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INTRODUCTION TO ARGUMENTATION AND DEBATE

Argumentation, or the process of forming and communicating claims based on supporting information, is a fundamental aspect of everyday life.

Take a moment to reflect on the various opportunities for argumentation as you go about your daily business: You look at the nutritional information on cereal boxes to determine which is healthiest for breakfast. You go to work or school and debate important ideas with colleagues and friends. You weigh the pros and cons of a working lunch before deciding to take a full lunch break. As the work day winds down, you pull up your social media feed and read argumentative posts on important (and frequently not-so-important) topics. You turn on the TV after you come home and are bombarded by advertisements offering reasons to buy the products.

All of these moments have, at their core, argumentation. Whenever you reach a conclusion about something based on reasons, whenever you challenge another person's reasons or conclusions, whenever you consider the benefits and drawbacks of action, you are engaging in argumentation. As Edward Z. Rowell, a professor of rhetoric, observed back in 1932: "Argument is a part of the real business of living. It serves us in our daily tasks, in our perplexities, in our disputes, in our search for truth, and in the promotion of our interests."¹ You probably agree that argument's role hasn't changed much in the last century.

The prevalence of argumentation in everyday life means you surely have cultivated argumentation and debate skills through the process of living. But one lesson of argumentation and advocacy is that we can always pursue self-improvement and learn more than we currently know. Thus, you can gain a lot by studying theories and concepts of argumentation, especially since many of them are tried and true, having first been identified more than two millennia ago in ancient Greece or Rome. If you have no formal

ARGUMENTATION:

The process of forming and communicating claims advanced by support

experience with argumentation and debate, don't worry, this book is also for you. It is designed to give you practical tools to use in your daily life.

This first chapter justifies the importance of your journey into the world of argumentation and debate. We'll define some key terms—argument, debate, and controversy—and consider the current state of argumentation. We'll then explore the importance of honing your argumentation skills to improve your personal, professional, and public lives. Finally, we'll explore a few aspects relevant to your lived experience of argumentation and debate: audiences, co-arguers, presumption, burdens of proof, and spheres of argument. By the end of this chapter, you should have a working understanding of the nature, value, and situations of argumentation in everyday life.

ARGUMENT, DEBATE, AND CONTROVERSY

ARGUMENT: A claim advanced by support

CONTROVERSY: Prolonged argumentation at the societal level spanning space and time

DEBATE: The exchange of arguments on a topic

In the English language, people often use the word “**argument**” to mean at least three different things: an object, an action, and a controversy. As an *object*, arguments are products that people construct and advance through communication. This is the meaning behind the statement, “I disagree with your argument that Coke is better than Pepsi.” As an *action*, argument may mean an exchange of reasons on a topic among communicants. This meaning is evident, for example, when someone says, “We had a heated argument about which soda [or “pop”] is better.” Finally, sometimes we mean the general **controversy**, or many debates happening all over the place, such as the statement, “Congress’s consideration of a soda tax reinvigorated the argument over sugary beverages in the United States.”

People commonly use all three senses of the word but having multiple meanings for “argument” in this book would create confusion. To avoid this, we will use the word *argument* exclusively to mean the object, or product, of argumentation. Specifically, our starting definition of an argument is a claim advanced by support. When referring to the action-based meaning, we'll use the word **debate**: the exchange of arguments on a topic. And, the word *controversy* will refer to the prolonged argumentation at the societal level spanning space and time.

Here's an example to illustrate how we will distinguish argument and debate:

Me: You should clean the dishes (**claim**)

You: Why?

Me: You should clean the dishes (**claim**) because it's your turn (**support**) (**argument**)

You: I disagree (**claim**) because you are the one who dirtied all the dishes currently in the sink (**support**) (**argument**)

(**debate**)

In later chapters, we'll explore these terms in greater depth but it's important to note that argumentation, debate, and controversy are not reserved to formal settings between two people who have timed segments for their content. The everyday nature of argumentation means that you frequently argue as a student, family member, employee,

consumer, citizen, friend, and a whole host of other roles you occupy. You encounter, evaluate, employ, and engage arguments every day. In many cases, you may not even recognize the presence of arguments because they are so ingrained in your experience; you may instinctively process or disregard the information and move on with your day. And, arguments come in all shapes and sizes: in verbal, audio, and visual formats, in questions and statements, in formal writing and casual conversation.

Additionally, debate is not limited to ceremonial, argumentative occasions but occurs in many forms such as conversation, heated yelling, text messaging, and online posts. Debate also occurs in a hypothetical sense when we produce argumentative writing that imagines the reader holding a counter-perspective and accounts for arguments against our position. All reason-based advocacy, then, uses argumentation and offers the potential for debate.

Despite the frequency of argumentation and debate in everyday life, most people are not formally taught how to argue in an effective, ethical, and eloquent manner. Few K-12 schools teach argumentation as a formal skill akin to reading, writing, and arithmetic. While many colleges and universities require public speaking of all students, courses in argumentation and debate tend to serve smaller populations. And the debating societies that were once breeding grounds of articulate communicators have been eliminated altogether or become so technical that an outside observer would hardly recognize them as contests in argumentation.

