Civics Lessons

In these activities students use what they have learned about the parts of argument to evaluate the quality of political and civic discourse. You can find a large collection of audio, video, and printed texts at www.americanrhetoric.com. Because judgments of these texts will be complicated by students’ own beliefs and values, it is best to use these exercises only after students have completed some of the other activities. You can, however, profitably return to them throughout the term.

Materials for Oral Argument

You will need recordings of political arguments: speeches, debates, or talk show conversations. Try to obtain both a video or audio tape or computer file and a printed transcript (add line numbers if you can). If your students have strong opinions about the issue in question, find arguments on different sides of it. Make copies of the Argument Boxes worksheet and of the worksheet below (or make an evaluation worksheet of your own).

Materials for Written Argument

You will need copies of arguments shorter than five printed pages. (Add line numbers if you can.) If your students have strong opinions about the issue in question, find arguments on different sides of the issue. In addition to the standard print sources, also check Web sites for political organizations.

Process

1. As homework, assign students to fill out both an Argument Boxes worksheet and a Civics Lessons worksheet for each speaker / writer.
2. Put students in groups to discuss the quality of the arguments. Have each group prepare a one-minute summary of its views, with disagreements.

3. Reconvene the class to discuss their experience evaluating the arguments.
   Focus not only on the quality of the arguments (and public discourse generally) but also on how hard it is to make sound judgments about arguments that contradict your own views and beliefs.

4. (Optional) After students have done those three steps a few times, have them write a formal analysis of the arguments in a particular public debate, of the habits of argument of a specific person or organization, or of some aspect of civic arguments in general.

Worksheet

1. Does the writer present evidence for each reason?
   Do you accept the evidence as evidence?
   If you accept the evidence, is it sufficient evidence for you?
   Can you imagine other evidence that you would accept? What would that be?

2. Do the reasons support the claim well enough for you to accept it?
   Does each reason support the claim to some degree?
   Can you imagine other reasons that might lead you to accept the claim? What would they be?

3. Does the writer acknowledge objections or alternatives?
   If so, how respectfully does the writer treat those holding those other views?
   Do you accept the responses?
   If there are no acknowledgements, can you think of any major objections?
   Are those objections strong enough to undermine the argument?

What specific aspects of the argument or its presentation contribute to your sense of the writer’s ethos?

5 Do you accept the claim?

If so, did you already believe it or did the writer change your mind?

If you do not accept the claim, do you accept the argument as at least reasonable?

6 List the most important factors from questions 1–4 that led to your answers in 5.

7 Overall, do you think this argument enhances or degrades the quality of our public deliberations? Why?