

How to Win Arguments

Robert Allen



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Originally published in 1998 and now available as an ebook. The essential guide to the ins and outs of arguments – and how to make sure you always win them. Although it is not considered polite to argue, we all do it constantly. It is our device for persuading, cajoling or bullying others into giving in to us. This vital book shows you how you can argue more effectively. Robert Allen describes all the strategies and tactics for winning an argument, and teaches you how to cope with the ploys and dirty tricks of your opponents. Discover: • what causes an argument • the different types of argument • how body language, verbal skills and relaxation techniques can help you win every time. How to Win Arguments contains everything you need to know to come out on top.

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INTRODUCTION

Heated Exchanges

How good are you at getting your own way? Do you usually persuade people to do what you want or do you sometimes feel that you get put upon by others who have greater powers of persuasion? The subject is, of course, a delicate one. In theory ‘getting your own way’ is rather frowned upon and our parents and teachers always discouraged us from being too pushy. However, there will always be ruthlessly ambitious people who have no qualms about pushing others around to get what they want out of life. Unless we live a life of total seclusion, we are bound to come up against such people, and must be prepared to deal with them if we don’t want to be pushed around ourselves. We may try to live a quiet life away from the fighting, but those of us with goals and ambitions are unlikely to achieve them without stepping into the ring. The rules of the playground, though uncivilized, dominate our lives to the grave.

As humans we live, work and play together in social groups such as families, firms, institutions and nations, all in social cooperation with each other. However, we are, each of us, autonomous: we have free will. And like other animals, even social animals, we are competitive. How does the autonomous individual seek to influence the behaviour of the social group? By argument. We seek to persuade others to our point of view. However, as we all know, that is a bland description of a process that is, in practice, decidedly colourful. For human nature dictates that the process of persuasion is invested with such importance that when we are thwarted the result might be anything from mild frustration to anger, violence or even, in extreme cases, outright war. This makes argument, and how we can get our own way, a subject of compelling interest to us all.

The truth, unattractive as it may be, is that we all argue constantly. Much of this argument occurs at a fairly innocuous level and we therefore tend not to notice what we are doing. In any case, because we have been cautioned from our earliest years that loud, public disagreement is in bad taste, we often try to pretend it is not happening. We say things like, ‘We weren’t arguing; we were just discussing.’ If we come across people involved in an unseemly squabble (and we are conditioned to regard any quarrel not involving ourselves as unseemly), our usual reaction is to turn away. ‘I wasn’t going to get involved in an argument,’ we tell our friends later. The result is that argument, like death, is a subject we tend to avoid thinking about. This is a pity. For if the objective of argument is to persuade, then what we are doing is to make ourselves less effective persuaders. Also, as we shall see later, the process of argument is a uniquely human way of providing a safety valve for powerful feelings. Many animals indulge in threat displays that resolve conflict without risking damage to the participants, but humans who feel frustrated by the lack of cooperation shown by others can engage in a whole series of verbal manoeuvres before they resort to beating each other over the head with a brick. In societies where this safety valve is deliberately blocked, violence may be explosive and unpredictable.

So let’s cast aside our natural reluctance and take a good, hard look at how we argue. By studying the processes involved we may be able to learn to make ourselves more effective at using them. Perhaps we should take as our model the self-defence class. It is one of the basic principles of self-defence that, because you will not have time to think when you are actually attacked, you should prepare yourself in advance to the point where your reactions are fluent and automatic. Argument is often bound up with human aggression and with consequently heightened levels of emotion. It follows that we should practise before any dire necessity arises.

Arguments are never the verbal free-for-all we might assume. They are highly structured and there are many distinct categories, all with their own rules and tactics. It is possible to identify a number of elements in all arguments, including emotional content, concern for the truth, status of the

participants and self-interest of the participants. However, the relative proportions of such elements in different types of argument can be a very important guide to the tactics that we should adopt in a given situation. This process of analysing arguments and learning in advance how to respond forms a large part of this book. We must understand that a tiff with our partner is different in both kind and scale from, say, a legal wrangle conducted in the courts. Both are arguments and will be carried on according to rules, but they will be as different from each other as Rugby Union and Rugby League. (As my former games master succinctly put it, 'Same shaped ball, different games.')

We shall look at tactics used in argument and learn how to make them work effectively for us. There is a whole section devoted to different tactics, both aggressive and defensive, that will help you argue better. They have been culled from witnessing many hours of actual argument and are recommended for their efficacy. We shall also look at the 'dirty tricks' of argument and see what can be done to guard against them. This brings me to an important point. Much of what goes on in argument is the sort of behaviour we are not proud of. It shows us at our worst and not as we would wish to see ourselves. When we argue, we may have all sorts of justifications for what we are doing, but the plain truth is that we are trying to get our own way. Quite often we do so directly at the expense of someone else and in the full knowledge that our victory may inflict damage on our opponent. I am merely commenting on how these ends are achieved. I am not recommending that you should suddenly adopt a repertoire of dodgy tactics and use them to bully and cajole those around you to do your will. Moral decisions about what is fair and what is not are left, at all times, up to you.