Consider your own education in argumentation:

Where and how did you learn to argue? It's possible you learned some argumentation skills in school but you've probably honed them primarily through experience based on trial and error.

When did you learn to argue? Your training in argumentation probably began at a very young age. A toddler who says "no" to a parent's request is not advancing a full argument but is certainly advancing a claim. As you grew older, you learned that you need a reason or two for those claims to get others to agree.

From whom did you learn to argue? If you had an argument coach who taught you these skills, consider yourself a lucky individual. Most of us learn argumentation and debate from observation: how parents or guardians debate with one another, how siblings and friends respond when things don't go their way, how teachers and leaders argue ideas, how the mass media communicate claims, etc.

If most people learn to argue informally through their life experiences that might explain why current argumentation practices are often disappointing. Books such as *The Assault on Reason* by former Vice President Al Gore or *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue* by linguistics scholar Deborah Tannen contend that public discourse in the 21st century has prioritized competition, fearmongering, and personal interests over rational and productive conversation.² Some authors, such as social psychologist Jonathan Haidt in *The Righteous Mind*, take the argument further by claiming that humans are biologically predisposed to non-rational impulses and must exert substantial energy to use rational argumentation.³

The messages that surround you on a daily basis likely illustrate the inadequacy of contemporary argumentation. The mass media and press often pay lip service to the importance of argumentation while relying on polemics and drama that accentuate rather than resolve disagreements. Politics, business, and interpersonal relationships are often no better. In politics, “compromise” is a dirty word while personal attacks, inflexibility, and competition abound. *Saturday Night Live* recognized this prevalent political culture of argumentation in the 2016 presidential campaign when, during a mock debate between Hillary Clinton (Kate McKinnon) and Donald Trump (Alec Baldwin), McKinnon and Baldwin broke characters. They noted that what passes for debate these days is often personal insults yelled at one another, with McKinnon observing that “the whole election has been so mean.”⁴

The situation is not much better on college and university campuses across the United States. Once considered bastions of free thought and expression, campuses today seem happier to avoid contentious disagreement by instituting “free speech zones” or “safe spaces,” reducing or canceling controversial speakers, and conferring legitimacy on all ideas and perspectives. These elements may be important and useful in isolation and in particular circumstances, but they also limit when and where students can engage in open argumentative expression. If everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion, then debating those opinions with reasoned evidence is inappropriate and potentially offensive. If some speakers are denied a voice, then we may not learn how to productively respect all perspectives. And if safe spaces segregate us from those with whom we disagree, then we all remain shackled by our existing and sometimes flawed beliefs. Historian Mark Lilla observed in a *Wall Street Journal* article that historical shifts in social identity have hastened this trend, explaining that “classroom conversations that once might have begun, *I think A, and here is my argument*, now take the form, *Speaking as an X, I am offended that you claim B*. What replaces argument, then, are taboos against unfamiliar ideas and contrary opinions.”⁵

This reality is not helped by the echo chamber of social media, in which the curation of messages on Facebook, Twitter, and other outlets is designed to reinforce our existing beliefs. According to Michael J. Socolow, a professor of journalism, the inability or unwillingness to “properly read a social media feed” means that “some very smart people are helping to spread some very dumb ideas.”⁶ In particular, he noted the lack of support for claims—that is, the lack of a full argument as we’ve defined the term—to be a significant tell for “fake news” and cautioned people against immediately believing what they read, *especially* if it conforms to your existing worldview.

If any of this describes your own experience, please know that it’s not entirely your fault. The inability to argue is cultivated early in life. NoRedInk, an online learning platform widely utilized in U.S. school districts, recently conducted a study of more than 200,000 middle and high school students from all 50 states. More than half of the students couldn’t distinguish a claim from support, couldn’t identify when support fails to advance an argument’s claim, couldn’t spot weak evidence, and couldn’t detect imprecise, misleading language.⁷ NoRedInk founder, Jeff Scheur, credited these results to limited hands-on experience with argumentation, noting that students “need strong modeling. They need practice.”⁸

Although this landscape may seem bleak, Scheur’s statement provides a ray of hope for budding arguers. This book provides exactly the kind of modeling and practice that

can help you cultivate the skillful art of argumentation. The title indicates the book's emphasis on improving the culture of argumentation in everyday life rather than training you for technical debate. While some of the material may seem specialized at first, it's designed to give you adaptable tools for numerous situations. Before starting down this path, though, it's beneficial to more fully consider the value of our journey.

WHY STUDY ARGUMENTATION?

The study of argumentation has a long history, dating as far back as 500 BCE. In ancient Greece, Rome, and China, scholars of the art of rhetoric recognized that people can hone habits of mind and speaking through training and practice. This tradition has endured over time, through the Roman Empire, dark ages, renaissance, industrial revolution, and into the present day. People in all eras understood the need for pursuing reason and truth through argumentation.

But changing times provoke different needs, desires, and pursuits. Has our online, social media environment brought us to a post-argument culture? Is the study of argumentation still relevant in the 21st century? First, reflect on your personal incentive through the Find Your Voice feature on this page. Then, we'll explore at least three broad reasons acquiring argumentation and debate skills should be important to you.

