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A Textbook Argument: Definitions of Argument in Leading Composition Textbooks

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Source: *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (December 2011), pp. 244-268

Published by: [National Council of Teachers of English](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23131584>

Accessed: 27-08-2015 01:17 UTC

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## A Textbook Argument: Definitions of Argument in Leading Composition Textbooks

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This essay examines the definitions and practices of argument perpetuated by popular composition textbooks, illustrating how even those texts that appear to forward expansive notions of argument ultimately limit it to an intent to persuade. In doing so, they help perpetuate constricted practices of argument within undergraduate composition classrooms.

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As I sit here, typing this introduction, it is exactly nine years after the September 11 attacks; I am reminded of Jennifer Bay's 2002 response essay, "The Limits of Argument." Using the attacks on the World Trade Center as one striking and horrifying example, Bay laments: "While we teach students argument and vehemently defend its importance, argument fails. In the place of argument, wars are fought, violence committed, vengeance inflicted. [. . .] For all of our conviction about arguments and the ability of arguments to accomplish understanding and mediation, they often fail to enact change" (694). Bay goes on to argue that "what we need to grasp is an emergent alternative to argument, which we understand to be equally or more persuasive but which reconfigures the structure of the statement for generative ends" (694).

Many in composition and rhetoric might argue that even at the time of Bay's article, we *had* offered alternatives to argument—at least to classical or traditional argument—alternatives that explicitly focus on negotiation and

understanding, some perhaps still working toward some form of persuasion but, in Bay's words, that also "reconfigure the structure of the statement for generative ends" (694). In fact, Bay draws attention to a number of these alternatives, including those offered in the Emmel, Resch, and Tenney collection *Argument Revisited; Argument Redefined*. But Bay goes on to explain that "while the definition of argument has changed, the process and procedures by which argument is taught remain the same" (687). Part of the problem, says Bay, is that "argument as understanding is often no more than a retooling of argument as persuasion for the postmodern world" (687). It is this act of retooling to which I would like to draw attention.

In this article, I apply Bay's concern to one of the primary ways in which definitions of argument are proliferated: composition textbooks. More specifically, I look at how argument is defined in popular argument-based composition textbooks, particularly in the introductory and supporting materials. A cursory survey of such texts points toward a more expansive definition of argument, one that challenges the primacy of persuasion or pro-con debates so often linked with what Nancy V. Wood calls "traditional" forms of argument, those in which a rhetor attempts to convince or convert an opponent (315). Yet a closer look reveals that these more expansive definitions are often retooled, as Bay laments, as another form of traditional argument, one that privileges argument as winning and undercuts the radical potential of argument as understanding across difference. Furthermore, I show that while the definitions of argument within popular argument-based composition textbooks may be evolving, and while some texts include alternatives like Rogerian argument and invitational rhetoric, the processes by which these texts are "teaching" argument are rarely as expansive.

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Ultimately, I hold that while traditional argument is essential, as is persuasion itself, we do our students (and ourselves) a disservice by not taking seriously a wide variety of definitions, practices, and goals of argument within popular composition textbooks.

Bay does not refer specifically to textbooks in her article, but in terms of "the process and procedures by which argument is taught," one has to consider textbooks, especially as introductory composition courses continue to be staffed largely by temporary instructors and novice graduate students. As Kathleen E. Welch notes, in many of these cases, "the textbooks are instructional

material more important for the writing teacher than for the writing student” (271). Welch goes so far as to argue that “since the textbooks largely train the writing teachers, we must radically revise our textbooks” (272). Such a statement seems to imply that many writing teachers enter the classroom unprepared or underprepared—a sentiment with which many might take issue. And yet, introductory writing courses *are* often staffed with inexperienced teachers who have little or no background in composition and, in fact, sometimes have not even taken the course that they are asked to teach. Even if participating in a teacher development course, many of these teachers are still learning the content as they prepare to teach. In this way, textbooks can become one method of content, and even pedagogical, instruction for many inexperienced teachers.

Robert J. Connors provides some historical context for this reliance on textbooks, arguing that the inexperienced writing teacher was, in fact, one contributing factor to the flourishing of textbooks in the nineteenth century. Noting a move toward Lancastrian teaching, Connors explains that in the early to mid-1800s, classroom responsibilities began to shift to student “monitors,” who tended to be older but were “untrained in pedagogy and often had little more knowledge of the subject than the students they were drilling” (181–82). The then-new textbooks, complete with discussion—or at least comprehension—questions, provided these novice monitors with a built-in structure, if not a fully realized pedagogy. The following century saw a progression toward better-trained teachers, and yet, one hundred years later, we see echoes of the “monitors” Connors describes, as well as the concomitant reliance on textbooks. Certainly not all inexperienced instructors are simply “monitoring” classrooms, but many of us likely can remember the fear that accompanied our first day, week, semester, even year of teaching; I certainly can. When first awarded a position as a teaching assistant, I was twenty-two years old, three months out of college, and had never taken the course I was being asked to teach. I, like many teaching assistants, instructors, and adjuncts across the country each year, was handed a textbook for use in the first-year composition course, and I gripped it firmly.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, not all writing instructors—inexperienced or otherwise—use a textbook in their courses, but a quick survey of the Bedford/St. Martin’s, Pearson Higher Education’s, and W. W. Norton’s composition catalogs reveals a glut of textbooks geared specifically toward introductory composition classes. Norton, for example, lists thirty-four texts under “composition,” including a collection of short stories. In August 2010 the Bedford/St. Martin’s online catalog

listed seventy-two “new” textbooks on their composition page.<sup>2</sup> Entering the terms “English composition” in the Longman Higher Education site produced 528 titles in August 2010, including e-books. Adding “argument” as a keyword reduced the hits to 312; titles published after 2005 totaled 175, excluding supplements. These numbers make clear that despite concerns about publishing and the potential shift toward e-books, the textbook industry is still alive and well. Furthermore, while not all instructors use a textbook in introductory composition classes, clearly a number do.

