

COM 351: ARGUMENTATION

Winter 2008

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This class meets from 1:00-5:00 pm on the following Saturday afternoons: **January 12, January 26, February 2, February 16** (1:40 pm start on that day), **March 1, March 15, and March 29.**

GENERAL COURSE DESCRIPTION

Whether or not we consciously realize it, we make, read, and hear arguments every day. The premise of this course is that well-educated people should be aware of the argumentative claims that surround them and be able to respond coherently to them. In general, argumentation courses tend to be rather prescriptive--that is, they suggest how people ought to argue rather than how they actually do argue; they set out standards for "good" argument. Because all people do not share these standards, taking this course does not guarantee that you will be able to convince your friends to loan you money--nor will it make you a shoe-in for the presidency. What this course can do for you is to help you learn how to think and speak in a more orderly, thoughtful, and intelligent manner. Key objectives include increasing skill and awareness in understanding and processing arguments; understanding basic principles about claims, evidence, and reasoning; and being able to apply these principles to everyday life experiences and contemporary public issues. This course is required for a major in communication studies, and it also meets General Education "skill" requirements in writing and critical thinking.

REQUIRED TEXT

David Lapakko, Argumentation: Critical Thinking in Action (tentative title), available in the Augsburg College bookstore in photocopied, spiral-bound form. This is a working manuscript of an argumentation text that I started during my sabbatical leave in the spring of 2006. I am eager to give it a second try in a classroom setting (the first was last winter WEC), and I hope you'll provide me with feedback about it. Since it is not an especially lengthy book at this point, I do expect a "close" reading of it. Also, keep in mind that you will need to do some "outside reading" in order to complete various assignments.

ATTENDANCE

Since WEC courses meet only seven times now in the winter term, my expectation is that you won't miss any classes—certainly no more than one. Although there are no formal penalties for attendance, I will consider attendance as a grading criterion. As an absolute minimum expectation, I do want to make it clear that you cannot expect to receive credit for the course if you miss three or more classes, even if you do all of the work. Also, the "lecture" material for this course will generally not be a simple repetition of what is in the text; therefore, if you miss any classes, it is your responsibility to get the notes for them.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS

All late assignments will be penalized to some extent--depending on the assignment, how late the assignment is, and other circumstances. (I consider it more sensible to tailor the penalty to the exact circumstances rather than having an inflexible policy.) In general, late oral assignments will be penalized more severely than written ones, because late speeches tend to throw our entire class schedule out of whack; half-credit for late speeches is a likely consequence.

PLAGIARISM

Please remember that both written and oral assignments can involve issues of plagiarism. Work turned in to fulfill class assignments is to be prepared for this class and only this class, unless you have made explicit arrangements with me and with the instructor of the other class. All work is to be original work. **If you are borrowing the ideas and/or language of someone else in a paper or speech, you need to provide acknowledgment (footnotes, endnotes, and/or textnotes).** Use the following guidelines from the National Observer to assist you in avoiding plagiarism:

“Do not at any time steal paragraphs, sentences, phrases, or even distinctive terms from other publications or research sources. . . . A descriptive phrase or an explanation found in research may aptly represent what you want, but the facts are all you are permitted to use; the language must be entirely your own. Loose paraphrasing or a substitution of synonyms for some of the key words is not sufficient; an entire reworking of an idea in your own language is required.”

Penalties for plagiarism will be based on the circumstances of the situation and can range from a simple point deduction to failing the course.

GRADING POLICY

Your grade will be based on two exams, three argumentative cases, and two papers, all of which are briefly explained below. Your grade will be based on the total number of points you accumulate during the term. Essentially, I will make a "class curve," but I will also take into account (roughly in order of importance):

- (1) percentage of total points;
- (2) the mean and median point totals in the class;
- (3) how the point totals are clustered or distributed--i.e., if there are any "gaps" where it would be appropriate to draw a line;
- (4) college grading guidelines, which state that a 4.0 means achieving “highest standards of excellence” and a 3.0 means achievement “above basic course standards”; and
- (5) any other relevant factors (e.g., attendance, class participation, perceived competence).

