

HOW TO ARGUE

Powerfully, Persuasively, Positively

JONATHAN HERRING

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Introduction

Do you hate arguments and avoid them at all costs? Or do you just find that you keep losing them? Perhaps even when you win, somehow you feel it has all been counter-productive?

If so, this is the book for you. It will teach you how to argue well. You'll discover how you can get your points across in a clear and effective way. It will also help you to develop techniques so that you can respond to the arguments of others equally effectively.

Some people love arguments (lawyers and small children in particular). But most people flee them. Sometimes that's a good thing, but often it isn't. Avoiding an argument can mean that the problem simply goes on and is brushed under the rug. The suppressed resentment can poison a relationship or fill a workplace with tension.

In this book we will look at more positive ways of understanding arguments. They needn't be about shouting or imposing your will on someone. A good argument shouldn't involve screaming, squabbling or fistfights, even though too often it does. Shouting matches are rarely beneficial to anyone. Instead, we should view the ability to argue well as an art and a skill.

The ability to argue calmly, rationally and well is a real asset at work and in life. It can sharpen your thinking, test your theories, get you what you want. In any case, it's impossible to avoid arguments. So you need to learn how to argue well. Arguments can be positive. A good argument between friends can be fun and enlivening. An argument can get matters out in the open so

that issues can be dealt with and there are no hidden grudges. Sometimes an argument is necessary to ensure that we get what we are entitled to: if you never argue in favor of a pay raise, you might never get one!

Arguments should be about understanding other people better, sharing ideas and finding mutually beneficial ways ahead. Arguing has sometimes gotten a bad rap. But that's because people often argue badly. That must stop!

“The aim of argument, or of discussion, should not be victory but progress.” Karl Popper

Arguing should lead to a better understanding of another person's point of view and a better understanding of your own. Many people go through their lives simply not understanding how anyone could be a socialist, believe in God, support fox-hunting, or enjoy French films. This happens because they've not discussed these issues with people with whom they disagree. They've not presented their views and had them tested by others. It's astounding how many preconceptions people have about those who are different from them. “It's amazing, I met a Libertarian supporter the other day and they were quite nice,” a friend once said to me. It's only by talking to other people who disagree with you that your own responses become clearer and you can better appreciate the views of others.

This book is in two parts. The first will set out what I call the *Ten Golden Rules of Argument*. These are rules that can be relevant in a whole range of situations: from arguments with a boss, to arguments with a partner, to arguments with your plumber. They'll even work if your partner is the plumber! In the second part I will look at particular situations where arguments commonly arise. We'll put the golden rules into practice.



Chapter

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Golden Rule 1

Be prepared

Those Boy Scouts are on to something. Being prepared for an argument is key to success. Sometimes arguments come out of the blue. But not always. It may be that you realize a difficult business meeting or conversation is going to take place, in which case being prepared is a real advantage.

What do you want?

Before starting an argument think carefully about what it is you are arguing about and what it is you want. This may sound obvious. But it's crucially important. What do you really want from this argument? Do you want the other person just to understand your point of view? Or are you seeking a tangible result? If it's a tangible result, you must ask yourself whether the result you have in mind is realistic and whether it's obtainable. If it's not realistic or obtainable, then a verbal battle might damage a valuable relationship.

Imagine you would like a pay raise. You have arranged a meeting to discuss this with your manager. Think carefully about whether this is a realistic goal. Is it clear the company is making cutbacks and all budgets are being drastically reduced? If so, the likelihood of getting a raise is probably nil and there's little point asking for it. But are there other things you can do to achieve higher pay? Is there a promotion you can apply for? Increased training you can do? Can you offer to do something extra for the company? Think through the options before you enter the room. Always enter an argument with a clear view about what you want at the end.

Framing an argument

When preparing your argument, spend time thinking about how to present your point in a logical way. Admittedly, logic has a bad reputation.

“Logic is the art of going wrong with confidence.” Joseph Krutch

People are often put off by references to logic. There is even suspicion that logic is some kind of clever trick to trip up those who are not “trained” in logic. In fact, there’s no magic to it. True, professional logicians have developed rules of magnificent complexity, but everyday logic is not difficult to grasp.

Logicians talk about a “premise” and a “conclusion.” A premise is a fact upon which it logically follows that there will be a particular conclusion. For example: “I like all action films, therefore I like James Bond movies.” Here the premise is that I like action films and the logical conclusion is that I like James Bond movies. Sometimes several premises are needed to reach a conclusion. In a complex argument, a series of logical conclusions can be drawn from an initial premise. Consider this fine example of an argument:

“[T]he evils of the world are due to moral defects quite as much as to lack of intelligence [premise]. But the human race has not hitherto discovered any method of eradicating moral defects . . . Intelligence, on the contrary, is easily improved by methods known to every competent educator. Therefore, until some method of teaching virtue has been discovered, progress will have to be sought by improvement of intelligence rather than of morals [conclusion].” Bertrand Russell

A good argument, then, is not just saying what you think but offering a set of reasons for it. Bad arguments will involve people simply repeating their conclusions to each other:

Getting it wrong

Bob: “Men can’t do the dishes. They just aren’t programmed that way.”