Skills Are Empowering

First, learning skills in argumentation and debate is empowering because you cultivate the tools to find and use your voice. It's often easier to retreat to the safety of our electronic devices than it is to confront challenging topics face-to-face.⁹ The real world, however, demands that we talk honestly and openly with others to cultivate ideas, reach judgments, and take action. When disagreements inevitably arise, argumentation becomes a primary tool for addressing them rather than deluding ourselves that they will go away if we ignore them. Building your argumentation and debate skills, then, can empower you to more effectively advocate your ideas and engage the ideas of others. Research shows that training in argumentation and debate can boost your confidence and improve your speaking and writing.¹⁰ Yes, debate will involve risks and surprises, but this excitement is the very reason debate can have such a profound impact.

FIND YOUR VOICE

STUDYING ARGUMENTATION

Effective arguers emphasize what their audience stands to gain from agreeing with them. You, as *my* audience, should take a moment to reflect on what you might gain from learning the skills taught in this book. What concrete,

personal goals motivate your effort to improve your argumentation skills? Establishing these motivations now and keeping them in your mind might help sustain your learning down the road.

These skills translate directly into leadership. Erika Anderson, author of *Leading So People Will Follow*, argues that passionate leadership relies, in part, on the ability to “make a clear case without being dogmatic.”¹¹ Learning argumentation and debate skills can help foster your own leadership on the controversies that surround you. It’s often the case that our intuition and conviction may underlie and occasionally override our argumentation so these skills are necessary to balance the non-rational and rational sides.

Beyond honing your own ability, argumentation skills empower you to be a more critical audience member. John Dewey, an education philosopher and proponent of strong public argumentation, defined **critical thinking** as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends.”¹² Putting this in our book’s language, Dewey essentially defined critical thinking as active, persistent, and careful consideration of arguments.

CRITICAL THINKING:

Active, persistent, and careful consideration of arguments

Critical thinking requires energy, focus, and time, and it doesn’t stop once you reach a decision; even if you accept an argument as true, critical thinking involves constantly questioning it as you encounter new information.

Of course, if you don’t know what criteria to use in critically evaluating an idea, then you can’t be expected to do so. Luckily, training in argumentation and debate gives you such tools and improves critical thinking.¹³ Empowerment means you can take these skills with you when you encounter arguments in society. Peer pressure, mass mediated messages, political propaganda, and other manners of argumentation exert the most power when we consume rather than critically engage them. The more you stop and reflect on these messages, the more you’ll weaken their hold over your mind. You must often decide for yourself where you stand on important topics and argumentation skills give you the autonomy to do so and help you evaluate how well arguers use information to advance their own agendas.

Skills Are Productive

Second, learning skills in argumentation and debate is productive insofar as the skills help individuals and communities make better decisions and achieve their goals. When people understand how arguments work, they can more quickly and successfully weigh evidence to reach a conclusion. If we want others to make reasoned decisions, then we ought to train ourselves in what counts as reasoned decision-making.

Argumentation and debate skills are also a productive part of societal change. The example of 1960s civil rights leader Malcolm X is instructive. Even though he justified “any means necessary” in bringing about civil rights, it’s telling that he *chose* debate as his preferred means of activism.¹⁴ He believed debate was a powerful method of revealing a situation’s truth and of fostering change. His efforts, along with the argumentation efforts of other advocates for civil rights in the 1960s, are testament to the productive power of argumentation and debate.

The ability to argue in a productive manner is also a desirable trait in any employee, romantic partner, or friend. In the workforce, for example, the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) noted that “more than nine in ten employers (91 percent) say they value [critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills] more than a potential employee’s undergraduate major.”¹⁵ There are a few reasons why employers might prefer the mastery of these skills rather than of a subject matter. First, they make

you more self-sufficient, not relying on your boss or colleague to hold your hand through every obstacle or anxiety. Second, they promote the *process* rather than *content* of tackling challenging topics. Many employers will provide training for important job-based skills, but it is harder to teach employees so-called “soft skills” (e.g., how to communicate ideas, think critically, or argue cogent arguments).¹⁶ Third, these skills make you a more pleasant and productive group member, open to using the available information rather than being aggressively inflexible. Ultimately, argumentation skills help you better manage your personal and professional lives where you spend most of your time and energy each day.

Skills Are Democratic

Third, learning skills in argumentation and debate is democratic by helping you meet your responsibility to public life. Because argumentation involves choice—of whether and what to communicate—it necessarily engages ethics and community values (see Chapter 3). Training in argumentation can make you more sensitive to the interests and viewpoints of different audiences, enabling you to appropriately adapt your messages, consider multiple perspectives, and work through competing ideas while valuing everyone’s voice. This might be why the AAC&U report observed that these skills help “prepare graduates to live responsibly in an increasingly diverse democracy and in an interconnected global community.”¹⁷

The democratic virtue exists regardless of the argumentation’s outcome. In the very process of debating others, you communicate a lot about what you personally value, how you understand your role, and what worth you afford them. For instance, a simple interruption of a co-arguer conveys that stating your own ideas is more important than listening. You may recall the eye roll seen ‘round the world, delivered by CNN host Anderson Cooper in May 2017 during a televised interview with Kellyanne Conway, one of President Trump’s counselors. It became a viral sensation in animated GIF and meme formats and sparked a wave of discussion about the virtue or vice of rolling one’s eyes. Regardless of your own stance on the controversy, Conway felt it belittled her ideas and her worth as a person.¹⁸ Cultivating skills in argumentation and debate makes you more aware of these reactions and promotes accountability when you slip up.

