A SINGLE EXAMPLE

The Indians made names for us children in their teasing way. Because our very busy mother kept my hair cut short, like my brothers', they called me Short Furred One, pointing to their hair and making the sign for short, the right hand with fingers pressed close together, held upward, back out, at the height intended. With me this was about two feet tall, the Indians laughing gently at my abashed face. I am told that I was given a pair of small moccasins that first time, to clear up my unhappiness at being picked out from the dusky behind the fire and my two unhappy shortcomings made conspicuous. — MARI SANDOZ, ‘The Go-Along Ones’

In the following excerpt, George Orwell’s topic sentence (in italics) begins the paragraph and encourages the reader to ask why? Orwell then provides several reasons (also in italics) for and against shooting the elephant.

SEVERAL REASONS

But I did not want to shoot the elephant. I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with the preoccupied grandmothers air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. At that age I was not squeamish about killing animals, but I had never shot an elephant and never wanted to. (Somehow it always seems worse to kill a large animal.) Besides, there was the beast's owner to be considered. Alive, the elephant was worth at least a hundred pounds; dead, he would only be worth the value of his tusks, five pounds, possibly. But I had got to act quickly. I turned to some experienced-looking Burmans who had been there when we arrived, and asked them how the elephant had been behaving. They all said the same thing: he took no notice of you if you left him alone, but he might charge if you went too close to him.

— GEORGE ORWELL, ‘Shooting an Elephant’

Definition

You will often need to write an entire paragraph in order to define a word or concept. In many such instances, however, you will want to combine definition with other patterns of development. In the following paragraph, Timothy Tregarthen starts with a definition of economics (shown in italics) and then uses examples to support it:

Economics is the study of how people choose among the alternatives available to them. It’s the study of little choices (“Should I take the chocolate or the strawberry?”) and big choices (“Should we require a reduction in energy consumption in order to protect the environment?”). It’s the study of individual choices, choices by firms, and choices by governments. Life presents each of us with a wide range of alternative uses of our time and other resources; economists examine how we choose among those alternatives.

— TIMOTHY TREGARTHEN, Economics

Division and classification

Division breaks a single item into parts. Classification groups many separate items according to their similarities. A paragraph evaluating one history course might divide the course into several segments — textbooks, lectures, assignments — and examine each one in turn. A paragraph giving an overview of many history courses at your college might classify, or group, the courses in a number of ways — by time periods, by geographic areas, by the kinds of assignments demanded, by the number of students enrolled, or by some other criterion. In the following paragraph, note how Aaron Copland divides the listening process into three parts:

DIVISION

We all listen to music according to our separate capacities. But, for the sake of analysis, the whole listening process may become clearer if we break it up into its component parts, so to speak. In a certain sense, we all listen to music on three separate planes. For lack of a better terminology, one might name these (1) the sensuous plane, (2) the expressive plane, (3) the sheerly musical plane. The only advantage to be gained from mechanically splitting up the listening process into these hypothetical planes is the clearer view to be had of the way in which we listen.

— AARON COPLAND, What to Listen for in Music

In this paragraph, the writer classifies, or separates, fad dieters into two groups:

CLASSIFICATION

Two types of people are seduced by fad diets. Those who have always been overweight turn to them out of despair; they have tried everything, and yet nothing seems to work. The second group to succumb appear perfectly healthy but are baited by slogans such as “look good, feel good.” These slogans prompt self-questioning and insecurity — do I really look good and feel good? — and, as a direct result, many healthy people fall prey to fad diets. With both types of
people, however, the problems surrounding such diets are numerous and dangerous. In fact, these diets provide neither intelligent nor effective answers to weight control.

**Comparison and contrast**

Comparing two means looking at their similarities; contrasting means focusing on the differences. You can structure paragraphs that compare and contrast in two different ways. One way is to present all the information about one item and then all the information about the other item (the block method). The other possibility is to switch back and forth between the two items, focusing on particular characteristics of each in turn (the alternating method).

**BLOCK METHOD**

You could tell the veterans from the rookies by the way they were dressed. The knowledgeable ones had their heads covered by kerchiefs, so that if they were hired, tobacco dust wouldn't get in their hair; they had on clean dresses that by now were faded and shapeless, so that if they were hired they wouldn't get tobacco dust and grime on their best clothes. Those who were trying for the first time had their hair freshly done and wore attractive dresses; they wanted to make a good impression. But the dresses couldn't be seen at the distance that many were standing from the employment office, and they were crumpled in the crush.

