Solving Problems by Negotiating Differences adapted from Becoming an Academic Writer by Joseph M. Moxley

How many times have you been in an argument that you knew you couldn’t win? Are you reluctant to change your mind about certain social, political, or personal issues? Do you have an unshakable faith in a particular religion or philosophy? For example, are you absolutely certain that abortion is immoral under all circumstances? Are you categorically against animal experimentation for advancements in medicine? Do you believe that criminals who have tortured and killed people should receive the death penalty? Do you believe that parents should have no more than two children because of the world population problem? Do you believe it is your patriotic duty to buy solely American products?

Some of our beliefs and arguments are based on faith, some on emotion, and some on logic alone. We all hold different religious, political, and personal beliefs that largely define who we are and how we think. Within the past fifty years, as the size of our global village has appeared to shrink with the use of television, fax, and jets, we have become increasingly more sophisticated and knowledgeable. As a result, most educated people now realize that few significant issues have simple solutions. Thanks to modern scholarship and research, we have come to realize that our personalities and thoughts are shaped to some degree by cultural expectations. Philosophers have challenged us to recognize that our worldviews - our assumptions about reality, what is good, what is possible - are influenced by our day-to-day experiences. We have realized that truth is not a fixed, static entity that can be carried into a battle like a banner.

One wonderful aspect of your college career is meeting different worldviews through books and through discussions with people whom you otherwise would not encounter. Indeed, many college campuses offer a wonderful glimpse of the diversity of modern-day life. A wide-eyed glance at students at the university center on my campus, for instance, will show you Chinese students working alongside students from Africa and South America. Young women dressed in their power suits mix freely with returning older adult students. Fraternity brothers rush from place to place, dressed in their blue blazers and short haircuts, while male musicians, dressed in the tie-dyed fashions of the 1960s and shoulder-length hair, play guitars and sing protest songs.

One result of our increasingly sophisticated world is that you cannot assume that your readers will believe or even understand everything you say. On the contrary, you need to assume that your readers will doubt you. They will question the validity of your evidence and test the logic of your conclusions. Modern readers tend to be particularly contentious when you insist on assertions that they find objectionable. Because of this shift in audience attitude, writers need to develop compelling ways of organizing and presenting arguments.
When you wish to address an emotional and controversial issue and when your audience is likely to be threatened by your ideas, you will probably not be successful if you make your claim in the introduction of your essay (or verbal argument). No matter how thoroughly you go on to support your ideas with careful reasoning and to refute other claims (such as those held by your audience) respectfully, your readers have already decided to ignore you. For example, can you imagine how your roommate would respond if you remark that he or she is a terrible slob? Even if you follow up your comment with photographs of the dirty dishes, cluttered rooms, and soiled carpet left in his or her wake, can you imagine that the final outcome of your detailed presentation might be resolution? More likely you will face anger, bitterness, and denial. Watch your introductory prepositions!

Most of us tend to resist change and are threatened by ideas that challenge what we believe. Also, most of us dislike being told what to do and how to think, so even if our brains tell us to agree, our emotions (and egos) tell us to shut down and ignore what we are hearing. A male chauvinist who believes that women are intellectually inferior to men will be unlikely to listen to your argument that women are as intelligent as men. Your quotes from world-renowned educators and philosophers and your statistics from the Stanford-Blinet or SAT, GRE, and MCAT scores would probably be dismissed as inaccurate because they threaten his assumptions. Of course, you could hope that the chauvinist would change his mind over time when he wasn't being pressed, yet you couldn't bet on this outcome.