We are also going to consider what 'winning' and 'losing' really mean. It is interesting that we so often regard argument as a competition. In spite of all those earnest American scholars of Management Studies, with their talk of 'principled negotiation', most of the time we want to see a winner and a loser. But is it enough merely to outwit your opponent in a battle of verbal skill or do you require some specific result that will be to your advantage? The two aims are often incompatible. Also we have to bear in mind those oriental mystics who would sagely point out to us that, in many cases, losing (or appearing to lose) is winning. Actually this insight is not confined to Zen monks and Taoist sages – they share it with most women, especially the married ones.

This brings us to another point. Do men and women argue differently? Do they employ different tactics, argue about different things or have different concepts of what constitutes winning and losing? Are women happier than men to reach a consensus? These are some of the issues to which we shall be paying attention.

Also we shall look at the psychology of argument and, using techniques from a number of different disciplines, try to understand the mechanics at work when we argue. We shall devise strategies for a more effective use of arguing skills and try to use psychological insights to understand an opponent's motives and strategy. In particular, the techniques of transactional analysis will be recommended as a means of understanding some of the forces at work in an argument.

I must also add a personal comment about self-help books. They have always bothered me. Surely the reader is entitled to ask, 'Who is this person and what gives him the right to lecture me?' It is a fair question and is seldom answered. You are expected to take the author on trust. My answer is this: I assume that since you are reading this book you feel that your arguing skills could do with improvement. Naturally bossy, assertive people are unlikely to have strayed further than the front cover. I am not a professional in the field of argument (though I do have some psychological training). I have made a study of argument because the subject fascinates me. Like most people I have often felt that I could have given a better account of myself in arguments and have regretted lost opportunities. However, the sort of writer who happily advises shy people to smile and offer a new acquaintance a friendly handshake is rather missing the point. If they were capable of doing that they would not be shy in the first place. So all the advice I intend to give is intensely practical and has been thoroughly researched and tested. If an idea has proved reliable I shall recommend it warmly, but where a particular tactic is of only marginal value I shall mention it with an appropriate 'health

warning' attached. I am certain that you will not finish the book without having learned a number of skills that will improve your arguing ability significantly.

Although you will find a list of recommended books in the appendix these will not help you half as much as observing arguments for yourself. There is no problem about this, they are happening around us all the time. Any bus queue, crowded shopping centre, car park, railway station, TV debate, radio phone-in or playground squabble will provide you with ample opportunity to study. The art is to listen attentively and take a dispassionate interest in what is going on. This is a difficult habit for many of us to cultivate because we have such a deeply ingrained dislike of hearing people bicker. We know full well that we are only a hair's breadth away from violence and our instinct is to put as much distance between ourselves and the cause of the trouble as possible. But try not to run away. Most arguments are merely ludicrous rather than threatening. Most of the anger is bluff and will never lead to blows. If you watch what is happening closely you will see that much of what is happening is ritualized and predictable. Once you understand the ritual you are well placed to control its direction. The techniques that are being used effectively by one arguer can be easily adapted for use by yourself. And because so few people bother to study argument properly you, who have taken the time to do so, will be in a position to win.

One final point. Throughout the book, in the interests of brevity, I have used the male third person singular pronouns. No sinister sexist sub-text should be found in this; unless otherwise stated, my remarks apply as much to women as to men.

CHAPTER ONE

Things You Should Know

What Makes an Argument?

The question seems unnecessary. After all, argument is a universal human activity in which we all engage as regularly and naturally as breathing. Even if we have never given much thought to the theory behind it, we have enough practical experience to recognize an argument the moment we become embroiled in one or hear others engaged in verbal conflict.

However, if we are to avoid misunderstandings later there are a few points to sort out at the start. *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* says that to argue is 'to discuss with reasoning'. Reasoning? Two cars collide on a cold, wet Monday morning in the rush hour. One, driven by a 25-year-old junior executive, a sporty job with a souped-up engine and go-faster stripes down the sides, was going much too fast and skidded in the wet. The other is driven by a woman doing the school run with two small children in the back seat. How much reasoning would you expect to hear? Would a calm, impartial and mutually satisfactory discussion be the most likely outcome? Experience tells us that the ensuing argument would probably be high on emotion, low on reasoning.

