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COMX 242.01: Argumentation

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Argumentation COMX 242, Fall 2018

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Office Hours: MW 1-3 pm & by appt.

Course Context

We find ourselves in a moment where the quality of public discourse in the US is terribly poor. Whether it is fact-free assertions, blatant fallacies, or the idea that we live in a “post-truth” world, we are surrounded by discourse that has nothing to do with reasonable argument. At this critical juncture, it is crucial for you to be able to critically evaluate arguments made by others and engage in persuasive advocacy by using sound evidence and reasoning. Skill in argumentation offers a means for “doing democracy” that can transcend the distortions of partisanship and demagoguery, and it offers guidance for sensible decision-making in the public sphere.

Argumentation is critical in the private sphere, too. Your ability to make good judgments about personal issues—your classes, your finances, your career—depends on gathering evidence, weighing options, and anticipating pitfalls. Your ability to support your ideas orally is imperative for success in any field of work. The GRE has an entire section that tests your ability to analyze and respond to arguments. And, as a dead Greek once said, it is more humane to defend yourself with speech than with violence. Develop your humanity by learning to argue well.

Course Description and Objectives

Argumentation teaches students how to analyze and construct arguments, with an emphasis on developing oral advocacy skills. You will develop knowledge of basic concepts in argumentation including claims, evidence, reasoning, and fallacies. By the end of the course you should be able to:

- Identify the main claim of any argument
- Determine the key issues in any controversy and systematically address them
- Evaluate the quality of evidence and reasoning used to support claims
- Construct reasonable and persuasive arguments that are adapted to audience concerns
- Anticipate and respond to counter-arguments

Texts

The class has a small number of assigned readings which will be put on Moodle. Print them ASAP. However, you will be doing a lot of research for this course; so, don't blow your textbook money on lift tickets and beer just yet; you will need that money for printing and copying.

Requirements and Grading

Your grade will be based on four oral arguments plus homework and quizzes.

- ARGUMENT 1: Taking a Position, 10%
- ARGUMENT 2: Argument of Fact, 20%
- ARGUMENT 3: Policy Panel, 25%
- ARGUMENT 4: Debate, 25%

- OTHER WORK: Homework and quizzes, 20%

Arguments

All four arguments will be oral performances. Argument 1 asks you to take a position in response to an opinion piece on a public issue. For the remaining assignments, you will work with a group in a shared topic area. Argument 2 asks you to assemble the best available evidence on a disputed factual claim. Argument 3 asks you to produce an argument of policy in a panel setting with questions, and Argument 4 takes place in the context of a cross-examination policy debate.

Homework and Quizzes

Quizzes will involve short exercises designed to test your ability to understand basic concepts from reading and lecture, and your ability to analyze arguments. For those of you in COMX 240, they differ from those 240 quizzes in that they are more about “application” than seeing if you did the reading. Homework will emphasize application and often contributes to your major speaking assignments.

Evaluation and Grading

Each assignment will state the evaluation criteria. In general, my philosophy is that the default grade is C (moderate effort, average performances) and that you must work to move your grade up or down from there. An A grade is earned only by outstanding performance; your work must clearly surpass the evaluation criteria and stand out from your colleagues’ work in order to earn an A. *In this course, arguments are evaluated primarily on 1) the quality of the claims, evidence and reasoning you use, and 2) your ability to respond to questions and competing arguments.* Polished delivery of weak arguments will earn a weak grade.

Attendance

Because the class is heavy on application, you will need to attend the class consistently in order to understand the material and perform successfully on assignments. If you must miss, talk with your colleagues and get their notes. As the semester progresses, the course will include workshops and group meetings in which I can give you feedback on your work, and you will have the opportunity to collaborate with your group members. Participation in these activities will affect your grade as I ask you to turn in material from those activities. Finally, since speeches require audiences, I expect you to attend on all speech days to provide feedback and questions for your colleagues.

