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## The Process of Argument

This is a book about how we argue. If your initial reaction is to be apprehensive at the thought of arguing, we understand. Popular use of the term *argument* associates it with the loud, aggressive, and unreasonable behavior that we all too frequently witness from politicians, media pundits, or those noisy neighbors working their way toward a disturbing-the-peace complaint. Those are fights, not arguments. We invite you to consider a more productive alternative in which people exchange information or explore alternatives (argue) without malice. We actually engage in argument rather routinely, whether we recognize these interactions as arguments or not. Every day, friends and family members disagree about decisions—big and small—and work it out. Someone proposes a different way to do something at work. Committees deliberate about the best candidate to hire. Students request that professors extend a deadline on assignments or reconsider a grade on a paper. School boards and town councils meet to make policies that will affect the daily lives of their neighbors, who they often invite in to present arguments as well. The list of examples of arguing in our daily lives is endless because every day people work in communities to make sound decisions in ways that do not undermine relationships. These types of exchanges lack the combative features of a TV reality show or talk radio. Often they are not terribly dramatic, and while people argue passionately for their own positions, such disputes tend to bring people together in a shared attempt to forge agreement. Fortunately, such arguments are far more common than their combative counterparts.

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### ARGUING IS PART OF OUR NATURE

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One attribute that separates humans from animals is our reflective nature. We do not respond only automatically or instinctively to situations but instead we consider the reasons for and consequences of our actions. We develop this skill at an early age. One of the most frustrating challenges facing parents is dealing with children who have entered the “why” phase. This is the point where children abandon their tendency to act without reflection to parental commands and adopt a more skeptical stance. Their response to commands is “why?”—as is their response to their parents’ explanations. Suddenly, our children are responding to us on a new and often irritating level. Everything seems to be an occasion for debate. Occasionally, these exchanges can be highly

productive. Asked *why* they should not talk to a stranger or *why* it is a good idea to wash their hands provides parents with valuable teaching opportunities. Other times they are occasions for parental self-reflection in those situations where they really do not know why they are making a particular demand and have fallen back on that all-purpose “because I said so” response. The *why* phase represents a significant point in a child’s cognitive and social development, as he or she become reflective rather than merely reflexive. No longer passively reacting to the world around them, they are now trying to understand their environment and behavior. Parents also are communicating on an entirely different level as their child struggles to come to a deeper understanding of their (and their parents’) actions, and to understand the role of reason giving in communication and relationships.

Attempting to understand the statements of others through critical reflection and questioning is a natural tendency. As we develop a sense of when it is appropriate to question others and when, instead, arguing is pointless and irritating, we also develop an understanding of the rules of engagement as well as develop the tact and sensitivity that will make our exchanges beneficial learning and teaching opportunities. Additionally, as we respond to questions or reservations voiced by others, we become involved in a process that encourages us to think about what we say—to provide some acceptable justification for our statements. With any luck, we will never grow out of the “why” phase, and as adults we learn to ask increasingly sophisticated and nuanced questions, and become better reason givers as well. In short, we argue.

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## WHAT IS ARGUMENT?

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We define argument as *the communication process through which the reasons that inform our statements are explored*. There are a variety of definitions for the term *argument*, and each of them suggests particular ways in which to view, study, or practice the activity. A number of definitions draw attention to the elements that constitute an argumentative statement, noting that an argument consists of an assertion (claim) that can be supported with reasons (grounds). For a more detailed account of product-centered definitions, consult the discussion of the Stephen Toulmin model of argument contained in Appendix A. Our definition casts argument as a *communication process*. This notion is important in that it focuses on the *process* of argument (as in “they are *having* an argument”) in addition to the *product* (as in “that is a good argument”).<sup>1</sup> In this book, our attention is focused primarily on how we might productively argue (the process of argument) while understanding that making good arguments (product) is a part of that process, but the quality of the product depends heavily on the reputation of the advocate, the nature of the audience being addressed, and the context in which argument takes place. In short, you can make the case that an argument must contain particular elements, but those formal requirements are often altered by circumstances.