Eventually the police appear and tempers are calmed. But while the adults talk, one of the children steals the other's teddy bear and throws it into the front seat. Will they sort out their differences by an exchange of reasons? Even the most limited observation of young children will make you aware that reason rarely plays a part in such exchanges. People are not wholly rational creatures and their arguments are seldom based purely on reason. Of course, human beings know how to use reason and may well do so when trying to justify their actions but that is a far cry from acting consistently in a rational manner. Most human arguments are conducted in an atmosphere that reeks of emotion, manipulation, self-interest, false reasoning, bigotry and propaganda. This book aims to show you how to survive that jungle.

In America there is currently a great vogue for analysing and teaching negotiation skills. The business section of every bookshop and library has handbooks offering to improve the reader's negotiating technique. University courses are offered to those hoping that their business careers will be enhanced by a talent for negotiating. Harvard boasts the distinguished Harvard Negotiation Project whose aim is to 'develop and disseminate improved methods of negotiation and mediation'. This morning's newspaper even contains an advertisement for a twenty-page report which for £19.70 promises to reveal '38 of the dirtiest tactics used by professional negotiators' and '... how to handle them'.

However, although negotiation is one part of the area we shall be discussing, it is by no means the whole of it. There is a fundamental difference between negotiation and argument.

In a negotiation, both sides, however much they try to look detached and disinterested, are searching for an agreement. Naturally they want the most advantageous settlement they can get and during the course of the discussions they will try all manner of stratagems to achieve that aim. If they feel that there is no possibility of getting a sufficiently favourable settlement then the negotiations may be broken off for some time, but still deep down they want agreement. They may even need one desperately. Take a look, for example, at the war that has followed the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. Much of the time peace seems impossible and repeatedly the various factions have met to negotiate and have then parted without reaching a settlement. Yet all the parties are well aware that no state can exist in a condition of permanent civil war and therefore, at some stage, a negotiated settlement will have to be found. Similar situations exist in the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Rwanda and many other world trouble spots. However bitter the differences that divide one side from another, there is always a need for people who live in close proximity to get on with each other. Since human

society is impossible without that element of cooperation, in the end negotiation must always be the answer. Even the Troubles in Northern Ireland, which have persisted for twenty-five years and are based upon disagreements hundreds of years old are at last being settled by negotiation.

Argument is fundamentally different. In an argument the parties may not want a settlement at all, ever. For example, where two rival politicians are debating a point on television it is a forgone conclusion that neither will change his or her position or make any concession at all to the other. That was never the point of the argument. The aim of each contestant is to convert as many voters as possible to his or her own point of view. Similarly, there are many cases where the only point of an argument is to chasten and humiliate an opponent by scoring a victory in a battle of verbal skill. The substance of the argument is purely secondary to the emotional battle that forms the subtext. Take as an example a couple about to divorce who are trying to decide who gets custody of the children. We have all heard of cases where concern for the children's welfare is outweighed by a desire to score an emotional and legal victory over a former spouse who has become a hated opponent. Couples have been known to inflict enormous mental and emotional damage on themselves and their children in such a struggle.

Negotiation experts who offer advice like 'separate the people from the problem', or 'deal rationally with irrational people' are missing the point. Frequently people enjoy being irrational. There are many areas of human life where arguments exist for their own sake and are tied up with issues of power and status, not to mention sheer bloody-mindedness.

The American psychologist Eric Berne described arguments as a clash between the images we all carry in our minds. He explained that none of us has an objective view of reality but instead we perceive things through the filter of our own personality. With time these perceived images become fixed and we are increasingly loath to change them. Berne cited the instance of an able-bodied man who loses a leg. It may take some considerable time for him to alter his image of himself from that of a fit person to that of a handicapped one. He may continue to 'feel' the leg even though it is no longer there and, even when he seems to have accepted his altered condition there may be times when he dreams of himself as once again being able-bodied.

The problem comes when we are forced to abandon an image to which we still wish to cling. Sam had admired Katie for about six months before he got up the courage to ask her out. He was not especially good-looking or well off and she was remarkably pretty and vivacious. To his surprise she accepted. The date was a great success, they found they had a lot in common and before long they were going steady. However, Sam's best friend Joe was unhappy with the situation. Once he and Sam had spent much of their leisure time hanging around together. Now Sam was usually too occupied with Katie to devote much time to his old friend. Joe heard gossip that Katie was well known for amusing herself with someone for a while and then dumping him in favour of a new conquest. Eventually Joe spotted Katie with another man and felt he had to warn Sam that his girlfriend was unfaithful. Sam was in no mood to hear Katie slandered. In his eyes she was just about the best thing that had ever happened to him and it was not hard to guess that Joe's motive was simply jealousy. An argument developed, became quite heated and soon the two friends split up and ceased to speak to each other.

