Rogerian Argumentation

One of the greatest challenges for a writer of arguments is to keep the audience from becoming so defensive and annoyed that it will not listen to anything the writer has to say. Sometimes audiences can feel threatened by viewpoints different from their own, and in such cases persuasion can rarely take place. The psychologist Carl Rogers developed a negotiating strategy to help people avoid such situations; he called it "empathic listening." In an empathic position, the writer refrains from passing judgment on the audience’s ideas until he or she has listened attentively to the audience’s position, tried to follow the audience’s reasoning, and acknowledged the validity of the audience’s viewpoint (if only from a limited perspective). By trying to understand where the audience is coming from and avoiding loaded or attacking language that might put the audience on the defensive, the writer shows empathy for the audience’s viewpoint and opens the door for mutual understanding and respect. This psychological approach encourages people to listen to each other rather than to try to shout each other down.

Because it focuses on building bridges between writer and audience, and places considerable weight on the values, beliefs, and opinions the two share, a Rogerian argument doesn’t emphasize an "I win–you lose" outcome as much as classical or Toulmin arguments do. Rather it emphasizes a "You win and I win too" solution, one where negotiation and mutual respect are valued. Thus, it is particularly useful in psychological and emotional arguments, where pathos and ethos rather than logos and strict logic predominate.

A Rogerian argument usually begins with the writer exploring the common ground she or he shares with the audience. For instance, in an argument in favor of handgun registration, the writer might begin by stating his or her respect for individual rights, especially the right to self-defense and protection of one’s property. The writer might also show appreciation for sportsmen and collectors, who regard handguns as equipment for an activity or collectibles to be valued. In exploring this common ground, the writer tries to state the audience’s side of the issue fairly and objectively, so that the audience realizes the writer is treating it with respect.

In the body of a Rogerian argument, the writer gives an objective statement of her or his position, again trying to avoid loaded and attacking language and trying not to imply that this position is somehow morally superior to the audience’s position. The writer explains the contexts in which his or her position is valid and explores how they differ from the audience’s. For instance, the gun registration writer might note that gun collections are frequent targets for thieves, and point out that registration might help the owners retrieve such stolen property before it is used to commit a crime. In the conclusion, the writer finally presents his or her thesis, usually phrased in such a way that shows the audience that the writer has made some concessions toward the audience’s positions. For instance, the gun registration writer might concede that this law should only apply to new sales of handguns, not to guns the audience already owns. By giving some ground, the writer invites the audience to concede as well, and hopefully to reach an agreement about the issue. If the conclusion can show the audience how it will benefit from adopting (at least to some degree) the writer’s position, an even better chance for persuasion takes place.
**Writing Format**

- **Introduce Issue**: Provide any necessary background, definition, or history, but be sure that you do so without using judgmental or inflammatory terminology. Try to present the issue as fairly and objectively as possible.

- **Summary of opposing views**: Note that the opposition has points to ponder. This gives value to the opposition’s view and proves that there is neither side that is 100% right or 100% wrong.

- **Statement of Understanding and exploration of common ground**: begin by assuming that your reader may disagree with your position. To make a Rogerian argument, you’ll want to start by exploring the common ground you share with the opposing point of view. You may try restating the opposition’s point of view in ways that emphasize the similarities of positions rather than the differences. However, in exploring this common ground, you must state the opposing side of the issue fairly and objectively, so that the reader sees that you are treating it with respect.

- **Establish position with contexts and conditions**: In the body of a Rogerian argument, the writer gives an objective statement of her or his position, again trying to avoid loaded and attacking language and trying not to imply that this position is somehow morally superior to any other position. The writer explains the contexts in which his or her position is valid and explores how they differ from the opposing viewpoint. Therefore, in this section, you acknowledge how the opposition’s argument is also valid under certain conditions and contexts.

For instance, a pro-gun registration writer might note that gun collections are frequent targets for thieves, and point out that registration might help the owners retrieve such stolen property before it is used to commit a crime. You should avoid implying that the opposition is wrong.

- **Statement of context**: Similar to statement of understanding in which you describe situations in which you would share the opposition’s view.

- **Statement of benefits and conclusion**: In your conclusion, you finally presents your thesis, usually phrased in such a way that you show the reader that you’ve made some concessions toward the oppositional position. For instance, the gun registration writer might concede that this law should only apply to new sales of handguns, not to guns the audience already owns. By giving some ground, the writer invites the audience to concede as well, and hopefully to reach an agreement about the issue. Ask yourself if you have you tried to offer a solution that encourages cooperation and compromise. If you can show in your conclusion how the reader will benefit from adopting (at least to some degree) your position, you create an even better chance that s/he will be persuaded.