This brief survey of major textbook publishers in the field also illustrates the conscious delineation of more general or introductory composition textbooks and those composition textbooks focused on argument. The demarcation reflects (and responds to) the structure of many universities’ writing programs, a format in which the first semester of composition is focused on informative writing and the second semester on argument or persuasive writing. The structural separation of argument or persuasion tacitly informs students that despite one popular textbook’s assertion that “everything’s an argument,” arguments, in the strictest sense, often are reserved for the second semester or second year. Argument, then, is segregated from more informative or expressive writing. This delineation in curriculum, in course content, and in textbook focus not only reinforces a genre approach to composition but also associates argument specifically with an intent to persuade rather than inform.

Let me state quite clearly that I believe an intent to persuade is, in itself, unproblematic. Indeed, as Susan C. Jarratt famously noted, students need to learn and practice the arts of persuasion in order to effect change in the social realm. However, a number of feminist theorists have also questioned the privileging of persuasion, especially at the expense of understanding across difference. Communication scholars Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, for example, believe traditional forms of rhetoric and argument based in an intent to persuade perpetuate patriarchal values of dominance, change, and control over others. They offer invitational rhetoric—a process in which one seeks understanding rather than persuasion—as an alternative. Catherine E. Lamb also seeks an alternative to what she calls “monologic argument,” which she defines as a form of argument in which rhetors work only toward their own goals, seeking usually to simply refute the opposition (13). These scholars’ concerns illuminate the drawbacks of privileging persuasion, especially an intent to persuade, at the expense of other possible forms of communication.<sup>3</sup> Further, given Connors’s and Welch’s observations that composition textbooks

serve to educate both students and teachers, and given that these textbooks sometimes serve as students' and teachers' only sustained introduction to theories of argument, we would do well to pay attention to the version of argument that such books perpetuate.

The glut of composition textbooks, even those focused specifically on argument, makes it impractical to survey all of them in one article. I have therefore chosen to gloss a handful of the more popular texts and then focus on two of the bestselling texts in this genre from two of the most popular

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textbook publishers in the field: Bedford/St. Martin's *Everything's an Argument* (Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz, and Walters) and Pearson/Longman's *Writing Arguments* (Ramage et al.). While two textbooks cannot be said to represent the entire catalog of argument-based composition texts, drawing from two of the most commonly adopted texts should give us some sense of what instructors and departments value in an

argument-based composition text.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, these two texts do, in many ways, function as (imperfect) representative examples of popular composition textbooks' treatment of argument.

A brief survey of these popular textbooks illustrates what appears to be a heartening trend toward defining argument not in terms of opposition and persuasion—or at least not solely in such terms—but as inquiry, discovery, or communication. Part of this trend is the inclusion or expansion of sections on Rogerian argument, often called conciliatory argument or “delayed thesis” arguments. Yet, a closer look at the texts' treatments of argument, especially outside of their introductory chapters, often reveals more traditional notions of argument, those that privilege winning and persuading one's opponent(s).<sup>5</sup> This shift toward an intent to persuade is exactly the kind of retooling to which Bay refers. Even Rogerian argument tends to be turned toward persuasive purposes within these texts, a trend that troubled Carl Rogers himself. But including a wider variety of arguments in composition textbooks can both highlight the complexity of our field and meet our desire to prepare students to function within the social realm.

### **Expansive Definitions of Argument**

As noted above, many popular argument textbooks are now including what seem to be expansive notions of argument, definitions that move beyond—in

fact, sometimes specifically challenge—argument as conversion or debate.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, they offer varying degrees of supplements or alternatives to “traditional argument,” which Nancy V. Wood, author of a number of textbooks on argument, holds “predominates in American culture, and it is what you are used to when you listen to people argue on television or when you read arguments in current periodicals or books” (315). She defines traditional argument as the type in which “the object is to convince an audience that the claim is valid and that the arguer is right. In this traditional model, the arguer uses the rebuttal to demonstrate how the opposition is wrong and to state why the audience should reject that position. Thus the emphasis is on winning the argument” (315). It is this emphasis on convincing, rebutting, and winning that marks much of traditional argument; a move away from such a desire to persuade (or even win) is a facet of the alternatives that tend to be offered in the introductory materials of many popular composition textbooks.

In *The Aims of Argument*, for example, Timothy W. Crusius and Carolyn E. Channell ask students to practice “mature reasoning,” which they define in this way: “rather than starting with a position to defend, mature reasoners work toward a position. If they have an opinion to start with, mature reasoners think it through and evaluate it rather than rush to its defense. To win is not to defeat an opponent but rather to gain insight into the topic at hand” (4). Mature reasoning also “challenge[s] unexamined belief, the stances people take out of habit without much thought” (6). Argument as mature reasoning is still often linked with winning, but winning in this context is defined as more thorough understanding of an issue rather than the defeating of an opponent.

In *Having Your Say*, by Davida H. Charney et al., to argue “means treating an issue as open instead of settled. If authors are fair and open-minded, arguing helps everyone understand the issue better, find weaknesses in their positions, and sometimes increase the amount of agreement” (3). The author-editors continue by noting that “Agreeing does not mean giving up important convictions without strong reason. But it does require listening carefully and responding politely to what others say, looking for shared concerns and ways to work together. The goal is to argue, not quarrel; have a civil conversation, not a fight” (3). As in *The Aims of Argument*, there is a clear attempt in *Having Your Say* to define argument as a means of better understanding, of working together, and of listening carefully to others.