— MARY MEBANE, "Summer Job"

**ALTERNATING METHOD**

Malcolm X emphasized the use of violence in his movement and employed the biblical principle of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." King, on the other hand, felt that blacks should use nonviolent civil disobedience and employed the theme of "turning the other cheek," which Malcolm X rejected as "beggarly" and "feeble." The philosophy of Malcolm X was one of revenge, and often it broke the unity of black Americans. More radical blacks supported him, while more conservative ones supported King. King thought that blacks should transcend their humanity. In contrast, Malcolm X thought they should embrace it and reserve their love for one another, regarding whites as "devils" and the "enemy."

King's politics were those of a rainbow, but Malcolm X's rainbow was insistently one color — black. The distance between Martin Luther King Jr.'s thinking and Malcolm X's was as the distance between growing up in the seminary and growing up on the streets, between the American dream and the American reality.

**EXERCISE 7.4**

Outline the preceding paragraph on Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, noting its alternating pattern. Then rewrite the paragraph using block organization: the first part of the paragraph devoted to King, the second to Malcolm X. Finally, write a brief analysis of the two paragraphs, explaining which seems more coherent and easier to follow — and why.

**Cause and effect**

You can often develop paragraphs by detailing the causes of something or the effects that something brings about. The following paragraph discusses how our desire for food that tastes good has affected history:

The human craving for flavor has been a largely unacknowledged and unexamined force in history. For millennia royal empires have been built, unexplored lands traversed, and great religions and philosophies forever changed by the spice trade. In 1492 Christopher Columbus set sail to find seasoning. Today the influence of flavor in the world marketplace is no less decisive. The rise and fall of corporate empires — of soft-drink companies, snack-food companies, and fast-food chains — is often determined by how their products taste.

— ERIC SCHLOSSER, Fast Food Nation

**Process**

You may need to develop a paragraph to explain a process — that is, to describe how something happens or is done: first one step, then the next, and then the next. Every time you give directions or write down a recipe, you are showing a process, usually in chronological order. In college writing, you will probably use process paragraphs most often to tell readers how a process occurs in general — for example, how the Electoral College works or how aerosol sprays destroy the ozone layer of the atmosphere. Here is an example of a process paragraph, with its topic sentence shown in italics:

*By the late 20s, most people notice the first signs of aging in their physical appearance. Slight losses of elasticity in facial skin produce the...*
Compendium of Social Statistics. At this point, you might decide to accept this document as authoritative — or you might decide to look further into the United Nations’ publications policy, especially to find out how that body defines illiteracy. You would also no doubt wonder why Rich chose the decade from 1960 to 1970 for her example and, as a result, check to see when this essay was written. As it turns out, the essay was written in 1979, so the decade of the sixties would have been the most recent data available on literacy. Nevertheless, you should question the timeliness of these statistics: Are they still meaningful thirty years later? Might the statistics today be even more alarming?

If you attend closely to the emotional, ethical, and logical appeals offered in any argument, you will be well on your way to analyzing — and evaluating — it.

FOR MULTILINGUAL WRITERS: Appeals in various settings

You may be familiar with emotional, ethical, or logical appeals that are not discussed in this chapter. If so, consider describing them — and how they work — to members of your class. Doing so would deepen the entire class’s understanding of what appeals carry the most power in particular settings.

The elements of an argument

According to philosopher Stephen Toulmin’s framework for analyzing arguments, most arguments contain common features: a claim or claims; reasons for the claim; assumptions (whether stated or unstated) that underlie the argument; evidence (facts, authoritative opinion, examples, statistics, and so on); and qualifiers that limit the claim in some way. In the following discussion, we will examine each of these elements in more detail. The figure on the following page shows how these elements might be applied to an argument about sex education.

