

# Argumentative Writing: Persuasion or Inquiry?

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**Note:** *The conception of inquiry and concrete directions for writing argumentative papers aimed at inquiry presented in this essay are set forth in detail in Jack W. Meiland, **College Thinking** (New York: Mentor, 1981).*

Teachers of composition often assign argumentative papers to their students. Many composition texts have chapters on argumentative writing. I have even heard composition teachers say that argumentative writing is the most important type of writing to teach students. In addition to agreement on the importance of argumentative writing, there also seems to be general agreement about the aim of argumentative writing: The aim of argumentative writing, we are told, is to *persuade* the reader. Thus, Thomas Elliott Berry, in his very useful composition text *The Craft of Writing*, tells us: "Argument is basically an attempt to persuade or convince the reader to accept a particular viewpoint or conclusion. It presents the facts of a specific case in a manner that aims to lead the reader to accept the author's point of view" (Berry, p. 139). And in her helpful and widely used textbook *The Lively Art of Writing*, Lucile Vaughan Payne says: "The goal in any argument is identical to the goal in any essay — to win others to a particular point of view, to *persuade*" (Payne, p. 34).

If we teach our students argumentation to help them *persuade* others, how far should we go? As teachers, we should want our students to become as well-trained and effective as possible. It seems to follow that as teachers of persuasion we should want our students to learn to use whatever rhetorical devices will prove most persuasive. But, as Wayne Minnick rightly says in his *The Art of Persuasion*, "Persuasion, as it is practiced by some men, appears to other men merely as a clever form of duplicity . . . . Thus teachers of persuasion, in every age, have had to grapple with the question: Are all of the available means of persuasion fit for decent men to use? . . ." (Minnick, pp. 276-277). Composition textbooks give us concrete illustrations of this problem. For example, Lucile Vaughan Payne tells our students: "Never develop a *con* point as fully as you develop a *pro* point . . . . Never allow an opposing point of view to appear stronger than your own . . . (Payne, pp. 49-50). But what should the student do if an opposing point of view is stronger than the student's own?"

Not many writers of composition texts — "teachers of persuasion" — worry about questions like this. One who does is Robert C. Pinckert, whose recently-published *The Truth About English*, is billed by the publisher as "the most

straightforward, useful, and common-sensical book on the English language to come along in years." Be that as it may, it is clear that Pinckert does not shirk some difficult questions: "Is a good speech, a good ad, a good argument the one that succeeds or the one that tells the truth? Should those who teach rhetoric tell their students not to lie or tell them the truth about lying? That's a good question because I don't know," (Pinckert, p. 179).

Another question connected with these problems of ethics in persuasion but perhaps even more fundamental is this: How is the student to select the position or point of view which he or she is then to persuade others to adopt? I would suppose that we, as *ethical* teachers, want our students to select the position or point of view which *is* the strongest, in order to avoid misleading the reader into thinking that the weaker case is the stronger. So, the activity of finding out which position is the strongest position — which position is most worthy of our belief — is prior to and more fundamental than the task of presenting this position persuasively to the reader. I will use the name *inquiry* for the activity of finding out which position is most worthy of our belief.

This activity of *inquiry* is carried out through argumentation. The position which is most worthy of our belief is the position best supported by good reasons for believing. And these reasons take the form of arguments. An argument is a reason for believing a position on a topic or question. The best reasons or arguments are those which not only give plausibility to the position but which also withstand the test of objections by generating strong replies to those objections.

I suggest, then, that we composition teachers must teach *inquiry* to our students and that argumentative papers may have *inquiry* as their aim. I am not denying that persuasion is a legitimate purpose of an argumentative paper. I am only claiming that *inquiry* is also a legitimate purpose of such a paper. I am also claiming that *inquiry* must occur first in order for subsequent persuasion to be ethically correct, since it is unethical to try to persuade someone of any position except that which the persuader believes on good grounds to be the strongest.

There are concrete, easily recognizable differences between these two types of argumentative papers. We have seen that in a persuasion paper it may be most effective to slight and downplay objections to one's position. But in an *inquiry* paper, one must raise and discuss the strongest objections in

elaborate detail to give one's positions and arguments the most severe tests. A second difference is this: The writer of a persuasive paper presents and sticks to a position, come what may; but it is acceptable to end an *inquiry* paper inconclusively as between two positions, since it might be found that both positions are supported by equally strong reasons.

Finally, it is possible that ultimately the distinction between inquiry papers and persuasive papers disappears. If our aim is *ethically correct* persuasion, perhaps the most persuasive paper is an *inquiry* paper which shows a particular position to be supported by the best reasons.