

On Rogerian Argument

Rogerian argument is often difficult for students to understand because it asks them to think about controversial topics in a different way: from the perspective of someone they disagree with. The discussions that follow are meant to help you understand the reason for and the components of an argument in Rogerian style.

ON FINDING COMMON GROUND

It is only through the clash of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.

—JOHN STUART MILL, *ON LIBERTY*, 1859

The major barrier to mutual interpersonal communication is our very natural tendency to judge, to evaluate, to approve or disapprove, the statement of the other person or the other group.

—CARL ROGERS, "COMMUNICATION: ITS BLOCKING AND ITS FACILITATION," 1951

argue (v.)—from the Greek *argos*, lit. "white," or *arguron*, lit. "silver," and meaning "to shine forth": in contemporary usage, to present reasons for or against.

In 1951, the psychologist Carl Rogers gave a talk at the Centennial Conference on Communications at Northwestern University that changed the

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way we think about argument. Psychology at that time was dominated by psychologists like B. F. Skinner, who were learning to scientifically condition thoughts and feelings in the same way that Pavlov had conditioned his dogs to salivate at the sound of their dinner bell a half-century before.

Rogers, on the other hand, was a humanist. He believed that human speech and human cognition were interrelated and that the success or failure of one was related to the success or failure of the other. In "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation," he put forward as the cornerstone of his practice the belief that "the whole task of psychotherapy is the task of dealing with a failure in communication" (330).

According to Rogers, the principle difficulty preventing people from settling their differences, indeed from communicating effectively in an everyday sense, was that people couldn't stop evaluating one another. The more important a topic was to them, the more emotional the participants in a discussion became, and the more they were apt to judge what the other person was saying rather than giving it the best hearing they could. In short, Rogers noticed that when people argue, they tend to make judgments about their opponents' positions before they really understand them.

Rogers's goal, then, was to avoid this tendency to constantly evaluate and instead to "listen with understanding." By this, he meant that people should not only try to understand that someone holds a particular viewpoint or even why someone holds that viewpoint but also try to get a sense of what it's like to believe that. "What does that mean? It means to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about" (Rogers 331-32). Rogers himself acknowledged barriers to this kind of understanding. First and foremost, you have to be willing to try it, and not many people are. Rogers's approach seems like you're giving ground to your opponents and, what's worse, sometimes you actually are. "In the first place, it takes courage [. . .] you run the risk of being changed yourself" (Rogers 333).

It is important to note, though, that this sort of Rogerian understanding is also itself an argumentative tactic. First, people will almost always refuse to consider something if they feel threatened by it, and Rogerian understanding reduces the threat to the opposition. Second, people reciprocate; they tend to treat others as they are treated by them.

Despite the initial difficulties, then, each new understanding of the opponent's view makes the next easier, while at the same time inviting, even obligating, the opponent to strive for a like understanding. "This procedure can deal with the insincerities, the defensive exaggerations, the lies, the 'false fronts' which characterize almost every failure in communication. These defensive distortions drop away with astonishing speed as people find that the only intent is to understand, not judge" (Rogers 336).

This Rogerian process started to make its way into textbooks in 1970. Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike's introduction of Rogerian psychology in their book *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* seeks to simplify some of Rogers's terminology and begin to present the process as a set of rhetorical objectives: "The writer who uses the Rogerian strategy attempts to do three things: (1) to convey to the reader that he is understood, (2) to delineate the area within which he believes the reader's position to be valid, and (3) to induce him to believe that he and the writer share certain moral qualities" (275). Put like this, in such a simple and reductive way, the process of attaining and expressing Rogerian understanding seems almost easy.

It is important to note that these are not developmental steps intended as heuristics, that indeed there are no sequential stages to a Rogerian argument. They are instead objectives to be pursued independently and recursively with the probable effect of facilitating communication. As Young, Becker, and Pike write, "Rogerian argument has no conventional structure; in fact, users of the strategy deliberately avoid conventional persuasive structures and techniques because these devices tend to produce a sense of threat." This is not to say the argument has no structure, but rather that "the structure is more directly the product of a particular writer, a particular topic, and a particular audience" (275). The danger of argumentative form becoming an exclusionary force, silencing rather than evoking discussion, is therefore greatly reduced.

