

Ch. 2: ARGUMENTATIVE TECHNIQUES

In the last section, you saw how the research arena is like a closed room in which a conversation about your topic is already taking place. If you are going to say something in the room and be heard, the people in the room will need to hear your own unique contribution to the conversation, regardless of whether it is a big contribution or a small one. This contribution is known as your **voice**. The following argumentative techniques are ways you can legitimately carve out a niche for your own voice.

Note: the letter *x* will be used to stand for your research topic.

Argumentative Techniques

Controversion	Motif	Context
Theory	Tradition	Essence
Generic Argument	Mistaken Critic	Value
Eureka	Extension	Action
Complexity	Frontier	Existence

Controversion

When you employ the argumentative technique of **controversion**, you take the conventional wisdom about *x* (what most average, well-educated, literate minds think about *x*, or, if *x* is a specialized topic, what most of the experts on *x* think) and argue for a 180-degree reversal. Literally, the word *controversion* means a turning around or a turning over.

Notice how the following examples don't just argue different thinks from what is commonly thought, they argue the exact opposite of what is commonly thought.

“Many people think that electric lighting has improved everyone’s overall quality of life. I will argue that since electric lights have artificially lengthened our awake period, and since they do not prompt the body to produce certain vitamins in the same way the sun prompts our bodies, electric lights have, in fact, brought about negative effects that ultimately outweigh the positive ones. Electric lights have decreased our overall quality of life.”

“For a long time, nutritionists have warned us of the dangers of eating too much red meat. The type of fat molecules that gives the red meat its signature taste and texture are exactly suited to clump together in the blood vessel, producing a permanent blockage. However, recent studies have shown that the fat cells do not clump. Instead, they improve blood flow by adding a micro-lubricant to the blood.”

Motif

When you employ the argumentative technique of **motif**, you show that in your research topic x, a certain something keeps appearing. This thing, whatever it is, keeps popping up in x and you intend to point it out and to explain it.

“The famous ‘Never Give Up’ speech by Winston Churchill has been well examined by the social critics of World War II and by professional analysts seeking to capture the secret to his rhetorical power. In all this research, nobody has mentioned the fact that in that speech, Churchill would consistently employ pauses of over 5 seconds. In this paper I will attempt to explain the presence and purpose of these deliberate gaps.”

“Much has been noted already about the decision-making habits of Robinson Crusoe—how he deliberates on the beach, how he thinks about verses from the Old Testament, how he looks for signs in the weather and in nature. But one habitual occurrence has gone unnoticed by students of the book. Whenever Robinson determines a course of action, the way he sleeps afterward is a foreshadow of how the decision will turn out. If he has a restful sleep after making such-and-such decision, that decision will turn out good; if he can hardly sleep because of nightmares, the fact of the matter is that he has made a poor decision. This paper will support this thesis by collating direct examples from the story.”

“The correct answer, then, to Christian’s frequent repetitions of the Philippian jailer’s question, ‘What must I do?’ (Acts 16:31), is ‘Thou canst do nothing for the obtaining of the forgiveness of sins, but must only hear the Word of God’ (Commentary 210). Christian’s ‘progress’ begins with this question, what the marginal gloss calls his ‘Outcry’ (8), and it is repeated frequently either as question or quandary throughout the narrative. In every crisis, Christian (or his companion) is forced to recall that he is powerless to do anything: ‘he wotted not what to do’ (20); ‘then was Christian in great distress, and knew not what to do’ (43). In Doubting Castle, the pilgrims’ nadir is marked by the desperate question, ‘what shall we do?’ (115). Over and over the question is repeated: ‘When a man is down, you know, what can he do?’ (130); ‘What can a man do in this case?’ (131); ‘Do! I could not tell what to do’ (140). The frequency of the question reflects Bunyan’s agreement with Luther that the doctrine of passive righteousness, of justification without ‘doing,’ is very difficult to keep hold of.”

*[Luxon, “The Pilgrim’s Passive Progress,” 79]**

*All actual sources in this section will have abbreviated citation information keyed to source page numbers.

