you say that this cartoon contains evidence, proof or reasons?
• Do you think that this cartoon is, in fact, an argument?
• What is your response to the statement: “This cartoon raises the issue of the responsibility of the cartoonist.”?
Exploring further:

Investigation

Does argument, as defined in STEP 5, have an important place in the teaching and learning that takes place in your school? You might ask yourself which of your subjects expect you to argue a case for something, or to find evidence to support your position on some issue. Discuss this question with a number of your fellow students and one or two teachers. Write a conclusion to your investigation, beginning with the words: ‘As a result of my investigation, I have come to the conclusion that …

Research

Look at a newspaper. Identify the items that refer to issues that are currently being argued about. Summarize your findings by:

- listing the issues;
• identifying the participants;
• identifying the positions taken by the participants.
Speech

Prepare a speech to your classmates on the research task above. Beside covering the issues and the positions taken by the participants, put forward your own position on one or two of the issues dealt with.

STEP 6: Producing text

As it turns out, the young writer of ARGUMENT D, whose name was David, had an aunt (his mother’s father’s older sister) who took an interest in him. She heard about the incident of the dress and decided to write him a letter (which, when his mother wasn’t looking, she gave him to read next time they were together).

The letter Aunt Hilda wrote appears below. However, the writer of this book has chopped the letter up into elements and has mixed up the order in which these elements originally appeared. Your job is to work out the correct order of the elements and to rewrite the original letter.

You will find it helpful to pay attention to the connecting words which are printed in bold. (You will recall that an argument can always be put in the form of a series of connected statements.)

Dear David

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Letter Segment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Real friends are sensitive to each other’s feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>Moreover, I assure you that she won’t be too hurt about the dress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of another’s position</td>
<td>I know that you’re feeling distressed at the moment because your mates are giving you a hard time about what your mum wears.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution</td>
<td>Try telling her what’s making you unhappy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credo (a statement expressing belief)</td>
<td>I believe that the best relationships happen when people are honest with each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of personal dilemma</td>
<td>And you feel that you can’t talk to Mum about it because you don’t want to hurt her feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution</td>
<td>Maybe you should confront them with how their remarks are affecting you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>You are unhappy at the moment because you’re bottling up your feelings around your mum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credo</td>
<td>I believe your so-called friends are acting in rather cruel and thoughtless way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequence</td>
<td>If you do, they will at least think twice before they make such comments in the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequence</td>
<td>If you do, I’m sure that you will find that she understands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of personal dilemma</td>
<td>On the other hand, you may feel that you don’t want to lose face with your mates. I can understand that.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Affectionately yours

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Aunt Hilda
**Exploring further** (Individual or pairs)

After getting the letter from Aunt Hilda, David decides to talk with his mother about what has been troubling him. As a result of their talk, they come to an agree solution to the problem which has been troubling David. Write the dialogue for the conversation which takes place between David and his mother. (If you have done this task in pairs, present your dialogue to the class as a role-play.)
References:

William Carlos Williams, ‘This is Just to Say’, from *Collected Shorter Poems*. 