Film Debates

This is an easy introduction to identifying the parts of an argument.

Materials

You will need at least one and as many as three videotapes from movies cued up to scenes based on debates. A good start is the classroom debate scene in Clueless, where Cher makes an argument that on analysis is less silly than it seems. Then move to serious debates, preferably in films students have seen or heard about. If you show more than one, make the final scene one in which the speaker depends on modes of persuasion that go beyond bare argument—a good example is the defense lawyer’s closing statement in John Grisham’s A Time to Kill. Each student will also need several copies of the Argument Boxes.

Process

1. Show each scene once, asking students to identify the main claim and reasons, then show the scene again asking them to make notes on each part of argument they can identify. For complex arguments, you may have to replay the scene three or four times.

2. In the Clueless example, after students identify the parts of the argument ask them whether it makes sense as an answer to the question posed by the teacher. If they don’t think so, talk a bit about arguments based on analogy, show the scene again, and then put them in groups to map the connections between the Haitian question and her dinner party (the connections are more extensive than students will at first think). After the groups report back, ask again about the quality of Cher’s argument.
3. If you use an example of persuasion that goes beyond argument, first have students identify the parts of the argument and then put them in groups to make a catalog of the persuasive appeals not specifically a part of argument. After the groups report back, have the class analyze the practical utility and ethical value of the appeals beyond argument.