Students with Disabilities

If you have a disability that requires modification of some element of the course, please obtain the appropriate documentation and then see me ASAP to discuss arrangements.

For my own part, I am currently undergoing chemotherapy and have treatments every other Thursday for the indefinite future. I have tried to arrange the schedule on subsequent Fridays to minimize disruptions if I am feeling less than 100% or unable to meet. The course schedule notes those Fridays. Plan to check your email late Thursday evening or early Friday morning for updates and instructions from me about those Friday sessions.

Personal Conduct, Academic Misconduct

This course requires you to address controversial issues and disagree with others, which can create personal anxiety and interpersonal conflict. So, please remember a few things. First, keep in mind that the course is intended to function as a model public sphere and a training ground for you. Our

argumentation needs to exhibit respect and reciprocity so that we can mutually determine the crucial issues and best arguments. Mutual inquiry, not annihilation of opponents, is the goal. Second, criticism and objections should be directed at arguments, not people. Crossing this line damages trust and, consequently, damages your ability to engage successfully in future argumentation. The Golden Rule is an excellent ethic for argumentation.

In the context of this course, academic misconduct typically is a matter of plagiarizing sources. We will discuss how to deal with sources throughout the semester, especially when we discuss evidence. Infractions typically result in an F on the assignment. In cases of willful disregard for the rules, it will result in failure of the course and recommendation of a university sanction.

COMM 242 Schedule

DATE	TOPIC	READING/WORK DUE
Monday 8/27	Introduction to argument	
Wednesday 8/29	Issues and claims	Browne & Keeley chs. 2 & 3
Friday 8/31*	Issues and claims	
Monday 9/3	No meeting (Labor Day)	
Wednesday 9/5	Evidence	Rieke & Sillars, Evidence
Friday 9/7	Research	Meet at Mansfield Library
Monday 9/10	Reasoning	Rieke & Sillars, Nature of Arg
Wednesday 9/12	Adapting to audiences	Warnick & Inch, Audience
Friday 9/14*	Workshop	
Monday 9/17	Argument 1	
Wednesday 9/19	Argument 1	
Friday 9/21	Argument 1	
Monday 9/24	Argument 1	
Wednesday 9/26	Discuss remaining assignments	Inch et al, arguing prop's fact
Friday 9/28*	Types of factual claims	
Monday 10/1	Group conferences with Steve	
Wednesday 10/3	Finding evidence	Re-read R&S on evidence
Friday 10/5	Evaluating evidence	
Monday 10/8	Reasoning in factual arguments	Re-read R&S on nature of arg
Wednesday 10/10	Fallacies in factual arguments	Browne & Keeley, Fallacies
Friday 10/12*	Workshop	
Monday 10/15	Argument 2	
Wednesday 10/17	Argument 2	
Friday 10/19	No class	
Monday 10/22	Argument 2	
Wednesday 10/24	Argument 2; discuss Argument 3	
Friday 10/26*	Group conferences with Steve	
Monday 10/29	Policy arguments	Inch et al, arguing policy
Wednesday 10/31	Policy warrants	
Friday 11/2	Policy fallacies	
Monday 11/5	Workshop	
Wednesday 11/7	Argument 3	
Friday 11/9	No meeting (NCA)	

Monday 11/12	No meeting (Veterans' Day)	
Wednesday. 11/14	Argument 3	
Friday 11/16*	Argument 3	
Monday 11/19	Argument 3	
Wed & Fri, 11/21-23	No class (Thanksgiving)	
Monday 11/26	Basics of Debate	
Wednesday 11/28	Cross-examination & refutation	
Friday 11/30	More on cross-x and ref; workshop	
Monday 12/3	Argument 4	
Wednesday. 12/5	Argument 4	
Friday 12/7	Argument 4	
Wed. 12/12, 8-10 am	Argument 4	

Starred * dates are those when Steve may be unable to meet the class as noted above. You should plan to check your email Thursday evening or early Friday morning for instructions.