

The ARGUMENT BUILDER

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The Argument Builder

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I would like to dedicate this book to
My husband, John Johnson
My parents, Bill and Faye Pruitt and John and Diane Johnson
and Trinity Christian Academy

The publisher wishes to extend its gratitude to
Lauraine Gustafson, who edited this text

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FOREWORD



All of us need to make good arguments now and then. Few of us, however, have been trained in the art of building a strong and persuasive argument. Even those people who seem naturally “good at arguing” could benefit from some excellent training. That is what *The Argument Builder* seeks to do: train you in the art of building a strong argument.

When a house is built, the workers consult a step-by-step plan. Materials are assembled and arranged, equipment is brought to the building site, then a hole is dug for the laying of the foundation of the structure. First the foundation, then the frame, then the roof, then the plumbing and electrical lines are installed. Next, the walls are completed, insulated and covered, and the windows are installed. Finally, the finishing work is completed inside the house, which involves fine carpentry and installing fixtures and appliances.

Crafting a good argument may not be as detailed or time-consuming as building a house, but it does involve planning, gathering materials, and assembling the whole in an orderly, compelling manner. Once you become skilled at argument building, you will find yourself building strong arguments quickly and efficiently.

In this book, you will be shown how to plan and build good arguments. You will study excellent examples of some very good argument makers indeed—talented people ranging from classical Greek and Roman orators to biblical writers, Shakespeare, Bacon, Montaigne, and contemporary writers. You will learn what materials to use: examples, statistics, experts, proverbs, analogies, difference, degree, and cause and effect, among others. Using these materials, you will have ample opportunity to practice building good arguments both by studying the masters and seeking to imitate them in your own arguments. You will even have a chance to engage in a debate with your fellow students when you finish the book.

While *The Argument Builder* specializes in building good arguments, its companion text, *The Art of Argument*, specializes in detecting what is wrong in bad arguments. *The Argument Builder* will review some of the fallacies studied in *The Art of Argument*, but you may want to work through *The Art of Argument* to round out your study of arguments. You may also want to study *The Discovery of Deduction*, our formal logic text that examines the correct form logical arguments should take. To see samples of these books please visit the website of Classical Academic Press at www.classicalacademicpress.com.

Enjoy your study of *The Argument Builder*. Soon you will be well prepared for building, supporting, and presenting a well-formed argument.

Christopher A. Perrin, Ph.D.
Publisher

INTRODUCTION *to Students*

Have you ever wanted to prove a point but you didn't know how to do it? Have you ever been stuck in an argument in which your opponent seems to have all the valid points but you don't know what to say? If so, this is just the book for you.

This book will teach you an argument-discovery method called **common topics**, which was created by **Aristotle**, one of the greatest thinkers of all time. The common topics present for exploration a list of categories or “lines of argument” that allow you to discover all the possible arguments for your topic.

To help you understand how we will proceed, let me give you an idea of the pattern of this book. Each unit will introduce one of the common topics. Every topic has several subtopics that demonstrate more clearly how the topic can be used. In addition, for many of the common topics, you will also learn some common **fallacies**, or errors in reasoning, committed with these topics. By studying these fallacies, you will learn to form strong arguments from the common topics without falling into some common traps of bad reasoning.

In each chapter, you will read about how you can use a particular common topic and its subtopics to develop a hypothetical argument about curfew (a rule that governs what time you must be in your house at night). As you move through the book, each chapter will use the curfew example to help you understand how the common topic works practically. At the end of each chapter, you will find other examples of the topic, and you will practice using them to develop arguments. After you have completed this book, you will be well on your way to mastering an argument-building method that will be an excellent tool for you to use for the rest of your life.



Imagine this scenario: You have just passed your driver's test, and you are now the proud owner of a license. You are excited about your new freedom and can't wait to go out on the weekends to drive around and hang out with your friends. You are certain that you are entering one of the most thrilling times in your life. Then, you hear the bad news: your parents are a little nervous about your driving alone, and they have set your weekend curfew at 10:00 p.m.—the same time your curfew was even before you got your driver's license. You are crushed! After all, you are nearly an adult, so it seems like you should get a few more privileges. A 12:00 a.m. weekend curfew seems much more reasonable to you. After all, all of your other driving friends have midnight curfews. However, you know, instinctively, not to try that line of argument. Whenever you do try the “But all my other friends...” argument, your mother always responds in the same basic way, with some creative variations: “If all your friends jumped off a bridge, robbed a bank, sold themselves into slavery, pierced their big toe would you do it, too?”

Right now, you may be contemplating two equally unappealing options: committing yourself to a life of mokey martyrdom or throwing the grandest, most spectacular tantrum of your life. Neither of these courses is recommended. Instead, you might consider a third option of presenting a civil, well-reasoned argument for a 12:00 a.m. curfew. After all, the worst that your parents can say is “no,” and they may actually be interested in hearing your opinion, especially if your standard M.O. (from the Latin *modus operandi* meaning “standard way of operating”) is to try the mokey martyrdom or tantrum options. How would you construct this hypothetical, well-reasoned argument? After all, your best argument up to now has been the “But all my friends are doing it” argument, and that is getting you nowhere. Where would you find good points to which your parents would actually listen? How would you know which arguments were your best ones? How would you know how to state them properly?

In order to find the answers to these questions, it may help if you learn a little more about the famous philosopher, Aristotle, and two of his favorite topics: **logic** and **rhetoric**. Aristotle lived in Athens, Greece, in 384–322 BC.¹ In Aristotle's day, people were becoming more and more fascinated with **rhetoric**, which is the art of effective public speaking. As people joined the profession of rhetoric, they developed different concepts of what defined good rhetoric. For instance, the **sophists** were one group of **rhetoricians**, or public speakers, who focused more on the sound and style of their speeches, rather than on the content.² While there is nothing wrong, per se (in itself), with this approach, many other rhetoricians considered the sophists' arguments shallow. In fact, even today, if someone says that an argument is “sophistic,” he means that the argument is shallow.

Aristotle did not agree with the sophists' approach to rhetoric, and was instead extremely concerned with the *content* of speeches. He wanted to help his students find all of the available arguments for a given topic. In order to do this, he wrote about something called the common topics, a set of argument categories that a person can use to discover evidence for an argument. The main categories of common topics are: **definitions**, **testimony**, **comparison**, **relationship**, and **circumstance**.³ Each of these main categories contains several subtopics. For example, under the common topic of comparison, Aristotle discussed **analogy**, **difference**, and **degree**. Aristotle believed that **logicians** and rhetoricians could use these topics to help them create the best arguments possible.

However, awareness of the common topics was not enough. Good rhetoricians also had to be able to reason well using the common topics, so Aristotle also taught about logic in order to help his students use the common topics properly. Logic can be defined as “the art and science of reasoning.”⁴ In his book *Rhetoric*, Aristotle described two types of logic that people can use to develop the common topics properly.⁵ Today we call these two types of logic **deductive** and **inductive**.