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Similar language is echoed in a number of other argument textbooks. In *Practical Arguments*, for example, Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell say argument “is not a quarrel. The object of argument is not to attack someone who disagrees with you or to beat an opponent into submission” (4). In *Dynamic Argument*, Robert Lamm and Justin Everett also note that argument is not “a shouting match, not a quarrel, not an altercation” (5). Linda McMeniman, author of *From Inquiry to Argument*, also believes that arguments “don’t boil down to a simple pro and con or ‘us’ against ‘them.’ In fact, the win-lose mind-set can cause people to overlook the range and complexity of viewpoints on an issue” (8). In *From Critical Thinking to Argument*, Sylvan Barnet and Hugo Bedau distinguish between argument and persuasion, holding that while persuasion is an attempt to “win over,” argument

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is only one form of persuasion, one that “relies on reason; it offers statements as reasons for other statements” (51, emphasis in original). Persuasion, for Barnet and Bedau, might also include “appealing to the emotions” or “using torture,” but these would not be considered arguments within their schema (51). And in *Discovering Argument*, William Palmer draws attention to the “middle ground” in argument, holding that “the middle perspectives can provide much truth that is not oversimplified by widely divergent views” (80).

These textbook author-editors are attempting to broaden the definition of argument beyond the pro-con debate (and, in the most extreme form, beyond torture) in order to take into consideration the ways in which interlocutors attempt to negotiate differences in opinion. The varied authors contrast argument marked by quarreling, fighting, winning, defeating opposition, and working against others with mature reasoning, civil conversation, mediation, and truth seeking. Such language is common in textbooks in which author-editors make an effort to expand the notions of argument beyond traditional persuasion or conversion models (and, of course, not all author-editors are attempting to do so). But a closer look at argument-based textbooks reveals a much more traditional definition of argument, even in those texts in which the author-editors seem to be consciously moving away from Wood’s definition.

I now turn to two of the most popular and most commonly adopted argument textbooks from two of the most popular composition textbook publishers: Bedford/St. Martin’s *Everything’s an Argument* (Lunsford, Ruskiewicz, and Walters) and Pearson/Longman’s *Writing Arguments* (Ramage, Bean, and

Johnson). Examining two of the most popular argument textbooks can give us a glimpse into the view of argument that is being disseminated through them in composition classrooms across the country.

### **Is Everything an Argument?**

In the preface to the fifth edition of *Everything's an Argument*, author-editors Andrea Lunsford, John J. Ruszkiewicz, and Keith Walters note that the text has been “a best-seller in its field since its debut” (v). This is not mere hubris; *Everything's an Argument* has, in fact, continued to be one of the bestselling persuasion-based composition textbooks since its first publication and is currently Bedford/St. Martin's top argument-based text (Edwards). Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz, and Walters attribute this popularity to their attempt to make the book “candid, balanced, and attuned to everyday events” (v). Additionally, as the title implies, the text includes striking visuals, newspaper articles, blog postings, transcripts of YouTube videos, magazine articles, student essays, book excerpts, posters, Wikipedia entries, and cartoons, all in an effort to illustrate that *everything* is, in fact, an argument.

But what does that term *argument* mean in the context of this particular book? Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz, and Walters explain that “arguments seldom if ever have only two sides: rather they present a dizzying array of perspectives, often with as many ‘takes’ on a subject as there are arguers.

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Understanding arguments, then, calls for carefully considering a full range of perspectives before coming to judgment” (v). Further, the author-editors believe that all language has a persuasive bent, and that “people walk, talk, and breathe persuasion very much as they breathe the air: everything is a potential argument” (v). For these author-editors, argument seems to be interchangeable with persuasion, or at least potential persuasion. As one continues through the preface, persuasion is further delineated by the terms *civil* and *cordial*: “we have designed the book to be itself an argument for civil persuasion, with a voice that aims to appeal to readers cordially but that doesn't hesitate to make demands on them when appropriate” (vi). Such a statement begs the question of when it is or is not appropriate to make demands on readers or on listeners outside of the boundaries of the text itself. How the author-editors answer this question points us toward a more nuanced understanding of how argument is defined in this textbook and therefore, at least in part, defined for the thousands of students and teachers using this as a primary text in their composition courses.

Certainly *Everything's an Argument* includes a wide variety of approaches to arguments; in fact, it is one of the only argument-based composition textbooks in which Foss and Griffin's theory of invitational rhetoric makes an appearance. Perhaps one of the more extreme alternatives to persuasion-based argument, invitational rhetoric asks that rhetors abandon the intent to persuade common in traditional forms of rhetoric in favor of an intent to understand. In short, while change (of viewpoint, of action) may occur as a result of the discursive moment, it is not—in fact, is never—the goal of invitational rhetoric. Invitational rhetoric's rather drastic departure from more traditional goals of argument might be one reason why it is so rarely included in argument-based composition textbooks. Yet in the most recent edition of *Everything's an Argument*, invitational rhetoric is given a place of prominence (albeit brief) in the first chapter as one of the “purposes of argument,” signaling to students that

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what many might imagine to be an alternative argument could be considered mainstream, a typical argumentative purpose and form. The overall goals of invitational rhetoric are further reflected in the

author-editors' belief that “arguing isn't always about winning or even about changing others' views” (7). *Everything's an Argument* also includes exploration, decision making, and even meditation or prayer as possible purposes of argument, supplementing more traditional persuasive goals.

Not only does this textbook (initially) represent an expansive notion of argument, but Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz, and Walters also highlight the impact of cultural perspectives when discussing what we might consider “common sense” approaches to argument. In a text box entitled “Cultural Contexts for Argument: Considering What's ‘Normal,’” the author-editors explain that different cultures might hold what Krista Ratcliffe would call differing cultural logics. Readers are cautioned to keep cross-cultural differences in mind and to respect those differences. Further, readers are reminded that not everyone argues in the same way. While it might feel natural for one person to take an aggressive stance, for example, others might find this approach disconcerting. This more expansive view of argument and argumentative strategies reinforces the shifting nature of logic, exposing (or reinforcing) the impact of cultural norms in defining what is “normal” or even “logical.”