At this point, then, you may be wondering what Rogerian argument might actually look like in terms of an essay for a composition class. An essay modeled on Rogers's approach should include a few particular parts:

- A discussion of the problem from both points of view that uses value-neutral language
- A discussion of the writer's opponent's point of view and a selection of facts or assertions the writer might be willing to concede to his opponent
- A discussion of the writer's point of view and a selection of facts or assertions the writer's opponent might be able to accept about his point of view
- A thesis that establishes a compromise between these two points of view and represents concessions from both the writer and his opponent

Let's look at an example, then, of one student writer's first draft.

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Harry Potter and Controversy

The film *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (titled *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in England) has stirred up much controversy. Directed by Chris Columbus and starring Daniel Radcliffe as Harry Potter, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* amassed over 946 million dollars worldwide according to the *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb). Based on J. K. Rowling's 1997 novel by the same title, which has received equal amounts of criticism, this film receives much bad review because of its depiction of witchcraft. The film, like Rowling's novel, paints magic in a positive light, which many Christians find sacrilegious. Many religious people believe that magic goes against the teachings of God and Christianity. This problem has resulted in much controversy between certain Christians and fans of the film.

Many Christians find Harry Potter evil for advocating magic. Turning to the Bible, we certainly find several references that indicate that magic is evil. Leviticus 19.26 says, "Do not practice divination or sorcery." Revelation 21.8 claims, "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death." According to this verse, Harry's practice of magic condemns him to what people today have termed "Hell." It follows, then, that anyone who watches the film and condones Harry's practice of magic, will follow him to Hell. *Christianity Today* magazine has a part of their website dedicated to allowing readers to "react as the debate continues over the merits (or lack thereof) of Harry Potter" ("Harry Potter: Good or Evil?").

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One reader, J. Buck, writes, "All spellcasting is bad. There is no good spellcasting. We get our miracles, blessings, healings, etc., from GOD. We do not get them from Satan." Certainly, using the Bible as the basis for understanding, Harry can be seen as a vehicle to leading people away from God.

Furthermore, Deuteronomy 18.10 commands, "Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead." Not only do Harry, Ron Weasley (Rupert Grint), Hermione Granger (Emma Watson), and all of the others at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry engage in witchcraft and cast spells, one of the most telling scenes in the film implies consulting with the dead. In the film, Harry discovers the "Mirror of Erised," which allows him to see what he desires most. An orphan from when he was a baby, Harry most desires to see his family. Thus, when he looks in the mirror, he sees his parents, who are dead. He proceeds to spend hours simply sitting in front of the mirror, enjoying the company of the dead. Certainly, this act goes against the teachings of the Bible.

Joseph Chambers of Paw Creek Ministries, a church in Charlotte, North Carolina, has an entire web log in his log series entitled *The End Times* dedicated to his opinions of Harry Potter and how its existence indicates that Armageddon is coming. He writes, "Without question I believe the Harry Potter series is a creation of hell helping prepare the younger generation to welcome the Biblical prophecies of demons and devils led by Lucifer himself." He further claims, "The very manner in which the series came to her would suggest 'spirit influence,'" for Rowling has claimed that the idea of Harry simply came to her one day (Chambers). The Harry Potter series

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advocates drug use and astrology. Although Chambers discusses the scene as it appears in the book, the film version of that particular scene is quite close to that of the novel. In the film, Severus Snape (Alan Rickman), Harry's Potions Master, introduces the class to the powers of various potions, some of which can be mixed to create drugs. In the end, according to Chambers, this encourages children to take drugs, and "[c]ertainly no parent or school official in their right mind would want these ideas in the minds of their children. Drugs have always been a large part of witchcraft and sorcery." This is particularly horrendous considering the age of the audience that watches Harry Potter. True, there are many adults who enjoy the film, but it was originally aimed at children, so it makes sense that parents may be upset that young, impressionable minds are being informed that it is acceptable to take drugs. Finally, the villain of the series, Voldemort, represents Satan. It is not the existence of the devil-like character, though, that makes the series Satanic; it is the fact that the Satan figure is glorified, according to Chambers's log.

