Constructing Effective Arguments

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1. The problem: How can speakers construct effective arguments?

Social actors make arguments for a range of purposes, such as to reflect on their own reasoning (Hoffmann 2016), to induce audiences to perform cognitive activities that may be precursors to belief or action such as wondering, considering, and looking for evidence (Pinto 1991), to accept accountability for a position (Andone 2015), to display identity (Hample and Irions 2015), and more. In this chapter I focus on making arguments for a proposal in order to influence audiences to consider the merits of the proposal.

By “making arguments” I mean the strategy of communicating linguistically explicable premise-conclusion units (O’Keefe 1982), distinguishable from other strategies such as using vivid descriptions, marching in protest, or drawing a border around some text that includes arguments (Jacobs 2000). When constructing effective arguments, social actors need to consider the full range of rhetorical strategies, in addition to making arguments, that they can use to get audiences to reason well (Jacobs 2006). Rhetorical traditions show that social actors have been inventing ways of managing disagreement in reasonable manners for centuries (Jackson 2015).

Proposing is a widespread illocutionary act—an act performed just by saying something (Austin 1962). Social actors propose in a range of contexts: proposing a policy at a school board meeting, proposing a topic for a research paper, proposing to a committee that a project receive funding, proposing a destination for a family vacation, and more. To address the range of contexts in which social actors make proposals and the various design options that contexts present, such as school board meeting procedures or the parameters of a research paper assignment, I limit the discussion to communication design strategies, or how social actors design contexts just by saying something (Goodwin 2007; Jackson and Aakhus 2014). What strategies can social
actors use to construct effective arguments for a proposal, where “effective” arguments are arguments that audiences are influenced to scrutinize?

Social scientific researchers have identified factors that may influence the likelihood that audiences will scrutinize arguments. For example, on one hand, if personal involvement in an issue is low, then even if a social actor designs a proposal that includes many strong arguments to show why the matter is relevant to the audience, audience members may simply assume that the high number of arguments means the proposal was well-researched, and warrant their attitude about the proposal by that assumption rather than think carefully about the merits of the arguments (Petty and Cacioppo 1984). On the other hand, undistracted audiences who are knowledgeable, have a high need for cognition and high personal involvement with an issue, may scrutinize arguments by assessing the relevance and sufficiency of evidence, considering counter-proposals, playing devil’s advocate, and so on (O’Keefe 2013). Many of these factors are beyond the proposer’s ability to address directly, and focus on human cognition to the exclusion of actual circumstances of people’s lives—their race, class, gender, ability, and more (hooks 2015). How can social actors construct effective arguments for proposals to influence even reluctant audiences to make special efforts, such as finding a quiet location or acquiring background knowledge, to scrutinize them?

Textbooks typically cover communication strategies proposers may use to construct effective arguments: undertaking and discharging a burden of proof, addressing stock issues, adapting to the audience, and using style and broader language strategies. In what follows I introduce argumentation theory developed by Communication Studies researchers (e.g., Goodwin 2011; Innocenti and Miller 2016; Jacobs 2000; Kauffeld 1998; van Eemeren et al. 2014) that explains why these strategies may reasonably be expected to influence audiences to scrutinize arguments for a proposal. The theory is called “normative pragmatic theory” because it accounts for the persuasive force of strategies social actors actually use (“pragmatic”) by the norms that strategies bring to bear in the situation (“normative”). The theories hold that strategies influence because they bring to bear norms that audiences presumably want to enact, such as acting prudently, holding well-informed opinions, living up to the “golden rule,” and more. To avoid criticism for ignorance, holding double-standards, and so on, audience members can be influenced by the strategies.

2. Undertaking and discharging a burden of proof

Textbooks typically discuss making arguments for proposals in terms of presumptions and burdens of proof. Students may be familiar with a presumption of innocence: a defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty; the prosecution has the burden of proof. In the context of a policy debate, students
or instructors may assign the burden of proof to those proposing changes to the status quo; the status quo has the presumption. But why do social actors in a range of more or less formal, institutional through interpersonal contexts, willingly undertake a burden of proof when making a proposal, even in contexts where a burden of proof is not simply assigned by, say, the forms of process in a legal institution or an instructor assigning a research paper?

The answer involves describing presumptions and burdens of proof in terms of the kinds of responsibilities incurred just by the act of proposing. A presumption may be described as an inference or a kind of reason based on what social actors believe someone would not risk doing due to the resentment it could occasion (Kauffeld 2001). For example, statements designed to get audiences to believe something engage a presumption of veracity: audiences can presume that a proposer would not risk their resentment for lying or ignorance unless she had made a responsible effort to ascertain the truth of what she was saying. Statements made for a proposal engage a presumption of veracity, but ordinarily just a presumption of veracity is not sufficient to influence audiences to give a proposal serious consideration (Kauffeld 1998; Pinto 2007). To construct a proposal that influences audiences to scrutinize arguments for its merits, typically a social actor needs to say more than “I propose x.”

