

Understanding Arguments

Rationale: Politicians, advertisers, teachers, corporation executives, clergy, community activists -- a great many people are trying to influence what we think and do. These efforts often take the form of arguments aimed at persuading us to believe one thing, rather than another. Being able to understand how arguments are put together and whether their claims are well supported is a basic analytic skill. It is essential knowledge for the development of critical consciousness, for full participation in society, as well as for virtually all academic and professional work.

This first-level competency focuses on developing a broad awareness of the range of arguments we encounter in our everyday lives and an understanding of strategies of persuasion. It requires close, critical reading of texts. It requires the ability to formulate your own view in relation to what you have read. It also requires knowledge of how to recognize when someone is "selling you a line" rather than making a legitimate case for a claim.

Mastering these basic skills will provide a foundation for analysis and evaluation of more complex theoretical and ideological arguments. It will also give you the building blocks to construct sound arguments of your own.

Competency: Can identify arguments and their main claim, summarize the support for claims, discuss how different kinds of texts are used to persuade, and explain why certain arguments are convincing.

Criteria: To demonstrate this competency, you must:

1. Identify the main claim of arguments about public issues in a variety of everyday texts – for example, newspaper editorials, Letters to the Editor, campaign speeches, opinion pieces, press releases, sermons, Internet chat group messages, etc.
2. Identify the reasons and evidence given in support of the main claim of each argument.
3. Describe the intended audiences for arguments and give reasons for your choices.
4. Explain how language choices and numerical data are used to try to persuade audiences to accept claims.
5. Compare different texts which address the same issue in terms of their effectiveness and the strength of the support for the claim. You might consider:
 - two or more factual accounts which present an issue in different ways or
 - two or more texts which make opposing arguments on the same issue.
6. Using the texts compared in Criterion 5, explain which position on the issue you find most convincing and why.

Standards:

You are expected to use the Communications I Portfolio writing standards as guidelines for the essays required by this competency.

1. To address Criteria 1, 2, 3 and 4, you must analyze at least three different arguments chosen from a range of texts. The first argument should be the length of a brief editorial or Letter to the Editor (i.e., two to three paragraphs); the second and third should be the length of an op-ed column or long editorial (i.e., one to two pages). You may use audio, video or Internet statements, as long as you have hard copy of the written text. *(A downloaded Internet argument can serve as the printed product of a basic search required by criterion 1e of the Computers section of the Communications Portfolio and can form the basis for the evaluation sheet in criterion 1d.)*
2. Outlines may be used to demonstrate Criteria 1 and 2. They should contain an appropriate mix of the general and the particular.
3. In a two-to three-paragraph description of the intended audience referred to in Criterion 3, you should include consideration of:
 - who wrote the argument and what was the author's purpose
 - when and where the argument appeared
 - other clues which reveal the particular group that the argument is aimed at.
4. Explanation in Criterion 4 should include identification of:
 - language which is designed to elicit emotions
 - where relevant, numerical data (graphs, charts, statistics, etc.) which present a compelling or distorted picture of significant facts
 - biased, stereotypical or ambiguous statements

It should include discussion of how these are used to persuade the audience to believe the claim. Your explanation should be presented in a two-to three-page essay. *This essay may be used to demonstrate Criterion 1c of the Writing portion of the Communications Portfolio.*

5. Texts used to address Criterion 5 should be at least the length of an op-ed column or long editorial (i.e., one to two pages). In comparing texts, you should identify key differences between the texts that lead to the different perspectives on the issue. For instance, you might consider key facts that are highlighted or omitted from accounts, the use of sources, the use of emotive language, etc. Present your comparison in a two-to three-page essay. *This essay may be used to demonstrate Criterion 1b of the Writing Portion of the Communications Portfolio.*
6. Explanation of why a position on an issue is convincing (Criterion 6) should clearly state the main claim, reasons and evidence given in support of that claim, and your own reasons for finding the position persuasive. Your explanation should draw on the two or more texts compared in Criterion 5. Present your explanation in a two-to three-page essay. *This essay may be used to demonstrate Criterion 1a of the Writing Portion of the Communications Portfolio.*

Examples of Demonstration:

Prior Learning: A student would successfully complete a diagnostic test.

Independent Learning: A student wishing to do this competency independently is advised first to complete a self-assessment diagnostic test which will help her determine what parts of the competency she would need to work on. In completing the competency, the student would obtain an evaluator's approval of the issues and texts she plans to work on.

Students intending to demonstrate this competency through Independent Learning are advised to review a critical reading or "everyday logic" text as part of their preparation. Recommended texts include: *Writing Arguments* by Ramage & Beam and *Critical Thinking* by Moore & Parker, and *Elements of Arguments* by Annette Rothenberg.

Course: Students may demonstrate Understanding Arguments by successfully completing the requirements of a CPCS course or other approved course that is designed to provide students with experience in close, critical reading of texts and basic guidelines for understanding arguments. Such a course would begin with attention to critical reading skills. It would include sections on the uses and abuses of language and numbers as well as instruction on argument analysis: how to take an argument apart, identify its claims, reasons and evidence. The final section of the course would be devoted to comparing texts, which support opposing claims, and examining their persuasive strategies.