Marie: “That’s ridiculous.”

Bob: “No, men are just different from women.”

Marie: “That’s sexist—there’s no difference.”

Bob: “It’s just obvious women have different brains.”

Marie: “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

This is typical of many arguments. All Bob and Marie are doing is repeating their conclusions to each other. There’s no possibility of any progression. This is because they are stating their conclusions and not giving the reasons for their beliefs. If either were to say “Now why do you say that?” or “Do you have any evidence for that claim?” then progress could be made. They might be able to begin a useful argument through which each party could start to understand why the other person thinks as they do.

So if you’re trying to make an argument that’s convincing you need to start with some facts (premises) that the other party will accept as true and then move to a conclusion that must logically flow from the premise. There are two things you need to be confident about:

1. Make sure your facts (your premises) are correct.
2. Make sure that your conclusions necessarily follow from your facts.

Facts

We need to say a little bit more about facts.

Using facts

It should be obvious that facts are essential to many debates and arguments. Before starting any argument it’s important

you discover the information about it. You're going to lose an argument about the benefits of the European Monetary Union if you have only read a couple of blogs about it and are discussing the issue with a professor in economics. You'll lose an argument about a pay raise if you don't know what similar workers in your company and in other companies are earning. Arguing without facts is like trying to make a snowman with cold water.

Finding facts

Unless you are someone's parent, or are particularly well-respected, "because I say so" isn't going to get you very far. You need to refer to facts to back up your argument. The Internet is most people's first stop for information, although it's well known that this must be used with care.

It's dangerous to assume things are true just because they're well known. Here are some well-known assumptions that are simply wrong:

- Goldfish have a memory of only a few seconds. False: in experiments it has been found that goldfish can navigate complex mazes.
- Thomas Crapper invented the flush toilet. False: it was invented by Sir John Harrington in 1596.
- Shaving makes hair grow back quicker. False: it doesn't, nor does it make hair thicker or coarser.

Of course, libraries, newspapers, magazines and friends can also provide a source of information too. Make sure your source of information is respected.

Is the information reliable?

This is an important part of the task and needs to be handled with care.

- The source of the statistics can be key. The best source may be a group or organization that is respected by the person you're arguing with. If that's not possible, then an organization that is neutral or very well regarded. A study produced by a small pressure group on the dangers of eating too much meat is unlikely to be as persuasive as a report by the World Health Organization saying the same thing. So consider: Who produced the study? Was the group likely to be biased? Is it a respected body or a little-known pressure group?
- What source will most influence the person you're arguing with? If you tell a creationist what an atheist scientist has said they may be suspicious. However, give them a study from a scientist who is Christian and they may be more convinced. Otherwise it's easy for them to dismiss the study as "biased."
- With regard to citing statistics to support your argument, how large was the sample? When a study is undertaken this normally involves interviewing or testing a sample of people and generalizing from that. So if 100 people are interviewed about, say, whether they like Nutella and it is found that 38 do, we are told that 38 percent of people like Nutella. Of course this does not mean that everyone in the world was asked, but the researcher assumes that if 38 percent of the sample liked Nutella then it is likely to reflect the opinion of people generally. However, crucial to this assumption is the size of the sample. If you asked just two people if they like Nutella and one did, that would be weak evidence that 50 percent of people liked Nutella. You couldn't assume that the views of two people would match the whole population! Generally the larger the sample the more reliable the survey is likely to be. If the study doesn't say how many people were involved, be suspicious. Be very suspicious.
- Another statistic issue: how representative was the sample? Always find out who was surveyed. If you interviewed only

those visiting a Nutella museum then it would not be surprising that a large number of people liked Nutella. Watch out particularly for groups who say “of those who phoned our hotline, 86 percent agreed that ...” If people contacted the pressure group for help they are likely to be sympathetic to the group’s aims. You can’t assume they are representative of all people. The best studies are those that sample a large cross-section of the population, and these results will better support your argument.

A study found that 70 percent of smokers surveyed had tried to stop smoking, and not one had succeeded. That sounds like terrible news for those trying to stop smoking. However, the poll had only interviewed smokers. So it was hardly surprising there were no successes!

