Structuring an Argument

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Introduction

- ▶ Effective argumentation is one of the most important abilities you can develop during your college education
  - ▶ People are generally dismissive of new information and resistant to change (even when high quality are used)
  - ▶ Crafting an effective argument requires careful thought
  - ▶ Decision making is inseparably linked with argumentation

Today's reading (brief discussion)

1. With your group, develop a brief summary of the article's main argument.
2. Choose an example used in the article to support the author's argument. What do you like/dislike about the author's use of this example?

What makes an argument?

An argument should include three components:

1. Central claim or thesis
2. Reasoning or rationale
3. Evidence/support/proof

Presenting an argument typically progresses linearly through these components (though people may form their own positions in reverse).

Making a claim

A central claim or thesis clearly presents information you'd like someone to accept as true. Which of the following is a reasonable thesis?

1. "This paper will discuss the advantages of school uniforms."
2. "School uniforms positively impact students by creating a unified school experience and reducing bullying."

Making a claim

- Example #1 doesn't make a claim, the statement itself isn't meant to be supported by reasoning and evidence.
- Example #2 can be supported or refuted using data or logical reasoning.
  - It's acceptable to shorten Example #2 to "School uniforms positively impact students" by removing the reasons/rationale
  - However, these need to be explicated somewhere when making the argument, so it's logical to include them in the central claim.

Reasoning and rationale

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  - For example, "school uniforms reduce bullying" can be supported by data from scientific studies
- It's important to distinguish *reasoning* from *sources*
  - There should be many sources that support a given line of reasoning

Reasoning and rationale

- Reasoning should be geared towards your *target audience*
  - Consider: their existing knowledge, attitudes, and the types of reasoning they'll find most convincing
- You should prepare prebuttals for expected criticisms your target audience might raise
  - How might you refute the critique: "a unified school experience is bad because it squashes individual expression"?

Evidence

- ▶ Evidence serves as the support for your reasoning
    - ▶ Similarly, you should present evidence that's tailored to your target audience
- ▶ Types of evidence include:
    - ▶ Narratives and examples - singular instances that support a reason
        - ▶ ex: "my cousin who attended a boarding school felt constrained by their school uniform"
    - ▶ Statistics - numeric information supporting a reason
        - ▶ ex: "75% of US high school students feel negatively about school uniforms"
    - ▶ Testimony - expert and eyewitness opinions
        - ▶ ex: "Dr. Jones has 10-years of clinical experience treating the psychological trauma they attribute to school uniforms"

Evidence (remarks)

- I *really* like statistical evidence in an argument, but that doesn't always make it the most effective support for a claim
  - Statistical evidence can seem authoritative and objective to some audiences, but others will view it with skepticism unless you provide ample details about the underlying sources and methods
- Narratives/examples aren't rigorous evidence (from a scientific perspective), but they can be very compelling (particularly when paired with statistical evidence)

Evidence (remarks, cont.)

Expert testimony also might not seem like evidence, but a large number of professional organizations consider it as such, for example:

Canadian Task Force on the Periodic Health Examination's Levels of Evidence[*]

Level	Type of evidence
I	At least 1 RCT with proper randomization
II.1	Well designed cohort or case-control study
II.2	Time series comparisons or dramatic results from uncontrolled studies
III	Expert opinions

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[*]Adapted from Canadian Task Force on the Periodic Health Examination. The periodic health examination. Can Med Assoc J 1979;121:1193-254

source: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3124652/

Conclusion

▶ With your group, briefly outline the article you read for today.
  ▶ That is, write out the central claim/thesis, the reasoning and rationale behind it, and the evidence/support.