And yet, despite the inclusion of these alternative definitions or forms of argument and the recognition of the impact of cultural logics on all commu-

nication, the importance of such alternatives is quickly undermined. Within the first chapter, for example, Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz, and Walters explain that although there are a number of forms of argument, this text focuses on those that students will “make in professional and academic situations,” going on to clarify that such arguments “adhere to precise standards for handling evidence” (15). On the one hand, this makes perfect sense, as this textbook is meant to be used primarily in academic settings. However, shifting so abruptly to common forms of “academic” arguments makes it easy for students to leave behind less common forms such as Rogerian and invitational rhetorics, seeing them as less important or less useful than these more traditional forms. Additionally, stating that academic arguments have precise rules, thereby implying that other forms of argument might *not* adhere to such rules, can lend traditional arguments a legitimacy that the alternatives might appear to lack. The text’s almost sole focus on these more traditional arguments, especially once a student moves beyond the first chapter, further visually illustrates for students the primacy of persuasion and reinforces the idea that what “counts” as an academic argument is quite limited.<sup>7</sup> In fact, academic arguments within this text become nearly synonymous with attempts at persuasion. Furthermore, the author-editors quickly define rhetoric as the art of persuasion, contradicting the attempts of Foss and Griffin to expand definitions of rhetoric (and argument) beyond the intent to persuade and casting any alternative that does not seek to persuade into a seemingly ahistorical realm that is hard-pressed to compete with twenty-five hundred years of (Greco-Roman) rhetorical tradition.

We see a similar undercutting in terms of the text’s discussion of Rogerian argument, a much more commonly included alternative to more traditional oppositional frameworks. Rooted in the work of psychotherapist Carl Rogers, Rogerian argument is based on the belief that a tendency to evaluate is the primary barrier to successful communication. To remedy this issue, Rogers asked that interlocutors learn to “*see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person’s point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about*” (Young, Becker, and Pike 285, emphasis in original). Such a move, Rogers hoped, would help reduce threat and build bridges between parties, all but guaranteeing a reasonable solution between those holding divergent beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

Rogers imagined his process primarily within the realm of oral communication, an arena that allows for much more flexibility and immediate response than does written discourse. Yet, Rogerian argument is fast becoming a staple in argument-based composition textbooks.<sup>9</sup> Rogerian *writing*, as it is now found

in most composition texts, is the result of Young, Becker, and Pike's attempts to translate Rogerian therapeutic methods into a form of written communication. Within this translation, however, we see a clear shift away from Rogers's notions of empathetic listening and toward persuasive goals.

*Everything's an Argument* reflects this common trend within argument-based textbooks to recast Rogers's empathetic listening to persuasive ends. This textbook does boast a fully developed section on Rogerian argument, dedicating six pages to Rogers and his methodology. As the fourth edition of *Everything's an Argument* included only one paragraph on Rogerian argument, we might further read the expansion of this section in the fifth edition as evidence of the author-editors' desire to offer more inclusive and varied notions of what defines an argument. In the span of one edition, Rogerian argument has grown from one paragraph to its own six-page section, complete with popular culture, visual, and historical examples ranging from Gilda Radner's *SNL* character Emily Litella to Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. In this latest edition, Rogerian argument even spills outside the bounds of its section: a "link" in the sidebar on page 176 directs readers to Elizabeth Royte's excerpted chapter "Bottlemania" in the text's anthology section. For those of us interested in seeing more expansive notions of argument included in composition textbooks, this larger section on Rogerian argument is encouraging progress. Yet this progress also needs to be put into the larger context of the book.

While the text does devote six pages to Rogerian argument, this section is dwarfed by the approximately twenty-one pages dedicated to Toulmin argument alone. These twenty-one pages are committed exclusively to Toulmin strategies, but readers see the mark of Toulmin in the following chapters as well, as students are directed to "outline in Toulmin terms" (230) and consider the "relationships among the claims, supporting reasons, warrants, and evidence" (231). In developing an evaluative argument, students are again asked to think in Toulmin terms of claim, reason, warrant, and evidence (297). In other words, Toulmin strategies permeate the textbook, while Rogerian argument is primarily relegated to its six-page section (and invitational rhetoric to one paragraph in the text's first chapter).

Similarly, a look at the "Respond" questions following Royte's chapter excerpt (the Rogerian example "linked" in the textbook) reveals a lack of attention to Rogerian strategies in the textbook at large. In fact, there is no mention of Rogerian argument in these response questions; instead, students are asked about the effectiveness of Royte's visuals, to respond to an evaluation of Royte's argument, to consider the effectiveness of using footnotes, and to "construct an

academic argument” about a related issue. Students are then told “the argument may be factual, evaluative, or causal in nature” (842). Not, apparently, Rogerian. While Royte’s excerpt is offered as an example of Rogerian argument, the link directing a student to this excerpt is over six hundred and fifty pages from the excerpt itself. Furthermore, there is no reference to Rogerian argument framing Royte’s piece, nor is there reference to her Rogerian strategies in the follow-up questions concerning her excerpt. Unless moving directly from page 176 to page 834, students would be hard-pressed to remember that “Bottlemania” is meant to illustrate Rogerian argument. In this way, despite the six-page spread, Rogerian argument is marginalized in both structure and purpose.

Perhaps this seems an unfair critique. Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz, and Walters were clear in their intentions to focus on academic argument throughout this text, and they have done just that. The vast majority of the text is dedicated to various forms of argument as persuasion and, as such, to strategies for creating persuasive arguments. Perhaps they should not be faulted for not including more alternative strategies when, in fact, that does not seem to have been their primary goal. And yet, as composition textbooks do help to structure composition courses, it is important to understand the forms of argument forwarded by the most popular of such textbooks. In other words, *Everything’s an Argument* not only reflects argumentative strategies, but it also helps to create them, to create definitions and forms of argument, and to perpetuate these practices in the classroom. The author-editors do focus on traditional academic arguments, but in continuing to define academic arguments in such limited ways, they perpetuate the same limited definitions and practices to which both Wood and Bay draw attention. Why not include Rogerian argument as a fully legitimate form of academic argument? Why ultimately dismiss its usefulness after highlighting that some of the most moving and effective oration of the past two centuries has included Rogerian strategies? Yes, “academic argument” tends to be limited to a format in which one is encouraged to simply prove one’s point; it will continue to be so limited until textbooks begin to take seriously more expansive notions of argument, including them, as well, under the umbrella of “academic.”