Labeling *argument* a communication process suggests the social/public nature of argument. Granted, we may engage in the kind of reflective activity by which we think through our statements—internalized argument. However, our concern is with those occasions where our judgments, and the foundation upon which those judgments are based, are shared with others. Examples could include a variety of exchanges or discussions with romantic partners, family, and friends; presenting an idea at a parent-teacher conference, city council meeting, classroom, or civic club; to the more formal and stylized exchanges that characterize judicial or deliberative bodies. Confining our attention primarily to communication exchanges is critical to understanding that argument has social consequences and that the process functions best in a climate where information is freely shared with and evaluated by others.

Finally, argument involves the evaluation of the *reasons* that inform our statements. When others ask us to explain our positions, we are invited to engage in argument. The process works best when we are willing to clearly explain ourselves and are open minded enough to consider the other points of view that emerge as part of the process. Our definition provides the beginning of an ethical perspective on argument—behaviors that discourage the examination of reasons are at best poor argument and at worst an exercise in propaganda or coercion. To effectively engage in argument, one should observe the attributes that facilitate reason giving, such as clarity, empathy (understanding other perspectives), and open-mindedness.

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## WHY SHOULD WE ARGUE?

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To answer the question “why should we argue?” it is important to recall our definition of argument as the communication process through which the reasons that inform our statements are explored. Embracing argument as a form of communication carries with it some vital assumptions about the way we interact with the world around us. First, we believe that our opinions and actions should not be random or arbitrary. We believe and act only after we are satisfied that our decisions are based on good reasons. We are constructively critical of the messages to which we respond: Why should we buy a particular product? Why should we vote for a particular political candidate? Why should we grant or withhold our support for a ballot initiative, school board proposal, or community project? Why should we donate our time and resources to a particular civic or charitable organization? On a more personal level, how should we respond to the challenges and decisions that we confront on a daily basis? The short answer to all of these questions is that we respond after weighing the alternatives available to us, examine the foundation upon which these options are based, and make the best choice possible given the information we possess or are able to acquire. Much has been written about the value of being an informed citizen. Clearly, there is a degree of personal satisfaction and empowerment as we do not simply act, but act *wisely*. The critical and inquiring mind

that makes informed action possible is a result, in large measure, of our willingness to embrace argument. It is the communication equivalent of taking off the blinders.

A second benefit of argument is that it is a path to productive citizenship. Our democracy is based on notions of informed consent of the governed, or in other words, we are to be participants in, rather than mere spectators of, public decision making. Admittedly, at times our impact may be limited, but often we underestimate the influence we can exert. The alternative is an apathetic posture where we are content to defer to others as they make decisions that may dramatically affect us, our friends, or the society in which we live. We may rationalize our inaction with the comforting yet dangerous belief that decision makers, being well intentioned, would not act in ways that run contrary to our interests or the interests of society. Yet how would they know those interests if no one bothers to speak up? Particularly at the local level, individuals can make constructive contributions, but they have to be willing to express themselves.

Being an engaged citizen is not easy. The task is complicated by the fact that all too often we must wade through misleading statements, exaggerations, misinterpretations, and occasionally outright lies. As we become accustomed to evaluating the reasons that inform statements made by others, we rehearse the critical habits of mind that enable our informed judgment. These skills go well beyond the persistent *whys* of a child as we learn to listen critically, evaluate fairly, and present our own positions with clarity while at the same time cultivating an environment that encourages the exchange of informed opinions that constitute the basis for sound judgment.

