

Critical Voter Lesson Plan – Argumentation

Overview

One of the most important elements of critical thinking, especially in a political context, is *argumentation*. Most people think of any loud disagreement as an example of an argument. But an argument is actually a cooperative enterprise in which people are engaging one another to find an answer to a common question or a solution to a common problem, even if they are proposing radically different ways of getting to their shared goal.

It is important that students understand the distinction between an argument in this critical thinking sense and something that is not an argument (such as a fight). Students will also learn the difference between *forensic arguments* (used to determine what happened in the past, or to lay blame), *demonstrative arguments* (which praise or condemn individuals or a present situation) and *deliberative arguments* (which debate options for the future). They should also understand why most effective arguments (including political arguments) should primarily be deliberative.

Students will also be introduced to the concept of *fallacies*, including the difference between formal and informal fallacies, and will be introduced to common fallacies seen in political discourse. Finally, they will learn how to use Toulmin diagrams in order to create argument maps that can provide a better understanding of an argument's strengths and weaknesses.

Terminology

Important vocabulary terms used in this lesson include:

- Argument
- Argumentation
- Forensic argument
- Demonstrative argument
- Deliberative argument
- Fallacy
- Formal fallacy
- Informal fallacy
- Specific fallacies (Fallacy of Composition, Fallacy of Moderation, Post-Hoc Fallacy, etc.)
- Toulmin argument maps

Critical Voter Lesson Plan – Argumentation

Goals

The goal if this lesson is to give students an understanding of:

- What is (and is not) an argument
- The difference between forensic, demonstrative and deliberative arguments and when each type of argument should be used
- Fallacies, including the difference between formal and informal fallacies and fallacies seen frequently during a political campaign, such as the Fallacy of Composition, the Fallacy of Moderation and the Post-Hoc Fallacy
- How arguments can be diagrammed using Toulmin argument maps

Primary Resources

The following resources are available at the www.criticalvoter.com web site to support this lesson:

- **Critical Voter:** Chapter 5 (Argumentation), 6 (More Fallacies), and 7 (Mathematical Deception)
- **Check for Understanding** – A short quiz designed to determine if someone has understood material in the reading.
- **Blog Entries** – To find additional examples and information on the Critical Voter blog (if available), select “Argumentation” and “Fallacies” in the blog’s **Category** list.

Additional Resources

[Thank You for Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us About the Art of Persuasion](#) by Jay Heinrichs.

Lists of fallacies: <http://www.nizkor.org/features/fallacies/>

Critical Voter Lesson Plan – Argumentation

Suggested Activities

Activity	Notes on this activity
<p>Have students read the assigned book chapters and answer the Check for Understanding questions to ensure they have understood the concepts covered in this lesson.</p>	<p>The Check for Understanding quiz is made up of questions which were designed to be easily answerable by anyone who has read the book chapters in their entirety.</p>
<p>Ask students to provide examples of what they consider to be arguments and together determine if these examples represent a genuine argument or something that is not an argument (such as a fight).</p>	<p>Examples could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A conflict between friends • A classroom discussion • Statements made in a courtroom • Exchanges during a press conference • A debate taking place on a cable news program
<p>Provide students with a political speech (such as the stump speech of one of the Presidential candidates) as well as three colored markers. Ask them to color code statements in the speech that represent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forensic arguments • Demonstrative arguments • Deliberative arguments 	<p>Once this exercise is completed, discuss whether the speech was primarily forensic (past tense), demonstrative (present tense) or deliberative (future tense) in nature.</p> <p>Discuss the effectiveness of the speech based on the balance between past, present and future tenses used during the speech.</p>
<p>Ask students to think of (or look for) examples of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Fallacy of Composition • The Fallacy of Moderation • Post-hoc Fallacy 	<p>Students should be able to determine why these are examples of fallacies as well as be able to determine when arguments related to parts of a whole (Composition), middle-of-the-road thinking (Moderation), and cause-and-effect (Post-hoc) can be legitimate or fallacious.</p> <p>Once they are familiar with common fallacies, they can also explore (or go on a “scavenger hunt” through various news sources) to find colorful, less-common fallacies.</p>
<p>Ask students to create a Toulmin diagram based on simple arguments brought up in class.</p>	<p>Once students are comfortable with the Toulmin model, have them map out more complex arguments (such as one contained in a negative campaign commercial) using material in Chapter 5 and the “Romney vs. Toulmin” Case Study from <i>Critical Voter</i> as a guide.</p>