Because conflict is inevitable, we need to seek creative ways to solve complicated problems and to negotiate differences between opposing parties. Although there are no simple formulas for bringing opposing factions together, we do have a relatively new form of communication founded on Carl Rogers's client-centered therapeutic approach to one-on-one and group counseling. Essentially, the Rogerian problem-solving approach reconceptualizes our goals when we argue. Instead of assuming that an author or speaker should hope to overcome an antagonistic audience with shrewd reasoning, the Rogerian approach would have the author or speaker attempt to reach some common ground with the audience. Thus, in a very real way, Rogerian "persuasion" is not a form of persuasion so much as it is a way of opening communication for negotiating common ground between divergent points of view. In terms of writing, we could say that the Rogerian approach melds the techniques of informative analyses with those of persuasive reports. Your goal when you employ the tactics of Rogerian problem-solving is not for you to win and for your opponent to lose, a scenario that more often results in both parties losing. Instead, you explore ways that will allow both you and your audience to win.

**On Rogerian Argument**

*adapted from Rhetoric Matters: Language and Argument in Context* by Megan McIntyre and Curtis Le Van

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.

[Click here to watch “What is Rogerian Argument?” (Youtube Video)]
On Finding Common Ground

"On Finding Common Ground" is written by Jeffrey Spicer, University of South Florida

"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 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 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 dela 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
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 probably 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

Analyzing Pertinent Conventions
Below are some of the strategies that you can use to negotiate consensus between opposing parties. As usual, you should not consider the following to be a rigid formula. Instead, pick and choose from these strategies in light of your audience, purpose, and intended voice.

**Present the Problem**

In the introduction, identify the issue and clarify its significance. Because you need to adopt a nonthreatening persona throughout your essay, however, avoid dogmatically presenting your view as the best or only way to solve the problem. Unlike your strategy for shaping a conventional persuasive text, at this point in your discussion you will not want to lay your cards on the table and summarize your presentation. Instead, explain the scope and complexity of the issue. You might want to mention the various approaches that people have taken to solve the problem and perhaps even suggest that the issue is so complicated that the best you and your readers can hope for is consensus or agreement on some aspect of the matter.

In your introduction and throughout your essay, you will want to explain the problem in ways that will make your audience say, “Yes, this author understands my position.” Because the people whom you are writing for may feel stress when you confront them with an emotionally charged issue and may already have made up their minds firmly on the subject, you should try to interest such reluctant readers by suggesting that you have an innovative way of viewing the problem. Of course, this tactic is effective only when you can indeed follow through and be as original as possible in your treatment of the subject. Otherwise, your readers may reject your ideas because they recognize that you have misrepresented yourself.

**Challenge Yourself to Risk Change**

Rather than masking your thoughts behind an "objective persona," the Rogerian approach allows you to express your true feelings. However, if you are to meet the ideals of Rogerian communication, you need to challenge your own beliefs; you must be so open-minded that you truly entertain the possibility that your ideas are wrong, or at least not absolutely right. According to Rogers, you must "run the risk of being changed yourself. You ... might find yourself influenced in your attitudes or your personality."

**Elaborate on the Value of Opposing Positions**

In this part of your argument you will want to elaborate on which of your opponent's claims about the problem are correct. For example, if your roommate's messiness is driving you crazy but you still want to live with him or her, stress that cleanliness is not the be-all-end-all of human life. Commend your roommate for helping you focus on your studies and express appreciation for all of the times that he or she has pitched in to clean up. And, of course, you would also want to admit to a few annoying habits of your own, such as taking thirty-minute showers or talking on your cell phone late at night while your roommate is trying to sleep! After viewing the problem from your roommate's perspective, you might even be willing to explore how your problem with compulsive neatness is itself a problem.

**Show Instances When Your Assertions Are Valid**

Once you have identified the problem in as nonthreatening a way as possible, established a fair-minded persona, and called for some level of consensus based on a "higher" interest, you have reached the most important stage in Rogerian negotiation: you can now present your position. At this point in your argument, you do not want to slap
down a "But!" or "However!" and then come out of your corner punching. Remember the spirit of Rogerian problem solving: your ultimate goal is not to beat your audience, but to communicate with them and to promote a workable compromise. For example, in the sample argument with your roommate, rather than issuing an ultimatum such as "Unless you start picking up after yourself and doing your fair share of the housework, I'm moving out," you could say, "I realize that you view housekeeping as a less important activity than I do, but I need to let you know that I find your messiness to be highly stressful, and I'm wondering what kind of compromise we can make so we can continue living together." Yes, this statement carries an implied threat, but note how this sentence is framed positively and minimalizes the emotional intensity inherent in the situation.