*Everything’s an Argument* reinforces the distinction between “academic” and “alternative” arguments in more subtle ways as well. The response ques-

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tions at the end of the first chapter, for instance, at first seem to reiterate the grand possibilities for argument, listing a Boston Red Sox cap and the cover of a science fiction novel as possible arguments for students to consider. Yet the questions themselves privilege more traditional arguments: right or wrong answers, evaluations, and attempts to persuade. For example, the first response question, the one for which a number of nontraditional arguments are listed, asks students: "Can an argument really be any text that expresses a point of view? What kinds of arguments—if any—might be made by the following items?" (36). Such a question encourages students not so much to explore the issue at hand, but to try to find the "right" answer: Can anything be an argument? Readers might imagine an addendum: If yes, in what way? If not, why not? Convince me.

Similarly, the second response question appears, at first, to reinforce the expansive nature of argument highlighted in the exposition of the first chapter by prompting students to write a paragraph describing times in which they "used language to inform, to convince, to persuade, to explore, to make decisions, and to meditate or pray" (36). This question lists a variety of arguments, moving students beyond the typical pro-con debate so often associated with the term. Yet students are then asked to pair up, trade paragraphs, and decide whether or not their partners' experiences fit into the category listed. If not, students are encouraged to find the problem: Is there a flaw in the students' description of the experience or in the categories themselves? This evaluative move drives students back to a right-or-wrong format in which even informal writing based in one's personal experience can be judged by others as simply wrong, or at least wrongly categorized.

Again, this is not to say that students should not learn how to evaluate personal experience, nor that they should be protected from judgment, only that the response questions at the end of the introductory chapter subtly undermine the more extensive descriptions of argument included in the chapter by privileging evaluative or pro-con formats. Given that the introductory chapter is the one in which the more expansive understanding of argument is forwarded, this particular chapter would seem to provide an opportunity to reinforce those practices, especially as other chapters (and the corresponding response questions and writing prompts) are specifically focused on more traditional academic arguments. By closing even the introductory chapter with more traditional response questions and prompts, the author-editors again signal to students the primacy of traditional arguments and the marginal status of alternatives such as invitational or Rogerian argument, leading one to believe

that while everything might be an argument, only certain arguments—traditional academic ones—are worth our time and focus.

Given that the audience for this textbook is composed of those working, teaching, learning, and writing in academia, a focus on academic arguments is not problematic in itself; however, a textbook entitled *Everything's an Argument* gives readers the impression that definitions and practices of argument might be expanded beyond a traditional emphasis on persuasion. Yet, as we have seen, the expansive notions of argument within this text are limited primarily to the first introductory chapter and one later excerpt labeled as Rogerian rhetoric (but not supported as such). The examples, the response questions, and the supporting apparatus throughout the text, almost all of which are focused on persuasion or right-wrong answers, effectively silence the alternatives discussed in the text's first chapter, further constricting definitions and practices of academic argument, and of argument itself. As *Everything's an Argument* is a bestselling composition textbook, the definitions and practices of argument contained within are widely disseminated to college composition students throughout the country. While the text is clear, engaging, and useful, its limited definition of argument undermines the title notion that everything is, in fact, an argument.

**Yet, as was the case with *Everything's an Argument*, a closer look at the definitions within *Writing Arguments* reveals a privileging of more traditional notions of argument as opposition—just a particular kind of opposition.**

### **Arguments in/of *Writing Arguments***

The same can be said for Pearson/Longman's bestselling argument textbook in four-year colleges: John D. Ramage, John C. Bean, and June Johnson's *Writing Arguments* (Barickman). Like Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz, and Walters, the three author-editors of *Writing Arguments* take pains to explain that argument is not a fight, quarrel, or pro-con debate and that the goal of argument is not to "win a game but to find and promote the best belief or course of action" (4). In doing so, they also seem to be forwarding a definition (or definitions) of argument that open(s) up a space for a variety of argumentative approaches. Yet, as was the case with *Everything's an Argument*, a closer look at the definitions within *Writing Arguments* reveals a privileging of more traditional notions of argument as opposition—just a particular kind of opposition.

For Ramage, Bean, and Johnson, the difference between a quarrel and an argument is evidence. Quarrelers, the author-editors say, "exchange antagonistic assertions without any attempt to support them rationally" (10). A quarrel

turns into an argument “because one of the quarrelers has offered a reason for her assertion” (10). To produce an effective argument “an arguer is obligated to clarify and support the reasons presented” (11). The author-editors offer an example of a sixteen-year-old girl who wants to stay out later than her parents would like. The young woman explains that she should be able to stay out later because she’s sixteen. Ramage, Bean, and Johnson hold that simply stating the girl’s age is not a good argument (although it is an argument, according to the author-editors, because she has given a reason—her age—to support her claim). Instead, if she hopes to succeed, the girl must “anticipate the sorts of questions the assumptions will raise in the minds of her parents” (11).

Clearly, the goal of this young woman is to prove her claim, to convince her parents that because she is sixteen, she is old enough to make her own decisions, including her curfew. While the author-editors may claim that the goal of argument is to “seek the best or most just solution to a problem while observing all available evidence, listening with an open mind to the views of all stakeholders, clarifying and attempting to justify your own values and assumptions, and taking responsibility for your argument,” this example reflects not an attempt to find the most just solution, but instead to win—to stay out past curfew (or to change the curfew) (16). Readers never learn, nor are they encouraged to consider, whether or not the beliefs of this hypothetical young woman or her parents are just. Nor do readers learn whether or not her argument is successful, nor if she and her parents reach a compromise. Instead readers simply see a young woman who wants to win her case and to persuade her parents to change. To do so, she is encouraged to anticipate the objections of her parents who, in this example, are positioned as her opposition, whether or not the author-editors use that particular term.