The above reasons all underscore that argumentation occurs with specific people and in specific situations. Learning the skills of argumentation and debate, then, requires you to recognize how contextual factors might guide and shape your involvement. We’ll first consider audiences and co-arguers before turning to three general spheres, or contexts, of argumentation.

AUDIENCES AND CO-ARGUERS

You may have noticed that our definition of debate—“the exchange of arguments on a topic”—doesn’t specify *who* is debating. This doesn’t mean that the people involved in the argumentation don’t matter. On the contrary, there is always an audience for argumentation. Even U.S. founders such as Alexander Hamilton, whom we credit with writing philosophical statements that have stood the test of time, wrote their material “in the midst of controversy” with a desire to “convince people through appeals to their reason.”¹⁹

FIND YOUR VOICE

AUDIENCES AND CO-ARGUERS

Take a moment to reflect on the debates you have in a typical day. With whom do you usually debate? Are those co-arguers also the audience members? If not, for whom do you usually debate? You probably don't have

"typical" audiences and co-arguers but rather encounter many different debate relationships throughout each day. The more skilled you become, the easier it is to recognize and adapt to your various audiences.

AUDIENCE: The people to whom arguers speak and from whom arguers seek assent

CO-ARGUER: The people with whom arguers exchange arguments

PRESUMPTION: The expected outcome of a proposition absent a debate

Rather, the definition's vagueness allows room for a variety of audiences and co-arguers. By **audience**, we mean the people who we want to agree with our arguments. **Co-arguers**, on the other hand, are those with whom we debate, or exchange arguments. They are the people whose arguments we must address and surmount to earn the audience's assent.

Consider the various combinations of audiences and co-arguers. One common scenario is for the audience to comprise different people than co-arguers, as represented in scenarios such as political candidate debates. It's likely that you participate in debates of this nature in the classroom, workplace, or on social media platforms. Often, however, the audience for your arguments *is* your co-arguer, such as when exchanging text messages or emails to resolve an interpersonal conflict. Sometimes a person who starts as an audience member may become a co-arguer, for instance if someone challenges a statement that you didn't intend to be controversial. Sometimes your audience and co-arguers are imaginary rather than actual, such as when producing a written document that argues your ideas while addressing counter-arguments. And, sometimes you alone may be the arguer, co-arguer, and audience, such as when you generate a pro-con list for yourself or write an argumentative message to someone that you never send.

Once you've determined your audience, you should then consider two questions that help you understand your argumentation in relation to that audience. These questions apply to any advocacy situation, although they tend to be more useful for formal argumentation occasions (e.g., a presentation for your boss) as opposed to informal ones (e.g., a debate among friends at 2 a.m. about which of the four houses at Hogwarts is best).

The first question you should ask is: Where does **presumption** lie in the debate? To presume something is to expect it based on probability. Chaim Perelman, a rhetoric and argumentation scholar, explained presumption as "what normally happens and . . . what can be reasonably counted upon."²⁰ Presumption refers to the expected outcome of a proposition absent a debate. Rhetorical scholar Richard Whately explained that presumption "must stand good till some sufficient reason is adduced against it."²¹ For instance, presumption in our Hogwarts debate likely favors Gryffindor; it's what most people would want absent a debate. Presumption will always lean toward one side of a debate, but it may change as you change your audience or as a controversy develops. For instance, in many parts of Europe presumption still favors smoking in public spaces. This used to be the case in the United States as well, but that presumption has flipped since the early 2000s.

Presumption has a strong impact on the debates we have. For debates in the courtroom, for instance, jurists are told that presumption favors the defense; the accused is innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. For debates about action, presumption often favors the *status quo*, or the current state of affairs in the “present system”; as change-averse people, we assume no action necessary unless we are convinced otherwise. As you can imagine, however, presumption will often depend on the audience and co-arguers. When advocating student loan forgiveness before students, presumption will likely favor the policy whereas advocating it before college administrators will likely favor the *status quo* or stricter requirements for loan forgiveness.

Presumption helps you answer a second important question: What is my **burden of proof** in the debate? The burden of proof refers to an arguer’s responsibility to sufficiently demonstrate a claim. All arguers face a burden of proof but what it means to “sufficiently demonstrate” a claim will depend on the situation, presumption, and the audience(s) and co-arguer(s). For instance, the burden of proof is greater when arguing *against* presumption than it is when arguing *for* presumption. Additionally, the burden of proof is usually greater for arguers who have less power than the audience (e.g., a student trying to convince a professor of something).

