

Olympic Speaking

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"A mature society understands that at the heart of democracy is argument." -Salman

Rushdie

Heart pounding, mouth dry, pupils dilated, mind racing: fight-or-flight, the hardwired answer of your body to a threat, shock, pain, or the need to speak in a public setting. Modern science adds categories to the responses a body produces. Fight, flight, posture, submit and freeze. In the contemporary world seldom do we fight off a foe with sticks; instead, we use logic, verbal cunning, and wit. Posturing performed with theatrical gestures and an abundance of self-assurance is seen daily on the news. Also, on occasion, minds go blank, and we freeze. Then sometimes, we channel the energy from this response into an argument. These physiologic processes do not go away with experience; they still happen to your professors each time they get in front of a class or have to argue a point with a colleague. They have learned, and you can as well, to take these feelings and bring them out as a more energetic lecture, an exciting activity, or even a logical argument. These arguments are not the sitcom shouting matches seen on TV but the tool most used by modern humans to convince others of correctness, justify mistakes, and validate belief. With time you can learn how to do this with style.

Arguing stems from the desire to be understood. From a baby's first cry to the final words of the dying, almost all speech has the purpose of convincing others of an idea, belief, or a desire. This skill, the art of persuading with speech or writing, known as rhetoric, is considered so important historically and in modern times that it is still taught as one of the Liberal Arts.

The first three—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—of the Liberal Arts were known as the Trivium. The word trivial derives from Trivium; trivial not in the modern definition 'of little

value or importance,’ but in the sense that is only still used in mathematics—so essential and straight forward that everyone should know and understand it. Not everyone does understand. Looking at the comments section on any webpage or social media allows one to realize that most of the time we humans do not take the time to understand what another person meant or to put together a thought that is not trolling in nature. Nevertheless, these are the skills that you must have to participate in the world today, at work, school, and even at home. In the same way that you, when young, may not have been allowed to stay at the table and talk with the adults, you are not welcome at the table of business, healthcare, entertainment, and so forth if you do not have these abilities. Professors still strive to teach you these skills, often relabeled as General Education, with the hope that you will be able to think, reason, and argue.

Many people believe that to be teachable is to be passive and pliable. Some think one must sit quietly, listening with serious intent, taking precise notes as vast quantities of knowledge flow from the mouth of the teacher into the mind of the student. This passive manner is not learning nor being teachable; it is jumping through hoops and a waste of time, energy, and resources. Being teachable is to be actively engaged in learning, to be an independent, judgmental, and critical thinker. It requires a willingness to argue and challenge your thinking and the thinking of your classmates and teachers in an independent, judgmental, and decisive manner.

Being teachable does not permit you to spew whatever opinion you have heard from friends and family, read on a feed, or even learned in a previous class. Nor does it give you license to argue without purpose. Teachability allows you to learn to be open to new ideas, listen fully, decide what it means to you, and then present a rationale and argue your point, understanding that you may be right but that being wrong can still instruct. Rhetoric—the art of persuasion—is a tool to explain responsively and responsibly. Persuasion happens once you have listened and understood what is being discussed, decided what it means to you, and worked out if it is of worth.

Some arguments are unwinnable, how well thought out and planned your explanation is or even if it is correct doesn't matter—if your audience is not teachable you are screaming into the wind. Some arguments can only be 'won,' lessons taught, and ideas understood when one of three things occurs: the location changes and something can be seen or personally experienced, the time changes allowing an event to happen, or the level of understanding or teachability of your audience changes. Imagine standing in a cave trying to convince someone that had only ever lived in that same cave that the sky is blue when the sun is shining. The time, place, and personal understanding make it nearly impossible, no matter how eloquent the argument, to convince them that the sky exists let alone that it is blue.