A close, literal reading of the Bible would certainly indicate that Harry Potter could lead viewers astray. If one adheres strictly to the word that is the basis of the Christian religion, then one might see Harry as Satanic and thus a love of him Satanic by default. Furthermore, the film advocates bad habits such as dwelling too much on spending time with the dead as well as incorporating drug references without fully explaining their dangers. To young, impressionable minds, these drug references might encourage use and abuse.

However, Harry Potter is not without his merits. First of all, one must consider the fact that Harry Potter is, first and foremost, a work of fiction. Children can be taught to understand the difference between what is fake and what is real. Discussing the film with their parents can help young people to understand. One of *Christianity*

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Today's readers wrote, "I don't see the harm as I am a mature Christian and I can determine for myself through the word of God what is real and what is fantasy. To me, if the movie or program is well made, then it's just entertainment. It's the job of the parent, not a movie critic, to guide your child through a story like Harry Potter" ("Harry Potter: Good or Evil?"). Christians are forced to live in a world with nonbelievers, and being able to maintain their faith when presented with alternatives is part of what can make their belief strong. Furthermore, Harry Potter teaches moral lessons. Another reader wrote, "I am impressed with the deep meanings in the books. There is such a treasure trove of conversation we've been able to have with our kids. . . . My 11-year-old daughter came up with several themes: light over darkness, good over evil, love conquers, self sacrifice, friendship, trust, mercy, the importance of family" ("Harry Potter: Good or Evil?"). This woman was referring to the books, but those same themes are evident in the film. Towards the end of the film, Harry is telling Hermione that she is a better witch than he is a wizard, and she replies, "Me? Books and cleverness? There are more important things: friendship and bravery." A film that encourages children to be true friends who will face dangers cannot be all bad, can it?

Thus we can see that it would be beneficial to think of both sides. If parents and children can discuss the importance of telling fact and fiction apart, then everyone can learn the life lessons that Harry Potter has to offer.

This essay shows a struggle to grasp the concept of Rogerian argument. Here are some comments from an instructor, guiding the writer to better understand Rogers's approach:

Well, there are certainly things about it that are Rogerian. I think, though, with respect to your concern about tone, that it does read like you are trying to account for a position you regard as untenable.

I think this is how most people approach the Rogerian thing, but I don't think it's necessarily very real world useful in that way. What I mean is that if you don't believe in the literal truth of the bible, then this paper isn't going to be very convincing to you, right? In that way, it seems more like a traditional one point of view kind of argument, just from the opponent's point of view.

The goal of Rogerian-style is to produce identifications, and thereby reduce the amount of threat people feel from being opposed in an argument. So you want to find a position from which you can start building common ground.

So, if I were writing the thing I would've started with something like:

Problem: Although I don't personally think the HP books/movies are a danger to kids, many people do. So should kids be allowed to watch HP or not? I probably shouldn't state my opinion up front when I state the problem. On the other hand, the ways in which my opinion differs from theirs is going to always be on my mind whether I like it or not, so maybe it's not so bad to acknowledge it. The real issue, though, is whether or not you're stating the problem in such a way that it admits of a middle ground, admits of a solution that both sides are able to work toward. So, it's important that I'm not attaching any kind of negative value to the position that people disagree with me, or any kind of positive value to the initial position I hold. I'm just acknowledging that there's a difference of opinion, and that that difference centers around a question of policy, and that we're going to work toward a policy that accounts for the values held by both sides.

Exploration of common ground: Everybody wants to protect their kids. We can all agree that that's a good thing. We all want to prevent our children from experiences that would damage them mentally, physically, or spiritually. I, too, share these values. I do not want children to be warped, damaged, or sent to hell. With you so far.

