

**A COURSE IN  
ARGUMENTATIVE  
WRITING**

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A Course in Argumentative Writing by Gertrude Buck

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ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

BY

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## PREFACE.

THIS book arises out of certain beliefs concerning the study of argumentation, which, though perhaps not wholly novel, have as yet found no recognition in the literature of the subject. The first of these beliefs is that the principles of argumentation should be derived by the student from its practice before the practice is made to conform to the principles. In short—one may as well acknowledge it—a firm faith in the so-called “inductive method” as applied to argumentation lies at the root of this treatise. Such a faith implies, of course, that the student should be asked to dissect out logical formulæ for himself from his own unconscious reasonings, using them, when discovered, to render those reasonings more exact. The construction and the rough analysis of arguments would, similarly, precede the formulation of any principles of persuasion.

Such a plan as this, it will be noted, assigns to the student a task at once more difficult and more stimulating than that which the usual methods require. He is not asked simply to accept certain logical formulæ on the authority of text-book or teacher and apply them to his own writing; but first to quarry out these formulæ from his own writing and then to use them for such modification of that writing as may seem necessary. His duty is thus

doubled; but it is also enlivened by the zest of discovery. He deals not with the dead products of other people's labor, but with the fruits of his own first-hand observation and thought. In his study of the processes of reasoning he reasons himself, inductively as well as deductively,—an issue by no means inevitable under the old system.

From the conviction that the student should formulate his own principles of argumentation follows the second article of faith: that the subjects set for argument and the material used for analysis should be not remote from the student's natural interests, but interwoven with his daily experiences. If the student is to gain his principles from his unconscious practice, it follows that he will, for a time at least, be concerned with arguments about the probable score of the coming football game or the fairness of a certain examination rather than the desirability of a high protective tariff for the United States or the iniquity of free silver. Whenever these latter topics come to have a real and first-hand interest, they may well be used; but simpler and more intimate questions will usually serve better to disclose the typical processes of reasoning and argument, not obscuring them by needless bulk and complexity in the subject-matter. When once these typical processes have become thoroughly familiar in their simpler aspects, they may easily be traced through the mazes of an intricate and voluminous argument in politics or sociology. Work of this more ambitious type, however, properly follows the elementary study of the principles of argumentation with which we are here concerned.\*

The third canon of which this book is exponent is also

\* The sketch found in Appendix C of a course given conjointly by the departments of Economics and of English at Vassar College will furnish some suggestions for more advanced work in argumentation.



involved, though somewhat indirectly, in the first. This is the conviction that the logical basis of argumentation should be ultimately referred to psychology. This is an old word in philosophy, but it has not yet found place in treatises on argumentation. The logical substructure of arguments is universally recognized, but seldom is the psychological stratum beneath that pointed out, and thus, cut off from its deepest roots, logic has come to seem rather like a dead tool than like a living expression of thought. Beginning, however, as this study of argumentation does, with the unconscious reasonings of the student, it is bound to see them as they are, not compositions carefully planned to exhibit logical principles, but natural outputs of typical mental processes. Each argument is referred not only to its logical but to its psychological antecedent, so that the maxims and formulæ, usually regarded by the learner as malign inventions of Aristotle, represent to our student rather the ways in which real people really think. In fact, he himself thinks and argues in these ways—he has often caught himself doing so; and from this fact the abstract logical equations acquire a distinct flavor of personal interest. Knowing them thus inwardly, not as a mere external imposition upon his memory, he has them better in hand as a tool. He uses them not gingerly, but with the dash of intimacy.

Some explanation or defense of the syllogistic brief as used in the text may be demanded. The adoption of this form of analysis is due to the fact that it brings into clear relief the actual structure of an argument, which the ordinary brief so often allows to be forgotten. The syllogistic brief insists, more strenuously than does any other form, upon an exact representation of the entire reasoning process which underlies the argument, with all the relation-

ships and interrelationships among its various parts. What is needed, at least for the beginner, is a brief that first represents the argument as a unit, and then shows with precision how every point in the proof leads directly or indirectly to the single conclusion. This the syllogistic brief accomplishes. It reveals the comparative rank of all arguments and sifts out those which are irrelevant by virtue of its insistence upon the exact bearing of each point upon the main conclusion. This the ordinary form may also be compelled to do, if skillfully handled, and the more advanced student can safely be trusted to use it, having recourse to the syllogistic brief only in cases of doubt. But for the immature analyst of argument the more explicit and detailed method commends itself.

The emphasis laid by the exercises upon the exact analysis of trains of reasoning and arguments should perhaps be still further heightened by an explicit statement of its purpose. No part of the study of argumentation seems to the student more difficult than the correct analysis of his own arguments and of those of other people. But nothing is more indispensable than this to a mastery of argumentation as a practical art. The rapid unflinching insight into the core of an argument, the swift separation of the essential from the non-essential, the sure recognition of major and minor points in the proof of any question, these are the marks of a master logician, or one might say of a trained mind in any field. And it is to such mastery of argument and of thinking that exact analysis tends. The student should be trained to it by every means, analyzing first the simplest arguments, next those with one subsidiary train of reasoning supporting the first, later those containing not only a secondary but a tertiary grade, and so on until the completest arguments may

be resolved at once into their ultimate elements. It may be added that the teacher should by all means supplement the arguments set for analysis in the various exercises by many others drawn from current reading and conversation. The study of argumentation is perhaps most effectually quickened by a judicious selection of arguments and subjects for argument with reference to topics of current interest. The daily newspapers and the magazines furnish always abundant supplies of timely material for a class in argumentation. Toward the close of a course, if the students are sufficiently mature, the complete analysis of such popular arguments as those involved in books like Bellamy's *Looking Backward* or Kidd's *Social Evolution* may safely be attempted.

A considerable amount of oral debating is found to be useful as complementary to the writing. Often an impromptu debate may be held upon a subject before it is assigned for written argument. The question is then talked over as well as thought out, new points of view are suggested and objections raised, so that the written argument becomes better digested than is usually the case when put to paper without such preliminary working over. The writer's own belief in the efficacy of debating as an aid to the study of argumentation may appear from an account of the arrangement of the course as given in Vassar College. The class meets three times a week, twice in separate sections for quiz on the text, for writing and criticism, once for an exercise in which the whole class participates, usually a debate, either formal or impromptu. These debates are not only regarded by the students as the most interesting feature of the course, but they seem fully to have justified their institution by the impetus they have given to the written work.