RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHING ARGUMENTATION IN SAGES SEMINARS
FALL 2009

The Summer 2009 portfolio reading committee reports that students in SAGES would benefit from additional instruction in argumentation. The following resources are meant to provide some teaching tools and recommendations for clarifying the role of argumentation in college level writing.

First Seminar: Using *They Say, I Say* to Help Students Situate Their Ideas

In First Seminars, the Writing Programs encourage an emphasis on locating (and joining) academic conversations. The recommended text (Gerald Graff & Cathy Birkinstein, *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*) provides numerous ways to identify standard rhetorical gestures that academics use to situate their own claims. These templates may be useful as the basis for seminar discussions (acknowledging the ideas of fellow students and academic texts) and as a structure for composing academic essays.

“For us, the underlying structure of effective academic writing—and of responsible public discourse—resides not just in stating our own ideas, but in listening closely to others around us, summarizing their views in a way that they will recognize, and responding with our own ideas in kind. Broadly speaking, academic writing is argumentative writing, and we believe that to argue well you need to do more than assert your own ideas. You need to enter a conversation, using what others say (or might say) as a launching pad or sounding board for your own ideas. For this reason, one of the main pieces of advice in this book is to write the voices of others into your text” (Graff & Birkinstein 3).

WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE AN IDEA

What…does it mean to have an idea? You can probably best understand what it means by considering what ideas do and where they can be found. Here is a partial list:

- An idea answers a question; it explains something that needs to be explained.
- An idea usually starts with an observation that is puzzling, with something that you want to figure out rather than something that you think you already understand.
- An idea may be the discovery of a question where there seemed not to be one.
- An idea may make explicit and explore the meaning of something implicit—an unstated assumption upon which an argument rests or a logical consequence of a given position.
- An idea may connect elements of a subject and explain the significance of that connection.
- An idea often accounts for some dissonance, something that seems not to fit together.

[...] In other words…[analytical/argumentative topics] deliberately locate you in an area of *uncertainty*. They put you in a position where there is something to negotiate, where you are required not just to list answers but also to ask questions, make choices, and engage in reasoning about the meaning and significance of your evidence.

University Seminars: Helping Students Use Research to Support Their Claims

In University Seminars, the Writing Programs encourage attention to research skills and to situating relevant and significant claims within topical academic conversations. Building on the skills acquired in First Seminar, students now have the opportunity to approach academic problems related to the three “worlds” – Natural & Technological, Symbolic, and Social – which correspond to three broad approaches to knowledge production. In addition to more enhanced instruction in researching and incorporating others’ ideas into their own texts, students should be encouraged to evaluate the contribution of their own claims to ongoing conversations. The recommended text (Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, & Joseph Williams, *The Craft of Research*) provides detailed instruction in how to identify an appropriate research question (centered in a problem that needs to be solved) and how to find and assess the research needed to address the question.

Booth, Colomb and Williams describe argument at a “conversation with readers” (see chapters seven & eight): “In a research report, you make a claim, back it with reasons, support them with evidence, acknowledge and respond to other views, and sometimes explain your principles of reasoning” (108). They also recommend the following revision strategies (chapter fourteen, pp. 206-7):

1. Identify the Substance of Your Argument: Does the structure of your argument match the structure of your report?
2. Evaluate the Quality of Your Argument: What might cause your readers to reject your argument?
   a. Is your evidence sufficient, reliable, and clearly connected to your claims?
   b. Have you appropriately qualified your argument?
   c. Does your report read less like a contest between competitors and more like a conversation with colleagues who have minds of their own, asking hard but friendly questions?
   d. The hardest question: What warrants have you not expressed but should?

**YOUR ARGUMENT: IN A NUTSHELL**

We do not define an argument by its abrasive tone, the belligerent attitudes of arguers, or by the desire to coerce an audience into accepting a claim. Instead, we define an argument by two criteria:

- Two (or more) people want to solve a problem but don’t agree on a solution.
- They exchange reasons and evidence that they think support their respective solutions and respond to one another’s questions, objections, and alternatives.

You make an argument not just to settle a disagreement. Good arguments help you explore questions and explain your beliefs, so that even when you and your readers can’t agree, you can at least understand why.

Your first task in writing an argument is to understand the problem that occasions it. Why (other than the fact that your teacher assigned it) are you writing it? What do you want to achieve?

- Do you want your readers just to understand something, with no expectation that they will act? If so, why is that understanding important?
- Do you want your readers to act? If so, what do you expect them to accomplish? What problem will that action solve?

Once you understand your problem, try out a few solutions, pick one that seems promising, then list reasons that would encourage readers to agree. You can use that list as a scratch outline or, if you wish, expand it into a formal one.

Additional Resources

Writing@Case Website – for resources and information, for example:
- “Argumentation”: http://www.case.edu/writing/pedagogy/argument.html
- “Classroom Activities”: http://www.case.edu/writing/pedagogy/classroom.html

SAGES & Writing Programs Recommended Outcomes:
- SAGSE Learning Outcomes: http://www.case.edu/sages/fellows.htm#seminar
- Writing Outcomes: http://www.case.edu/sages/fellows.htm#write

Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) – for a variety of handouts & clear explanations, for example:
- “Developing Strong Thesis Statements”: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/588/01/
- “Using Research & Evidence”: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/588/02/
- “Organizing Your Argument”: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/588/03/
- “Using Rhetorical Strategies for Persuasion”: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/588/04/

Other Online Sources on Argumentation:

Print Resource on Integrating Writing into Your Classes:

Case Faculty Suggestions (Produced by the Faculty Writing Fellows, Spring 2007)

Works Cited