- Listen carefully to what is being claimed. Be especially wary of “up to” claims. If the argument evidence shows that pollution levels have risen by up to 35 percent that means that 35 percent is the very top level the evidence indicates. The true average figure is not disclosed and may be much less than 35 percent. Also beware of studies showing that people are “possibly” and/or “considering” something. A survey that showed that more than 50 percent of people were possibly considering using air travel less hardly shows that people are flying less!
- Watch out for “maybe” or “don’t know.” Consider a survey where people were asked, “Should the UK leave the EU?” They were allowed to answer “yes,” “no,” or “don’t know.” Let’s imagine 15 percent of people say “yes,” 20 percent say “no,” and 65 percent say “don’t know.” You can present the last two statistics by saying 85 percent of those questioned did not support the UK leaving the EU, or 80 percent of those questioned supported the UK remaining in the EU.
- Be very careful of percentages. Take a (fictitious) claim that drinking coffee increases your risk of heart attack by 35 percent. Such a claim may well send you heading for the nearest bar. But before you do, such a statistic is highly misleading. First, we need to know to whom the risk applies. Is the

increased risk only for those of a certain age, or those prone to heart attacks, or for the “average person”? Secondly, you need to think about what the risk of heart attack is in the first place. We could say that going for walks in the countryside increases your risk of being hit by an asteroid by 300 percent, but you would probably not worry because the risk isn’t high in the first place. So a horrifying-looking increase in a risk is irrelevant if the original risk is very low.

There are two lessons here. First, if you are going to rely on statistics make sure they are the best ones available: from a reliable source, with a large sample, with a clear conclusion. Secondly, if the person you are arguing with presents statistics ask some of the questions above. You might then explain why your study is far more convincing than theirs.

Explaining statistics

Don’t assume that the more statistics you have the better. A few well-placed statistics can be more effective than a long stream of them, which will leave the listener drowsy and confused. Only the most hardened statistic-nerd can take in more than a couple in a conversation. If necessary you can always say: “I have a lot of statistics I could use, but let me tell you these two.”

Present statistics well. It may be you’re addressing people who are familiar with the use of them, but often people find statistics hard to grasp. It can be best to present them in as personal a way as possible. So instead of saying “Twenty-five percent of women will experience domestic violence at some point in their lives,” it might be more effective to say: “If you have a room of twenty women you could expect five to have experienced domestic violence.” Not only does that make the statistic easier to understand, but it has more dramatic impact.

Tip: If statistics are about money and you want to show how expensive something is, put them in terms of individuals. For example: “If we took the money that it will cost to buy the furniture for the reception area and divide it between the people at this meeting, we could all afford a two-week trip to Florida.”

It's an easy and all too common mistake to make generalizations: "Everyone knows . . .," "All illegal immigrants . . ." These overarching statements are simply asking to be refuted by an exception that shows that the statement is untrue. There are very few statements of this generalized kind that cannot be refuted, so avoid using generalizations.

All generalizations should be avoided—except this one!

Presenting an argument

A key part of preparing for any confrontation is not only marshalling facts and reasons but thinking of how to present them. Obviously this will depend a bit on whether the argument is part of a meeting, a conversation or a presentation. But the basic principles will be the same.

Make it clear what you're arguing for and why

It's always good to set out at the start what you're arguing for and why. Consider this opening of an argument:

“The company should support the proposal to purchase the building at 3 New Street. I will demonstrate three reasons why. First, doing so will generate a considerable profit. Secondly, we have a real need for more space. Thirdly, it will improve the public image of the company.”

At the very start the arguer makes it clear what they're arguing in favor of and informs the listener by giving evidence of the three facts that will establish the case. Similarly, at the end of the argument repeat what has been shown:

“So we have seen that adopting this proposal to buy 3 New Street will generate considerable profit. We are in desperate need of space and buying that building will sort that problem out. Thirdly, adopting this proposal will greatly improve the public image of the company. I urge you to support this proposal.”

Note that the start and conclusion have put the reasons supporting the argument in their simplest form. There is obviously much more that might need to be said in the middle, but start and end with the three key points you're using to support your argument.

Tip: There is a well-known rule: tell people what you are going to say; then tell them again; then tell them what you have said. This is often said. For a good reason: it's extremely good advice.

One benefit of repetition is that, simply, it drives a fact home. Repeating a point at least three times is a popular technique of advertisers. Once you have heard five times that a particular product kills all known germs, you start to believe it.

Summary

Prepare for arguments well. Make sure you have researched your facts. Choose carefully the key arguments you will rely on. Work out what are the basic points you want to make and how you will present the arguments.

In practice

Write down what you want to say in bullet points. Use the following structure:

- premise
- supporting facts/reasons
- conclusion.

Keep your notes brief, then speak them out loud, slowly, three times. Then when it comes to having your argument, whether with a doctor, your spouse or an electrician, you will be able to speak “off the cuff” in a convincing way. Of course, refer to your notes if you find it helpful.

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