

## Chapter 2

# With What Kinds of Subjects is Argument Effective?

Now that we have observed that argument is widely used and is being demanded more and more as people become more educated and have seen what the nature of argument is, we may well ask in what areas is argument most effective? In other words, what is worth arguing about and what isn't worth arguing about?

### **PROPOSITIONS AS SUBJECTS FOR ARGUMENT**

A proposition is an assertion that an advocate intends to prove to an audience in the form of a complete sentence. Furthermore, it is a sentence about which individuals disagree. The speaker may consider such topics as school spirit, AIDS prevention, or automobile accidents. Although these phrases might make excellent titles for speeches or compositions, as subjects on which to present arguments they are valueless. On the other hand, if we phrase propositions about certain aspects of each of the foregoing subjects over which opinions might differ, we will have proper subjects for argumentation. For example, the proposition, "College athletes should be given scholarships," is a good one about which to present arguments either pro or con. This is particularly true when many members of your audience are opposed to such a policy. If the audience of students, alumni, and faculty to whom you are speaking is in complete agreement with you that college athletes should be given scholarships, you need not take the time to develop well-supported arguments. Your object in this case would be to get group action toward raising money for those scholarships. At best, you would start the speech for action by briefly summarizing the arguments constituting the basis of their belief and then proceed to stir the audience into action.

Subjects for argument must be in the form of propositions that are phrased in such a way that disagreement exists.

### **PURPOSE OF SPEAKERS USING ARGUMENT**

In building any speech, we must clearly state our specific purpose. In a speech using argument, the general purpose is to gain belief. The specific purpose is to gain belief on the proposition presented. In the example above, the specific purpose would probably be worded as follows: "To gain the belief of the audience that athletic scholarships should be awarded at university X." So, carefully craft the proposition for your whole speech and then place the words "to gain belief of the audience" in front of it. This is one of the cornerstones of a superior speech. The specific purpose becomes the guide that dictates what you should include and what you should not. A carefully expressed specific purpose will help you avoid irrelevancies and keep you from wandering from the subject. Place your well worded specific purpose at the top of the final outline of the speech to help you keep your focus.

### **TYPES OF PROPOSITIONS**

Your study of argumentation will be aided by an understanding of the different kinds of propositions. Each kind has its own particular methods for analysis, its own particular structure of arguments required for its development, its own particular methods of approach in refutation. At this point in your study of argument you would be wise to develop the skill of identifying the nature of proposition you are engaging.

#### **Fact**

A proposition of fact asserts the truth or falsity of some factual matter. In the courtroom, many of the cases are propositions of fact. "John Jones is a murderer"; "Jack Smith is a burglar." A trial is conducted to establish the truth or falsity of that proposition. The prosecuting attorney and the defense attorney argue over whether or not the charge is a statement of fact. We often argue over propositions about exactly what happened in the past or what may happen in the future. For many years any number of individuals in the United States tried to determine the actual cost of building an underground highway system beneath Boston, with much disagreement about the actual figures and years of discussion about the facts.

Another proposition of fact that has concerned us for some time is the degree of human influence on climate. The proposition that many are debating is: "Increased use of fossil fuels is causing global warming." Such propositions of fact are worthy of consideration and argument, both because they are important and as many gaps are evident between the amount of evidence available and the complete establishment of the truth or falsity of this statement.

### Value

A proposition of value asserts the worth of something. In recent years people have debated the propositions: "The idea of freedom has been taken too far in Western societies." and "We may need to sacrifice some of our liberties to guarantee safety from terrorism." For many years Americans have debated the proposition: "The use of the Electoral College in selecting the president is not democratic." Often you will find yourself developing arguments on propositions of value about the worth of some policy, action, or thing.