We’ll spend more time with these concepts in later chapters, but they are important terms to introduce now because they often guide the very framework of a debate. Given the diversity of scenarios for debate, understanding audiences, co-arguers, presumption, and burden of proof can be crucial to your participation and effective arguers should spend time reflecting on these elements. You should also recognize how these factors exist within particular spheres of argumentation.

BURDEN OF PROOF:

An arguer’s responsibility to demonstrate a sufficient case on the proposition

SPHERES OF ARGUMENT

There are virtually limitless circumstances for argumentation and debate but this doesn’t mean that the strategies, tactics, and procedures are different for all of them. Rather, there are patterns to argumentation depending on the situation and participants. You could probably piece together some patterns based on your own experience: argumentation at home over the dinner table likely follows a consistent pattern that differs from the pattern at a club meeting or the pattern in Tweets or the pattern for papers you write for class. And if you’re anything like my students, you probably feel like the patterns for argumentation in one subject (say, biology) completely differ from those in another (say, history).

These differences point to the concept of **spheres of argument**, or metaphoric spaces where argumentation occurs. G. Thomas Goodnight described argument spheres as “branches of activity—the grounds upon which arguments are built and the authorities to which arguers appeal.”²²

Such spheres are not physical locations, such as the house or the store, but figurative arenas that are activated when groups of people use specific argumentation norms. Consider the parallel to a church: Most faith traditions argue that a church exists not in a physical structure but in the community of people who assemble and behave in a particular religious manner (prayer, singing, etc.). Similarly, an argument sphere exists when a group of people assemble and behave in a particular argumentative manner. This means that an argument sphere can emerge anywhere, including cyberspace.

ARGUMENT SPHERE:

a metaphoric realm of argumentation characterized by predictable patterns

Three broad spheres—personal, technical, and public—usefully explain different patterns of argumentation. We’ll consider each kind of sphere before exploring an Everyday Life Example displaying how spheres shape argumentation and debate.

Personal Spheres

PERSONAL SPHERE: A realm characterized by informal argumentation of limited scope among individuals

If you have ever debated a family member about who gets the last cookie in the box or who has to complete a chore, you’ve enacted argumentation in a **personal sphere**. Personal spheres involve informal argumentative exchanges in which the participants largely determine their own procedures and guidelines. Because most personal spheres don’t specify such guidelines (e.g., what kind of evidence is appropriate; who gets to speak for how long and when; how debate is resolved and concluded), participants often need to make up the rules as they go and adapt as appropriate. Presumption will vary in these debates but the burden of proof tends to be the lowest in personal spheres.

Beyond the informal nature of this realm, personal spheres are characterized by consequences that don’t extend much, if at all, beyond the individuals engaged in the debate. That is, the resolution of the debate is of personal importance. Debates about topics such as who gets to hold the remote control or what to eat for dinner are largely consequential for only those participating in the debate (and a few others who may be affected by its outcome). Ultimately, personal spheres exist whenever we debate topics related to our lives and the lives of our family and friends.

Consider the decision of whether to become vegetarian. A personal sphere debate involving you and your family members might discuss some of the following topics: What is the financial cost to going vegetarian? How easy is it to find delicious and nutritious meatless food? What does your religion say about meat-eating? How will vegetarianism impact your general health and levels of energy throughout the day? These questions are of strong consequence to your own life but the significance largely stops there. You may also ask the broader societal impact of meat eating on the environment or on the animals themselves but personal sphere argumentation tends to focus more on how the outcome impacts you directly. As for procedures, there are not very strong guidelines for when, where, or how you should argue the answers to these questions.

Technical Spheres

TECHNICAL SPHERE: A realm characterized by formal argumentation within a specialized community

If you have ever written a paper for a class or a memo for a job that required you to use a particular format, you’ve enacted **technical sphere** argumentation. Technical spheres tend to be rule-driven and specialized, using logical forms and vocabulary appropriate to each arena. Most of the time, technical sphere argumentation is governed by institutional structures or groups who enforce those guidelines.

For instance, creating a resume is an argument—it offers evidence for your “profile” claim—that should be adapted to the technical sphere of the (kind of) workplace to which you’re applying. Even if the format looks slightly different from one resume to the next, you can probably predict that there will be supporting information about a person’s education, work experience, and skills. Resumes that violate these guidelines in egregious ways tend to be discounted. Of course, there are many technical spheres that may require different things on a resume—applying for a job in the education field requires different kinds of information and arguments than applying for a job in art or science. To outside observers, these rules may seem cumbersome or confusing but those who are part of the

technical sphere often recognize how these conventions ensure consistency and quality. This explains why the papers you write for different classes follow different rules; each field of study comprises a different technical sphere following a different argumentation pattern.

Technical spheres tend to involve experts whose arguments are relevant to a specific knowledge community. The consequences of and audience for technical sphere argumentation extend beyond those involved in the debate but are limited to the community in which the debate occurs. For instance, a company's Board of Directors may debate a budgeting decision that impacts the company's employees but matters very minimally for the public at large. Similarly, a person's resume may get forwarded up the ladder but the outcome of the debate over the person's credentials is limited to the company and applicants.