One strategy proposers use is deliberately, openly undertaking and discharging a burden of proof. In fact, ordinarily proposers are not simply advised but in fact are obligated to be able to give reasons why a proposal deserves consideration (Kauffeld 1998). First, it would be incoherent for a proposer to say, “I propose x, but I cannot give you any reasons why we ought to x.” Second, a proposer who says, “I propose x,” but gives few or poor reasons why the audience ought to x, risks the audience’s resentment for wasting their time. Just saying “I propose x” licenses audiences to presume the proposer has good reasons in support of the proposal; audiences can presume the proposer would not risk their resentment for wasting their time unless she could show the merits of her proposal (Kauffeld 1998). A proposer can forestall the risk of resentment by making good on that presumption—by showing that she has good reasons for making the proposal. Moreover, a proposer can make further efforts—undertake additional burdens—to license audiences to presume that her proposal merits attention and scrutiny. For example, she can show that she has taken into account doubts and objections that may be raised by the audience. By bringing to bear a norm that prudent people attend to messages that take their interests into account and display hallmarks of rationality, a proposer makes it risky for audiences who want to lay claim to acting prudently to ignore or perfunctorily dismiss the proposal. Undertaking and
discharging a burden of proof influences audiences to scrutinize arguments for a proposal in order to avoid criticism for acting imprudently.

3. Addressing stock issues

What kinds of reasons can a proposer give to an audience to make good on the obligation to have reasons? Again, textbooks typically suggest an effective strategy: addressing stock issues. Different textbooks may express stock issues in somewhat different ways. One possible list of stock issues for making a case that problems or needs ought to be addressed is the following:

- Conditions exist.
- The conditions result in harmful consequences.
- The harms are significant.
- The conditions are inherent to the system.

One possible list of stock issues for making a case for a solution or remedy is the following:

- The solution is possible.
- The solution will address the problem.
- The solution will produce additional benefits.
- The solution will not introduce new problems.
- The advantages of the solution outweigh the disadvantages.
- The solution is the best alternative.
- The solution is legal, fair, just, moral.

By addressing stock issues, a proposer can show that the proposal is well-researched, carefully-considered, and the like, and takes into account objections, queries, doubts, and so on that audiences may raise. So the strategy of addressing stock issues engages the presumption of veracity as well as a presumption that the proposer would not risk criticism for wasting the audience’s time, misleading them, and the like, unless she had made a responsible effort to think carefully about the issues, collect evidence, consider its sufficiency and relevance, and so on. These presumptions are reasons the audience now has to scrutinize arguments for the proposal. To avoid a risk of criticism for ignoring, disregarding, dismissing a well-researched proposal that takes their queries, doubts, and so on into consideration—to continue acting in accord with a norm that prudent people attend to messages that display hallmarks of rationality—they can scrutinize the arguments.

Addressing stock issues may not be a straightforward task in actual situations where issues are indeterminate or social actors clash about whether
something is an issue or what the issues ought to be. For example, proposers may need to make statements about what the “real” issues are and show that particular issues must be addressed to avoid future criticism for “wishful thinking” in case audience members refuse or fail to see that some matter is an issue (Goodwin 2002). Making arguments is a strategy for showing that some matter is an issue at all and worth arguing about. In short, constructing effective arguments for proposals involves making situated judgments to decide and then special efforts to show that something is an issue at all and to show that it is worth arguing about.

4. Adapting to the audience

The situated judgments that social actors need to make in order to decide how to design effective arguments for a proposal include deciding how to adapt to audiences. Typically textbooks suggest collecting different kinds of information about the audience in order to tailor arguments to the audience. For example, proposers may be able to collect demographic information about audience members’ ages, races, ethnicities, genders, nationalities, and more. In addition, proposers may survey audience members about their attitudes, beliefs, and values. As with other topics typically covered in textbooks, this is good information to consider when designing arguments for a proposal for a specific audience. Deploying that information in a proposal shows that the proposer has made special efforts to take into account the audience’s interests, so brings to bear a norm that prudent people will attend to messages that take their interests into account (Kaufeld 1998). To avoid a risk of criticism for acting imprudently, audiences can scrutinize the arguments for the proposal.

Perhaps proposers may easily collect that sort of information if they are constructing arguments for persons with whom they are familiar and have ongoing arguments (Gilbert 2014). But scenarios may present for which proposers do not know or are mistaken in their assumptions about the attitudes, beliefs, values, or demographics of persons with whom they are familiar. The difficulty of collecting that sort of information at all, or of using it to construct a coherent case for a proposal, is even higher in circumstances where an audience comprises diverse groups, and diverse groups comprise diverse individuals, or where a proposal may reach unintended audiences or unknowable future audiences (Tindale 2013). What general, theory-based advice can be given to proposers who want to adapt their arguments to their audience? How can proposers address the challenge of adapting to diverse audiences in their particularity?