Who was right? We don't know. From our point of view it doesn't really matter. Probably there was some truth in the accusation that Joe was jealous but, all the same, he may have genuinely thought that he had a duty to save his friend from what he saw as the clutches of a devious woman. That is the point about arguments. The 'real' facts are often extremely hard to discover. What is much more important is how people feel about the facts. Sam felt strongly attracted to Katie. Most people are lucky enough to have had the experience of liking someone so much that they can't bear to hear him criticized. Joe was trying to let what he saw as the cold light of reality break into his friend's romantic dream. It was the fundamental incompatibility of the two men's images of Katie that caused the row.

If we think about this tale a little further another interesting point emerges. Surely the strength of a particular image must have a bearing on the situation. If Sam's faith in Katie had been completely

rock solid he would have been able to dismiss Joe's advice with a pitying smile. He might not even have felt much offended. Imagine, for example, that someone accused your mother of being a spy for a foreign power. The idea would seem so ludicrous that your first reaction would be to laugh it off. Your confidence in her innocence would be so strong that it would take tremendous pressure to crack it. So we can see that one of the first lessons to be learned in argument is confidence in your own cause. As long as you are firmly convinced that your image is the one that best describes reality you will be very hard to budge even when, to all other eyes, you are in the wrong.

Richard, a scientist friend of mine, is a convinced and passionate Christian. He is also a brilliant speaker with a tremendous natural gift for oratory. I once organized a conference about the developments we could expect to see in the next millennium. To add some excitement to the proceedings I asked Richard to debate the notion that in the coming century Christianity would die. As a matter of interest we asked for a vote at the beginning of the debate to establish the beliefs of the audience and found that we had about forty atheists, fifteen Christians and twenty agnostics.

In the debate Jim, another scientist, put the case for the death of Christianity with great panache. He was a witty, practised speaker and completely familiar with all the pros and cons of this argument (it was a personal favourite of his and he had gone over it with many opponents in the past). Then Richard spoke. Intellectually his speech was not a patch on Jim's and, to a non-believer, it sounded far too personal and emotional, but he had one great advantage. Richard felt he knew God personally. He spoke with such utter rock-solid conviction that, by the end of the debate, the subject of which had by now changed from the death of Christianity to the existence of God, something interesting had happened. A final vote about religious beliefs showed that, as you might expect, none of the atheists and Christians had changed their view. However, among the agnostics Richard's speech had convinced about ten to change their mind, while Jim had persuaded none. Thus, although Jim won the debate on a show of hands, the true lesson for me was that a powerful belief in what you are saying is one of the biggest assets you can have in an argument.

Elements of an Argument

Arguments can seem like a verbal free-for-all in which the participants simply hurl at each other whatever missiles come to hand. However, there are a number of elements that always contribute to the making of any argument and the way in which these elements combine will tell you much about the form the argument may be expected to take. What are these elements? Here's a list.

Concern for Truth

It is always worth considering to what extent the parties are trying to reach the truth. Of course, your opponent's 'truth' may not be yours but, if you feel that he is trying, by his own lights, to get at a rational analysis of the situation then you will have more confidence in his arguments and be willing to give them a more sympathetic hearing. If, on the other hand, you are pretty sure that your opponent is only concerned to get his own way, to score a victory for the body he represents, or to inflict a humiliating defeat on you, then you will be suspicious of any arguments he may use.

Unfortunately, concern for truth is usually one of the rarest elements in any argument. Even among scientists and academics who spend their whole lives trying to deepen their understanding of their chosen field, it is common to find a degree of partisanship that does not do the truth any favours at all. Evidence that supports their own view is put forward while contrary findings are belittled or ignored.

The stories of this happening are too many to tell here but, as just one illustration, let's take the example of the Wright brothers and their experiments with a heavier-than-air flying machine. Although their efforts were widely reported, the experts persisted in dismissing them as poppycock. Heavier-than-air flight was impossible and so it followed that what these two charlatans were doing must be a fraud. The early tests took place in a field that lay beside a railroad track and were witnessed by many rail passengers as they passed by, but that counted for nothing in the eyes of the experts. You will quickly realize that if you get involved in an argument where a genuine quest for the truth is involved you will be extremely fortunate. When both parties struggle to reach a deeper level of truth by engaging in constructive argument they are experiencing one of the mental processes that sets us apart from our fellow primates. We rightly regard this phenomenon with great respect. So much so that we do not normally refer to it as 'argument' at all, but as discussion.