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## ARGUING PRODUCTIVELY

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Arguing can be one of the most productive and informative methods of communication. It can also be destructive. The quality of the outcome depends heavily on the outlook of those participating; we refer to them as advocates. We can choose to imitate talk-show ideologues that make a career out of browbeating and embarrassing guests who do not share the host's point of view or who only engage those with whom they really already agree, turning discussions into opportunities for mutual venting and self-praise rather than critical reflection. We can choose to model our behavior after what we have seen on televised political debates where all manner of verbal contortion is used to avoid directly answering meaningful questions from a moderator. We can take a page from the politician's book and respond in vague but nice-sounding generalities that are unlikely to elicit any meaningful scrutiny. We can accept as "normal" friends or families whose constant bickering and fighting seems the default position for conflict resolution. Finally, we can copy the demagogue and rely on fear, intimidation, or our apparent power advantage to ensure that our ideas prevail. Publicly, we can lament the lack of civility in public discourse even while our own actions contribute to the condition. We can, however, choose more productive and humane ways to

communicate. A central premise of this book is that argument is a productive activity, and with the proper outlook on the part of the participants, argumentative discussions can work to the mutual benefit of those involved in the exchange and to the advantage of those that will be required to live with the decisions.

### Keeping Our Ego in Check

Anytime we engage in an exchange that is argumentative in nature, we take a significant risk. The essence of argument is that ideas are clearly expressed and tested or modified in a thoughtful discussion. Of course, nobody likes to “lose” an argument, but if we engage in an argument believing that any result short of receiving a ringing endorsement of our stance constitutes a loss, then we are in no position to make productive use of the exchange. Advocates should enter arguments with more of an open mind. What if we were to define “winning” as mutually reaching a wise decision? This does not mean that we are not passionate about our opinions but does demand that we willingly and honestly reflect on them and are receptive to other points of view. We afford to those with whom we communicate the same consideration we expect in return—a fair hearing. This implies a dual burden. As advocates, we are mindful of the fact that the exchange is not about us but is instead about our ideas. This degree of detachment allows us to keep our egos in check. We are not offended by questions like “why do you believe that?” We fully expect our ideas to be evaluated and recognize that critical evaluation by another is not an assessment of our worth as a person. Recognizing that it is our ideas (not ourselves) under consideration, we feel less compelled to wow onlookers with our dazzling display of skill. Obviously we speak with conviction, but ultimately we realize that the product of the argument process is what matters, not simply showing off to gain personal recognition. We approach the exchange with humility and shun notions that the humiliation of other persons is a worthy goal. Beyond our responsibilities as advocates, we also have obligations as listeners. Are we truly listening in an attempt to understand the other, or are we listening strategically in an effort to find a weakness and pounce on it? If we do find a weakness in another’s position, do we exploit it in an attempt to make ourselves look superior rather than address it in an attempt to improve the final product of the argument process?

*Hardball*, MSNBC’s political interview show hosted by Chris Matthews, provides an interesting example of an ego gone awry. Matthews has a keen analytical mind and a deep passion for politics. Unfortunately, his passion can trump his sense of argumentative decorum. Matthews’s interrogation style is aggressive as he asks his guests complex questions (often six to eight questions in a single burst) and continually interrupts them to ask additional questions as they attempt to respond. Guests rarely are given time to provide a coherent response and are easily derailed by the persistent questioning that interrupts or redirects their responses. The tragedy of this tactic is that

informed participants are seldom afforded the luxury of formulating a coherent line of argument, much less resolving controversial points via reasoned debate. Such antics deny viewers the opportunity to learn as our judgments are reduced to simply determining who came out looking the best after the ordeal. We might point to Matthews's poor listening skills and attempts to dominate discussion as being responsible for creating a climate that prevents a meaningful exchange of ideas. One of Matthews's most famous exchanges involved his coverage of the keynote address of Democratic Senator Zell Miller at the 2004 Republican National Convention.<sup>2</sup> Miller had just delivered a hostile, incendiary speech, and his assertions deserved scrutiny. Enter Chris Matthews. With his characteristic aggressive style of inquisition, Matthews pressed Miller, who only became more agitated as the interview progressed. Finally, in an "I dare you to say that to my face" type moment, Miller expressed his regret that it wasn't the old days where he could challenge Matthews to a duel. The interview concluded and Matthews shared an "I can't believe he just did that" moment with the remaining panelists. He should not have been surprised. Given Miller's already agitated state and Matthews's relentless "you can't possibly believe that" line of questioning, the results were predictable. Matthews's apparent dismay was reminiscent of a basketball player intentionally delivering a vicious nose-fracturing elbow to an opponent and then raising his hands in an innocent "what did I do" gesture as the referee prepares to make the call and his bloodied opponent prepares to respond.