Please keep in mind that a "class curve" is not a "normal curve"--I do not assume that there have to be a certain number of any particular grade. But in general, I tend to be fairly generous on the "low end" and somewhat stingy on the "high end"--if you do all of the required work and attend class regularly, you absolutely will not fail; on the other hand, you will have to really earn a 4.0. Finally, please understand that in order to receive credit for the course, you must complete all assignments--you cannot "take a zero" on one or more of them and expect credit.

Regarding incompletes: you cannot “take” an incomplete. An incomplete is something that must be negotiated. In general, I actively discourage incompletes, in part because I don’t think they are in students’ best interests. (Most incompletes I have given over the years have never been made up, despite the best intentions.) Incompletes will only be given if there are extenuating circumstances, and you should see me ASAP if such circumstances arise.

GRADED ACTIVITIES (details subject to slight modification)

EXAMS (200 points)

The format of these “non-cumulative” exams will be a real hodgepodge--some multiple-choice, some true-false, some matching, some short answer. The exams will carry a weight of 200 points regardless of the number of questions—for example, if there are 120 points worth of questions on the two exams, and you get 102 correct (85 percent), then your exam score for the term will be 170 (85 percent of 200). Additional details will be announced later.

Exam #1 – February 16

This exam will be based on:

- text, chapters 1-4 and chapter 12
- any "in class" material from January 12 - February 2

Exam #2 – March 29

This exam will be based on:

- text, chapters 5-11
- any "in class" material from February 16 – March 15

IMPORTANT NOTE: For each exam, feel free to use both sides of a 4 x 6 note card (or 4 x 6 slip of paper) as an aid--put whatever notes you want on this "cheat sheet."

ARGUMENTATIVE CASES (200 points)

Twice this term I'd like you to construct an extended argument on a contemporary social issue—and to be able to critique another's argument on the same issue as well. Therefore, you will be involved in two pro/con “debates,” one written and one oral. For the written assignment, you'll submit a 6-7 page case in favor of the position for which you've signed up, and then swap cases with your “opponent.” You will then have one week to write a three-page critique of your opponent's argument. For the oral assignment, you'll present a 7-9 minute case in favor of the position for which you've signed up. For the second assignment, you'll make a 7-9 minute case supporting your position, and you will have an additional 3 minutes to critique your "opponent's" case (as well as being critiqued yourself, of course).

- **WRITTEN CASE:** (100 points)
Case supporting a factual claim
Due February 16 (critique of “opponent's case due February 23 by email)
- **ORAL CASE:** (100 points)
Case supporting a policy claim (with oral refutation)
Due March 15

With both of these assignments, the “main case” is worth up to 80 points, and the refutational response is worth up to 20 points—100 points total for each.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS (150 points)

As part of the course, you must submit two quality papers that demonstrate a good grasp of course material. Here is a brief summary of each one (more detailed assignment sheets will be provided):

Paper #1: Analysis of a written essay - due March 1 (50 points)

This 5-7 page paper involves using course concepts to analyze an essay titled "In Defense of a Little Virginity" by an organization called Focus on the Family. (If you want to spend some time pondering the issue of sexually transmitted diseases, this paper is for you!) I will provide a copy of this essay, along with a more detailed assignment sheet, at the first class meeting on January 12.

Paper #2: Argumentation journal - due March 29 (100 points)

This assignment is your opportunity to creatively and intelligently apply concepts in this course to the world-at-large. It should be a collection of your thoughts about the course as they relate to argumentative messages which you hear or read. Those of you who have a low tolerance for ambiguity will not like this assignment, because it doesn't specifically tell you what you must do. But here are some general guidelines and requirements:

- 1. It should be 10-12 pages typewritten--all else being equal, 12 is better than 10. (Please don't put your paper into one of those fancy plastic covers--they do look nice, but it's harder for me to stay on a particular page. Just **staple** the sheets of paper together, with a title page on the front and a blank page at the end. Also, please number the pages for ease of reference.)
- 2. It should be neat, correct, and written in complete sentences. If there are more than 5 different words misspelled, you will automatically lose 10 points, so do proofread your work. (I'm trying to move toward a "zero tolerance" policy with respect to spelling errors!)
- 3. It should be reasonably **comprehensive**--that is, it should deal with a relatively wide range on concepts and issues.
- 4. It need not be, and probably should not be, one continuous paper. That is, you are encouraged to break it up into little vignettes, in the spirit of a journal. Some sections may take only a paragraph, while others may take two or three pages.
- 5. It should demonstrate an awareness of argumentation that is not possessed, say, by a person walking in off the street. One should be able to read this journal and say, "This person has taken an academic course in argumentation." Try to go beyond what would be obvious to most people. Occasionally, the reader ought to be able to say, "Gee--I never thought of it quite like that."
- 6. Its primary emphasis should be on **analysis** and **evaluation**, not merely description. In other words, it should be more than a glorified "book report." Offer insights. Be thought-provoking. Be a critic. Be a judge. Take a stand.
- 7. It should demonstrate that you can intelligently apply course concepts to the argumentative messages you discuss. **This is important.** In some ways, consider this journal as another kind of "exam" in which you want to demonstrate your competence in working with course concepts.
- 8. If you must describe a particular argumentative situation before getting into the "meat" of the issue, please do so concisely--do not "pad" the journal with long-winded descriptions. If you are reacting to something in print, consider putting it in an appendix rather than in the actual paper.

Now, what types of things could you write about in this journal? Well, the possibilities are endless. Most any application of course material is potentially fair game. But, here are a few possibilities--remember, they are by no means exhaustive:

- Discuss a particular argumentative message in terms of the **evidence** which is used, basing your evaluation on standard tests for strong evidence.

- Analyze arguments you hear or read with elements of the **Toulmin model** in mind.
- Find examples of **fallacies** in reasoning which you encounter, identifying and discussing them.
- Do a critical analysis of arguments raised in the current Congressional session or any session of the Minnesota state legislature.
- Take the concept of "**stock issues**" and apply these stock issues to some specific social issue.
- Browse through a **formal logic text** in the library and compare it to reading material and concepts in this course.
- Discuss the **ethics** of certain argumentative messages which you encounter, stipulating what your personal ethical standards are when it comes to presenting arguments.
- Analyze/evaluate the **language** employed in a specific argumentative message.
- Take a current social issue and discuss it in terms of factual claims, value claims, and policy claims. Discuss what types of claims are at the crux of the issue.
- Examine **assumptions** which people make when they try to persuade others. What basic premises do they seem to be operating from? In your view, are they sound premises?
- Analyze and evaluate a short **letter to the editor** in the newspaper or a weekly news magazine. Or analyze an **advertisement** with course concepts in mind.
- Make specific comments about the speeches/cases presented in class.
- Do more "research" on a particular topic connected to argument—for example, read Toulmin's The Uses of Argument in the original, or a book on communication ethics that deals in part with argument, or a journal article/study that deals with the use of evidence in argument. Explain what this outside resource has to offer, and explain its potential relevance or application to the study of argument.
- **Take issue** with any material that is presented in lecture or in the text--that is, challenge your instructor and/or the draft of his textbook in some way.
- **Compare your text** for this course to other argumentation texts that have been published, making note of comparative strengths and weaknesses. (Many can be found on the shelves of the Augsburg library.) And, should you be interested, offer your instructor some advice on what he could or should add to his working manuscript to make his text more authoritative and/or complete.

In general, be imaginative. Be stimulating. Be provocative. Apply course concepts correctly. Try to provide insights that go beyond what is self-evident. **Do not procrastinate.** (However, you may want to wait a while before starting, since you'll have more material and course concepts to work from.) And do see me if you are having problems along the way.

FINAL NOTES AND PLEAS

- 1. Please read all assignment sheets carefully--they are meant to be helpful, and far too often, people simply don't follow instructions. Of course, don't feel bashful about asking questions, but many of your questions may well be answered simply by looking at the assignment sheets.
- 2. I have tried to provide you with as much time as possible to complete the assignments. But this also means that you have more time to procrastinate. Try to fight that temptation--life will be more enjoyable if you do.
- 3. On each of the exam dates, there is also another assignment due. Please keep in mind that we only meet seven times, so this sort of situation is difficult to avoid. Proper time management on your part will prevent any problems.
- 4. Please see me if I can be of help--I will assume that your life (academic and otherwise) is going all right unless I hear from you. And, if you have concerns or complaints, it is your responsibility, I believe, to see me. I really want you to be a "happy camper," but every so often this isn't the case. Just remember that I cannot read your mind.