Deductive logic comes from the Latin word *deducere*, which means “to draw down.” In other words, deductive arguments “draw down” knowledge contained by, or inherent in, a previously stated fact. To help you understand deductive logic better, let’s look at the main tool used with this kind of logic: the **syllogism**. A syllogism is an argument that contains a **conclusion**, which is a statement of belief, supported by two **premises**, which are facts used as evidence. The following is a common example of a syllogism:

All men are mortal.

Socrates is a man.

Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

The basic idea of deductive logic is that if the first two statements are true then the last statement must also be true. It is a logical conclusion that follows from the first two statements. That is, the first two statements imply, or point to, the last statement. We could also say that the conclusion is inherent in, or an essential characteristic of, the premises. Deductive logic is a very precise type of logic. If the premises are true, and the argument is arranged properly, then the conclusion must be true.

The second type of logic—inductive logic—is what will be emphasized in this book. The word “inductive” comes from the Latin word *inducere*, which means “to lead to.” Inductive arguments are the opposite of deductive arguments. Rather than drawing down knowledge already implied in facts or statements, inductive logic leads us to generalize on observations or examples that we see in everyday circumstances. In other words, inductive logic helps us recognize general patterns and theories that everyday observations or examples indicate.

Many medical and nutritional studies are based on inductive logic. For instance, you have certainly heard people quoting studies that indicate that smoking cigarettes is linked with a high chance of developing lung cancer.

In order to make this conclusion, researchers surveyed hundreds and thousands of people who smoked, and they noticed that a high percentage of them ended up with lung cancer. Of course, these same researchers did additional research to make sure that no other factors, such as pollution or diet, were causing the lung cancer. Once they eliminated other possible sources, and determined smoking as a common habit of all the lung cancer victims, they could establish fairly conclusively that smoking caused the lung cancer. If you refer back to the definition of “inductive logic,” you can see that it is the basis of the researchers’ conclusion because they observed many examples of lung cancer patients who smoked, and those observations indicated a pattern of smoking as a cause for lung cancer. Just as syllogisms are the foundation of deductive logic, examples are the foundation of inductive logic.

You may notice that inductive arguments are not as precise as deductive arguments. No matter how many convincing examples you observe, there still may be some

“argument,” it means that you supply the evidence or proof for what you believe. When people state their conclusions and premises clearly and logically, it can actually help prevent tension and hostility. In fact, as you will see in the next chapter, it is important to approach debates and arguments with an attitude of humility and self-awareness. One of the most important things you can realize before you debate is that you might be wrong, and your opponent might be right.

Before we move on, it is important for you to realize that good logic requires two key skills. The first skill is building good arguments, which is the focus of this book. The second skill is detecting whether or not the other person’s argument is a good argument or if it contains fallacies, which are “commonly recognized types of bad arguments.”⁶ When someone commits a fallacy, his premise does not lead to his conclusion. In this book, we will examine some of the most common fallacies connected with each of the common topics. If you haven’t already, I would recommend that you

Deductive logic comes from the Latin word deducere, which means “to draw down.”



other example that disproves your point. However, if you learn to structure your inductive arguments well, your arguments will be extremely strong, even if they are not 100 percent certain. Our examination of the common topics and their subtopics will help you understand how to use them to construct strong and effective arguments.

Right now, you might feel a little uncomfortable with the word **argument** because it seems that it always involves fighting, tension, hostility, and hurt feelings. Although this unpleasantness can be present when people argue, it doesn’t have to be. The Latin word *argumentum* simply means “evidence” or “proof.” Therefore, when you have an

also study *The Art of Argument*, which is a companion text to this book. In that book, you will learn dozens of fallacies that people often commit. Learning those fallacies will not only help you sharpen your argument skills, it will also help you to avoid them in your own arguments. When you learn to build good arguments and to critique others’ arguments, you will be well prepared to engage in and analyze the arguments you hear every day.

DEFINE

1. Logic: _____

2. Rhetoric: _____

3. Sophists: _____

4. Common Topics: _____

RESEARCH

Research these other famous Greek and Roman rhetoricians and summarize their views and their contributions to rhetoric.

1. Demosthenes: _____

2. Protagoras: _____

3. Gorgias: _____

4. Isocrates: _____

5. Quintilian: _____

6. Cicero: _____

CONSIDER

Rhetoric surrounds you every day in speeches, commercials, advertisements, and writing. Considering what you know about the rhetoric of today, do you think it is more in line with sophistic (focus on style) or Aristotelian (focus on content) views on rhetoric? Give two examples to support your idea.

DESCRIBE

Describe two strengths and two weaknesses of both sophistic and Aristotelian ideas of rhetoric.

At this point, you may believe that the main reason to learn logic is so that you can win arguments. That is a common misconception. The most important reason for you to learn logic is to help you understand what is right and true. This is an important distinction to understand. If your main goal in argumentation is to win, you may, inadvertently, commit fallacies and miss the point.

To help you understand this better, there is something important that you should know about yourself: you are very easily deceived, especially by yourself. Don't worry, it's not just you—all human beings are easily deceived. In fact, a man named **Francis Bacon**, who lived from 1561 to 1626, believed that human beings tend to deceive themselves and that they must continually work to free themselves from flawed thinking.¹ He was one of the earliest proponents, or supporters, of the scientific method (yes, you have him to thank for all of those science fair projects and experiments you have done), and he was interested in how people think and search for truth. He developed the scientific method to help people overcome their flawed thinking. In order to help people understand the ways they deceive themselves, Bacon wrote about something that he called the **four idols**.²

An idol is something that people worship. Webster's dictionary defines an **idol** as “a false god; a false conception; an object of extreme devotion.” In ancient cultures, and in some cultures today, many people worshipped idols made of stone, gold, or other precious metals. When Francis Bacon wrote about the four idols, however, he was not referring to golden or stone images. Instead, he was describing ideas or habits we hold dear that can hinder our ability to think clearly. In other words, our devotion to these ideas and habits can cause us to be prejudiced or biased.³ Webster's dictionary defines a **prejudice** as a “preconceived judgment or opinion,” and a **bias** as a “highly personal and unreasoned distortion of judgment.” The four idols Bacon described were the **idols of the tribe**, the **idols of the cave**, the **idols of the marketplace**, and the **idols of the theatre**.⁴ As you read about these idols, you may be surprised at how they affect your life and thinking.

The first group of idols, known as the idols of the tribe, is made up of the faults that are common to all human beings. You might think of a tribe as a group of people who live in a certain part of the world. Bacon used the term “tribe” to refer to the whole human race. In other words, Bacon believed that the idols of the tribe were weaknesses that every single human being has in common. These are weaknesses such as **wishful thinking** and **hasty generalization**. For instance, Bacon wrote that our senses are weak and easily deceived, and he said that humans tend to engage in wishful thinking. By this, he meant that we have a natural tendency to accept what we would like to be true or what we believe is true.⁵ For instance, did you know that researchers recently have claimed that chocolate, especially dark chocolate, can be good for your health?⁶ You might find yourself eager to believe this study because you like chocolate and, if the study is true, you could eat chocolate three meals a day. However, just because you want something to be true doesn't mean it is true. This example illustrates a general tendency of human beings: we like to believe things that are pleasant and comfortable to us,

and we don't want to believe things that are unpleasant or uncomfortable to us. In this case, our idol, or our object of extreme devotion, is our physical or emotional comfort. We care about our comfort and pleasure so much that it can prevent us from seeing unpleasant or uncomfortable truths.

