

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

HOW TO ARGUE WITH ANYONE

But First, The Basics

Expand The Boundaries Of Your Thinking Through Resolving Conflicts Based On Reason And Empathy — Chapter One. About a 16-minute read.

How do you know if you've had a good argument?

Is it when the other person changes their opinion? Is it when you walk away even more confident in your own beliefs than before?

The reality of a good argument is, for better or worse, much more complicated.

How many times have you walked away from an argument feeling pleased that the other person agreed with you – only to have the exact same argument bubble up again a few days later? How often have you apologized or said you were wrong just to end an argument – even if you didn't believe it? How many times have you struggled to get your point across because the other person just seemed to be better at arguing? And how many times have you wanted to bang your head against the wall because the person you were trying to argue with was being so stubborn and unbelievable?

Arguing is important. It can even be fun. But arguing can also be one of the most frustrating things that we do, especially when the other person seems to be just wrong about something but refuses to admit it. Worse, arguing can create grudges and tension that lasts for days or weeks.

Does this mean that we're all doomed to argue endlessly with the people we care about, creating more and more bad feelings? No. There is a better way – a way to argue more effectively while bringing you closer to the people you disagree with, instead of creating bad feelings. That's what this book is about.

Over the course of this book, we'll go through the building blocks of a better argument. Starting with little tricks to improve your logic and expanding to how to deal with irrational conversation partners, we'll look at each aspect of having a better argument. By the end of the book, you'll not only be able to present your opinions more confidently, but you'll also be able to ask better questions and understand the points of value in even the most confusing argument.

The best part is that the strategies in this book work for any argument. You can use the same tactics when arguing with your spouse, friends, coworkers, and even your children. And these strategies work for everyone, whether you enjoy arguing or avoid it like the plague.

I should know – I used to struggle with arguing. My spouse and I didn't argue often, but when we did, it was memorably terrible. We would argue for hours, sometimes not even reaching a resolution after all that time. Then, days or weeks later, the argument would suddenly come back. Arguments with my friends and coworkers were much less tense – because they didn't happen. I preferred nodding along to even the most ridiculous claims instead of arguing, which left me feeling frustrated and unheard.

I made it my mission to learn to argue better. Drawing on my background in psychology and politics, I researched extensively what makes a good argument and how to argue better. Eventually, that research became this book. I know that every strategy works because I've tried it myself.

And it does work. My spouse and I still argue, which I won't claim always goes perfectly. Still, we reach a positive solution every time and agree that we feel closer and more connected after arguing than we did before. Even better, the argument doesn't come back later. Using the same strategies, I can disagree with my friends and coworkers respectfully and constructively instead of avoiding conflict and feeling unheard.

This book will give you a roadmap about how to argue better. It will give you helpful strategies for everything from knowing when to start an argument to using better body

language. It won't, however, make you an expert in arguing overnight. That will take practice. You'll need to decide that this is the time to become a better arguer and you'll need to keep working at it, even when things are difficult and arguments go poorly. But, with the strategies in this book, you'll be able to improve your arguments, bit by bit, until you're having exactly the kinds of arguments you want. These solutions are straightforward, give good results, and, best of all, you can start applying them today.

Are you ready to argue better? Are you ready to see the bigger picture of why arguing matters? Are you ready to walk away from arguments feeling positive instead of regretful? Then let's get started.

But First, The Basics

Have you ever watched a courtroom drama?

The interactions between the lawyers in these dramas are fascinating. They use logic, facts, emotion, and procedure to outline a compelling case that can even, for a moment, make you reconsider whether the defendant is guilty or not. Scenes like "You can't handle the truth!" from *A Few Good Men* stick with us for a long time after we switch off the screen. Both in life and on television, courtrooms are hotbeds for some of the most well-developed, interesting arguments out there. Plus, they always end with a resolution through a verdict.