### Policy

Probably the greatest numbers of propositions that you will be building arguments to influence belief are propositions of policy, which propose a course of action or a solution and are easily identified because the word should appears within the proposition. Specific examples of propositions of policy are: "Our corporation should raise the price of its product"; "The executive branch of our government should be reorganized"; "We should hire The High Fliers band for our sorority party"; "We should buy a new automobile."

In summary, we note that the proposition of fact is one in which we are trying to determine whether a particular statement is actually true. In the proposition of value, we are concerned with the worth of the thing we are talking about. In the proposition of policy, we are trying to determine what course of action we should take in the future. In Chapter 3 Analysis and Definition we will examine the differences among these propositions so as to discover the arguments necessary to prove them. In Chapter 7 Influencing Through Deduction, we shall discover the type of reasoning essential to proving various phases of these propositions. It should also be noted that there is a definite interrelationship among the three types of propositions. A proposition of fact may constitute a complete discussion in itself. Often, however, propositions of fact may be subpropositions to those of value or policy. The proposition of

policy, however, contains propositions of both fact and value as subpropositions. As we shall soon learn, in a proposition of policy, an advocate argues that a new course of action is of higher value than one that has been followed and that we should therefore adopt it. Subpropositions of fact, on the other hand, are used by an advocate in an attempt to prove the inferiority of an old policy and the superiority of the proposed new policy.

## **TESTING YOUR PROPOSITION**

The same tests that you applied to subjects in your beginning course in public speaking should be applied to propositions; you want to be sure that the proposition you are going to discuss is worthy. Thus, you should apply the following tests.

### **Am I Interested or Can I Become Interested in the Proposition?**

You will be effective as a speaker only on those subjects that concern or interest you. The greater your interest in a topic, the greater the chance you have in achieving success in its discussion. What subjects might interest you? Usually those that about which you have greater knowledge. However, do not cast aside a subject because you do not know much about it. Remember—interest grows with knowledge. The college student taking chemistry for the first time may not be very interested in the subject. But as he learns more about it, he may take additional courses and even decide to become a chemist.

### **Will My Audience Wish to Hear Me Discuss the Topic?**

This test is a double edged one. Audiences wish to hear the discussion of topics that concern them, that pertain to their daily lives, that are related to their basic wants and desires; they also want to hear from speakers who know more about the proposition than they do. So, in addition to discovering if the subject is related to the basic wants and needs of the audience, speakers must make themselves credible to the audience. A college student would hardly be acceptable to an audience of businesspeople speaking on “better business methods” and that audience would most likely reject her conclusions.

### **Is It Timely?**

A timely topic is one of present concern. We can do nothing now about the proposition, “The North should not have followed a policy of Radical Recon-

struction in the South following the Civil War." The problems of social and economic equality that confront us today are those that will receive an audience's continuing attention. Make sure your proposition is timely.

### **Is It Suitable for the Occasion?**

Individuals are usually asked to speak for a specific occasion, possibly as frequent as classroom lectures or as rare as the celebration of a community holiday. Always ask what the occasion is and then be sure to pick a proposition that fits the occasion. The proposition, "Our college should grant more scholarships to athletes," may seem related but is hardly the subject to be discussed at a pep rally prior to a football game. The proposition, "The United Nations Security Council should be expanded," is hardly suitable for the occasion of a celebration of the founding of a young people's group in a church. In many cases, presenting a speech to gain belief or to utilize argument shows lack of judgment.

### **Is It Narrow Enough to Be Covered Within the Time Limits?**

Some propositions take much more time to cover adequately than others. The time needed is dependent on how many main issues are involved and have to be proved. The proposition that the "divorce rate is distinctly higher than it was 50 years ago" should take much less time to establish than the proposition that "the states should adopt uniform divorce laws." The former might be developed sufficiently in 2 to 4 minutes, while the latter would require at least 15 minutes and could well be the subject for a discussion of 40 minutes or longer. All propositions of policy tend to take longer than other types because more issues and subissues involved are involved. On the other hand, to establish propositions of value, which may need as many as six or eight basic arguments, may take too long. Thus, in picking your proposition, be sure it is narrow enough to be covered in the allotted time. Do not risk the failure resulting from insufficient time to develop your argument.