Proposers can use strategies that bring to bear in the situation norms that involve the audience members acting as the kinds of persons they want to claim to be. Making arguments—stating claims and giving reasons—brings
to bear norms of acting reasonably, so people who live up to the norms—who are influenced to scrutinize the arguments—can lay claim to acting reasonably. Other strategies such as using humor can bring to bear other kinds of norms that enable audiences to act as the kinds of persons they want to claim to be. For example, in the case of an historical argument that women in New York State ought to have the right to vote, if audiences “get” a humorous refutation of the serious claim that giving women the vote would lead to domestic strife—one that humorously predicts domestic harmony because when men solicit each other’s votes, they buy each other drinks and smokes—then they can lay claim to being informed, unsentimental, politically savvy (Innocenti and Miller 2016).

Further, proposers can make these norms determinate to structure the interaction (Tracy 2010). For example, they can make statements about what reasonable, tolerant, thinking, open-minded people would do. Or they can narrate personal experiences that display these kinds of norms. For example, they can say that at one time they acted out of ignorance or fear, but now, in light of their own efforts to collect information and experiences, have changed their minds. These kinds of strategies hold both proposers and audiences accountable for living up to the norms or risking criticism for failing to live up to them. The strategies can be used to construct effective arguments for proposals, because the norms they bring to bear in the situation provide grounds for action and are sources of influence.

5. Using style and language strategies

Constructing effective arguments for a proposal involves attending to style. Analytically it is possible to separate arguments from style. Reconstructing arguments as premise-conclusion units to assess the acceptability, relevance, and sufficiency of premises does just that, and is a fundamental skill of critical thinking. When constructing effective arguments for proposals, it is possible to model the style on a reconstruction such that a reconstruction would look exactly like the argument as presented. Ordinarily actual arguments do not take the pristine shape of a reconstruction. In constructing effective arguments, proposers make stylistic choices from word choice to sentence structure to broader units of discourse, so making arguments is inseparable from style (Fahnestock 1999, 2011). In addition, proposers make other stylistic choices as they supplement the strategy of making arguments with other kinds of strategies that can enhance people’s capacity or ability to choose when to scrutinize arguments (Jacobs 2000, 2006; O’Keefe 1995).

One way of explaining the effectiveness of particular language strategies is cognitively. For example, clarity is necessary for message comprehensibility and increases the likelihood that audiences will scrutinize arguments
(Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Normative pragmatic theory explains why clarity is typically foregrounded in discussions of style from some of the earliest reflections on style and argument such as in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. Effective arguments that generate persuasive force require that social actors openly, deliberately intend to influence audiences, so proposers cannot plausibly deny their intent to influence audiences to seriously consider the merits of the proposal (Kauffeld 1998, 2001). As a result, proposing openly, with clarity, stylistically creates conditions that reduce the proposer’s “wiggle room”, constraining her from dodging obligations she incurs just by proposing, as discussed in the “Undertaking and discharging a burden of proof” section. Clarity makes vivid a presumption that the proposer would not risk the audience’s resentment for wasting their time unless she had good reasons for proposing.

When constructing effective arguments for proposals, proposers can consider the obligations and responsibilities they are willing to undertake and discharge, and make stylistic choices accordingly. For example, they may choose to use vivid descriptions to display the adequacy of a premise and, by doing so, hold both themselves and audiences accountable for seeing, say, the nature and significance of a problem (Manolescu 2005). Or they may choose to make powerful emotional appeals that license presumptions such as: the proposer would not risk criticism for manipulation unless she had made efforts to ascertain the high stakes of the situation (Jacobs 2006; Manolescu 2006).

**6. Conclusion**

In summary, it is possible to provide theory-based rationales for the kinds of actions typically recommended for constructing effective arguments for proposals: undertaking and discharging a burden of proof, addressing stock issues, adapting to the audience, and using style and other language strategies. In all cases, these actions may be designed by proposers to influence audiences to scrutinize arguments for a proposal by making it risky not to. Strategies bring to bear different norms—acting prudently, holding well-informed positions, possessing political savvy, living up to the “golden rule”, and more—that are designed to structure the interaction by pressuring audiences to act in accord with them. As it turns out, one of the best strategies a proposer can use to display these qualities and thereby pressure audiences to act in accord with them is making arguments.
References


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About the author:

Beth Innocenti has authored numerous essays on contemporary and historical argumentation theory and the entry “Argumentation” in Oxford Bibliographies in Communication. Her research has been published in journals such as Argumentation, Philosophy and Rhetoric, and Journal of Communication, and explains how social actors design speech acts and strategies—such as demanding, using humor, and making fear appeals—to influence addresseees as openly intended. She has also published accounts of historical theories of argument proffered by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers on rhetoric. She serves as Editor of Argumentation and Advocacy and on the editorial board of Philosophy of Rhetoric. She is currently Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas and has served as Department Chair, Director of Graduate Studies, and Director of Undergraduate Studies. The department houses faculty and graduate students who coach one of the best collegiate debate teams in the United States.