Claims

Claims (also referred to as arguable statements) are statements of fact, opinion, or belief that form the backbone of arguments. In longer essays, you may detect a series of linked claims or even several separate claims that you need to analyze before you agree to accept them. Claims worthy of arguing are those that are debatable: to say “Ten degrees Fahrenheit is cold” is a claim, but it is probably not debatable — unless you decide that such a temperature in northern Alaska might seem balmy. To take another example, if a movie review you are reading has as its claim “Loved this movie!” is that claim debatable? Almost certainly not, if the reviewer is basing the claim solely on personal taste. But if the reviewer goes on to offer good reasons to love the movie, along with strong evidence to support the reasons, he or she could present a debatable — and therefore arguable — claim.

Reasons

In fact, a claim is only as good as the reasons attached to it. An essay claiming that grades should be abolished because the writer often earns poor grades is on very thin ice: critical readers will question whether that reason is sufficient to support the claim. As you analyze claims, look for reasons drawn from facts, from authorities, from personal experience, and from examples. Test each reason by asking how directly it supports the claim, how timely it is, and what counter-reasons you could offer to question it.
Assumptions

Putting a claim and reasons together often results in what Aristotle called an enthymeme, an argument that rests on an assumption the writer expects the audience to hold. These assumptions (which Toulmin calls warrants) that connect claim and reasons are often the hardest to detect in an argument, partly because they are often unstated, sometimes masking a weak link. As a result, it's especially important to identify the assumptions in arguments you are analyzing. Once the assumption is identified, you can test it against evidence and your own experience before accepting it. If a writer argues that grades should be abolished because grading damages both teaching and learning, what is the assumption underlying this claim and reason? It is that anything that prevents or hinders education should be abolished. As a critical reader, remember that such assumptions are deeply affected by culture and belief: ask yourself, then, what cultural differences may be at work in your response to any argument.

Evidence

Evidence, what Toulmin calls backing, also calls for careful analysis in arguments. In an argument about abolishing grades, the writer may offer as evidence several key examples of the damage grading can cause: a statistical analysis of the correlation between grades and later success in life; a historical precedent from the centuries when grading was not used; or psychological studies of grade-related stress on undergraduate students. As a critical reader, you must evaluate each piece of evidence the writer offers, asking specifically how it relates to the claim, whether it is appropriate and timely, and whether it comes from a credible source.

Qualifiers

Qualifiers offer a way of limiting or narrowing a claim so that it is as precise as possible. Words or phrases that signal a qualification include few, often, in these circumstances, rarely, typically, and so on. Claims having no qualifiers can sometimes lead to overgeneralizations. For example, the statement Grading damages learning is less precise than Grading can damage learning in some circumstances. Look carefully for qualifiers in the arguments you analyze, since they will affect the strength and reach of the claim.

Fallacies

Fallacies have traditionally been viewed as serious flaws that damage the effectiveness of an argument. But arguments are ordinarily fairly complex in that they always occur in some specific rhetorical situation and in some particular place and time; thus what looks like a fallacy in one situation may appear quite different in another. The best advice is to learn to identify fallacies but to be cautious in jumping to quick conclusions about them. Rather than thinking of them as errors you can root out and use to discredit an arguer, you might think of them as barriers to common ground and understanding, since they so often shut off rather than engender debate. If a letter to the editor argues If this newspaper thinks additional tax cuts are going to help the middle-class family, then this newspaper is run by imbeciles, it clearly indulges in a fallacy—in this case, an argument ad hominem or argument against character. But the more important point is that this kind of argument shuts down debate: few are going to respond reasonably to being called imbeciles.

You may want to identify fallacies by associating them with the major appeals of argument—ethical, emotional, and logical.

Ethical fallacies

Some arguments focus not on establishing the credibility of the writer but on destroying the credibility of an opponent. At times, such attacks are justified: if a nominee for the Supreme Court acted in unethical ways in law school, for example, that information is a legitimate argument against the nominee's confirmation. Many times, however, someone attacks a person's character to avoid dealing with the issue at hand. Such unjustified attacks are called ethical fallacies. They take three main forms: ad hominem charges, guilt by association, and appeals to false authority.

Ad hominem (Latin for "to the man") charges directly attack someone's character rather than focusing on the issue at hand, suggesting that because something is "wrong" with this person, whatever he or she says must also be wrong.

Patricia Ireland is just a hysterical feminist. We shouldn't listen to her views on abortion.

Labeling Ireland hysterical and linking that label with feminist focuses on Ireland's character rather than on her views on the issue.