Self-interest

Another important element to be aware of is the extent to which the participants in an argument stand to gain from the outcome. The most obvious example is where there is some material gain in money or goods that is eagerly sought by the parties. There is also the question of a gain in status that comes from winning an argument but this is such an important element in arguments that it deserves, and will get, a section all to itself.

When getting involved in an argument it is as well to consider just what is at stake financially. Ask yourself what, if anything, your opponent stands to gain. This will give you great insight into the lengths to which he may go to defeat you. An argument over whose turn it is to buy the next round in the pub is likely to be fought less tenaciously than one over the ownership of, say, a champion racehorse or a valuable building site. This should not be taken as an infallible guide (see the sections on Status and Emotional Content), but it must be urgently considered.

There is another important consideration. People involved in arguments may not always tell the truth. They may either lie deliberately to deceive you about their true motives or they may even mislead themselves about what those motives are. It can be very hard indeed to unmask a good liar. The idea that liars look shifty or give themselves away with special body-language signs is laughably naive. When you are confused about who is telling the truth it is as well to consider what each participant has to gain. This may not be an infallible guide but it is often the only clue you will get.

What of your own motives? It is in the nature of argument that sometimes you will merely be trying to get your own way. Truth, Justice or the Greater Good will simply not enter your thoughts. This is human nature. However, if you are aware that that is what you are doing then you will be in a much better position to handle the argument. Naturally you will rationalize your position so that you feel justified in getting your own way (this is a psychological trick we all use as a matter of course). But if you can retain some vestige of impartiality you will be able to construct an argument that at least appears to be based on a desire to get at a just solution.

You should also weigh your advantage very carefully against the possible costs of getting what you want. For example, if you do battle with A over this matter and win you may feel very pleased with yourself. On the other hand, suppose your relationship with A is ongoing and you know that soon you will have to argue over matters that are even more important to you. What do you do? Perhaps by giving him a fair deal this time you will soften him up for a hard argument when it really matters. On the other hand you may reason that if you thrash the pants off A right now you will be able to use your psychological advantage to overcome him again in the future. Your actions in this situation will depend mainly on your reading of A's character, but an accurate assessment of the material gains to be made will tell just how far it is worth going with your argument. Would you, for example, be wise to offend someone mortally over a matter that was only worth a few pounds? Arguments quickly get out of hand, tempers become inflamed, pride suffers and before you know where you are you may find yourself engaged in a major war over something that is worth only a trifle.

Status

Anyone who has read this far will be in no doubt that I do not have much faith in human beings as rational creatures. A glance at today's news headlines (any day, any country) will bear me out. That is why the issue of status assumes such importance in the realm of argument. It is utterly irrational, a throwback to our animal ancestors, and yet it still exerts an iron control over our behaviour. One can readily understand why baboons may depend for their success on organising their family groups on the basis of status. But people? The thinking apes? Unfortunately it is all too true.

Status in arguments is seen best within a business environment or in some highly structured organization such as the army or police. Anyone who has ever worked in an office or factory will have seen a boss who is always right, no matter how wrong he may be. Bosses like this don't argue about the facts of a case (they may well be ignorant of them and, in any case, they regard them as largely irrelevant). No, their chief concern will be that by pursuing a particular course successfully (getting their own way), and putting down any opposition they may encounter, they get to stay Chief Baboon.

Subordinates will often play along with this game by deliberately deferring to the boss and letting his opinions hold sway even when they know he is wrong. In that way they help to confirm his status and thus bolster their own position in the pecking order. One of the features of a pecking order is that people do not mind it as long as it remains unchanged. In fact they will engage in regular rituals that are designed specifically to reconfirm the order. However, someone who dares to try to upset the status quo will spark off the bitterest of status arguments.

Another interesting feature of status is that the people who concern themselves with it do not have to be 'important'. It is not only officers and gentlemen who worry about their pecking orders. Think for a moment of the stock comedy figures of the mild-mannered gentlefolk who organize the church flower rota. Anyone who has experienced the intrigues and political chicanery attendant upon a church flower rota will know that the issue of status is just as important to the meek and humble as to the high and mighty.

Emotion

Arguments are frequently very emotional occasions. It is surprising that, even when we think we are engaged in a rational discussion about some matter of objective fact, a contrary opinion can stir feelings of resentment or even anger. The truth is that no one likes to be contradicted or, even worse, proved wrong. Issues of status are immediately brought into play in almost any argument. You may not care two hoots about a particular topic until someone tells you that your opinion on the subject is wrong. Then you may well feel inclined to fight to the death to prove yourself right.

This is a human reaction and, as such, we have to live with it. There is no point trying to pretend that you are some sort of superhuman being who is not affected by the heady emotions attached to an argument. However, if you are aware of the extent to which you may be emotionally involved in what is being said you may be able to stand aside from yourself just enough to prevent falling into the worst excesses.