Let's revisit the decision of eating meat. Dieticians comprise a technical sphere debating ideas that differ substantially from personal sphere debates on this topic. For instance, dieticians have pursued whether meat eating correlates to risk of various forms of cancer.²³ Arguments on this topic address specialized subjects such as polymorphism in enzymes (FADS2) and rely on strict research methods such as experimental or lab design to isolate factors. The goal is for other members of this technical community to build on and utilize the research with the eventual hope of finding a truth to share with the public at large.

The technical sphere of dieticians differs from the technical sphere of philosophers. In 2015, for example, a debate occurred in the pages of the *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* about whether humans should grant animals "moral status," thus rendering meat eating unethical.²⁴ This argumentation relied not on experimental design and isolating causal relationships but rather on the logical sequence from premise to conclusion, drawing value judgments based on the definition of terms and the sentient nature of animals. Here, again, the argumentation addressed a specific community and used the particular argumentative norms appropriate to that community.

Outside of scholarly research, there are other technical spheres that debate the topic of meat eating: restaurant owners discussing whether the sale of meat products makes sense for their company mission and profits; animal welfare organizations strategizing for how to best raise awareness and generate action; religious institutions offering justifications for restrictions they place on eating meat. In each case, resolving the debate may be important to society at large but it represents technical sphere argumentation because it is focused primarily on the community to which the arguers belong and it utilizes the specialized guidelines and norms of that community.

Public Spheres

If you have ever commented on a news article through social media or debated the consequences of a national policy proposal with a friend, you've enacted **public sphere** argumentation. In a public sphere, people transcend their status as private individuals to consider their role as engaged members of society, often in the role of citizen. Jürgen Habermas, a prominent theorist of public spheres, explains that "a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body."²⁵

Public sphere argumentation often strives to generate public opinions about topics of general concern that, ultimately, produce communal knowledge and societal change. The consequence of public sphere argumentation, then, exceeds that of both personal and technical spheres and tends to involve more diverse considerations.

PUBLIC SPHERE:

A realm characterized by community-oriented argumentation of societal scope

Public spheres are more formal than personal spheres but less specialized than technical ones. For instance, a family friend's struggle with discrimination may be enough of a basis for arguing in a personal sphere the nature of racism today but it may not justify your arguments in a public sphere for how the nation should address civil rights. At the same time, public sphere debate often requires translation from technical spheres, such as lawyers explaining the parameters of current civil rights laws, to a general audience.

Although argumentation norms may differ from one public sphere to the next, public spheres often uphold a few core argumentation principles. First, public sphere argumentation frequently promotes a *common good* rather than personal interests. Arguers certainly pursue their own benefit but public spheres tend to prioritize thinking beyond oneself to consider the public consequence of an argument. Because public spheres involve people outside your personal or professional network, there is a higher likelihood of encountering people who disagree with your ideas or have different values than you. Board members of a company may make technical decisions based on profit motive behind closed doors, for instance, but once they go public with their ideas they must justify them to people who care very little about the company's profits. Thus, finding common ground and shared values becomes part of the argumentation process.

Beyond the common good, public spheres often prioritize *equality of access*. In an ideal society, every person would participate in debates about topics of common concern. This is in stark contrast to technical spheres, which have gatekeepers and strict guidelines for entry, and personal spheres, which draw conversational boundaries based on access, familiarity, and trust. Proponents of social media often appeal to this equalizing factor in celebrating the virtues of these platforms; everybody has the power to share their ideas and participate in discussion. Although public spheres often fall short of the ideal insofar as exclusions exist based on various traits such as language, income, biological sex, race, ability, or education,²⁶ arguers in a public sphere often strive to promote an inclusive environment that affords everyone the opportunity to participate.

Third, public spheres tend to promote *freedom of speech*. Especially in the United States, censorship, demagoguery, and propaganda violate democratic principles and arguers often encourage freedom of speech and thought because they believe that the best ideas will prevail through open debate. Freedom of speech also means that all controversies are worth discussing, especially those they make us uncomfortable. Labeling some topics such as domestic violence or mental illness as "private" concerns best dealt with in personal spheres undermines the power of public sphere argumentation to tackle complex problems that affect society.

Returning to our example of meat eating, public sphere debates look quite different than both personal and technical sphere debates. Public spheres address concerns about cost, cancer, and conscience but there are more diverse (societal) considerations at play, including environmental impact, public health, and bullying.²⁷ Additionally, debates occur across many platforms such as newspapers, websites, social media, popular culture programming on television and radio, and even songs. For instance, the band Goldfinger's 2002 song "Open Your Eyes" addressed numerous public sphere concerns, including the meat industry's manipulation of people, the environmental and moral impact of meat eating, and the profit motive of factory farms.²⁸ This song represents public sphere argumentation because it addresses the general public rather than a personal or specialized community and it focuses on the common good by transcending concerns from personal or technical spheres.