The second group of idols is the idols of the cave. These are faulty thinking patterns that come from our specific backgrounds and social groups. Bacon called these the "idols of the cave" because our upbringing is like a cave that can limit our perceptions of the rest of the world. For example, each of us has been raised in a particular social class (lower, middle, or upper), and we all belong to a certain ethnic group (Caucasian, Asian, African American, Hispanic, Native American, etc., or a mixture of these groups). Whatever our background, we have learned to believe certain things about ourselves, the world, other people, and other groups based on the beliefs and practices of our specific group. Because of this, it is often hard for us to understand the viewpoints of other groups.⁷

For example, poor people often have misconceptions about rich people. They might believe that all rich people are spoiled or have been given their wealth by relatives. They also might believe that all wealthy people are happy. In reality, however, many wealthy people become wealthy by working hard in demanding jobs. Also, not all wealthy people are happy. There are plenty of miserable wealthy people. Many wealthy people also have misconceptions about poor people, such as that all poor people are poor because they are lazy. They might also think that poor people are unhappy because they don't have a lot of money. In reality, many poor people are extremely hard workers who work several jobs just to make ends meet. Also, many poor people are happy because they have great friends and families, and they love their jobs, even though they don't pay very well.

As another example, consider that people who have been raised in Republican families may not understand why people would be Democrats, while people raised

in Democratic families may not understand why anyone would vote Republican. These two groups may not understand each other, yet there are intelligent and moral people in both. These examples demonstrate that it can be difficult for us to understand people who hold viewpoints that are different than our own. The idols of the cave represent the cave of our own opinion, which can blind us to the truth in other viewpoints.

The third group of idols, the idols of the marketplace, represents the way in which words can be deceiving. For example, let's say that you decide to go to a popular new movie with a friend. Because tickets for the movie will sell quickly, you tell your friend to get to the movie early so that you can get good seats. In your mind, "early" means "at least fifteen minutes early and maybe twenty," but your friend is a bit of a procrastinator. When she arrives a mere five minutes early, you are upset with her. Your friend cannot understand why you are annoyed; after all, she did get there early. As you can see, sometimes words like "early" can be imprecise because they mean different things to different people. Bacon realized that in order to think clearly, people must clearly define words and use them precisely.⁸ However, Bacon also realized that translating our thoughts effectively into words so that others can understand us can be more difficult than it seems.

Sometimes we use words that have several different definitions, such as in the case above. Sometimes we use words that mean something to us but that are unfamiliar to other people. He called word errors like this the "idols of the marketplace." This may seem like an odd title for these errors, but if you think of a marketplace, or a place where people buy and sell things, it may help you understand why he named this kind of error the way he did. When someone tries to sell an object or a service to someone, the salesman must carefully communicate the benefits and value of what he is selling. If he uses words that his customer doesn't understand or words that can mean more than one thing, he will confuse and possibly even lose his customer.

A similar thing happens when we discuss ideas with other people. We aren't *selling* ideas to them, but we are trying to get them to accept, or at least understand, our opinion. People will not be able to do this if we speak over their heads or use words with many possible meanings. That is why it is so important that we use words carefully.

The last set of idols Bacon wrote about were the idols of the theatre. These idols represent “the human tendency to prefer older, more widely accepted ideas over novel, minority opinions.”⁹ Bacon believed that people often develop whole philosophies based on a few observations, rather than doing a thorough, scientific investigation. Bacon also believed that once people develop a philosophy or a **paradigm**—a model for understanding part of life,

these still occur. For example, even as late as the mid-1800s, people did not understand the link between germs and disease. During the Civil War, it was common for doctors to operate on several different patients without washing their hands between surgeries. Of course, this contributed to a high rate of infection and death among their patients. Because doctors at that time did not fully understand the connection between germs and disease, it was very hard for them to accept this connection, even when people like Florence Nightingale (a Civil War-era nurse famous for championing the adoption of improved medical hygiene) presented good evidence for better hygiene. As these examples demonstrate, the idols of the theatre represent our love for our personal philosophies.¹²



These four idols point to the need we all have to gain wisdom.

nature, or the universe—it is difficult for them to see past this philosophy, and it can blind them to the truth.¹⁰ An example of this would be the geocentric, or earth-centered, theory of the universe, which most people believed until the 1500s. Ancient philosophers observed the earth, planets, and stars and determined that the earth was the center of the universe. This was a fairly reasonable conclusion given the instruments and abilities they had to investigate these matters at the time. However, this model of thinking became so fixed in peoples' minds that when scientists, such as Copernicus and Galileo, demonstrated that the sun was the center of the universe, it was difficult for people to give up their belief in the old model. Many people still believed that the earth was the center of the universe and even refused to look at evidence that contradicted that theory.¹¹

We often look at examples like this and believe that we could not be similarly deceived. However, instances such as

As you can imagine, every single one of us is affected by these idols at some time in our life. As we become more aware of ways in which our thinking can be clouded and deceived, it helps us think more clearly. It is important for you to know that you are especially easy to deceive when you are very passionate or emotional about a topic. There is nothing wrong with emotions, per se, but when we are emotional about a particular topic and desperately want to prove a certain point, it is easy for us to use fallacies, especially if they seem to help us prove our point. As we carefully examine in later chapters each of the fallacies that are connected with the common topics, it will help you to avoid deceiving yourself.

The four idols and their effects on our way of thinking point to the need we all have to gain wisdom. If logic is a tool every person can use, then we can use the tool either wisely or foolishly. Too often, people misuse logic to manipulate, deceive, and attack other people. Logic can be a dangerous weapon or a wonderful tool. I hope that as you proceed through the rest of this book, you will resist the temptation of these four idols and fine-tune your ability to properly use the extraordinary tool that is logic.

As we wrap up this chapter, let's quickly relate the idols to the curfew debate we have been considering. At this point, you feel that your parents' proposed curfew is unfair and that they should be a little bit more lenient with you now that you are older. It is possible that you are right about this. After all, parents are human, and sometimes they make rules that are less than ideal or that are overprotective. However, it is important that you realize that you may be wrong, too. You also are human, and you might think that you are ready for more responsibility than you really are. Also, if you are honest with yourself, you will realize that your parents probably know much more about the potential dangers of driving at night than you do.

If you examine your thoughts and emotions, you may realize that it is difficult to see past your strong opinions and beliefs or to even think about your parents' point of view. If you can see this, you will understand that you are being affected by the idols that Francis Bacon described. If you approach the curfew debate determined to win and prove your parents wrong, you are already starting down the wrong path. Instead, you need to approach the curfew debate with the goal of using logic to state your point well, understand your parents' reasoning, and reach a good conclusion together.