It used to be said that the forbidden topics of polite conversation were sex, politics and religion. Nowadays many people pride themselves on getting to grips with the issues of the day and having full and frank discussions on things that really matter. There are far fewer taboos about what can be discussed. However, there has been no significant inward change in the way people feel about such topics. If you really want to get someone stirred up you have only to attack his religion or his politics, and sex, of course, is just a minefield. I would add another issue to this short list of dangerous topics: children. No issue is more contentious than the upbringing and education of children. For some reason just the mere mention of the word 'children' is enough to drive normally sane, sensible people into a frenzy. From that moment no theory is too nutty to be espoused and no statement too extreme to be proposed. Non-believers can expect pretty much the same treatment as heretics at the hands of the Inquisition. Beware when you argue about children!

The emotional content of an argument may often be of far more importance than the intellectual content and this is a fact that you ignore at your peril. Once hurt pride becomes an issue then it will prove the greatest of obstacles to getting a reasonable solution. In any argument in which you may be involved take great care to consider the effects of emotion.

Types of Argument

There are various types of argument, each with its own rules and methods.

The first major division is into public and private arguments. It is enormously important to decide whether you are arguing to convince an individual or whether you are merely using that person as a sounding board to help you convince others.

Private Arguments

Those arguments that take place between individuals, or in a small group of people with no audience listening, are clearly in the private category. The fact that such arguments are, by definition, carried on without an audience will have a profound effect on their shape. In a private argument, what is said will tend to be regarded as ‘off the record’ and people may well feel able to reveal feelings and opinions that they would hide from a wider audience. Inevitably a private argument will tend to concentrate on the personal aspects, even when matters of public importance are being discussed. Anecdotal evidence is very common in private arguments and people will frequently use their own experiences, and those of friends and relatives, to try to prove a case. They will often not be able or willing to see that just because Uncle Harry smoked forty cigarettes a day every day of his life from the age of eleven, and lived till he was eighty-seven, then that doesn’t mean that it must be a load of rubbish that smoking gives you cancer.

Unless the participants are experienced arguers they will tend to make common mistakes such as confusing fact and opinion or quoting facts inaccurately. One of the strongest ploys you can use in private arguments is *Know-all* (see page 49), the simple ruse of knowing the facts and quoting them accurately. However, know-alls are never popular in any sphere and in arguments, where emotions are usually heightened, you risk making yourself unpopular by always knowing better. It may be wise to save this technique for occasions when it really matters.

Another important facet of private arguments is that the participants will take the outcome intensely personally and will frequently carry it over into other parts of their private life. You must have noticed how an argument with friends or colleagues can have repercussions quite out of proportion to the importance of the original disagreement. People have been known to refuse to speak to each other for days, months or even years because of some minor squabble that got out of control.

One of the troubles with private arguments is that they often serve as an outlet for underlying hostilities. In fact such an argument will frequently be engineered solely for the purpose of providing an outlet for past grudges. Even where the original argument is genuine, it is surprising how, when emotions become aroused, the placid surface of everyday behaviour gets completely disrupted. Once this has happened there are no limits to what can result. Look, for example, at what happened in the former Yugoslavia when some of the constituent peoples informed their Serb neighbours that they would like to go their own way and form independent states. This may at first appear to be a matter of politics but, when you listen to the stories of those involved, it becomes apparent that many of the grievances and hostilities had their origins in squabbles between neighbours that got completely out of hand. News reports all emphasized that people suffered atrocities that were committed not by a foreign army but, in many cases, by people they knew by name.

Public Arguments

On the other hand, in a public argument the participants are usually much more interested in the effect their words will have on the audience than in whether they can convince an opponent. Indeed, most of the people who argue in public (businessmen, lawyers, politicians, journalists) come into the category of professional arguers. Their whole career is conducted in an atmosphere of verbal strife and they attack or defend a point of view on a purely professional basis. It is not being cynical to suggest that frequently they do not personally believe in the point of view they are expressing with such eloquence at all. For the most part, 'ordinary' people do not come into contact with the world of professional public arguments. But it can happen. If it does you must be able to decide whether you should respond to your opponent as a person or merely as the mouthpiece of a particular point of view.

A public argument is necessarily more formal than a private one. Often it will be conducted according to specific rules and may even have some sort of umpire or chairperson to make sure the rules are kept. Even though tempers may flare they will rarely be allowed to get so out of hand that physical violence erupts. Additionally there is a penalty attached to letting oneself get carried away. The audience will take it as a sign of the weakness of one's case. There will also be some sort of timetable in operation and therefore unless you use your time skilfully you might inadvertently gloss over or forget important points. Once the argument is over, no matter how many witty retorts come to you on the way home, you will probably not get another chance. Most public arguments are one-off events where the quality of your performance on the day is just as important as whether you have right on your side.