Who doesn't like to be the smartest person in the room? Often it is not enough that we know it; we want everyone else to know it as well. This is where our egos can be a major impediment to productive argument, as we see an argument as a performance that will convince others of our superiority. Any retreat from our original position is viewed as a personal failure. Under such circumstances, we have misunderstood the process of argument. Argument should be viewed as a learning opportunity in which we test our opinions and, if necessary, modify our judgments as a result of what we learn in the exchange. A willingness to change our mind or to question positions we once took as unassailable is not a sign of weakness but rather an indication that we are open minded and willing to listen and learn. While we should have confidence in our opinions and should advance them as clearly and persuasively as possible, we should also be willing to alter our views when circumstances warrant. A healthy argumentative perspective assumes that thoughtful deliberation yields superior results. How often have we dismissed decision makers as "wishy washy" or indecisive when in fact they are reflective? How often do we express admiration for leaders who "go with their gut" only to later regret decisions that were made absent a thoughtful consideration of alternatives or consequences? The key is to trust the process, to engage others with an open mind, and to the extent ego enhancement is our goal, to tie personal satisfaction to how well we are able to create an environment that produces a quality outcome rather than to engage in a spectacle where we posture or show off.

An example of how argument can devolve into a clash of egos and deprive the audience of a genuine opportunity to learn something is provided by an interview of actor Tom Cruise by NBC's *Today* morning show host Matt Lauer.<sup>3</sup> The focal point of the interview was the potential worth of antidepressants as a treatment option. Actress Brooke Shields (who was not present) had just been prescribed Paxil for postpartum depression, and like many who have taken such medications, was sold on the drug's benefits. Cruise questioned the validity of Shield's experience, claiming "there is no such thing as a chemical imbalance," taking the position that anyone embracing "mind-altering antipsychotic drugs" as effective was uninformed and, worse, irresponsibly promoting their use to a naïve public. Lauer countered that a number of people had taken antidepressants and found them to be helpful and asked Cruise to concede that for at least some people in some circumstances there could be medical benefits. Sidestepping the issue, Cruise informed Lauer "[y]ou don't know the history of psychiatry; I do" and offered an impassioned critique of psychopharmacology. When it appeared neither was willing to give any ground, Lauer offered an olive branch, telling Cruise "it's very impressive to listen to you because clearly you've done the homework and you know the subject." Dodging this compliment, Cruise used it as ammunition to assert that it would be nice if Lauer had bothered to do a little homework because he "should be a little more responsible." It would be charitable to call this exchange an argument—it was more like a verbal fight. Both ended the conversation where they had started, with Lauer asserting that he knew people who had been helped by antidepressants, and it was a bit arrogant for Cruise to discount the validity of his experience by simply responding "you don't know; I do."

To appreciate why this exchange went off the rails, consider the ways in which the communicators were constrained. Cruise was a strong believer in Scientology and, as such, a believer in the group's theological stance on the causes of human suffering. Scientology continues to devote considerable resources to debunking the psychiatric profession. Framed this way, Lauer's doubts are easily construed as attacks on Cruise's deeply held religious convictions. Since Cruise is seen by many as a high-profile spokesperson for the church, reluctance to publicly defend the faith was simply not an option for him. Lauer, on the other hand, had his own experiences with people that had benefited from antidepressants and was unwilling to tolerate having those experiences treated so dismissively. In short, we have two people unwilling to admit they might be wrong becoming stridently inflexible in a public exchange. Had this been a private conversation, both might have been more flexible, but with a national television audience looking on, neither wanted to endure the embarrassment of being "bested" in an argument. The whole interaction comes down to proving you are the smartest person in the room.