BUILD YOUR SKILL

SPHERES OF ARGUMENT

Similar to our meat-eating example, consider for the controversies below how the topics and patterns of argumentation might be similar and different across the three spheres:

- A. Rising student loan debt in the United States
- B. Opioid abuse among American youth
- C. Mass murder of civilians in Syria
- D. The discriminatory nature of the Washington Redskins name

Interaction of Spheres

Table 1.1 summarizes the personal, technical, and public spheres of argument. They often exist independently but they can also conflict with or complement one another. The following are some examples of this interaction:

- Students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida took their technical sphere debates about gun control into the public sphere following a mass shooting in February 2018 that killed 17 community members. Specifically, after students had debated gun control in class and as part of the debate team the prior semester, they used their knowledge to create a social movement organization and spark a national conversation on the topic. The *Miami Herald* noted that the students “have been praised for their composure and well-articulated arguments,” thanks in large part to their training in argumentation and debate.²⁹
- Concerns about climate change started in a technical sphere when scientists measured atmospheric carbon dioxide and discussed concerns about the “greenhouse effect.”³⁰ By publishing reports and working with various government institutions, the controversy entered the public sphere. Debates over climate change continue to this day despite decades of technical sphere evidence.
- Public sphere debates about immigration became a personal sphere struggle in 2017 for the Beristains of South Bend, Indiana, when Roberto Beristain was detained and eventually deported for illegally entering the United States 15 years earlier. His wife, who voted for President Trump, believed that the administration would only deport “bad hombres” rather than “get rid of all the people.”³¹ Trump’s immigration policy addressing the common good of the national public sphere seemed unrelated to the private lives of the Beristains until they were personally affected.

TABLE 1.1 ■ Spheres of Argument

Sphere	Mode of Argumentation	Scope of Immediate Consequence
Personal	Informal	The participants in the debate
Technical	Formal & Specialized	The particular knowledge community
Public	Open & Democratic	The “public” community or society at large

The above cases illustrate how debates in one sphere may bleed into or implicate others. The nature of these interactions can tell us a lot about the evolution and, in some cases, the resolution of a controversy because we are able to chart how they develop across time and space. This knowledge underscores the different kinds of evidence and norms that help ideas gain or lose favor with particular audiences.

The interactions can also tell us about the health of the various spheres. When Goodnight outlined the spheres in the 1980s, he expressed concern that “the public sphere is being steadily eroded by the elevation of the personal and technical groundings of argument.”³² Other scholars were less concerned about the rise of technical elites. In response, for instance, Charles Arthur Willard argued that public controversies require expertise from technical spheres while noting that “every expert’s span of authority is narrower than most public problems,” requiring “an overlap of specialized discourses.”³³ Various experts should guide public discussion for Willard because average citizens lack knowledge on most topics. John Dewey and journalist Walter Lippmann also famously debated in the 1920s this conflict between public and technical spheres. Questioning whether or not “the American people” can be trusted to govern, *The Phantom Public* by Lippmann argued that experts should guide society while Dewey’s *The Public and its Problems* prioritized education of average citizens to ensure self-rule.³⁴

To further explore this interaction between spheres, we’ll consider a post from *Scary Mommy* by Maria Guido addressing the vaccine controversy in the United States. This is a useful Everyday Life Example because a parent’s choice to vaccinate children relates to all three spheres and because the post represents everyday argumentation through online forums. *Scary Mommy* is a website that provides pregnancy and parenting advice, describing itself as “a massive vibrant community of millions of parents, brought together by a common theme: Parenting doesn’t have to be perfect.”³⁵

FIND YOUR VOICE

PUBLIC VS. TECHNICAL SPHERES

Consider your view on whether the people can and should govern. What role should public opinion play in determining solutions to public problems?

What role should experts play? When the two disagree, how should individuals, organizations, and politicians resolve the conflict?

As you read Guido's post, consider how the personal, technical, and public spheres are each represented: According to Guido, what questions and concerns motivate argumentation in each sphere? Which sphere's argumentation does Guido prioritize as most important to the controversy? Finally, consider which sphere *you* think should take priority and why?

Identifying the arguments from the different spheres helps arguers better recognize the competing concerns that animate any given controversy, especially since we often need to manage considerations from all three spheres. Guido began with the public sphere—bill SB277 in California—but then included the personal, scientific, and public concerns motivating the proposed law. Box 1.1 illustrates this complexity, offering one example of how public controversies often have origins in other spheres.

Everyday Life Example 1.1

Maria Guido, "California Set to Pass One of the Toughest Mandatory Vaccine Laws in US," *Scary Mommy* (blog), June 25, 2015.³⁶

1 Schoolchildren in California may be required to be vaccinated unless there is a medical reason not to
2 do so, thanks to a law that cleared another hurdle today, as the State Assembly approved it by a vote
3 of 46–30.

4 Bill SB277 would change the law so that only parents of children with medical reasons to refuse
5 vaccinations will be allowed to opt out of vaccines for their kids before they enter daycare or the
6 school system. As it stands now, religious and personal beliefs can exempt students.

