

Computers and Society

CPSC 430

Lecture 3 – Writing and Argumentation

Kevin Leyton-Brown

<http://cs.ubc.ca/~kevinlb/teaching/cs430>

Our focus this week: speaking, writing & argumentation

“In an Age of Information, what most professionals do is research, think, and make arguments.

(And part of the value of doing your own thinking and writing is that it makes you much better at evaluating the thinking and writing of others.)”

*from “Writing in College,”
Williams and McEnerney,
University of Chicago Writing Program*

Mostly, making good arguments is something you
learn by doing.

That's why we'll focus all term on
essays, review and class discussions.

However, this week we'll focus on some of the basics,
to help you get as much as possible
from the rest of the course.

Determining a thesis: generating ideas

- Easiest to generate ideas when you let them flow uncritically
 - freewriting
 - write without pausing, ignore grammar, set time limit
 - brainstorming
 - point form version of freewriting; again, don't be critical
 - clustering
 - organize ideas visually
- Consider more than one candidate topic to make sure you pick a good one

Finalizing your thesis

- easy to state in one sentence
- something you're passionate about and want to argue for
- In your essays:
 - make sure your thesis is narrow enough
 - make sure it's non-obvious
 - make sure it makes a claim rather than just stating a topic
- In an in-class discussion:
 - make sure you don't miss a better topic
 - make sure you pick something you're interested in and have arguments about

Outline your argument

- a simple point-form summary of what you want to say
 - this is the place to wrestle with how your argument will go, before you start getting caught up in sentences/details
- high level:
 - start by stating your thesis/main claim
 - two or three arguments in favor
 - some kind of conclusion; can be just a sentence or two
- Once high level is settled, work out arguments in favor in more detail
- Someone who read your outline wouldn't be surprised by anything in the essay

Anticipate & react to other arguments

- It doesn't weaken an argument to acknowledge that others will disagree
 - instead, it's better to anticipate arguments others will make
- In an essay, this is something you'll have to do explicitly
- In a class discussion, you actually hear other arguments
 - you'll need to adapt to what you hear
 - refute arguments made by others
 - claim that others' arguments actually support your point
 - add new evidence or arguments to reinforce your thesis

Rhetoric

- Make one point
 - Other arguments should be sub-points of this point
 - Your outline helps keep you honest here
- Be conversational; use simple, accessible language
- Be open to alternate points of view
- Be interesting!
- When speaking:
 - Be loud enough
 - Convey emotion and excitement
 - Refer to notes if you need to, but don't read
 - Pausing is better than “um”
 - Don't ramble; know when to stop!