Both men had a lot to lose if they were the one who ended up looking uninformed. The treatment of mental illness is an extraordinarily important and controversial issue,

and most unfortunately, the viewers of the Lauer/Cruise interview learned little. Judging by viewers' comments on YouTube, it was perceived as the argumentative equivalent of a professional wrestling match. In other words, the interview was an exaggerated, sensationalized imitation of the real thing.

## Controlling Competitive Juices

Our knowledge, beliefs, and understanding of the ways the world does and should work are often called into question during argument, so it is easy to see why we feel our egos are on the line. Moreover, in Western culture, arguments are “won” or “lost,” meaning that our skills as advocates are at issue as well. Too often, competitive success is our yardstick. Competition is so ingrained in our society that we often are unaware of its adverse consequences. We compete for grades, popularity, and financial success. We measure our accomplishments by asking ourselves if we are viewed as “better off” than others. We look over the fence at our neighbors and ask “do we have a nicer house, prettier yard, or flashier automobile?” Our society embraces the notion that competition encourages excellence and achievement, and we carry that assumption into nearly all of our activities.

Although we are conditioned to compete, it is not necessarily an inherent part of being human. It does not necessarily help us to live better together or solve the problems of our communities. Psychologist Alfie Kohn has written a number of thought-provoking, though controversial, critiques of competition. His book *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* asserts that there are limited grounds for viewing competition as an inherent part of human nature. According to Kohn, competition does not enhance performance or motivation, does not build character, and undermines relationships. Kohn laments the fact that “[l]ife for us has become an endless succession of contests” and implores his readers to “look at what it really means to try to beat other people, a careful investigation of this arrangement that requires some people to fail in order that others can succeed.”<sup>4</sup> Kohn describes *structural competition* as a situation “that is characterized by . . . mutually exclusive goal attainment. This means, very simply, that my success requires your failure.”<sup>5</sup> This may be a result of simply following decision rules that demand win/lose decisions as in a court of law. We suggest that in argumentative exchanges norms requiring zero-sum results, while not always stated, are binding on participants. A second type of competition might be termed *intentional competition*, which is more a question of individual attitudes reflecting one’s “proclivity for besting others”<sup>6</sup> and may operate in a variety of circumstances.

Consider the advantages that would result if one views argument as a cooperative search for truth. The authors find Kohn’s advocacy of cooperation rather than competition to be compelling, and while we may not agree with all of his claims, we certainly find his approach to learning and conflict both liberating and rewarding. A more



cooperative process of argumentation, your authors believe, provides a more productive path of problem solving. Kohn cites the observations of Morton Deutsch and outlines what we believe to be an enlightened approach to conflict:

A cooperative process leads to the defining of conflicting interests as a mutual problem to be solved by collaborative effort. It facilitates the recognition of the legitimacy of each other's interests and of the necessity of searching for a solution that is responsive to the needs of all. It tends to limit rather than expand the scope of conflicting interests. In contrast, a competitive process stimulates the view that the solution of conflict can only be one that is imposed by one side on the other . . . through superior force, deceptions, or cleverness. . . . The enhancement of one's own power and the minimization of the legitimacy of the other side's interests in the situation become objectives.<sup>7</sup>

In the realm of argument, the difference in a competitive or cooperative mind-set can be seen in behaviors that seek control over compromise, humiliation of others rather than humility, or combat over compassion.<sup>8</sup> Given the choice, what type of individual would you rather engage in conversation? If our objectives in argument are strictly competitive, we sacrifice opportunities for productive cooperative problem solving, jeopardize relationships, and most likely convince ourselves that ethical and humane considerations are secondary to winning. Imagine the benefits for our relationships and the greater opportunities for continued productive dialogue with others if we were to devote more attention to openness, compromise, and empathy. Yes, there will always be conflict since argument assumes some level of disagreement over ideas; but how we deal with conflict is vitally important.