ANSWER

Who was Francis Bacon? _____

EXPLAIN

*In your own words,
explain each of the four
idols and how they can
distort our thinking.*

1. Idols of the Tribe: _____

2. Idols of the Cave: _____

3. Idols of the Marketplace: _____

4. Idols of the Theatre: _____

1. Bias: _____

DEFINE

2. Prejudice: _____

DESCRIBE

Think of a time when you were affected by one of the four idols. You may have noticed the idols clouding your judgment, or you may have noticed them clouding the judgment of someone else. Describe what happened, how it affected you personally, and then write down which idol affected the situation.

LIST

List three or four words people often use that can be easily defined in several different ways.

Explain how these different meanings could result in conflict.

COMMON TOPIC 1

Definitions

If you are a person who loves to argue and debate, you might immediately assemble all of your arguments and fire them off at your opponent as though you were executing a military drill. If so, you are missing the most important step in any debate: definition. When you are getting ready to argue there are two important things that you must define: your position and the key terms in your position. Because this step is so important, definition is the first common topic we will examine. It is not exactly a type of argument, but it is an important preparatory step you need to take as you begin to argue.

The following are concepts that will be helpful to understand as you read the next chapter.

Thesis statement: A declarative statement of opinion that can be proven true or false.

Definition: An explanation or illustration of a word. There are several ways to define a word: **genus, species, etymology, synonyms, antonyms, description, and examples.**

You may not believe me right now, but once you learn how to define terms properly and clearly state your thesis, you will save yourself and anyone with whom you debate a world of frustration.

When did your mom and dad last ask you to clean your room? When you finished cleaning, were they pleased with the result? If you are like many teenagers, you have discovered that your definition of the word “clean” varies greatly from your parents’ definition of it. You may typically define “clean” as “to shove all the dirty clothes to one corner and all books, plates, and other unidentifiable objects under your bed and in the closet.” Your parents, on the other hand, seem to define clean as “to make sure your bed is made and all surfaces are spotless and junk-free.” As you have most likely discovered, this difference in definitions can cause miscommunication, which can lead to problems. Believe it or not, differing definitions not only cause small-scale interpersonal problems like the ones you may have with your parents over the condition of your room, but they have, throughout history, even caused wars.

Defining the terms of your argument will not solve all of your conflicts, but it can prevent a lot of confusion. In order to define your topic carefully, there are three main steps you need to take. First, you must determine what it is you believe about your topic. This is your conclusion. Second, you will write a declarative statement about your conclusion that can be proven true or false. This is your thesis statement. By “declarative statement” I mean a sentence that is a statement of fact rather than a question or a command. Third, once you have your thesis statement developed, you should then define the key terms within the position you have stated.

Every argument or debate that you ever have should proceed from a thesis statement. Here are some examples:

- Teenagers with driver’s licenses should have a 12:00 a.m. weekend curfew.
- Teenagers with driver’s licenses should have a 10:00 p.m. weekend curfew.
- Requiring students to wear school uniforms establishes a disciplined atmosphere.
- Requiring students to wear school uniforms inhibits students’ creativity and freedom of expression.
- Capital punishment is a biblical mandate.
- Capital punishment is not a biblical mandate.

As you can see, these statements all make a claim that is possible to prove true or false. In order to have a successful argument, it is crucial that you have a clear thesis statement. As odd as it may seem, it is possible for people to begin an argument believing they are discussing the same topic only to discover later on that they are actually discussing two different ideas. This can cause a lot of confusion and wasted time. By developing a clear thesis statement before you begin your argument, you can avoid this potential problem.

In some debates, you may be able to state your thesis statement before you do any further research. However, sometimes it is necessary to define the key terms of your debate before you can form your thesis statement. Before you attempt to form your thesis statement for your curfew debate, let's look at some techniques you can use to define words thoroughly and properly. It is important to define key terms for all topics because people often have different definitions for common terms. For instance, people have widely varying definitions of seemingly straightforward terms, such as "patriotism," "love," "discipline," "art," "music," "freedom," "Christianity" and "school." Once you define clearly what you mean by a word, it will be much easier to discuss it productively. For example, if you want to make a new proposal to your parents about curfew, it is essential to define exactly what they mean by "curfew." Do they mean that you must be in bed by 10:00 p.m. or just home by that time? Do they mean that you must be in your house, or could you be in a friend's house? Their definition of "curfew" will certainly determine the arguments you will use.

When you define your key term or terms, it is extremely important that you form a good, basic definition that allows you to proceed with the argument. Often, the best place to find this type of definition is in a good dictionary. For instance, Webster's *Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines "curfew" as "the time that the curfew signal is sounded; a signal (usually a bell) announcing the start of curfew restrictions; or an order that after a specific time certain activities (as those being outside on the streets) are prohibited." For your debate with your parents, you will be discussing the third definition of "curfew": "an order that after a specific time certain activities (as those being outside on the streets) are prohibited."

After further inquiry, you realize that your parents want you to be in your house by 10:00 p.m., although you don't have to be in your bed at that time. You may also, at times, be in other people's houses at curfew time if you have received permission ahead of time from your parents to stay

the night at someone else's house. Therefore, your working definition of "curfew" with your parents is: "A rule that requires you to be in your house, or a previously approved house, by 10:00 p.m."

If your argument is short, as your debate with your parents most likely will be, a dictionary definition may be an adequate enough definition for you to proceed with the argument. However, if you are engaging in a long argument, such as when you participate in a lengthy debate or write a long thesis paper, you may need to use other definition techniques. In these cases, it can be extremely helpful for you to ask and answer the following questions about the word or words that will be essential to your topic:

- Where did this word come from?
- What has been its common meaning throughout history?
- What kind of group does this thing belong to?
- What other words or concepts are like it?
- What are other words or concepts that are unlike it?
- How do you do it?
- What are some everyday illustrations of this concept?
- What does it look like?

Some of the most common definition techniques you can use to answer these questions are genus, species, etymology, synonyms, antonyms, descriptions, and examples. As I mentioned before, it is unlikely that you will use all of these techniques in your short discussion with your parents on curfew, but for the sake of illustration, we will examine them so that you can use them in other arguments.

One of the most helpful definition techniques is that of genus and species. The "genus" of a word is the larger group to which it belongs. For instance, lions, tigers, and Siamese cats, all belong to the genus of "cat." Blue, yellow, and green belong to the genus of "color." Mansions, cottages, and townhouses belong to the genus of "homes." When we refer

to “species,” we discuss the characteristics of a word that make it different from the other species in its genus. For instance, if we were discussing the different species in the genus of “cat,” we might discuss differentiating characteristics, such as size, predatory habits, and habitats. If we were to discuss different species in the genus of “house,” we might discuss square footage and architectural characteristics.

