



# Eng301 The Rogerian Argument



# Argument and Conflict

- ▶ As we have seen in recent political campaigns, argument and conflict seem to be inseparable. History shows us the truth of this, yet history also shows the precedent of successful arguments without conflict.
- ▶ Among the key characteristics of effective arguments are the ability to seek out, understand, and present the views of those who disagree with us.
- ▶ This may include the willingness to understand and establish common ground, and the ability to consider and present better solutions or compromise.
- ▶ In doing so we recognize that arguments are not “black or white”, “right or wrong”, “for or against.” In reality arguments are layered, often subtle, and dependent on direct and indirect assumptions.



# Carl Rogers

- ▶ In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century psychotherapist Carl Rogers began to argue for considering communication in terms of avoiding judgement and evaluation. “I would like to propose, as an hypothesis for consideration, that the major barrier to mutual impersonal communication is our very natural tendency to judge, to evaluate, to approve or disapprove, the statement of the other person, or the other group” (76).
- ▶ Rogers believed the ability to listen was central to effective communication, especially in high stakes communication, such as in communicating with a person with a mental disability. However, Rogers saw this as a societal or cultural process rather than one based in illness. He also understood the challenges inherent in trying to avoid or mitigate the above barriers.



# Carl Rogers Continued

- ▶ “The next time you get into an argument with your wife, or your friend, or with a small group of friends, just stop the discussion for a moment and for an experiment, institute this rule. ‘Each person can speak up for himself only after he has first restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately, and to that speaker’s satisfaction’” (77).
- ▶ This may seem like a simple process, but Rogers readily conceded the difficulties: “In the first place it takes courage . . . To carry on psychotherapy in this fashion is to take a very real risk, and that courage is required” (77).
- ▶ “It is just when emotions are strongest that it is most difficult to achieve the frame of reference of the other person or group. Yet it is the time the attitude is most needed, if communication is to be established” (78).



# Rogers and Argument

- ▶ Rogers did not set out to formulate a new model of argument, but contemporary theorists picked up on his ideas and began to model rhetoric around it as a modern means for mitigating the increasing levels of conflict seen in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Consider that Rogers and his contemporaries saw in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the two greatest and deadliest wars in human history, and the beginning of what became the Cold War between the U.S.S.R and the U.S.A.
- ▶ Theorists also recognized that human history is filled with examples of successful application of what Rogers tried to describe: demonstration of others' views and efforts to achieve common goals without conflict.

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# The Rogerian Argument

- ▶ What became the Rogerian Argument depends on four main components:
  - ▶ a summary of others' views
  - ▶ establishment of common ground
  - ▶ a statement of our own position in relation to others' views
  - ▶ and the presentation of alternatives to resolve the conflict or issue that all parties can agree with.
- ▶ You may notice the arrangement of these components does not begin with the statement of our views. If we think back to Rogers' proposed experiment, how would others feel and respond if we began the experiment by stating our views?



# The Rogerian Argument: Arrangement

- ▶ In terms of formal arrangement, we can break down the Rogerian Argument into seven parts:
- ▶ Introduction: Introduce the issue and why we should care, but don't establish our claim—it can be suggested, but not outright stated.
- ▶ Summary of opposing views/counterarguments.
- ▶ Establishment of common ground we share—what contexts are valid for their position? What specifically about their position do we recognize as valid or true? On what do we agree and why?
- ▶ Statement of our position: what is our position in relation to the above?
- ▶ Strengths for our position
- ▶ Possible drawbacks to the other side
  - ▶ Possible drawbacks to our side?

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# Arrangement Continued

- ▶ Resolution: how do we propose to resolve our differences?
  - ▶ This may be a compromise, the presentation of solutions the other parties may not have considered, or the presentation of what we believe are more effective alternatives.
  - ▶ What an effective “Rogerian” resolution is not:
    - ▶ One-sided.
    - ▶ Beneficial to only one party.
    - ▶ A refutation of the faults of others’ proposed resolutions.
    - ▶ A refusal to consider alternative means of resolving the conflict or issue.



# The Rogerian Argument versus the Middle Ground Argument

- ▶ Many people confuse the “Rogerian” argument for what is classified as a “Middle Ground” argument.
- ▶ A Middle Ground argument presents the main positions on an issue (commonly the “two” main sides, which as we have seen is often an oversimplification of an issue), then takes a middle position.
- ▶ The Rogerian Argument in contrast requires us to be on the “other side” in that we are summarizing the views of those who disagree with us and establishing where we agree. We then present our position as the “other side.”
- ▶ Our position might be in the “middle” of many others, but we still need to assert our position as one worth considering by our audience.



# The Rogerian Argument versus the neutral or negotiator argument

- ▶ Another common misconception about the Rogerian Argument is that the arguer must be completely “neutral.” In this version the author presents the main positions, the common ground they share, then a solution those parties can agree on.
- ▶ This results in the author playing negotiator, without taking an active role or position.
- ▶ The Rogerian Argument may include negotiation (such as in the presentation of a compromise) but still requires us to be an active party. Our language may be less aggressive or more “neutral” but we are still asserting the validity of our position and still attempting to persuade others of that validity.



## The Rogerian Argument: Arrangement (again, as a reminder; these will be a paragraph or more each):

- Introduction: Introduce the issue and why we should care, but don't establish our claim—it can be suggested, but not outright stated.
- Summary of opposing views/counterarguments.
- Establishment of common ground we share—what contexts are valid for their position? What specifically about their position do we recognize as valid or true? On what do we agree and why?
- Statement of our position: what is our position in relation to the above?
- Strengths for our position
- Possible drawbacks to the other side
  - Possible drawbacks to our side?
- Resolution: how do we propose to resolve our differences?



# Suggestions if you are struggling with your argument:

- ▶ Consider what you know about the issue and how you feel about it. What exactly do you feel, and what would you be interested in persuading readers to believe? How might you present your position without going negative?
- ▶ Consider what other people, especially those who directly disagree with you, believe about this issue. How do you know, or what leads you to believe, this is how they feel? Can you find evidence to show this is how people actually feel?
- ▶ What common ground do you and others share? Why do you share it? Be specific!
- ▶ What are some of the drawbacks and limitations for the positions of those who disagree with you? For your position? Why are they drawbacks and limitations?
- ▶ What are some of the strengths for the other side? For your side? Why?

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# Suggestions continued

- ▶ What solution could you propose to resolve the issue or problem that you and the your audience might both agree to? Why should your readers agree to it?
- ▶ Lastly: brainstorm on possible stances to take and work on developing your thesis and supporting claims, in order to help you structure the body of your essay.
- ▶ Keep in mind that you must examine other perspectives before stating your position; it is tempting to insert our own arguments into a summary of counter-arguments and statement of common ground. Therefore it may be wise to consider your own position before beginning to write your draft, and to outline counter arguments in contrast to your position.

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# Works Cited

- Rogers, Carl. "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation." *Inventing Arguments Fourth Edition*. Boston: Cengage Learning, 2016. 75-80. Print.