### **Is It Suitable for Oral Presentation?**

In your beginning work in public speaking you learned that certain topics cannot be presented orally in the classroom. A person cannot learn to swim in a classroom, but a speech about swimming techniques is quite worthwhile at a swimming pool. So, to present an effective speech, the audience must be in the area where the subject can be taught. In the same fashion many proposi-

tions are not suitable for oral presentation. Some may become more suitable if you use such visual aids as PowerPoint presentations, DVDs, video clips, diagrams, or charts. This is particularly true when the proposition demands considerable use of statistics. If the statistics can be simplified and put on charts so that the audience can see them, your subject may become suitable for oral presentation. Accordingly, one of the important characteristics of your proposition is that it be suitable for oral presentation.

### **Is It Subject to Disagreement?**

The most frequent purpose of using argument is to change attitudes or beliefs. You choose to argue on propositions about which some members of your audience will disagree; your purpose is to change their belief. If everyone in the audience agrees with what you, then the usual reason for speaking is to arouse them emotionally, and possibly to action, about the issue. Most people agree to the proposition that we should give to various well-known charities. Thus, you wouldn't present arguments in the drive to raise money for such charities; rather you would attempt to engage the emotions of the audience. Likewise, a debater would not have to build arguments on the proposition: "Republicans are best to govern America" if the audience was composed only of Republican state chairpersons.

Although a speaker need not use a logical mode of persuasion for an audience that already believes in the proposition that he is advancing, sometimes a speaker will use elements of the logical mode of persuasion in speeches in which he is trying to arouse the audience emotionally. For example, everyone knows that we should drive more carefully. We don't have to present arguments for it. In a speech to stimulate an audience to drive more carefully, however, the speaker may use what appears to be a logical approach. Her main headings may seem to be reasons for believing. The support material may consist of statements of authorities, statistics, and factual examples. In this case, although the speaker may seem to be using the logical mode of persuasion on a proposition, her actual purpose is to get the audience emotionally committed to doing what they already know they ought to do. Thus, although exceptions may appear to exist, only those propositions that are subject to disagreement are worthy of development with argument.

### **Is It Clear Rather than Ambiguous?**

Any term with two or more meanings is ambiguous. Many words or terms do have two or more meanings and, hence, avoiding ambiguity is often dif-

ficult. Strive to word your proposition as clearly as possible. The proposition that “the United States should adopt socialized medicine” uses the extremely ambiguous term *socialized*, which has been defined in many different ways. This proposition could be reworded to state that “the federal government should guarantee medical care for all citizens.” This is a better wording; however, the term *medical care* is still ambiguous and would cause difficulty. The speaker might get out of difficulty by explaining what “medical care” includes (e.g., primary, preventive, and rehabilitative care but not long-term custodial care). In choosing and wording your proposition, be as clear as possible and avoid ambiguous terms.

### **Is It Capable of Being Supported with Evidence?**

Theoretical arguments are interesting but the speaker has little chance to gain the belief of an audience unless facts are presented that support the conclusion. Reasoning is a process of drawing conclusions from facts, and the proposition that has too few or no facts to support it will hardly be worth discussing. To present arguments to an audience in your hometown that a sewage disposal plant should be constructed is valuable for discussion only if facts are available to prove it. What kind of facts would support that argument? Water pollution statistics, an outline of the problems of disposal would be a start. In addition, you would need facts about the cost of a sewage disposal plant for your hometown, and so on. Without these facts, your discussion would be useless.

An example of another kind of subject often discussed is: “Was George Washington or Abraham Lincoln the greater president?” This is a question that cannot be answered—no direct evidence is available to establish such a proposition. Was one more capable of performing a particular kind of task than the other? With no direct evidence, we cannot answer the question. A characteristic of a good proposition is that it is capable of being supported with evidence. Thus, these kinds of propositions are not good ones for fruitful debate.