If we look at our argument about curfew, we could say that the term “curfew” is under the genus of “rules.” It is like other rules, such as dress code, socializing rules, and entertainment rules. A curfew differs specifically, however, because it is a rule that governs when you come and go

picture of the Latin and French languages as great rushing rivers full of words, some of which have flown into other language rivers, such as English. Using etymology when building an argument can be helpful because it can aid you in understanding what a word means. Pastors often share the etymology of certain words in their sermons in order to help their congregations understand a particular passage, as do teachers when they are seeking to clarify a concept. Keep in mind that etymology is not always useful or helpful in an argument or debate. For instance, when you are debating something in everyday life, or a similarly informal setting, it may be odd to share the etymology of a word. However, if you are participating in a formal debate or writing a formal

If you are participating in a formal debate or writing a formal paper, it is proper to be more academic, and discussing etymology can be helpful.



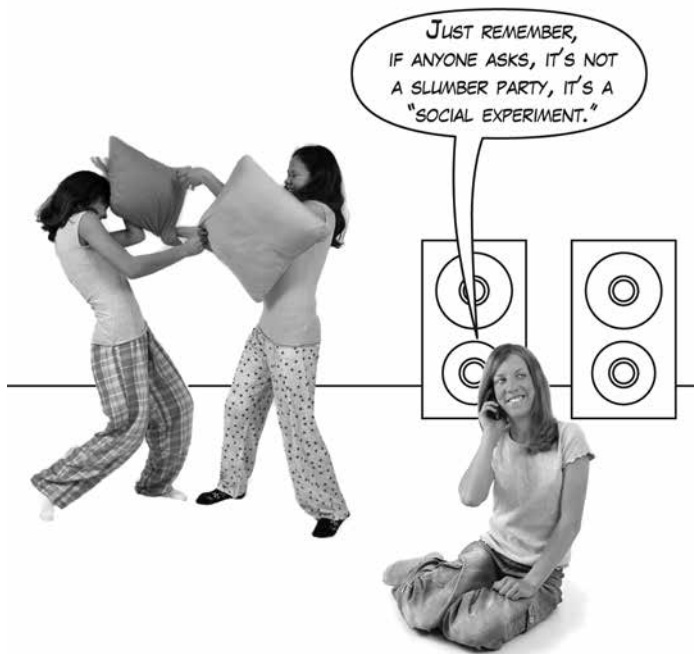
from your house at night. Furthermore, curfew rules usually affect teenagers or young adults, rather than children or adults. Discussing the genus and species of a term can help you to pinpoint the most important elements of your topic. This can be especially helpful when a term is unfamiliar to the person with whom you are debating.

Another definition technique is etymology, which is the history and origin of a word. To better understand what etymology is, it may be helpful to know that many of our English words came from other languages, such as Greek, Latin, or French. That is, we have many derivatives, or words that come from other languages, in our English language. Take the word “derivative,” for instance. It is actually a derivative itself. It comes from two Latin words *de*, which means “down from” and *rivus*, which means “river.” So, the word “derivative” literally means “down from the river.” Knowing the background of this word helps us to better understand its definition, and paints us a

paper, it is proper to be more academic, and discussing etymology can be helpful.

For the sake of example, let’s look at the etymology of the word “curfew.” It comes from the Old French word *cuevrefeu* or *covrir*, which means “to cover.” It can also mean “to cover the fire” (*feu* is “fire” in French). This helps us better understand why a curfew is a rule that requires someone to be at home because, based on its word of origin, it means that it is time, literally, “to cover the fire,” an action people used to do as they prepared for going to bed.

Description is another useful definition device. When people use description, they explain a word in greater detail than what is available in the word’s definition. To better illustrate the term “curfew,” you could describe some of the different types of curfews parents have set for their children. For example, you know that some parents allow their teenagers, especially older ones, to come home at all



hours of the night. Other parents, especially those whose families live in a dangerous part of town, may require their children to be in by dark in order to avoid the dangerous activities that can occur after nightfall. A majority of other parents require their teens to be at home or in a previously approved house by midnight and to call their parents when they reach the pre-approved location. Some parents allow their teenagers to be out as late as 2 a.m. on a weekend, but only if they are coming back from a previously approved activity, such as watching a movie with friends. Description can be a useful definition technique because it shows the range of possibilities for a given topic. Examining these possibilities can help people to make better decisions.

A definition technique closely related to description is example. When you give an example of your topic, you focus on one instance that clearly illustrates the word you are trying to define. This is different from description because description focuses on many different instances, while an example focuses specifically on one instance to illustrate a word. If you were giving an example of curfew, you might say, “My friend, David, has an interesting weekend curfew arrangement with his parents. When he first got his driver’s license, he was required to be in his house or a previously approved friend’s house by 11:00

p.m. If he was away from home, his parents also required him to call to let them know he was at the approved house. However, as he demonstrated responsibility, he earned greater curfew privileges. Therefore, after following his initial curfew responsibly for three months, David earned an extended curfew. After following this rule responsibly for the next three months, he was no longer required to check in with his parents. He continued to renegotiate with his parents every few months, and after a year or so, he earned the privilege to be out until 2:00 a.m. on the weekends as long as his grades did not suffer during the week.” Providing an in-depth example like this can be very helpful and can aid further discussion.

Genus, species, etymology, description, and example are some of the most common definition techniques that you can use to explain your topic. Other helpful definition techniques include synonyms, antonyms, and procedural or operational definitions.

Synonyms are words that have the same or similar meanings as other words. As we noted earlier in this chapter, there are some words, such as the word “love,” which can have different meanings to different people. Using a synonym for the word “love,” such as “affection” or “devotion,” can help others understand how you are using the word “love” in a discussion or argument.

Antonyms, which are words that have the opposite meaning of another word, can also be used to clarify the meaning of a word you are using. For instance, by pointing out that an antonym of the word “love” is the word “hate,” you can clarify how you are using the word “love” in your argument. Often we better understand a topic by exploring what it is like (synonym) and what it is not like (antonym).

Another helpful definition technique is to provide a **procedural or operational definition**. This type of definition actually describes how something happens or occurs. For instance, words like “democracy” or “education,” which can include concepts that are difficult to explain with

just a simple definition, might be better illustrated by an explanation of how they are done or accomplished.

Now that you understand how to define terms appropriately, let's formulate a thesis statement for the curfew debate. As mentioned before, your parents' working definition of curfew is: "A rule that requires you to be in your house, or a previously approved house, by 10:00 p.m." You know that you want a more relaxed curfew. Your conclusion is that you want to be able to be in your home or a previously approved home by 12:00 a.m., and you want to be able to earn more privileges if you act responsibly within the initial guidelines your parents set. You believe that this will allow you more freedom, and it will allow you to practice responsibility. Therefore, you

could frame your thesis statement like this: "A negotiable, 12:00 a.m. weekend curfew can help a young adult learn responsibility." Notice that this sentence can be proven true or false, which means it is debatable.

At this point, you know what logic is, you understand the importance of approaching any debate with humility, and you know how to define your position and its important terms. In the following chapter, you will learn about a few fallacies that people fall into as they are defining terms, and then you will be ready to form the main part of your curfew argument.



DEFINE

1. Thesis Statement: _____

2. Etymology: _____

3. Genus: _____

4. Species: _____

5. Description: _____

6. Example: _____

ANSWER

Explain why it is so important to establish a clear thesis statement and to define the key terms of your argument.