This focus on persuasion and winning is also embedded in the first class discussion question offered in the text where the author-editors explain, “Any argument, whether implicit or explicit, tries to influence the audience’s stance on an issue, *moving the audience toward the arguer’s claim*” (6, emphasis mine). Such a statement seems to undercut the text’s assertion that argument is part truth seeking and part persuasion, but a closer look the meaning of “truth seeking” in this context reveals that it, too, is defined almost solely in terms of persuasion.

In the introductory chapter, for example, Ramage, Bean, and Johnson hold that we might imagine truth seeking and persuasion on a continuum in which pure persuasion is “outright propaganda,” and pure truth seeking is an “exploratory piece that lays out several alternative approaches to a problem and

weighs the strengths and weaknesses of each with no concern for persuasion” (13). Indeed, this phrasing creates a space for a version of argument that is not concerned with persuasion, changing minds, or anticipating one’s opposition. But the application of this continuum within the textbook highlights persuasion as an argument’s—any argument’s—primary goal.

In the paragraph immediately following the author-editors’ explanation of this continuum model of argument, readers are introduced to a Kathleen, a student writer who is “focusing primarily on truth seeking” (13). In her essay on American Sign Language, Kathleen asks whether the university should consider ASL to be a foreign language. The reader is told that Kathleen, while researching her topic, “was only tacitly concerned with her audience, whom she thought of as primarily her classmates and the professor” (14). In the end, she “wrote a well-documented paper, citing several scholarly articles, that made a good case to her classmates (and the professor) that ASL is indeed a distinct language” (14). Kathleen may only have a cursory sense of her audience and thus has perhaps leaned more toward the informative or “truth seeking” end of the continuum, but readers also learn that Kathleen enters her project already believing that ASL should be considered a foreign language. Additionally, as the author-editors note, she makes a “good case . . . that ASL is indeed a distinct language.” While Kathleen’s audience might not be able to enact change in this matter, it seems Kathleen has persuaded her classmates and professor that ASL should be considered a foreign language.

This project is then contrasted with Kathleen’s radical revision in which she directed her argument toward the chair of the foreign languages department, specifically attempting to persuade this resistant audience of her claim and offering a proposal using audience-based reasoning to appeal to the chair. Here, Kathleen’s attempts at persuasion are clear. She has identified an audience who could, at least in theory, enact the change she advocates, she has taken her audience’s needs and assumptions into consideration, and she has presented a persuasive argument supported by well-researched material.

Kathleen is offered as an example of both truth seeking and persuasion, but in different ratios. Yet even her attempt at truth seeking is heavily laden with an intent to persuade. Indeed, for Ramage, Bean, and Johnson, argument is always, at least in part, about an intent to persuade. They conclude their discussion of Kathleen by noting that “all along the continuum writers attempt both to seek truth and to persuade, but not necessarily with equal balance” (15). Even more pure versions of truth seeking mean “determining the ‘best answer’ or ‘best solution’ to the question for the good of the whole community

when taking into consideration the interests of all stakeholders" (16). This is a laudable goal, certainly, but it does serve to reduce all argument to an intent to persuade; the terms of that persuasion are all that really change. In so framing

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Such a focus on changing another's viewpoint is still evident in Ramage, Bean, and Johnson's treatment of Rogerian argument, although to a lesser degree than in *Everything's an Argument*. While these author-editors allot fewer total pages to Rogerian argument than do Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz, and Walters, and while we can certainly see the pull toward persuasion in the initial discussion of the Rogerian approach, *Writing Arguments* ultimately offers teachers and students a more nuanced understanding of Rogerian argument than most argument-based textbooks.

Ramage, Bean, and Johnson introduce Rogerian argument by noting that it is a "powerful strategy for addressing resistant audiences" (138), especially when "dealing with emotional issues" (139). In this case, the author-editors emphasize "addressing" rather than persuading. Furthermore, they highlight Rogerian argument's emphasis on common ground, threat reduction, and bridge building in order to reduce resistance and facilitate listening. The author-editors explain that in situations in which "you're unlikely to convert your reader," one might use Rogerian strategies of highlighting shared values to increase the chance that a reader might "listen to you when you present your own opinion" (139). More pointedly, the author-editors note that Rogerian argument shares ground with feminist theories of argument, as both are concerned by the privileging of masculine systems of dominance and winning. They conclude by explaining that Rogerian argument "stresses self-examination, clarification, and accommodation rather than refutation. Rogerian argument is more in tune with win-win negotiation than win-lose debate" (139). The focus on empathetic listening and self-examination coupled with a critique of conflict metaphors opens space for a re-imagining of argument itself, a space in which argument is not linked solely to persuasion, but also to understanding. Understanding here is not solely the work that comes before the argument itself, but is *itself* the argument. In highlighting the more radical aspects of Rogerian methods, Ramage, Bean, and Johnson provide expanded notions of argument for both students and instructors.

Unfortunately, this movement away from persuasion is, again, short-lived and inconsistent. While the description of Rogerian argument in *Writing Arguments* focuses on alternatives to persuasion, especially when persuasion or conversion seems unlikely, the writing assignments and examples tend to revert back to the desire to persuade, thereby providing, at best, a sort of split identity for Rogerian argument. For example, while the text includes an assignment that at least on the surface has students attempting a Rogerian argument, the description of the assignment actually privileges persuasion over understanding. The “Dialogic Argument Aimed at Conciliation” asks that students address a “highly resistant audience” and “persuade your audience toward your position or toward a conciliatory compromise” (140). The second phrase, “or toward a conciliatory compromise,” is more in line with true Rogerian argument than the earlier directive toward more direct persuasion, but even the compromise privileges change in the audience (“persuade your audience toward . . . a conciliatory compromise”) over change in the rhetor, leaving behind discussions of self-examination and listening. In this assignment, Rogerian approaches are suggested as one possibility, but listening becomes simply another tool in order to best effect change in an audience.