To achieve the nonthreatening tone needed to diffuse emotional situations, avoid exaggerating your claims or using biased, emotional language. Also, avoid attacking your audience's claims as exaggerated. Whenever you feel angry or defensive, take a deep breath and look for points in which you can agree with or understand your opponents. When you are really emotional about an issue, try to cool off enough to recognize where your language is loaded with explosive terms. To embrace the Rogerian approach, remember that you need to defuse your temper and set your pride and ego aside.

**Present Your Claim in a Nonthreatening Way**

Admittedly, it is difficult to substantiate an argument while acknowledging the value of competing positions. Yet if you have done an effective job in the early part of your essay, then your audience perceives you to be a reasonable person - someone worth listening to. Consequently, you should not sell yourself short when presenting your position.

Because of the emotionally charged context of your communication situation, you still need to maintain the same open-minded persona that you established in the introductory paragraphs. Although your main focus in this section is to develop the validity of your claim, you can maintain your fair-minded persona by recalling significant counterarguments and by elaborating on a few limitations of your claim. You can also remind your readers that you are not expecting them to accept your claim completely. Instead, you are merely attempting to show that under certain circumstances your position is valid.

**Search for a Compromise and Call for a Higher Interest**

Near the conclusion of your essay, you may find it useful to encourage your audience to seek a compromise with you under a call for a "higher interest."

**Writing Assignments**

The Rogerian method of problem solving is designed for exploring controversial interpersonal, social, and political problems. You can use these techniques to help you begin or end a personal relationship or to help you effectively communicate with your professors, etc. Knowledge of the Rogerian method can help you deal with instances of sexual discrimination in the workplace or help you encourage insecure authorities to take the action that you want. You could use Rogerian approaches to encourage your classmates and other students at your school to be more sympathetic about social problems such as poverty and ecological issues. To select a subject for a Rogerian analysis, try reviewing your journal and freewrite about significant interpersonal problems you have dealt with in your life.

Below are a few questions that may help you identify a subject:
1. Do I want to write about an interpersonal issue? For example, am I having trouble communicating with someone? Could the breakdown be linked to my failure to employ Rogerian strategies? Are there any major differences in belief that I could bridge by communicating with him or her in a Rogerian way?

2. Do I want to write about a social or political problem? Are there any on-campus or work-related problems that I wish to explore? For example, am I worried about an important national issue such as the federal deficit? Or could I promote harmony in a local or campus conflict?

3. Are there any sports-related topics that I could tackle? For example, do I want to convince skiers that short skis have carved up the mountain in an ugly way? Do I want to persuade tennis players that we need to throw away the wide-body power rackets and go back to the days of wooden rackets because power tennis is killing finesse tennis?

4. Consider playing the role of a marketing executive. Find a new product that you believe is superior to an established product and then write some advertising copy that explains why people should shift their loyalty to the new product.

**Prewriting and Drafting Strategies**

**Analyze Your Communication Situation**

To help you get a handle on which claims you are willing to relinquish and which you wish to negotiate, write a profile of your anticipated audience. Because awareness of the opinions and fears of your audience is so crucial to successfully negotiating differences among competing positions, you need to try to "become" your audience. As usual, this process involves asking, "What do my readers believe and know about the subject? Why do they think and feel my position is wrong?" Ideally, this process extends beyond merely considering your audience's needs to setting aside your thoughts and feelings and embracing the opposition's notions about the subject.

After you have gotten "under the skin" of your audience, freewrite an essay about your subject from their perspective. Doing this in a Rogerian way means that you truly challenge your own beliefs and present your opponent's viewpoints as strongly as you would your own. If you find yourself unwilling to explore the strengths of your opponent's position, then you should select a new subject.