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## WHEN NOT TO ARGUE

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The circumstances under which we should not argue, given the way we have defined the term, are rare. After all, the statements or claims we make are based on reasons, and an argumentative perspective simply means we are willing to give voice to those reasons. On the other hand, even if one follows the “rules of engagement” listed in the previous section, there is no guarantee that the person with whom you are communicating shares that commitment. He or she may view the exchange as threatening, aggressive, or a waste of time. The skilled advocate will recognize this and consider the disposition of the audience and their overall receptiveness to argument. The skilled advocate will recognize when the environment would be conducive to constructive and robust discussion, and strive to create a more favorable climate for argument. Common sense dictates that advocates should select their opportunities to engage carefully. There are a number of variables to consider as you assess the potential benefit of engaging in argument.

**TABLE 1.1****Suggested Rules of Engagement**

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• It is not about me, it is about my ideas.
• I could be wrong.
• I am not diminished by changing my mind or compromising.
• I am not interested in humiliating others.
• I am community centered rather than self-centered.
• I value cooperation over competition.
• I will communicate in a way that creates and maintains a positive argumentative climate.

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**When You Are Not Sufficiently Prepared**

You should know what you are talking about. Admittedly, there are occasions when one argues without significant prior preparation. For instance, we may attempt to help others better understand their positions by playing devil's advocate (intentionally taking an opposing position whether we believe in it or not) or suggest alternatives to a position that is conditional or not well thought out in hopes we might reason together. There is value to these interactions, but we believe they should be rather rare. Remember, it is a fine line between being a devil's advocate and being a contrary pest. The "let me just throw this out there" advocate may come across as ill prepared or intellectually lazy. It might be fine to ad lib in informal or spontaneous interactions, but the practice is hazardous in more formal forums or when decisions of great consequence must be made.

You (and your audience) will gain more from argument if you do your homework. You will be better prepared to explain your positions and better equipped to evaluate counterpositions. Your level of preparation also conveys a sense of respect for your audience. Teachers and professional speakers, for example, might be able to occasionally "wing it," but that approach gets old fast as your listeners expect you to leave them with something of value. A common example of arguing while unprepared involves public response to newly released and potentially controversial art, books, and movies. It is not uncommon that individuals will voice strident condemnation of a work's so-called politically objectionable or socially irresponsible content. Unfortunately, all too often the critic's answer to the question "have you seen/read it" is "no, I don't need to" or "I won't support trash like that by paying attention to it." Here, people are expressing their opinion but they are not offering an *informed opinion*. Judgments such as this simply regurgitate condemnations heard elsewhere or are *a priori* judgments based on suspect assessments about the motivation or mind-set of the work's creator.

## When Argument Will Not Make a Difference

Is arguing simply a waste of breath because your audience is so stridently committed to a position that they will not give you a fair hearing? If so, you should consider choosing *not* to engage. However, we believe these occasions are infrequent and in subsequent chapters will demonstrate that there is usually an opportunity to establish common ground with your audience. The alert advocate is aware that even in those instances where an audience is unlikely to totally embrace a competing point of view, they may be receptive to more modest requests. For example, members of the National Abortion Rights Action League would likely reject any proposal that limits reproductive choice from a pro-life advocate, but the two may find some common ground on the issue of preventing unwanted pregnancy.

Consider the recent national debates—and stalemate—over raising the country's debt ceiling. Congressional votes on the debt ceiling, which are normally routine and simply mean the United States will not default on its debts, were for the first time mired in controversy in 2005 as a number of politicians insisted that the ceiling should not be raised until we got our national debt under control. The debt crisis can be addressed through spending cuts or revenue enhancements, yet a number of key players in the controversy entered the negotiations with notions about how some options, such as raising taxes, closing corporate tax loopholes, or making cuts to Medicare and Social Security, are “off the table.” Constrained by signed pledges to never raise taxes or bound by commitments to powerful lobbies or voting blocs, negotiations seemed to be at an impasse. As a result of this impasse, the credit rating of the United States was downgraded. Significantly, Standard and Poor's referenced the poor prospects for constructive problem solving by our elected officials as partially responsible for their decision:

The political brinksmanship of recent months highlights what we see as America's governance and policy making becoming less stable, less effective, and less predictable than what we previously believed . . . The statutory debt ceiling and the threat of default have become political bargaining chips in the debate over fiscal policy . . . in our view, the differences between political parties have proven to be extraordinarily difficult to bridge . . . .<sup>9</sup>

Until participants adopt a mature argumentative perspective that allows for compromise and values competing perspectives, the issue will be difficult to resolve.