Of course, these dramatized arguments are very different from those that you or I might have on a day-to-day basis. Real-life arguments are rarely as polished or as convincing. Why do arguments differ so much between different people at different times? What role do arguments play in our daily lives? And why is it important to argue and to argue well?

What Is An Argument?

We've all been there. One moment, you are having a normal conversation. You're chatting easily with your friend, co-worker, or family member. The next moment, things get heated, and opinions start flying – suddenly, it's an argument.

Although arguments are as familiar to most of us as coffee or toast, many people have the wrong idea of what an argument is. Often, people think that an argument is more or less the same as a fight. If people are disagreeing, it's always an argument. Right?

In fact, it's a little more complicated than that. A fight is any disagreement (or heated discussion or brawl). If you are fighting, you and the person you're disagreeing with might just be throwing assertions at each other, such as "You have no idea what you're talking about!" or "You're doing this wrong." Fights are generally about the airing of opinions, while arguments are generally more productive.

Arguments are more nuanced and, when done right, much more productive. Arguments are a societal process of using facts and logic to challenge incorrect opinions*. In an argument, you make statements (also called arguments) that support your opinion, with the goal of finding the truth about the topic you are discussing. Instead of just stating what you believe, you are working together with your conversational partner to find a shared, factual understanding.

In an argument, for instance, you might say, "I understand why you believe that you do more chores around the house. But personally, I believe that we do a fairly equal amount because I always clean the bathroom and the kitchen while you always clean the bedroom and the living room." You may go into an argument with the goal of changing someone's opinion, but a good argument can also lead you to change your own opinions. Arguments don't necessarily involve yelling or annoyance. They can also be friendly, calm, positive discussions.

A good argument draws on two things: data and logical arguments to structure that data*. Data refers to the facts and evidence on which you base your argument. In later chapters, we'll have a closer look at how to gather good data and make sure that it's accurate and relevant.

We'll start here with logic in arguments. There are multiple types of logical structures that you can use to structure your arguments – we'll have a brief look at a few of them here.

Types Of Arguments

The three basic types of logical arguments are deductive, inductive, and abductive.

Deductive arguments start with a main statement or hypothesis, which is then applied to specific situations*. Whether or not your argument makes sense comes down to how accurate your main statement is. For instance, your main statement could be that candies are all delicious. Then, if you find a new piece of candy that you've never eaten before, you'll know before you taste it that it must be delicious.

For a more applicable example, say you're disagreeing with the people you live with about whose turn it is to buy milk. You might make a deductive argument as follows: "We alternate whose turn it is to buy milk. So, since it was my turn last week and I brought home a carton, that means it must be your turn this time."

You can also use an inductive argument. Inductive arguments start with observations or statistics which are used to draw a conclusion*. They can be very accurate if you have enough data, or very flawed if your argument is based on limited data. For instance, you might reach into a bag of candies and pull out red candies three times in a row. From that, you might deduce that all the candies in the bag are red. This could be true: maybe all the candies are red. But it could also be that there were only three red candies in the bag and all the rest are other colors.

Going back to the milk discussion, you might choose an inductive instead of a deductive argument. You could say, "You forgot to buy milk two weeks ago and last month when it was your turn. So, if someone forgot to buy milk this time, it must have been you."

There are also abductive arguments. In abductive reasoning, you make an educated guess of the most likely explanation for something based on the data you have available*. This kind of argument is the least logical, because it's based on some guesswork, but can still be accurate. A jury trying to find out if a suspect is guilty of robbery usually uses abductive reasoning to examine whatever evidence they have to reach a conclusion.

In the milk situation, you might use abductive reasoning to say, "there's no milk in the fridge, so you must have forgotten to buy it."

Beyond the three basic types of arguments, there are a few more possibilities for argument structures that are more nuanced. Stephen Toulmin developed the Toulmin style of arguments back in the 1950s. His arguments have several factors: claim, grounds, warrant, qualifier, rebuttal, and backing*. This may sound complex, but it actually draws heavily on both inductive and deductive arguments.