Docendo disco, scribendo cogito is a Latin saying that means, "I learn by teaching and think by writing." In becoming teachable, you will learn how to teach, not just others but yourself as well. You will often find that you are your own worst critic and toughest opponent. Arguing with yourself is healthy; it is one of the skills that you need to help you become a life-long learner. Write down your ideas and arguments, plots and plans, old beliefs and new understandings. The act of writing will help you to think through, question thoroughly, and complete your understanding of a topic.

How do you start? First, you must seek understanding and not just someone else's opinion. What is your opinion on some of the following topics?:

- Abortion— specifically the laws regarding late-term abortion
- Gender— are there only two? How do we determine what gender is?
- Police Shootings
- A wall on our southern US border.
- The death penalty.
- Opioid use— both prescription and illicit.

From where did your opinion arise? Did you form it after reading credible source material, studies, or professional news articles and thinking about it, or was it from a social media

feed? If someone shared a different opinion, would you listen and try to understand a different side, or would you start repeating what you had heard? This is the power of 'fake news' in the world that we live in—if I can convince you of an idea, without you taking the time and energy to discover your understanding of the truth, you will have given up your freedom and denied yourself the opportunity to participate effectively in a democracy.

I am by profession a biologist and by training a medical doctor. In many of my classes, the issue of gender comes up. Are there only two? What does gender mean? How do we determine gender? Is there a difference between biological sex and gender? These are not simple points to consider, and yet we all have or are expected to have an opinion. In class, I do not share my personal opinion as an educator. I will listen to a well-phrased argument and ask questions to verify understanding, both mine of the student's case, as well as the students understanding of their evidence. Then I ask questions. Answering questions that contradict your opinions will help you to know your thoughts.

Right now, think of your stance on this topic. Got it? Now answer the following:

- What is gender? How does it differ from biological sex?
- Is a male genetically XY and female XX? Why? Would your great-grandparents feel the same?
- X and Y chromosomes were only discovered in 1905, what was gender before?
- Is gender a simple question of plumbing? Men have a urethra (a tube that carries urine from the bladder) that is 12-15 cm long, a woman's urethra is only 3-5 cm, but what about hermaphrodites?
- Mammals generally cannot change gender mid-life, but many species of fish and birds can by turning on a single gene. So, is gender a biologic constant?
- This gene, SRY, turns on in a human twice. Once in utero and once in puberty. If this gene malfunctions or is missing 'maleness' does not occur. What does that make someone with a Y chromosome with a non-functioning SRY gene?

These questions may be upsetting. They could lead you to conclusions with which you don't agree. That's normal and okay. That's how learning begins. Questions like these can be used to help you understand the level of knowledge you have before arguing, especially if a topic is important to you. You must have a deep understanding of your own opinion and not just parrot other people's words. You are now at the time of your life when you must be actively engaged in learning who you are and in what you believe. You are entitled to hold the positions you see fit. To do so responsibly you must consider whether you can justify your opinions to yourself and others. A mature thinker can defend positions with reason, evidence, and explanation and takes ownership of an answer even when that answer is "I don't know."

There is one side note that has to be made. No matter how well you understand yourself, your beliefs, and the topic at hand an argument can be deadlocked by the word 'no.' More correctly, by answering in the negative, continuously, no progress and no case can be made.

Is the sky blue? No.

What color is it then? Not blue.

How can I help you to understand blue? Nothing.

Do you believe that it is possible for the sky to be blue? No.

Will you read this article that explains the science behind the color of the sky so that your understanding of this topic can be broadened? No.

Be aware of these actions coming from others; more importantly, watch out for this type of behavior in yourself. Continually saying "no" shuts off a conversation, eliminates effective argument, and stunts the democratic process.

As you move forward in your education be ready to have your knowledge challenged, to have what you know to be real change as you progress and learn more. More importantly, learn and practice rhetoric, how to test others and yourself with not the quantity but the quality of your arguments. In doing this, your words will develop the power

to explain correctly, convince others, and share the knowledge that you are now working so hard to gain.