## When the Issue Is Not Worth Arguing About

*Pest* is one pejorative term we apply to individuals who will argue aggressively and unproductively about virtually anything. Much like the youngster who responds

to every statement with “why,” the routine gets tiresome and irritating after a while. Adults (who should know better) may offer argumentative challenges that seem trite or unwarranted by the nature of the issue being considered. All ideas deserve exploration, but argument should, when possible, involve matters of consequence. In short, it is probably best not to argue when the issue is trivial while keeping in mind that what is trivial to you may be a matter of great consequence to others.

Decisions have to be made and matters settled, and the notion of *burden of proof* illuminated by Richard Whately can help an advocate appreciate the status of a decision.<sup>10</sup> You are likely familiar with the concept from the many legal programs on television. The notion is that existing ideas, laws, etc., are assumed to be fine (or enjoy *presumption*) absent compelling reasons to believe otherwise. The presumption of innocence is central to our judicial system. Those who would question established wisdom assume the responsibility to present a compelling case for their position. In other words, though perhaps everything is negotiable, we cannot renegotiate everything. Some sense of stability is needed. Imagine enrolling in college and expecting to graduate in 4 years only to find that the graduation requirements change each semester. You would never graduate. By the same token, how would one even make long-range decisions if we could not assume agreement over “settled” matters rather than having to renegotiate at every encounter? Sometimes we do not argue because we respect prior decisions. Other times we simply weigh the risks of argument and determine the issue is not big enough to justify the effort and potential damage discussing them might entail.

### When Arguing Could Jeopardize Important Relationships

Arguments can injure relationships. If the person involved in discussion with you is likely to view even innocent questions as aggressive threats, then you might want to modify your approach or simply avoid engaging in argument. This involves some sensitivity on your part as you attempt to understand your audience and determine the most appropriate means of reaching them. We will discuss that in more detail in Chapter 3.

The term *relationship* is used here in an expanded sense. On one hand, you may not want to jeopardize personal friendships through your discourse. On the other hand, we refer to a communication relationship and are concerned with whether or not our actions diminish the possibility of future productive argumentative encounters. Ask yourself if your response patterns make it more or less likely that your friend will engage in open, honest communication with you in the future. Will someone risk expressing themselves if they perceive that your default position is to question and criticize unnecessarily?

*Real Housewives of New York* (and New Jersey and Orange County and Beverly Hills . . .) is a popular television series. Watching the show is a lot like viewing an

interpersonal train wreck. Gossip, petty jealousy, and fights are a standard feature of the program. One of the most compelling parts of the drama is the private “heart to heart” talk between friends. They go like this: One of the housewives invites another out for lunch or a drink and a “talk.” The premise of the talk is that because the housewife is such a firm believer in open, honest communication and wants a better relationship with her “friend,” it is important that they meet in conversation so that the housewife can explain why she thinks her friend is such a hideous human being. It goes downhill from there. The point of this example is that the results are predictable. Could you reasonably expect someone to sit passively as you dig up some real or imagined slight from the past and explain to your friend why it was all her fault? The exchanges are dramatic but unproductive and help to perpetuate the conflict that evidently makes the show so popular.

Sometimes, even when you “win,” you lose. The phrase *pyrrhic victory* is derived from the actions of Greek King Pyrrhus, born in the third century BCE. Considered a great general, Pyrrhus defeated the Romans at Heraclea in 280 BCE and Asculum in 279 BCE. His victory, however, came at a great cost—an unacceptable loss of life and resources—which would render his ability to continue his military campaign doubtful. Pyrrhus considered the carnage and is reported to have said, “If we are victorious in one more battle with the Romans, we shall be utterly ruined.” The term *pyrrhic victory* is now used to refer to any situations in which victory is gained at too great a cost.<sup>11</sup> Applied to the field of argument, a pyrrhic victory might refer to a situation where the advocate “scores a point” but in the process ruins relationships, loses the trust and goodwill of others, achieves capitulation rather than commitment, or so contaminates the communication environment that chances for reasoned discourse in the future are undermined.