In Toulmin's arguments, you begin with a claim, similar to your main statement in deductive reasoning. You then find the grounds, evidence, or data to support your claim. Next, you link them with a warrant. For instance, you might claim that China has the best divers in the world. To back this up, you might note the grounds that the Chinese team has won the highest percentage of Olympic medals*. Then you'll connect them with a warrant, which may be that winning Olympic medals points to skill in any sport. Qualifiers, rebuttals, and backing are additional ways to support your argument by making it specific, responding to critiques, and supplying additional evidence.

A rebuttal argument may be viewed as a type of argument all on its own, in which your argument is focused on disproving and contradicting your conversation partner*.

In the case of the milk debate, you might say: "You are the one who forgot to buy the milk. There's no milk in the fridge, and I bought the milk last time. So, this time it's your turn."

Classical Western arguments, on the other hand, draw on logic as well as other factors. In a Classical argument, you draw on four strategies to convince your conversation partner to agree with you. These four strategies are:

Ethos

Your credibility or character. When you draw on Ethos, you are offering your credentials and experience that make you a trustworthy source of information on a topic in question.

Logos

The logical, factual structure of your argument. When drawing on Logos, you put together statements and facts in a compelling way.

Pathos

The emotional side of your argument. When you draw on Pathos, you reach out to your conversation partner's feelings.

Kairos

The temporal side of your argument. You might say that there is limited time to change an opinion or that now is exactly the right time to do so*.

When it comes to milk, you might say, "I always keep good track of our shopping list and the milk-buying schedule (Ethos). Since it was my turn last time, this time it is your turn (Logos). We really need milk if we want to have cereal tomorrow, and the store will close in just half an hour (Kairos and Pathos). Will you go buy some?"

Not all arguments are about winning, though. The Rogerian argument offers a different viewpoint on arguing. In a Rogerian argument, your goal is to reach a common ground between you and the person you are arguing with that is mutually acceptable*. This happens in three steps:

1. Making your conversation partner feel understood,
2. Outlining the points in which you think your conversation partner is correct,
3. Show that you and your conversation partner have similar values, such as reaching a mutually acceptable solution*.

Rogerian arguments have a lot of benefits. They are useful for arguments with friends, family, and coworkers in which reaching a peaceful and positive conclusion is the most important goal. However, there are drawbacks, too. If the argument centers around science and facts, for instance, it may not be possible to reach a compromise that is also truthful.

And, if your conversation partner is only interested in winning, you are unlikely to resolve the argument peacefully anyway.

In the milk situation, you might say, "I know that you were really busy today and that you didn't have time to go to the store. I also agree that we are both responsible for making sure we have groceries. How about we go to the store together?"

Similar to Rogerian arguments is the proposal argument. In a proposal argument, your goal is to outline a solution to a problem and, using evidence, convince your conversation partner that you have the best solution*. If you are using a proposal argument, you are focused on resolving the issue peacefully, just like in a Rogerian argument.

Meanwhile, the opposite of a proposal argument is a causal argument, in which you focus on finding the cause of a certain problem*. This argument is often too focused on placing blame, so it's less likely to lead to a productive conclusion.

With the huge variety of possible arguments out there, how can you decide which is best or most effective? The answer is that it depends hugely on your context and goals. If you get into a debate with your spouse about where you should go on vacation using an inductive argument about how miserable you've been in the past when they chose the destination, you probably aren't going to get good results. On the other hand, if you use a Rogerian argument to pick your next vacation along with your spouse, you might be happier with what happens next.

In our everyday arguments, we usually use a mix of different styles depending on the circumstances, the goal of the conversation, and how the argument unfolds. Which argument works best, and how each type of argument plays out in real life, is something that we'll continue to explore throughout the rest of this book.