### **Is It Significant Enough to Be Worthy of Discussion?**

What value is there in the ancient argument over how many angels can stand on the head of a pin? Little or none. Likewise, most of the arguments over what section of the country is best as a place to live contain little of real value. Most arguments of this nature merely end up as “my opinion against yours.” Don’t waste the time of your audience, use your time as speaker to address

the problems in the world that need solving, causes that need sponsoring, the many injustices that need correcting.

### **Is There a Basis for Comparison?**

Most propositions, particularly those of value and policy, have comparison as the basis for development. In propositions of value we are asserting the worth of some idea or thing. The proposition: "Wal-Mart stores are beneficial to a community," can be proved only in terms of comparison with the smaller and independent store. Propositions of policy are decided by audiences on the basis of comparing the worth of the old system to the value of the new. Only when the new is shown to be superior to the old will they adopt it. As comparison is the basis of many propositions, it is essential that a sound basis for such comparison exist. The proposition above, "Lincoln was a greater president than Washington" is poor because little exists to make a comparison. They performed different tasks, lived in different ages, and were confronted by vastly different problems. The proposition, therefore, is virtually unprovable and the likelihood of drawing sound conclusions is nil.

### **Does the Proposition Involve a Single Subject?**

Many propositions can be so worded as to involve several plans of action. In the 1990s, the Republican members of the U.S. Congress argued for a "Contract with America." That proposition had many different subjects and would, accordingly, be a poor proposition to advance in a single discussion because of its many parts. An evening would barely suffice to cover even one facet. A speaker addressing the "Contract" would make a stronger presentation if he chose just one of those subjects and advanced arguments for or against it. To attempt to argue such a multiplicity of subjects in one speech would lead to such superficial treatment as to be valueless.

Still another proposition of recent times has been: "A social safety net should be adopted." This, likewise, is a poor proposition because so many programs are involved. The social safety net probably includes, in the minds of most speakers, government health insurance, social security retirement benefits, a program of unemployment insurance, and mental health services, and others. Again, the multiplicity of subjects involved would make any discussion of this proposition poor because each could only be treated superficially.



## WORDING THE PROPOSITION

Not only should we know the characteristics of a good proposition, we should also know how to word the topic we choose for general and special occasions,

### General Occasions

Sometimes the proposition is formally worded for general occasions, more often it is not. If you have been called on to speak and you have a proposition that you want to advance, you would be wise to consider whether or not you should introduce it early in the speech. For example, if you were to tell the audience in your introduction that you were going to try to convince them that "you should refrain from creating too much credit card debt," their reaction might be, "Oh yeah, just try living without credit cards." If you think that the announcement of your overall proposition early in your speech would get a "no" response, you would be wise to hold your announcement for later. You might use a question form to avoid a "no" response or you might merely announce your subject as a phrase, for example, "I'm going to talk to you tonight on the subject of living beyond your means." You, of course, are quite well aware of your proposition and can bring it out in the conclusion of your speech. Speakers giving goodwill speeches seldom announce their proposition even in the conclusion because of the danger of a "no" response. The supermodel promoting her line of cosmetics has for her proposition: "Buy my make-up system." She tends to avoid stating it, however, by showing her great beauty with the hope that such display will cause us to look favorably on her product and buy it. The political campaign speaker may have the proposition: "Vote for me," yet she tends to avoid such direct approach. Instead, she tries to gain favor by a discussion of the important problems that confront the nation or her constituents. Although in both these cases the audience is not unaware of the speaker's real proposition, neither the model nor the politician want to risk a negative reaction by too openly stating their proposition.