In summary, some arguments are important to have. Often, we need to argue to sort through options and make good decisions. We do not suggest avoiding difficult conversations or standing up for one’s beliefs simply out of deference to all relationships. Carefully considering one’s approach is important, however, if the goal is to both maintain the relationship and have someone important to us understand and appreciate where we are coming from. But there also are times when the benefits of arguing just might not be worth the potential damage that can come to a relationship.

**TABLE 1.2**  
When Not to Argue

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| • I am unprepared to participate constructively    |
| • There is no possibility of resolving the issue   |
| • The issues are trivial                           |
| • Arguing unnecessarily jeopardizes a relationship |

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## CONCLUSION

You may be thinking that the approach to argument advanced here is nice in theory but naïve in practice. After all, isn't it a jungle out there? In the "real" world, aren't people out for blood? You might even agree that your authors have a nice aspirational goal but consider it to be impractical. In response, we encourage you to look around at your own interactions with friends and family, in the classrooms in which you learn, the social clubs in which you gather, and the workplaces in which you negotiate responsibilities. There you see a more cooperative version of argumentation in action every day. The fact that a media focused on conflict sees limited ratings value in reasoned discourse and cooperative problem solving does not mean that the spectacles they present are the norm.

As teachers, we see constructive argument used effectively in classrooms where students question assumptions held by others in a respectful and open-minded manner. It is much more rare—though not

unheard of—that class discussions are derailed by students whose argument behavior alienates and intimidates others. The same is true in boardrooms, public meetings, and a host of other forums where important decisions are facilitated by cooperative argument.

There are other encouraging signs. That people are becoming increasingly disenchanted with leaders who would rather posture and score political points than solve problems is evidenced by the fact that public approval of and confidence in Congress is at an all-time low.

In your own experience, consider the conversations you have with others where you explain your feelings and opinions or seek guidance. These enriching exchanges are examples of argument, even though you may have never considered them as such given the negative associations conjured up considering the way the term *argument* is frequently portrayed.

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## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Locate a video example of an unproductive argument. Which "Rules of Engagement" explain why the argument was unproductive? What adjustments could the advocates make to render the argument more constructive?
2. Find a video example of a productive argument. What was it about the advocate's behavior that made the exchange productive?
3. Find an example of an argument in which you think the wiser course of action would have been not to argue at all. Explain why it would have been better not to have had the exchange.

- In your opinion, under what conditions (if any) could the argument be made productive?
4. View the movie *Fail Safe* (1964). In what ways does the negotiation between the president (Henry Fonda) and the Soviet premier illustrate or contradict the "Rules of Engagement" discussed in this chapter?
5. View a video of one of the presidential debates. Does the debate reflect what you would consider quality argument? Why or why not?
6. Social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) give us a nearly infinite number

of opportunities to engage (or not) in argumentation with “friends” online. Consider the implicit rules that you have developed that help you determine when to argue and when not to argue. Do they align with the reasons provided in the text? Do those implicit guidelines work well for you?

7. Given the situation as you understand it, what were Matt Lauer and Tom Cruise’s argumentative alternatives in the situation described? Was it inevitable, or were there other choices available that they could have made to make the interaction more useful for the viewers?

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### KEY TERMS

Argument 000  
Reasons/Grounds 000  
Zero Sum 000  
Devil’s Advocate 000  
Presumption 000

Argument as Process 000  
Structural Competition 000  
Competitive Mind-set 000  
Communication  
Relationship 000

Argument as Product 000  
Intentional Competition 000  
Cooperative Mind-set 000  
Burden of Proof 000