Another feature of public arguments is that, in common with written arguments, they are almost always 'on the record', and usually there will be some kind of permanent record made in the form of notes, recorded on a paper and/or electronic document, or on audio or video tape or film. The tendency will therefore be for people to weigh their words carefully and avoid the sort of overly personal and dramatic statements that flourish in a purely private setting.

It is also likely that a lot more will be riding on the result of a public argument. Court cases, political debates (at both national and local level), public inquiries, and formal meetings of boards of governors are all the sorts of occasions where public arguments take place and where the results may well have far-reaching, long-term consequences. Even a debate on television, though it may appear to be little more than a piece of entertainment, will have an effect in moulding public opinion. Therefore a public argument is in all respects a much more serious affair than a private one.

Written Arguments

Almost all arguments can be carried on in writing but generally we reserve this method for our more formal disagreements. The reasons are obvious: anything you put in writing and send to someone enters the public domain and cannot be recalled. This has a number of implications, not least of which is that you can be held legally responsible for your words. Call a man a lying bastard to his face and you risk a split lip; write it down and you risk heavy damages for libel. However, in spite of the risks involved this method has considerable advantages that make it widely popular. The very fact that you and your opponent must measure your words and imagine them being read by a wider audience will inevitably raise the quality of debate. You will think twice about quoting evidence that can be retained and checked by an unknown number of third parties. You will also, if you are prudent, remember that your words, if spoken hastily and unwisely, may return to haunt you. Anyone who remembers President Bush urging people to ‘read my lips’ while he promised no new taxes will also remember his immense discomfiture when he later broke that promise.

Written arguments have the other advantage of allowing you time for reflection and research before you reply to your opponent’s latest onslaught. An argument conducted in writing will favour the conscientious researcher who pays attention to getting the details right but will penalize the person who relies on a ready wit to skate over the cracks in his reasoning.

Yet another reason for people favouring written arguments is that by putting your opponent at arm’s length you remove his power to use some of the more aggressive techniques of argument. The written word forms a screen between you and the opponent that protects you from people who try to get their own way purely by force of personality. In fact, you may observe something interesting that often happens once people commit their arguments to writing. It is quite common to find rather ineffectual people who would not normally say boo to a goose transformed into lions once they are able to express themselves in writing. This can be a good thing if it enables people to get the fair hearing of which they would otherwise have been deprived. On the other hand there is the less pleasant phenomenon of the ‘poisoned pen’ in which people who seem quite affable suddenly reveal a talent for vituperation as soon as they are let loose with a pen and a sheet of paper.

The issue of emotion in written arguments is also interesting. People are on the whole less inclined to let themselves go when putting their thoughts down on paper. Many people resort to the old trick of writing two responses to their opponent. The first is the one where they really lash out and call him all the names they can think of. Then, having got that off their chest, they tear the first letter up and set about writing the calm, dignified response they are actually going to send. If you do not do this already it is a tactic well worth adopting.

In a written argument you have a chance, largely denied to you in face-to-face situations, to adopt a persona that may be quite at variance with your real character. Whereas in real life you might get easily flustered, stammer, go red in the face and forget the important details of your case (and we all do some of these things from time to time), once you enter the realm of written argument you can be as calm, suave and poised as you please – you have time to get it right. You may also choose to show the draft of your letter to a trusted friend or a paid advisor (such as your lawyer or accountant) and get the benefit of that advice before you send the final version. The great luxury of written arguments is that you can draft and redraft each document as many times as you wish until you get it exactly the way you want it.

Although written arguments have great advantages they also have dangers that you should bear in mind before embarking upon one. You should make quite sure that you are operating in a field where you know all the rules. You should not, for example, unless you have legal training, try to conduct a legal argument in writing. You may think that what you have said is straightforward and unambiguous but, in a legal context, words can take on meanings that they do not have in everyday

speech. Also you will discover that lawyers are very practised at picking to pieces any argument presented to them. The only person likely to be able to stop them doing that is another lawyer. The rule here is to recognize your limitations and never let the joy of battle tempt you into playing out of your league.

If you are going to argue in writing you must be very strict with yourself and make sure you do not indulge in irrelevance and high-sounding waffle. Things you might just get away with when you speak can look awfully stupid when written down. Try to cut out words you do not need. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short and to the point. Make sure that your argument flows naturally and logically from your initial outline of the facts, through your proof, to what you hope is an inescapable conclusion.