1. Genus and Species**a. Love**

Genus: emotion

Species: happiness, hate, fear, excitement, sadness, elation

b. Speech

Genus: _____

Species: _____

c. Car

Genus: _____

Species: _____

d. Sister

Genus: _____

Species: _____

e. Buddhism

Genus: _____

Species: _____

PRACTICE

Determining the genus and species of a word can be tricky, so here is an opportunity to practice this helpful definition technique. First, under genus, write down the large category into which the word fits. Then, under species, list several other species that also fit in that larger category. A word may fit into several different genera (more than one genus), but in this case, just choose one. The first one has been done for you.

2. Etymology

For example, the word “faux pas” is French for “false step.” In France, a faux pas can refer to either the use of bad grammar or to physical clumsiness, such as when someone trips. However, when English speakers use the term “faux pas,” they are referring to actions or speech that violate common, but unspoken, social norms or traditions. When used in this manner, a faux pas falls into the genus of “mistake.” Other species in this genus are: presenting incorrect information, acting on a mistaken idea, making an unwise choice, or accidentally violating a rule or law.

peccadillo

ennui

faux pas

ambulatory

pellucid

portmanteau

obstacle

demonstrative

ludicrous

auxiliary

oratory

laborious

PRACTICE

Choose one of these words, research its dictionary definition and etymology, and write them both down in the space provided. In addition, write the genus and species of your term.

PRACTICE

Use the word you chose in the previous exercise and think of examples from life that illustrate that word. In the space provided, you can either list several examples that clearly illustrate the word you chose, or you can discuss one example in detail. To help you gather details for your example(s), you might want to think about the 5 Ws and 1 H (who, what, where, when, why, and how) related to your example.

3. Examples

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

PRACTICE

Find three synonyms and three antonyms for the word you have been exploring in exercises 2 and 3 of this section.

4. Synonyms and Antonyms

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

ANALYZE

The provided excerpts use the common topic of definitions. Read the excerpts and then answer the corresponding questions.

1. From Harold Ickes' speech "What Is an American?"

What constitutes an American? Not color nor race nor religion. Not the pedigree of his family nor the place of his birth. Not the coincidence of his citizenship. Not his social status nor his bank account. Not his trade nor his profession. An American is one who loves justice and believes in the dignity of man. An American is one who will fight for his freedom and that of his neighbor. An American is one who will sacrifice property, ease and security in order that he and his children may retain the rights of free men. An American is one in whose heart is engraved the immortal second sentence of the Declaration of Independence.

Americans have always known how to fight for their rights and their way of life. Americans are not afraid to fight. They fight joyously in a just cause.

We Americans know that freedom, like peace, is indivisible. We cannot retain our liberty if three-fourths of the world is enslaved. Brutality, injustice and slavery, if practiced as dictators would have them, universally and systematically, in the long run would destroy us as surely as a fire raging in our nearby neighbor's house would burn ours if we didn't help to put out his.¹

a. At the beginning of this speech, Harold Ickes uses a definition device that we did not really discuss in this chapter but that is, nevertheless, very simple and effective. What is this definition device? What could be the danger of using this definition device to the exclusion of others?

b. In the second part of the speech, what definition device does Ickes primarily use?

c. If you were adding another section to this speech, what is one other definition device that would be especially effective? Why would it be effective? What is one device that you think would be ineffective? Explain your answer.

ANALYZE

2. From Susan B. Anthony's speech *"On Woman's Right to Suffrage"*

Friends and fellow Citizens: I stand before you tonight under indictment for the alleged crime of having voted at the last presidential election, without having a lawful right to vote. It shall be my work this evening to prove to you that in thus voting, I not only committed no crime, but, instead, simply exercised my citizen's rights, guaranteed to me and all the United States citizens by the National Constitution, beyond the power of any State to deny.

The preamble of the Federal Constitution says: "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessing of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

It was we, the people; not we, the white male citizens; nor yet we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed the Union. And we formed it, not to give the blessing of liberty, but to secure them; not to the half of ourselves and the half of our posterity, but to the whole people—women as well as men. And it is a downright mockery to talk to women of their enjoyment of the blessings of liberty while they are denied the use of the only means of securing them provided by this democratic-republican government—the ballot.

For any State to make sex a qualification that must ever result in the disfranchisement [sic] of one entire half of the people is to pass a bill of attainder, or an ex post facto law, and is therefore a violation of the supreme law of the land. By it the blessings of liberty are forever withheld from women.... Webster, Worcester, and Bouvier all define a citizen to be a person in the United States, entitled to vote and hold office. The only question left to be settled now is: Are women persons? And I hardly believe any of our opponents will have the hardihood to say they are not. Being person, then, women are citizens; and no State has a right to make any law, or to enforce an old law, that shall abridge their privileges or immunities. Hence, every discrimination against women in the constitutions and laws of the several States is to-day [sic] null and void, precisely as in every one against the negroes.²

- a. What is Susan B. Anthony arguing for in this speech? Write her thesis in your own words.

- b. In order to prove her point, Anthony defines several words. Below, list two of the words she defines.

ANALYZE

1. Continued

c. The term *ex post facto* law is a term in our constitution and would have been very familiar to people at that time, but is not necessarily familiar to people today. Find out what an *ex post facto* law is and then determine what Susan B. Anthony claims in her speech to be an *ex post facto* law.

ANALYZE

3. From Henry David Thoreau's "Walking"

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks—who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*: which word is beautifully derived from "idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going *a la Sainte Terre*," to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, "There goes a *Sainte-Terrer*," a saunterer, a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from *sans terre*, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering. He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all; but the saunterer, in the good sense, is not more vagrant than the meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea. But I prefer the first, which, indeed, is the most probably definition. For every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of Infidels.³

a. What is the key definition device that Thoreau uses in this passage?

b. The main topic of this essay is walking. However, Thoreau isn't just talking about walking as a means of getting from point A to point B, but rather his theme is focused more on walking as an experience. Write a paragraph in the space provided using the definition device of genus and species to add to this theme.

WRITE

Read the provided definition essay. Then, using the word you explored in the Practice section of the review exercises or one of the words listed here, write a similar definition paragraph. Be sure to use at least four of the definition techniques we have covered in this chapter.

freedom
education

integrity
capital punishment

patriotism
art

Sincerity is one of the most important characteristics a person can have if he wants to have good relationships with those around him. Webster’s dictionary defines sincerity as “genuineness,” “honesty,” [or] “freedom from hypocrisy.” *Sincere* comes from two Latin words: *sine*, meaning “without” and *cera* meaning “wax.” So “sincere” literally means “without wax.” This etymology may seem odd, but a brief story clearly illustrates this meaning. In Rome, there were many shops selling ornamental statues, and these statues were very popular. Sometimes, a statue maker would accidentally crack a statue as he was making it, but because he did not want to lose profit on this statue, he would seal the statue with wax and sell it to his customer without telling him of the cracks. This was unfair, however, because the customer was receiving damaged goods, while still paying the full price. Therefore, Roman shopkeepers began to post signs on their shops reading *Sincera*, which communicated to their customers that they were honest statue-makers, and they would not swindle their customers with damaged goods. Of course today, we do not associate statue-making with the word sincere, but it has retained its idea of honesty. Sincerity is a virtue, or a moral excellence, like prudence, temperance, justice, courage, and faithfulness. One of the most sincere people in history was Mother Theresa. She was completely honest in all of her dealings with people, whether they were poor lepers in India or presidents and other heads of countries that she met to discuss problems of poverty and other social issues. She was known for speaking directly and simply to people and showing compassion whether she went. Sincerity reflects solid, trustworthiness to people, and it lets them know they can trust you. Therefore, it helps build a great foundation for future friendships.