In the student example of a Rogerian approach, Rebekah Taylor more carefully walks the line between “pure” forms of Rogerian argument and the desire to persuade. A response to the prompt above, Taylor’s “A Letter to Jim” does speak to a desire to persuade but privileges listening and understanding, simultaneously meeting the assignment guidelines and undercutting the persuasive assumption in the assignment description. In format, Taylor’s letter to omnivore friend Jim concerning the benefits of a vegetarian lifestyle and the importance of buying locally raised meat follows what Young, Becker, and Pike would recognize as a classic schema for Rogerian strategies. Taylor first states the issue up for consideration, demonstrates that she understands Jim’s views on eating meat and their source, states her own views and background, focuses on what the two of them have in common, and then moves toward a compromise, noting that it is unlikely Jim will stop eating meat but could consider buying locally in order to reduce animal suffering. Taylor concludes by noting that she will “never try to force my beliefs on you [Jim]. As your friend, I am grateful simply to be able to write to you so candidly about my beliefs. I trust that regardless of what your ultimate reaction is to this letter, you will thoughtfully consider what I have written, as I will thoughtfully consider what you write in return” (144).

One can see in this example a desire to persuade, for certain, but Taylor can hardly be “blamed” for that: She feels strongly about the suffering and killing of animals, and she wishes that humans would stop eating meat. She recognizes that she cannot force Jim to change his mind, however, and says that she is simply glad she can voice her beliefs to him. Additionally, she reminds Jim (and the textbook readers) that she, too, needs to be open to Jim’s views, whatever they may be. While the body of this letter follows a more traditional route to what my students often see as the “sneaky persuasion” version of Rogerian argument, the conclusion echoes Rogers’s initial discussions of empathetic listening: the outcome might matter to Taylor, but she recognizes that she has little control over Jim’s actions and therefore is grateful at least for the attempt at communication and understanding, both highlighting and reinforcing the mutual trust between the two of them. Further, she is open to changing her own views—or at least she believes this to be the case.

Taylor’s “Letter to Jim” is one of the more radical examples included in popular argument-based textbooks, illustrating Ramage, Bean, and Johnson’s recognition of critiques of traditional argument and their commitment to Rogerian strategies. This is a strong model for students attempting Rogerian strategies, and one that goes further than most (when examples are included at all) in working toward mutual understanding and empathetic listening rather than sheer persuasion. Taylor does offer a conciliatory compromise, one that asks Jim to change his own practices and requires no change in Taylor, but by highlighting listening and understanding in the conclusion, this letter underscores the potential for Rogerian strategies to broaden textbook definitions of argument, reinforcing *in practice* the notion that argument is more than multiple versions of persuasion or pro-con debates. One student example, however, is not enough to tip the scales of traditional argument that predominates even in this rather progressive textbook.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, both *Writing Arguments* and *Everything’s an Argument* initially define argument as more than attempts at winning or conversion, but the discussion questions, examples, and more detailed explications within both textbooks privilege an intent to persuade, illustrating for students the primacy of persuasion and either marginalizing or functionally erasing alternative processes or outcomes. This focus on an intent to persuade is evident even in the respective sections on Rogerian argument, a potentially radical alternative to traditional ideas of argument within an oppositional framework. While both

textbooks include discussions of Rogerian argument, their representations of this alternative starkly differ. Although the description of Rogerian argument in the Ramage, Bean, and Johnson text still hints at the primacy of persuasion, this text actually highlights the potentially progressive nature of Rogerian argument. The Rogerian section in *Everything's an Argument*, on the other hand, reinforces a more traditional desire for persuasion—a form of Rogerian argument that, despite Rogers's own concerns, is quite common within composition studies. In this way, all argument, including Rogerian, is linked to that drive to persuade, the desire to change another (or an Other). Even within this potentially radical approach to argument, we see what John Ramage, Michael Callaway, Jennifer Clary-Lemon, and Zachary Waggoner might call the “ossification” of argument: “when one of many possibilities generated by a principle or insight is carried out to the detriment of other possibilities” (62).<sup>10</sup> The possibilities of alternatives such as invitational rhetoric and Rogerian argument within such textbooks are subsumed by the persuasive paradigm, thereby limiting the possibilities of argument itself.

My point isn't that traditional argument and persuasion are themselves problematic, but that this “ossification” within textbooks is disconcerting. The option for argument-based textbooks, for argument itself, is not an all or nothing choice between persuasion and alternatives to persuasion, opposition and alternatives to opposition, traditional argument and alternatives to traditional argument. In other words, calling into question the primacy of traditional argument is not to promote the erasure of traditional argument. Instead, what I am advocating is a treatment of argument in composition texts that reflects the complexity of argument itself. Yes, the increased attention to Rogerian argument is a promising step, as is the practice of defining argument (in the introductory materials, at least) as more expansive than only traditional notions of debate and conquest or conversion. But as we attempt to help students negotiate differences, both within the classroom and in the larger social realm, we do them a disservice if we limit definitions and practices of argument, even academic argument, solely to conversion and an intent to persuade. As Jennifer Bay notes, traditional arguments fail all of the time. And despite what was the hope of a new administration, we are still a nation divided. We will continue to be divided as long as our discursive practices highlight division to the detriment of listening and understanding. Argument

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as conquest and conversion can serve to reinforce current power structures; even mediation and negotiation can privilege those who enter the discussion with more social or political power. What would it mean to take seriously in the classroom more expansive forms of argument in which persuasion was not the primary goal? What might the outcomes be, not only in the classroom, but in the larger social realm?