Family Arguments

Kevin, a designer who used to do work for me, was in business with his younger brother. Things went pretty well for them for some years. They had a studio on the ground floor of their elderly mother's house and the whole family got on very well. Then the brother, Robert, got married to a French woman called Thérèse. Suddenly all hell was let loose. The new wife did not get on with the elder brother. The mother was drawn into the quarrel. The brothers stopped speaking. The rows became so frequent and so furious that the studio had to be partitioned to keep the warring factions apart. Finally they even had to have separate entrances to the house constructed. At the height of the mayhem a meeting was called with all the family members and their accountants and solicitors present. Things quickly got out of hand. Kevin, a rather easygoing soul most of the time, started to say something about trying to settle the whole mess reasonably when Thérèse bellowed at the top of her voice: 'What's reason got to do with it? A family is not a democracy!' It is a quotation worth remembering. It will remind you that family arguments are in a league of insanity all of their own.

An argument within the family is rarely concerned with the apparent subject matter. Most arguments start over something so banal as to be hardly worth considering, like whose turn it is to wash up, or whether someone remembered to lock the front door last night. If such an argument were to start outside the family it would probably be resolved quickly and possibly even amicably. However, families are different. When a little group of people lives together year in year out, often in a fairly confined space, frustrations are bound to build up. And because we are supposed to love our parents, partners and children no matter how badly they behave towards us, we often feel we have to suppress our resentment. No wonder explosions occur so often. When you see a family argument in full swing, that old statistic about people being most likely to get murdered by a member of their own family makes perfect sense. As the zoologist Desmond Morris observed, the interesting thing about people is not that they are so prone to violence but that for most of the time they manage to avoid it so well. It is worth mentioning that these remarks apply not just to traditional families but to other sorts of households, such as groups of students.

Furthermore, the very closeness of family relationships makes for high levels of emotion. Because our family members do love us we feel that we can exhibit to them a side of our personality that we have to keep hidden from the world at large. Sulky teenagers become even more morose with their parents, while frustrated husbands pick on their harassed wives and vice versa.

Family arguments are also in a class of their own in that they have almost nothing to do with reason, concern for the truth or even, in many cases, true self-interest. All these things are quite alien to the way people in families behave. Their main concern will be with methods of manipulation (see page 94). They will use every trick in the book to cajole, blackmail or bamboozle their loved ones into behaving in the way they want. This process of manipulation will be the main purpose of the argument. The ostensible object will on most occasions be peripheral to the real aims of the arguers. In other words it doesn't matter in the slightest that you washed the car; what matters is that I made you wash it.

Manipulation has a bad name because it involves emotional dishonesty. People believe that it is not possible to have a good relationship with someone if you are not honest with them. However, families have their own internal structure and the practice of manipulation helps to maintain that structure. Many couples maintain a sort of emotional Punch and Judy relationship in which verbal assaults, followed by reconciliations, help to ensure that aggression is channelled safely and real violence never occurs.

There is little that we can do about this. Arguments of this sort, in moderation, help us to blow off steam and release the pressures under which we live. That is all to the good. The occasions when

people lose control and a domestic argument turns into a blood bath, though they make sensational headlines, are mercifully few.

At the moment we are concerned with only one question: how do you win a family argument? Obviously different criteria apply from just about any other sort of argument. Within the family, just because you manage to make your spouse or child admit that it really was his or her turn to mow the lawn that does not mean you have in any meaningful sense won the argument. In fact, beating someone into submission (figuratively or literally) never counts as a win in such circumstances. Winning is only achieved by an outcome that will help the family to continue functioning effectively. A bloody good row in which all parties give vent to their suppressed anger can be a win for everybody involved if it is followed by a genuine reconciliation. ‘Say what you like but never go to bed mad,’ is the best advice anyone can follow in a family row.

Arguments and the Gender Gap

When considering the types of arguments in which people indulge I thought it might be interesting to consider whether women argue differently from men. Perhaps my whole perspective on argument was exclusively male and was therefore blinding me to a side of the subject that women would find obvious. I started by asking friends and colleagues what they thought. Almost without exception they claimed that women would argue differently with members of their own sex than with men. They accepted that in mixed company women might well be pressured into emulating a male style of argument but, among themselves, they would be far more reasonable. A lot of well-worn prejudices started to appear. Men felt that women were more inclined to argue from a purely emotional point of view while they, of course, were practical, hard-headed chaps who seldom let emotion rule their reason. Strangely, women felt something similar about themselves. However, they preferred to put it a different way and used words like ‘feeling’, ‘intuition’, and ‘consensus’. They, you will be unsurprised to hear, were not impressed by the men’s claims to be more reasonable. They felt that they were themselves perfectly reasonable but possessed some ill-defined extra quality that men could never quite grasp.

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