Best, most generous possible interpretation of the opposing case: HP is unhealthy for children; it is potentially damaging to them in the following ways:

- a. Some people think it promotes drug use.
- b. Some people think it's difficult for children to differentiate between fantasy and reality.
- c. Some people believe that it is forbidden by God, and some people further believe that it leads people to the worship of Satan, and that this is a bad thing.

Degree to which I can reconcile this position to my own: Harry Potter does depict that certain difficult problems might have easy solutions connected with the consumption of chemicals. To the degree that we think particular children might be susceptible to this conception of things, we should prevent them from watching the movie, supervise their watching of the movie, or discuss the movie afterwards to correct these misconceptions.

There is the potential for children to have difficulty distinguishing between reality and fantasy. This can be a problem, and measures like those above should also be taken to deal with this problem.

Because I don't believe that magic is real, I don't believe that real people can practice it, so as long as care is taken to help children understand that HP is make believe, I don't believe that they will be spiritually endangered by magic. I also believe that the HP movies help uphold many of the same values that members of religious communities tend to promote.

Thesis: Because children are impressionable, and because images they see and valorize can be interpreted in different ways, those images do represent potential dangers to their well-being. While many good consequences can also result from experiencing films like HP, there is also some cause to value supervision and discussion of the experience with children afterwards, and possibly even to prevent particularly vulnerable children from seeing the film.

See what I mean, Jonathan? Your paper does a lot of this, but there are also a few things that make it seem more antagonistic. The beginning with "Some Christians . . ." indicates that you are not part of that group. You're trying to give that group a fair hearing, but you're not trying to identify with that group, or rather to identify a group that you can both be part of. So then when you get to the "However," in the last full paragraph, the reader is getting a pretty standard "and now here's my better

take on things." Note that in my thesis above it doesn't necessarily deal with the question of Christianity at all. It just states the degree to which my position and theirs are compatible, and it shows that I've come a certain distance in their direction. There's a lot of stuff I don't agree with, but that's not what we're dealing with right now. It's implicit, not explicit. Everyone knows that what's outside our little circle is still there, and it's clear what the limits of that circle are, but that's not what we're emphasizing, so it's not generating hate and discontent.

After carefully considering those comments by his instructor, the student turned in the following revised draft.

Seline 1

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Harry Potter: Poison or Passion?

The film *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (titled *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in England) has stirred up much controversy. Directed by Chris Columbus and starring Daniel Radcliffe as Harry Potter, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* amassed over 946 million dollars worldwide according to the *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb). Based on J. K. Rowling's 1997 novel by the same title, which has received equal amounts of criticism, this film receives bad reviews because of some of the lessons it may be teaching young minds. I enjoy watching the film for the adventure and excitement as well as its ability to help me escape from reality and imagine that I, too, can perform magic. However, I can see why some people see the Potions scene as advocating drug use, and other people are concerned about the safety of children who like to pretend that they can do magic. Furthermore, I can comprehend why some Christians think that God forbids the magic portrayed in the film.

Drug use is an ever-increasing problem in American society, and some of that problem can be traced back to the media's portrayal of drugs as not being all that bad. Joseph Chambers of Paw Creek Ministries, a church in Charlotte, North Carolina, has an entire web log in his log series entitled *The End Times* dedicated to his opinions of Harry Potter and how its existence indicates that Armageddon is coming. One of his complaints is that the Harry Potter series advocates drug use. Although Chambers discusses the scene as it appears in the book, the film version of that particular scene is quite close to that of the novel. In the film, Severus Snape (Alan Rickman), Harry's Potions Master, introduces the class to the powers of various potions,

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some of which can be mixed to create drugs. In the end, according to Chambers, this encourages children to take drugs, and “[c]ertainly no parent or school official in their right mind would want these ideas in the minds of their children. Drugs have always been a large part of witchcraft and sorcery.” This is particularly horrendous considering the age of the audience that watches Harry Potter. True, there are many adults who enjoy the film, but it was originally aimed at children, so it makes sense that parents may be upset that young, impressionable minds are being informed that it is acceptable to take drugs.