Textbooks provide the time, space, and scope for this more inclusive framework.<sup>11</sup> Imagine if more textbooks really engaged with Rogers's empathetic listening by creating supporting questions, assignments, and examples that reflected the kind of attention that most give to Toulmin strategies. Rogerian argument would no longer be seen as a marginalized alternative, but instead as an equally valid option, especially in cases when tensions run high.<sup>12</sup> Imagine, too, if texts included full sections on invitational rhetoric (out of twenty texts surveyed, only *Everything's an Argument* mentioned—briefly—invitational rhetoric), illustrating for students a rhetorical theory that challenges the primacy of persuasion. Or on embodied rhetoric, so that students would be asked to reflect on how their very bodies impact their creation of knowledge. Imagine if introductory argument textbooks took rhetorical listening and the potential of silence as seriously as they did Aristotelian appeals, and framed these not as alternatives to Toulmin or Aristotle, but as equally useful strategies of argument to be considered, as should all argument, in relation to context, audience, and purpose.

Perhaps textbooks are, as Mike Rose argues, too rigid and static to fully capture the dynamic nature of writing (1). But including a variety of argumentative approaches in composition textbooks would be a step toward reflecting more dynamic practice, solely by better representing the numerous possibilities of argument itself. Additionally, texts such as the one imagined here would not only better prepare students for a range of argumentative purposes and for dealing with differences of opinion, background, and positionality, but would also illustrate the expansive character of composition studies as a field and a pedagogical practice. When our textbooks continue to privilege a limited definition of argument, especially academic argument, composition is too easily confined to the role of service course. Textbooks that ask students to consider a variety of discursive practices could shape, support, and even publicize a course in which the variety of writing, argument, and communication practices is the primary subject. Such a course would better reflect the complexity of the field of composition and rhetoric, introducing both students and many teachers to

the depth of study available within this discipline. More importantly, a textbook like the one I imagine would also reflect the complexity of discourse and argument in our society, challenging the very definition of “alternative” argument. When understanding is no longer figured as an alternative curricular goal or subsumed by the intent to persuade, we make strides toward Bay’s goal of highlighting the generative possibilities of argument and of our field.

### **Acknowledgments**

*I would like to thank Kara Northway, Kelly Myers, Lisa Tatonetti, Jessica Enoch, and Brian Johnson for their time and for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this article. Thanks, also, to Kathleen Blake Yancey and the two reviewers for their clarifying questions and suggestions.*

### **Notes**

1. While my focus in this section is on more inexperienced writing instructors, it would be naive to assume that textbooks shape *only* those courses taught by inexperienced instructors.
2. The Bedford/St. Martin’s site divides composition texts into seven categories: argument, creative writing, handbooks, readers, research, rhetorics, and WAC. Many of these categories overlap, however. For example, Bedford/St. Martin’s lists seven argument texts (plus iClaim, a digital resource), but all seven are also listed under “readers” (where one will find forty-eight titles).
3. See also Suzanne Clark, Sally Miller Gearhart, Susan Meisenhelder, and Joyce Trebilcot, among others.
4. It is important to note that textbooks alone cannot be said to perfectly reflect classroom practice. Not every composition teacher uses a textbook, and of those who do, likely few follow the structure of the textbook exactly. Teachers at all ranks supplement textbooks with outside readings, use their own discussion questions, and develop their own activities and assignments to enhance or illustrate primary textbook content. That said, many of us have seen the authority granted to textbooks by students, based in part on the printed, and therefore seemingly fixed, nature of the text. Additionally, as I have noted, the textbook may serve as the primary entry into composition studies for many inexperienced instructors of introductory college writing courses. So while textbooks alone cannot be said to reflect all classroom practice, they should be recognized as a driving force in many composition programs.
5. In his 1997 review of twenty-four argument textbooks, Larry Beason noted that an “essential component” in defining argument in such texts “is that an argument should take a stance on an issue in an attempt to secure agreement” (2). I believe

this definition still holds true over a decade later.

6. For the sake of brevity, I often refer to composition textbooks that are focused on argument as “argument textbooks” or argument texts. I do not mean this term to include those texts outside the realm of composition studies that address how to argue effectively for business, for example.

7. The great majority of materials in *Everything's an Argument*—sample essays or excerpts, response questions, definitions and types of arguments, and supporting materials—privilege the kinds of persuasion common in traditional “academic arguments.” This, of course, makes sense as the textbook authors make quite clear that they focus on this argumentative form.

8. The field of composition studies is no stranger to Carl Rogers’s work. Allan E. Shields published an article in the *Journal of Higher Education* entitled “Socrates Was Not a Rogerian” as early as 1953. Yet Rogerian argument did not make real headway into composition studies until Maxine Hairston’s 1976 CCC article “Carl Rogers’s Alternative to Traditional Rhetoric,” in which Hairston attempted to apply Rogers’s client-centered psychotherapeutic methodology to written discourse.

9. A survey of the newest editions of twenty popular texts reveals that sixteen—four out of five—include specific references to Rogers and Rogerian strategies. Some include full sections or chapters, while others make only brief mention of Rogerian strategies. Lamm and Everett’s *Dynamic Argument*, for example, includes only a brief sidebar reference to Rogers. Other texts, such as Kirszner and Mandell’s *Practical Argument* and Barnet and Bedau’s *From Critical Thinking to Argument*, include full sections or even full chapters—a heartening trend in itself. Yet Rogerian argument in these texts is also turned toward persuasive ends, illustrating not only the impact of Young, Becker, and Pike on Rogerian argument within composition studies, but also the pull toward persuasion noted by Bay. This trend toward persuasion holds true in all but one of the textbooks surveyed (Goshgarian and Krueger’s *Dialogues*).

10. It is interesting that one of the authors drawing attention to this ossification problem in teaching argument is one of the author-editors of *Writing Arguments* (John Ramage).

11. Lunsford, Ruskiewicz, and Walter’s *Everything's an Argument*, for example, is over one thousand pages long.

12. It should be noted that Rogerian argument is not without its own problems. See Phyllis Lassner for a feminist critique of Rogerian argument.

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