### Debates

The proposition for a public debate should be carefully worded. Most usually it is stated formally as a resolution, such as "Resolved, that all peace proposals should be made under the auspices of the United Nations." Or, for publicity purposes, it may be stated less formally as a question, for example, "Should capital punishment be abolished?" A good debate proposition has two additional characteristics. It is worded in a complete sentence as an assertion and

it places the burden of proof on the affirmative. The affirmative is the side that upholds the proposition; the negative opposes it. The affirmative will have the burden of proof if the proposition is so worded that it advocates a change from existing conditions. The affirmative must be for something new, something different.

Another way to determine whether the burden of proof is on the affirmative is to analyze the attitude of the audience toward the subject. The affirmative will have the burden of proof if the proposition is so worded as to be contrary to public opinion. In wording a proposition for public debate, be sure that it not only has the characteristics already described but is also a complete sentence and so phrased that the burden of proof falls on the shoulders of those who would support the proposition.

### **Public Discussions**

The best type of proposition for discussion is one of policy. Propositions of fact or value may sometimes bring favorable results and be good topics for discussion; however, the proposition of policy is much more certain to bring strong participation. We call these "problem solution discussion questions." In public debate or advocacy, the proposition of policy is one that supports a particular course of action. The discussion question, however, should indicate a problem area and make possible the discussion of a variety of solutions. The debate proposition might be worded: "Resolved, that the developed nations should significantly reduce the use of fossil fuels." For discussion, the following wording might be used: "What are the best methods for limiting the use of fossil fuels?" In fact, the use a single-solution kind of statement for discussion is unwise; the statement should be worded so that it allows a variety of solutions and so that the participants can make a choice among the various solutions available.

In summary, those who would influence by argument must phrase carefully propositions that they intend to advocate. These propositions may be of fact, value, or policy. Although the proposition is not always articulated in the speech, more frequently it is and appears at least as the final conclusion. The following are the characteristics of propositions that are worthy of argument:

1. I am interested in speaking on the proposition.
2. My audience will wish to hear me discuss the topic.
3. It is timely.

4. It is suitable for the occasion.
5. It is narrow enough to be covered within the time limits.
6. It is suitable for oral presentation.
7. It is subject to disagreement.
8. It is clear rather than ambiguous.
9. It is capable of being supported with evidence.
10. It is significant enough to be worthy of discussion.
11. It has a basis for comparison.
12. It involves a single topic.

## EXERCISES

1. Define:
  - a. Proposition
  - b. Proposition of fact
  - c. Proposition of value
  - d. Proposition of policy
  - e. The general purpose of a speech
  - f. The specific purpose of a speech
2. Give examples of propositions of fact, value, and policy.
3. Bring to class a list of 10 propositions that would fulfill the tests of a good proposition.
4. Where would you look to find out what people are arguing about?
  - a. Locally
  - b. Within the state
  - c. Nationally
  - d. Internationally
5. The following is a list of propositions, some good, others lacking the characteristics of good propositions. First indicate the type of proposition and then apply the criteria to see if they are good subjects for argument:

- a. Prejudice should be abolished.
- b. It is better to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all.
- c. Eisenhower was a greater general than Washington.
- d. Subsidizing athletes is an immoral practice.
- e. The Electoral College has been beneficial to the United States.
- f. The writers of the European Union Constitution should have provided for a president to be selected by direct vote of the people.
- g. Discrimination against homosexuals is a horrible practice.
- h. Lincoln was a greater president than Washington.
- i. George W. Bush should never have invaded Iraq.
- j. Socrates should not have drunk hemlock, he should have made the Athenians execute him.
- k. The civilization that came from Europe is better than any other.
- l. The countries of the former Yugoslavia would be better off if they returned to socialism.
- m. Truman was unjustified in using the atomic bomb on Japan during World War II.
- n. Tobacco smoking causes cancer of the lungs.
- o. European Union workers should not be allowed the right to strike.
- p. Marriage counselors have been effective in preventing divorce.
- q. Canada has a superior immigration policy than the United States.
- r. The United States was justified in invading Afghanistan after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.