**Write an Outline**

After freewriting about your opponent's positions as if they were your own, you will probably have excellent ideas about how best to shape your essay. You may find it useful to jot down your objectives as suggested in the following outline. Remember, though, don't let the outline control your thoughts. If insights occur while you are writing, experiment with them.

I. Explain the issue's significance and scope
   A.
   B.
   C.
II. In what ways are the major assumptions of the opposing position valid?
   A.
   B.
   C.

III. In what ways are your assumptions invalid and valid?
   A.
   B.
   C.

IV. What consensus can you establish?
   A.
   B.
   C.

**Revising and Editing Strategies**
By analyzing the strengths and weaknesses that your classmates and instructor have identified in past papers, you can know what special problems you should look for when evaluating your persuasive essay. As always, give yourself as much time as possible between drafts. Below I have listed some questions that highlight special concerns you will need to address when writing your Rogerian essay.

**Is the Subject Appropriate for a Rogerian Approach?**

A day or so after you have completed the first draft of your essay, reread it from the perspective of your intended audience. To conduct an honest self-evaluation, try to answer the following questions:

1. In the introduction, have I truly been open-minded? Have I thoroughly reviewed the strengths of my opponent’s counterarguments? Have I honestly challenged the weaknesses of my own position?
2. How could I change the essay to make it less emotionally charged?
3. Are the transitions from the opposing position to my position as smooth as possible?
4. When I present my claims, do I sound informed, intelligent, compassionate? What additional data would help my readers better understand my position? Do I need more facts and figures? Can I incorporate more outside quotations to substantiate my argument?
5. Have I successfully limited my analysis and elaborated on one specific, significant claim? Have I presented my position clearly and accurately?
6. Is the compromise I have suggested reasonable? Can I be more original in my call for a higher interest?

**Read Your Work Aloud**
Before submitting your essay to your peers or teacher, read it aloud to yourself several times. As you read, make a note of passages that seem difficult to read or sound awkward. Question whether the tone in the paragraphs is appropriate, given your audience and purpose. For example, can you find any passages that sound insincere or condescending?
Share Your Work with People Who Disagree with You
Ask people with different viewpoints from yours to critique your work. Let them know that you are attempting to seek a compromise between your position and theirs and that you welcome their suggestions.

Do a Criteria-Based Evaluation
In addition to making notes on criticisms of your text and ideas for improving it, you may find the following criteria-based format a useful way of identifying and correcting any weaknesses in your peers’ drafts or your own.

I. Rogerian Appeals
• Author establishes an emphatic persona and avoid threatening challenges
• Author clarifies instances in which opposing assertions are valid
• Author show instances when assertions are valid
• Author develops claim in as nonthreatening way as possible
• Author seeks compromise and calls for an higher interest

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II. Substantive Revision
• The document is reader-based
• The tone is appropriate given the audience and purpose
• The document is organized and formatted effectively
• The paragraphs are coherent and cohesive

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III. Edited Document
• Unnecessary jargon and awkward abstractions have been edited
• To be verbs have been eliminated
• A high verb-to-noun ration has been established
• Strings of prepositions have been avoided
• The document has been edited for economy
• The document has been copyedited for grammatical, mechanical, and formatting errors

Evaluating Criticism
When your professor returns your Rogerian report to you, take a few moments to reflect on your growth as a writer. To help put your role as "apprentice" in perspective, you may find it useful to consider the following questions in your Writing and Research Notebook:

Source URL: http://writingcommons.org/genres/academic-writing/rogerian-argument
Saylor URL: http://www.saylor.org/courses/ENGL001/#2.5
1. What have you learned about yourself as a writer as a result of writing your Rogerian essay?
2. In what ways has your knowledge of Rogerian negotiation and problem solving influenced how you will make oral and written arguments in the future? When writing this report, did you find your original point of view softening?
3. Based on your peers' and teacher's responses to your work, what goals will you set for your next writing assignment?