Context

When you employ the argumentative technique of **context**, you show how the current voices discussing x have taken x out of a historical, intellectual, or psychological context.

By far the most common type of context used in this technique is the historical:

“It is all very well to ascribe a hidden meaning to Emily Dickenson’s dashes—there are so many of them! what could all these dashes mean?—but one should remember the dash in the literary culture of Emily Dickenson’s Massachusetts was a punctuation mark much more common for everyday writing then than now. Her dash is like our modern @ symbol. Consequently, it doesn’t mean anything more than a pause.”

“A few scholars have wondered about Charles Dickens’s lengthy works. Why did he write so much? Why are his books so long? Frank and Smith have postulated that Dickens’s characteristic length was what it was because of Dickens’s underlying fear of closure (94). Others (Johnston; Rederick) argue for a detailed plan of social reform or an ambitious literary agenda, respectively (34; 124). When one views Dickens’s literary production in light of the publishing demands placed upon him, however, it is easy to see why he wrote so much. Dickens was under contract to write a certain number of words per month for various popular magazines of his time. The more he wrote, the more he got paid. I contend that this is a valid explanation for his length and will present my evidence at length, below.”

But there are other types of contexts, too:

“[S]cholars who are mainly concerned with Donne’s literary legacy have tended to interpret his images of the body without grounding them in his theological thinking.”
[Felecia Wright McDuffie, To Our Bodies Turn We Then,” p. ix]

“K. W. Manley’s poems have been noted for intense use of sounds, smells, and textures instead of for any visual imagery like color or shades, and some have theorized that this indicates an attempt by Manley to break away from the then-current literary fad of overloading poems with attention-grabbing imagery. Perhaps, but probably not, since the structure of Manley’s poetry can be better explained when one views the poetry in terms of the whole author and remembers that Manley was, in fact, blind. Sounds, smells, and textures would have been much more alive to her than colors and shades.”

Theory

When you employ the argumentative technique of **theory**, you show how an outside theory or system or explanation of an apparently unrelated process or phenomena can help explain the nature or actions of x.

Theory Application: Sometimes the theory is applied to the research topic at hand:

“The displacement of these infant terrors into worship of God, predictable enough by the Freudian model of religion, makes all the more sense in the case of Donne, who wrenched himself so violently away from the Roman church that continued to command his mother’s full devotion.”

[Robert N. Watson, The Rest Is Silent, p. 179]

“Mary Shelley’s monster in Frankenstein is not so horrid and unpredictable beast if the reader views it through the lenses of the beliefs of Romanticism, which was a philosophy emerging in Shelley’s culture as a counter-structure to the scientific method and the whole collection of newly discovered scientific laws. Romanticism held that a being—a person—was more than the physical sum of its parts. There was an ability to experience beauty, love, and fascination that science could never produce, analyze, or properly explain. In trying to invade the realm of the personal, science only produced dysfunctional creatures.”

“The strange way a quantum particle works can be largely explained if we try to understand it (the particle, that is) as a ball that is really a wave. We know a lot about waves. We know how they travel and how they can be manipulated. But we think of a wave as a type of movement coursing through a body, say, a body of water or of earth. Consequently, we struggle to take the central characteristics of the nature of a wave and apply them to a body in itself, a body like a very, very small tennis ball. But it is only in this application process that we can move forward with our study of quantum physics.”

Theory Abstraction. And sometimes the theory is abstracted, or pulled from, the research topic. This technique is especially popular when there are a number of instances of x to examine:

“Cosmopolitan [the magazine] allows its 44 [national] versions to be localized to different degrees and in different ways, which results in observable differences between the versions, yet it also has the stated aim of globally distributing its ‘brand’, which results in observable similarities between the 44 versions. In this article we concentrate on the similarities [in order to] understand the nature of the global brand, and to investigate just what it is that is being globally distributed here.”

[Machin and Thornborrow, “Branding and Discourse,” p. 379.]