Another problem that is partially a result of the media is that films such as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* may encourage children to “try this at home.” Not being able to differentiate between reality and fantasy, young children are likely to think they possess magical abilities and try to imitate things they have seen in the film. The flying scenes in particular offer an opportunity for rambunctious youngsters to try to emulate the characters in the film. What child has never desired to fly on a broomstick? Unfortunately, gravity will eventually catch up with any boy or girl who tries using his or her mother’s broom to fly off the roof of the house, resulting in serious injuries.

Parents not only look after their children’s physical well-being; many tend to their children’s spiritual well-being as well. They teach their children to follow a certain religion and all of the rules of that religion. Thus, since many people in America are Christian, and the Bible speaks out against magic, some parents find Harry Potter evil for advocating magic. Turning to the Bible, we certainly find several references that indicate that magic is evil. Revelation 21.8 claims, “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars — their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death” (*Reflecting God: Study Bible*). According to this

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verse, Harry's practice of magic condemns him to what people today have termed "Hell." It follows, then, that anyone who watches the film and condones Harry's practice of magic, will follow him to Hell. *Christianity Today* magazine has a part of their website dedicated to allowing readers to "react as the debate continues over the merits (or lack thereof) of Harry Potter" ("Harry Potter: Good or Evil?"). One reader, J. Buck, writes, "All spellcasting is bad. There is no good spellcasting. We get our miracles, blessings, healings, etc., from GOD. We do not get them from Satan." Certainly, using the Bible as the basis for understanding, Harry can be seen as a vehicle to leading people, particularly children, away from God.

Because children are so impressionable, parental fears that the film advocates drug use by discussing the potions without fully explaining their dangers is certainly valid. To young, impressionable minds, these drug references might encourage use and abuse. Furthermore, children are accident-prone on a normal day, and the added danger of wanting to imitate magic increases chances for injury, so it once again makes sense for parents to worry about their children watching *Harry Potter* and thinking that they, too, can fly. Finally, a close, literal reading of the Bible would certainly indicate that Harry Potter could lead viewers astray. If one adheres strictly to the word that is the basis of the Christian religion, then one might see Harry as Satanic and thus a love of him Satanic. I, too, worry about the welfare of children, and as a Christian I can sympathize with those who wish to remain true to the teachings of the Bible.

While I can certainly understand these viewpoints on *Harry Potter*, the film also advocates some of the qualities on which Christians base their religion, particularly love. Towards the end of the film, Professor Dumbledore (Richard Harris) informs Harry that the reason he had survived when Voldemort tried to kill him when he was a baby was because his mother loved him so much that she was

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willing to sacrifice herself to save him. The Bible states, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (*Reflecting God: Study Bible*, John 15.13). Also, we can teach children to understand the difference between what is fake and what is real. Discussing the film with their parents can help young people to understand. One of *Christianity Today's* readers wrote, "I don't see the harm [in *Harry Potter*] as I am a mature Christian and I can determine for myself through the word of God what is real and what is fantasy. To me, if the movie or program is well made, then it's just entertainment. It's the job of the parent, not a movie critic, to guide your child through a story like *Harry Potter*" ("*Harry Potter: Good or Evil?*"). The same concept applies to the drug references in the film: If we sit down with the children and discuss the film, we can explain to them the effects of drug use that are not explained in the film.

We can use *Harry Potter* as a means to teach children the difference between fantasy and reality as well as how to be a good friend. Towards the end of the film, Harry is telling Hermione that she is a better witch than he is a wizard, and she replies, "Me? Books and cleverness? There are more important things: friendship and bravery." When watching the movie with children, we can emphasize scenes such as this so that they get more out of the film than simply the idea that they can fly on a broomstick. Certainly, *Harry Potter* can be dangerous if children watch it alone without understanding what they should and should not be learning from it. However, if we are willing to discuss our concerns with children before, during, and after watching the film, we can hopefully reach a compromise — one that allows children to see the movie without poisoning their minds.

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