**Argument Grab Bag In-Class Exercises**

**Strategies for Teaching Argument Brooke Rollins**

**Exercise 1:** **Using the *Dissoi Logoi* (Opposing Arguments).**

Based on the ancient teaching practices of the Sophist Protagoras (a travelling rhetoric teacher and philosopher), I ask students to compose opposing arguments in order to settle on the best possible course of action. Protagoras believed that the only way to decide on, to determine, and to navigate reality was to develop fully formed persuasive arguments about particular courses of action. Only once you had gone through this process could you decide on the best view. For example, Protagoras was known to ask his students to draw from all of their rhetorical knowhow to make the best possible case for going to war with Sparta, and then he’d ask them to make the best possible case for *not* going to war. Only after this working through, he believed, would students be able to decide on their views.

This works best with an issue you’ve recently discussed in class (something students have read, watched, and debated over the course of a class or two). Often I won’t reveal that students will have to write an opposing claim until after they’re finished with the first one.

**Exercise 2: Using the Stasis Questions**

The stasis questions, or stasis theory, identify several categories of claims and put them into relationship with one another so that they may be used as a heuristic for exploring an issue. Modern stasis theory, as it applies to writing classrooms, generally involves five categories of questions:

* Fact (“Is there an issue or problem to be considered?”)
* Definition (“How can the issue be defined? What is its nature?”)
* Evaluation (“What is the quality of the issue or problem? Is it good or bad? Just or unjust? Right or wrong? Ethical or unethical? Why should people care about the issue?)
* Cause and Effect (“What forces are behind the issue? What are the causes of the problem? What are the consequences of the issue/problem?)
* Policy (“What should we do about the issue/problem?”)

I use the stasis questions in a variety of ways after students have selected a general research issue because they can:

* Help students focus their research by clarifying their thinking about a controversial subject or issue. (Where does the issue stand? What, exactly, is in dispute? What, if anything, do those involved agree on? What are they arguing about?)
* Guide students as they figure out where and how they want to enter a public discussion, debate, or argument.
* Help students understand the concept of kairos, or the appropriate rhetorical moment, and give them tools for analyzing the rhetorical situation(s) to which they will add their voices (and begin their arguments).
* Highlight for students both the assumptions (of the writer) and the values shared by an audience.
* Keep students from arguing at cross purposes.

Here’s a sample worksheet I have used to help students turn their research subject into a topic for an argumentative essay:

**Questions of Fact**

1. What is the issue/problem you are researching?
2. Is there disagreement about whether the issue exists or whether the problem is, in fact, a problem?
3. Why is now an appropriate time for you to address this issue?

**Questions of Definition**

1. What are the key terms used in the discourse surrounding this issue? How are these defined? Is there disagreement over any of these definitions? *(Think about words and phrases such as “global warming,” “reality TV,” “technology,” “performance enhancing drugs,” “racism,” etc.)*
2. Given your audience, which key terms do you think you might have to define and, perhaps, argue for? Why do you think this?

**Questions of Evaluation**

1. What are the positive or negative forces involved in this issue? In other words, what’s good or bad (or some combination) about your subject? Why?
2. What are the ethical implications of this issue?
3. Why/how is this issue one that deserves attention? Why should your audience care about this issue or problem? What’s at stake?

**Questions of Cause and Effect**

1. What do you think are the causes of the issue/problem? Is there disagreement over these causes?
2. What positive consequences is the issue/problem causing now? Is there disagreement over these consequences?
3. What negative consequences is the issue/problem causing now? Is there disagreement over these consequences?
4. What consequences might flow from your proposal?
5. What are the consequences of doing nothing about the issue/problem? How might the consequences get worse as time goes on?

**Questions of Policy**

1. Based on your research, what do others say should be done about this issue/problem?
2. What course of action for addressing the issue/problem do you wish to propose to your audience? Why?

**Exercise 3: Using Toulmin.**

I think it’s important to remember that the Toulmin system is NOT a template for composing arguments. It can, however, work well as an analytical tool—for reading and evaluating arguments and for developing and testing argumentative claims, reasons, warrants, and support. The “Claims, Reasons, and Warrants” worksheet is one example of how you can use Toulmin’s ideas and terminology to help students think about important elements of an argument, especially the unstated assumptions that authors bring to their claims. While I don’t spend a lot of time on the Toulmin system, I have found it useful for helping students:

* analyze arguments (their own, their peers’, or others) by providing them with some vocabulary for thinking and talking about claims, reasons, warrants, backing, grounds, and qualifiers (to use Toulmin’s terms), or thesis statements, authorial and audience assumptions and expectations, and evidence (to use more general terms);
* understand the difference between a claim (a simple assertion) and a thesis (a more nuanced statement/summary of an essay’s central argument and support);
* and think about audience expectations and needs (I link this to the rhetorical appeals: What kinds of support/evidence will help you connect with and, perhaps, persuade, your audience?).

In addition, I have found that the basics of the Toulmin system can help me talk productively with individual students who assume that their feelings or beliefs are universal and thus require no support or justification.

**Exercise 4:**

**Exercise 5:**

**Exercise 6:**