—Shelly Johnson

PREPARE

As you continue through this book, you will examine the curfew topic with each of the common topics. This will help you better understand how the common topics work. To provide you with additional practice with the common topics, you will also prepare for another debate, in which you will participate at the end of this book. For this debate, you will discuss the topic of school uniforms for junior high and high school students. In order to gather arguments for this debate, your class should determine what definition of "uniform" you will use. In order to do this, answer these questions about uniforms to help you determine the definition you want to use.

1. What is the dictionary definition of the word "uniform"? _____

2. What type of thing is a uniform? In other words, into what large category, or genus, does a uniform fit? _____

3. What are several other species in this genus? In other words, what other types of uniforms are there? How does a school uniform differ from other species in this genus? _____

4. What is the etymology of the word "uniform"? _____

5. Provide descriptions of uniforms you have seen in other organizational settings or in other schools. _____

6. What is one very clear example of a uniform in another school? Give as much detail as you can about it. _____

7. What are some words that could be synonyms for "uniform"? What words could be antonyms? _____

PREPARE

8. What is a procedural or operational definition for the word “uniform”? That is, how or why do schools use uniforms, and how do they work? _____

Now that you have answered these questions, you can decide on the definition of uniform that you want to use as you debate this topic. Be sure to include answers to the following questions in your definition as you write it in the space provided:

- Will the uniform be one outfit that the students must wear each day, or will the uniform include several different outfit styles from which students can choose?
- Will the uniform be purchased from one specific vendor, or can students buy the uniform from any vendor as long as it meets the established uniform criteria?

PROPOSE

Now that you have determined what type of uniform you want to debate about, your teacher will split your class into two teams: one team will be for the use of uniforms in junior and senior high schools, and the other team will be against it. Once you know whether you will be arguing for or against uniforms, write a thesis statement for your debate. Remember to form your conclusion into a declarative sentence that can be proven true or false.

Congratulations! You now understand the first common topic and the most important part of debate: determining your thesis statement and defining your key terms. Now we need to look at several common mistakes people make when defining terms. These mistakes are **vagueness**, **ambiguity** and the fallacies of **equivocation** and **amphiboly**. If you understand each of these definition errors and learn to avoid them in your own arguments, you will be much more persuasive and clear. First, we will review what a fallacy is, and then we will examine each of the fallacies of definition.

In chapter 1, I mentioned that “fallacies” are “commonly recognized bad arguments.” In other words, fallacies are errors in reasoning. To better understand this, let’s review the two parts of an argument: the premises and the conclusion. The conclusion of an argument is what you believe or what you are trying to prove. The premises of an argument are the pieces of evidence or the proof that you are giving to support your argument. If you construct a good argument, the premises, or the proof, should lead directly to the conclusion. Remember that when you construct an inductive argument, the premises will not lead directly to the conclusion the way that deductive premises do in deductive arguments. However, if your inductive argument is well-formed, the premises will lead to the conclusion closely enough to warrant an **inductive leap**. When people make an inductive leap, they accept the conclusion of an inductive argument because the premises are believable, they provide ample proof for the conclusion, and it is reasonable to accept the conclusion. For example, let us consider again the inductive study we addressed in chapter 1 regarding smoking and lung cancer. A medical researcher studying the link between smoking and lung cancer surveys 5,000 smokers, and finds that 4,988 of the smokers have lung cancer. Although this evidence does not *absolutely* prove that smoking causes lung cancer, the premises provide enough evidence to warrant an inductive leap. So, when your argument contains valid premises, they will lead to a valid conclusion. However, when you commit a fallacy, your premises do not lead to your conclusion.

Now that you understand why committing fallacies can cause you to present an erroneous argument, let’s look specifically at fallacies of definition. To understand the first two fallacies, we need to understand two problems that can lead to these fallacies: vagueness and ambiguity. When a word is vague, it is unclear, fuzzy, or imprecise because it can have a wide range of meaning or intensity. Vagueness often also means that certain words have been used so much that they have lost their meaning. Words such as “nice,” “good,” “important,” “thing,” and “bad” are vague words. For example, you might refer to a poorly cooked meal, a terrible sickness, or a bloody war in another country as “bad.” It is a fuzzy, “loose” word that can be used to describe a variety of situations. This may seem like a good quality, but a word like this doesn’t mean much because it can mean anything. It is better to avoid vague words like this because they are unclear and can be interpreted in different ways.

For example, the thesis statement “Capital punishment is bad” can be confusing. For whom is it bad? For whom is it good? Do you mean “bad” as in painful, or morally wrong, or bad for society? In order to argue about a topic like this, you need to use a much more precise word than “bad.” The following are some possible alternative thesis statements for an argument *against* capital punishment:

Capital punishment is unethical.

Capital punishment fails to stop crime.

Capital punishment is state-sanctioned revenge.

If you wanted to argue *for* capital punishment, you might use one of these thesis statements:

Capital punishment is a form of justice.

Capital punishment is a biblical commandment.

Capital punishment stops crime.

or it can be used as a popular expression of approval. These words can be ambiguous because they can express different ideas depending upon the context in which they are used. Phrases can also be ambiguous.

There are two fallacies of ambiguity that people commit: equivocation and amphiboly. Let’s look at a common example of the fallacy of equivocation. You may be aware that for the last couple of decades one of the greatest debates in our society has been over the teaching of evolution in school. This debate is especially heated because people on one side of the argument believe that evolution is scientific fact, and, therefore, that it would be irresponsible not to teach it in school. On the other side of the debate, there are people who believe that evolution is not fact and that it contradicts basic religious truth. Unfortunately, when people debate about this topic, they can confuse one another because the term “evolution” is ambiguous and can refer to several different concepts. In other words, people



When you use precise words in your thesis statement, you avoid vagueness, and you are able to address your topic more effectively.

When you use precise words in your thesis statement, you avoid vagueness, and you are able to address your topic more effectively. When people are vague in their arguments, they do not necessarily commit a fallacy, but they create an opportunity for misunderstanding.

Another problem of definition, ambiguity, can cause confusion just as vagueness can. Ambiguity occurs not because a word could have a range of meanings, but because it has several different common meanings, and it is not clear which one is being used. For instance, the word “plane” might refer to a flat or level surface or to a transportation vehicle. The word “cool” can mean “cold,”

often commit the fallacy of equivocation when discussing this topic. When a person commits this fallacy, he argues as though he is using a single definition of a term, but he is actually using more than one definition.