Right, Wrong, Or Just Plain Weird

You might go into an argument with the most logical, factual, multi-pronged argument possible – and find that your conversation partner has no idea what they're talking about or

is just making things up. In the milk argument, for instance, your conversation partner might say, “I don’t even drink milk!” when you see them have a large latte every morning. How can you tell if they are making a fact-based argument or not?

The first and most important thing is to determine the basis of your conversation partner’s arguments. Are they drawing on credible sources? If you aren’t sure, ask questions about where and when your conversation partner heard the facts that they are stating. If their argument has a factual basis, it’s more likely to be valid – although there are still more factors to consider.

Next, think about the logic behind their argument. It’s possible to take factual sources and stretch or bend them until they are no longer valid. Perhaps your conversation partner is taking a quote out of context or trying to apply inductive reasoning based on only a single experience. We’ll discuss logic and how it can go wrong more deeply in Chapter Three.

When examining the validity of your conversation partner’s argument, make sure you think about the validity of your own argument, too. Without meaning to, we can make the same kinds of logical or factual errors as anyone else. Thinking carefully about your opinions and reading books like this are good ways to prevent that.

Why Arguments Start

Another person’s illogical or counterfactual statement is one reason that arguments tend to start, although it isn’t the only one. There are three main reasons why arguments usually start:

1. The other person has incorrect data or logic;
2. You have incorrect data or logic;
3. You both have different but valid opinions about a complex or emotional topic.

In the first two cases, the argument will likely be resolved by one or the other of you ‘winning.’ Maybe someone says that the flashing red light on the printer means that it’s out of paper because the light flashed once before and stopped when they added more paper.

However, you know this isn't true. You show the other person the part of the printer manual where it says that the flashing red light means a paper jam. When the other person added more paper, they also cleared out the old paper, resolving the jam. Unless the other person is in a bad mood or has some very strong opinions about printers, they'll probably change their opinion to agree with you now that they have all the facts. They were wrong about the meaning of the flashing light, while you were right.

Most arguments, however, are more complicated. They start for the third reason on the list: different but valid opinions about a complex or emotional topic. Perhaps you mention to a friend that you try to eat meat at least once a day for protein. They might respond that they are a vegetarian and get their protein from other sources. You can argue about this topic by showing articles and citing experiences that support your point. Neither of you is technically wrong, but there's a low chance of the argument ending with anyone changing their opinion. The third type of argument is the one that we tend to encounter more in daily life. It's also the kind of argument that you can make better with strategies – like the ones we discuss in this book.

Whether or not you like arguing, arguments are an important part of life. From deciding who forgot to buy the milk to choosing a political viewpoint, arguments play a huge role in our choices and relationships. Without arguments, your opinion, and the opinions of those around you, right or wrong, would stay the same. Making and having better arguments means change, growth, and new understanding for everyone involved.

Action Steps

It's time to look more closely at the arguments in your own life. Over the next week or so, keep a log of your arguments. Note who you argued with, how it started, and how the argument was resolved. If possible, keep track of the kinds of logical arguments that you and your conversational partner used (though it's more likely to be a mix of styles than one strict type).

Keep in mind that arguments aren't the same as fights. A debate with a cashier over the sale price of a bar of chocolate should go on your argument list, but a heated discussion with your child about their bedtime might not.

At the end of the week, reflect on the types of arguments that you have and who you tend to argue with. Do you usually argue with coworkers, family, friends, or others? Do some arguments seem to go better than others? If so, do you have any guesses about why that might be? Hold on to your list of arguments as you continue reading this book.

Whether you are a courtroom lawyer or not, arguments play a big role in your life – and always have. Throughout history, humans have had a shifting understanding of what it means to argue and what the most effective strategies are. Throughout, though, arguments have remained an important part of society. In the next chapter, we'll look at that shifting understanding and how it has shaped today's arguments. We'll also assemble time-tested strategies for better arguments, whether in Roman times or modern society.