7 The bill was crafted in response to a large Measles outbreak that originated at Disneyland in
8 December 2014. There is a disproportionate amount of unvaccinated children in southern California,
9 thanks in part to the "Personal Belief Exemption" that allows parents to opt out of vaccines easily.
10 Hopefully not any more.

11 From *NPR*: "If it passes out of the Legislature, the bill would then move to the desk of Gov. Jerry
12 Brown. The governor hasn't indicated whether he'll sign the bill, but a spokesman said via email that
13 Brown 'believes that vaccinations are profoundly important and a major public health benefit and any
14 bill that reaches his desk will be closely considered.'" In other words: this bill is passing.

15 If signed into law, California will be the biggest state with such a mandate in place. There are only
16 two other states *in the country* that don't allow for philosophical or religious exemptions to vaccines:
17 Mississippi and West Virginia. *Vox* has a comprehensive graphic of school vaccine exemptions by
18 state. 19 states still allow philosophical exemptions. 48 states allow religious exemptions. Well, 47
19 when this law passes.

20 When it comes to personal belief exemptions, there is no medical basis for the vaccine paranoia. The
21 vaccine-autism link has time and time again been proven non-existent. There is no scientific evidence
22 that backs refusing or delaying vaccines.

23 Vaccines are essentially the biggest medical miracle of the 20th century. Measles was considered
24 eliminated in 2000, because the U.S. has a highly effective vaccination program and a strong public
25 health system for detecting and responding to cases and outbreaks. It came back in full force when
26 parents got wrapped up in the hysteria—and started believing celebrities instead of scientists.

27 Choosing whether or not to vaccinate your child is not a personal choice—it's a public health issue.
28 Let's hope California will serve as an example and other states without strict vaccine laws in place
29 will follow suit.

Source: Maria Guido, "California Set to Pass One of the Toughest Mandatory Vaccine Laws in US," *Scary Mommy* (blog), June 25, 2015, <http://www.scarymommy.com/california-set-to-pass-one-of-the-toughest-mandatory-vaccine-laws-in-us>.

BOX 1.1: SPHERES AND THE VACCINE CONTROVERSY

The major concerns raised in Guido's post correlated to the spheres:

- **Personal Sphere:** Religious and personal belief exemptions (lines 6, 9-10); anti-vaccine hysteria promoted by celebrities rather than scientists (lines 25-26)
- **Technical Sphere:** Bill SB277 cleared hurdle following California State Assembly vote (lines 2-3); Bill SB277 moves to Governor's desk for signature (lines 11-12); no scientific evidence that vaccines are harmful or linked to autism (lines 20-22); vaccines are "medical miracle" (lines 23-25)
- **Public Sphere:** Law in response to Disneyland measles outbreak (lines 7-8); Governor's belief that vaccinations are "a major public health benefit" (line 13); laws regulating vaccines across the country (lines 15-19); public health responsibility (lines 27-29)

Mapping the spheres also helps arguers better distinguish information from opinion and better weigh conflicting values among the spheres. Acknowledging a wider array of concerns is especially important when public and technical arguments challenge our established personal beliefs. In this case, Guido promoted the arguments from technical spheres (science) and public spheres (responsibility to public health) above personal spheres (hysteria), culminating in the forceful claim that "choosing whether or not to vaccinate your child is not a personal choice—it's a public health issue." Ultimately, being able to recognize and resolve these conflicts is part of effective argumentation.

Summary

This chapter has demonstrated how learning argumentation and debate skills will benefit your personal growth, professional influence, and public engagement insofar as the skills are empowering, productive, and democratic. You should now have a stronger sense of the world of argumentation in two ways: (1) by being able to define key terms such as

argument, debate, controversy, presumption, and burden of proof; and (2) by understanding contextual considerations as they relate to co-arguers, audiences, and spheres. The three spheres of argument—personal, technical, and public—are a particularly helpful concept you can use to analyze and engage controversies in everyday life.

Application Exercises

Exploring Technical Spheres in Higher Education:

Look at the assignment sheets for major writing assignments in classes you are or have taken. According to those prompts, what counts as "good" argumentation? What norms must you follow to

engage that technical sphere? How are the norms for argumentation similar to and different from courses in the same department? How are the norms for argumentation similar to and different from courses in different departments?

Engaging Public Sphere Argumentation: Read articles or posts from two different sources (e.g., Townhall.com and Huffingtonpost.com; *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*) discussing the same controversy and answer the following questions:

1. Who is the audience for each article, what presumption are they likely to have, and how does the article attempt to meet its burden of proof in convincing that audience?
2. As examples of public sphere argumentation, do the articles emphasize the common good, equality of access, and freedom of speech? Which qualities do the articles demonstrate in their *enactment* or *performance* of the argumentation?
3. Do the articles summarize arguments from other spheres? If so, what do these arguments tell us about the nature of the controversy and the priorities that audience members should have when attempting to resolve the controversy?

Key Terms

Argumentation 3
Argument 4
Controversy 4
Debate 4
Critical Thinking 8

Audience 10
Co-Arguer 10
Presumption 10
Burden of Proof 11
Argument Spheres 11

Personal Sphere 12
Technical Sphere 12
Public Sphere 13

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