For instance, the word “evolution” can mean the broad concept of “change over time.” Everyone accepts this type of evolution as true. After all, it is easily observed: people change over time, landscapes change over time, and even languages change over time. However, besides this broad definition of evolution, there are also several other types of evolution to which people discussing the topic of evolution could be referring. There is “micro-evolution,”



which can be defined as change within a species. Such a change could be when the color of an animal's skin or fur changes over time to adapt to an environmental change. "Macro-evolution," on the other hand, is a change from one species to another, such as if a reptile evolved into a bird, or a fish evolved into a mammal.¹ Two other common terms that people use in the discussion of evolution are "theistic evolution" and "naturalistic evolution." Theistic evolutionists believe that God or a Creator used evolution to create the world. Naturalistic evolutionists believe that the process of evolution is unguided and random and that there is no God or Supreme Being behind it.² Therefore, because there are so many different terms within the topic of evolution, it is easy for people to equivocate and confuse each other when they are discussing this important subject. For instance, a person might discuss the evidence for micro-evolution and then later use the same evidence to validate macro-evolution. However, macro-evolution is very different from micro-evolution, so using the same evidence could be both misleading and confusing. This is an example of equivocation. To avoid equivocation it is crucial that you define the key words in your topic and then consistently use those definitions throughout your debate.

The story of the *Odyssey* offers a classic example of the second fallacy of ambiguity: amphiboly. You may recall that Odysseus, a Greek hero who was trying to reach his beloved island of Ithaca after the Trojan War, was trapped on an island in the cave of Cyclops and could not escape because the giant

rolled a boulder in front of the cave entrance. After blinding Cyclops' one eye, Odysseus finally escaped. As he sailed away, Cyclops, tormented by pain, shouted out for Odysseus to reveal his name. Odysseus shouted back, "My name is 'No One.'" Later, Cyclops' friends asked who had blinded him, and Cyclops responded, "No One blinded me." This is a good example of amphiboly. The phrase "No One blinded me" can be taken in two ways, which is what Odysseus was certainly counting on. It could either mean that a person named "No One" blinded Cyclops or that "no person" blinded him. To deceive Cyclops, Odysseus used amphiboly, which is using the same phrase in two different ways.

In his book *Introduction to Logic*, Irving Copi presents another example of amphiboly from ancient literature. King Croesus of Lydia wanted to go to war with the king of Persia. As he did with many important decisions, Croesus decided to consult the oracle (a person who was said to communicate with the gods) at Delphi. The oracle prophesied to Croesus that if he went to war with Persia, a mighty kingdom would be destroyed. Emboldened by this favorable prophecy, Croesus waged a war with Persia and was utterly defeated. When Croesus complained to a priest of the Delphi Oracle, the priest responded that the oracle had spoken the truth: Croesus *had* destroyed a mighty kingdom—his own.³

You may have noticed that while it could be very easy to equivocate or use amphiboly accidentally, it is also possible to use these fallacies purposefully to deceive. These fallacies can be used as a verbal sleight-of-hand. By "sleight-of-hand," I am referring to the distracting tricks magicians use to focus your attention on one hand while they are tricking you with the other hand. Sometimes arguers will use amphiboly to trick you and take your attention from the main issue or from the weakness of their argument. Learning these fallacies of definition will help you avoid them in your own arguments and resist being tricked with them by other people.

DEFINE

1. Vagueness: _____

2. Ambiguity: _____

3. Equivocation: _____

4. Amphiboly: _____

IDENTIFY

Each of the provided statements contains an italicized term or phrase that is vague or ambiguous. In the space provided, explain how each phrase or word could be understood in two different ways.

Errors of Equivocation and Amphiboly

1. After attending a dinner party, my roommate told me that he enjoyed a good *punch* on a warm summer's evening. Therefore, around the same time the next evening, I punched him in the nose.

2. A little boy who was terrified of *bats* refused to go into the barn of his family's farm at night because of the bats there. To play a cruel joke on him, his older brothers blindfolded him and told him they had a surprise for him. They led him into the barn that night, at which point they made screeching bat noises. The little boy ran screaming out of the barn and went directly to his mother. When the mother scolded the other brothers, they said, in feigned innocence, that they thought it would be OK because no one was playing baseball in the barn that night.

IDENTIFY

3. A man named Al wanted to purchase a new car, and, in order to save money, he visited a used car lot. After looking at several cars, one of the salesmen showed Al his dream car at an incredible price. Al, who was a little naïve, exclaimed, "What a great car! What a great price! Can this be possible?" The salesman responded to him, "*Let's just say that if you buy this car, there will be one more very happy person in this world!*" Al was so excited that he bought the car immediately. On his way to work the next day, Al's new car broke down, and he discovered that it was unfixable. Al returned to the salesman and accused him, saying, "You lied to me. You said that if I bought this car, there would be one more very happy person in this world! Well, my car broke down, I can't fix it, and I am certainly not happy!" The salesman looked innocently at Al, and replied, "But my dear sir! When I said that there would be one more very happy person in the world, I meant me. I have been trying to get rid of that car for months, and now, thanks to you, I am a very happy man, indeed!"

Humor with Fallacies

1. For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.

2. The eighth graders will be presenting Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the church basement on Friday at 7 p.m. The congregation is invited to attend the tragedy.

3. This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs. Lewis to come forward and lay an egg on the altar.

4. The preacher will preach his farewell message, after which the choir will sing, "Break Forth With Joy."

5. The Rev. Merriweather spoke briefly, much to the delight of the audience.

6. Next Sunday Mrs. Vinson will be soloist for the morning service. The pastor will then speak on "It's a Terrible Experience."

DETERMINE

The provided humorous sentences are actual phrases or announcements that were in church bulletins. Note in the space provided whether the errors in these sentences are equivocation or amphiboly.⁴

WRITE

Fortunetellers often provide their customers with ambiguous statements that seem to promise a great future. Modeling your story along the pattern of the story of Croesus and the Delphic Oracle, write a short story about a person who runs into a conflict with a local fortuneteller. Make sure that the story hinges around an ambiguous statement given by the fortuneteller, just like that of the Delphic Oracle and the used car dealer in the example about Al and his used car misfortune.

Ambiguity and Creative Writing

This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 28 horizontal blue or grey lines spaced evenly apart, typical of notebook paper. The lines extend across the entire width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There are no vertical lines, text, or other markings on the page.

1. Studying is a *good* habit.

2. Exercising regularly is *helpful*.

3. Being friendly to people is *good*.

4. Gossip is *bad*.

5. Helping little old ladies across the street is *right*.

REWRITE

Each of the provided thesis statements has a vague term that is italicized. Rewrite the statement, replacing the vague term with a more precise term or phrase.

Your Debate Thesis Statement

EXAMINE

Now that you understand the problems of vagueness and ambiguity, you need to examine the thesis statement for the uniform debate you wrote in the previous chapter. Is it clear? Are any of your terms vague or ambiguous? Could they be misunderstood by a person with whom you were discussing this topic? If so, rewrite the statement in the provided space so that it is free from any of these problems.