

# VALUES IN ARGUMENTS

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Advocates use values in the arguments they make. Sometimes advocates forward arguments that state the value explicitly. Sometimes advocates assume the person listening or reading the argument will fill in a desired value. Either way, the values in and underlying arguments are important to understand and consider, for both argument construction and argument response.

## **WHEN ARE YOU USING VALUES IN ARGUMENTS?**

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When you **evaluate**, you are making a value argument.

**Example:** X is right/wrong, good/bad, important/insignificant, helpful/hurtful...  
Capital punishment is wrong.  
Being greedy is immoral.

When you **compare**, you are making a value argument.

**Example:** X is better/more important/ than Y.  
Happiness is more important than money.  
The interests of the child outweigh the interests of the parent.  
It is more important to let a guilty person go free than send an innocent person to jail.

When you argue something is **harmful**, you are making a value argument.

**Example:** X is bad/hazardous/hurtful/etc.  
Cigarette smoking is hazardous to your health.  
Having a gun in the house is dangerous.

When you argue a proposal is **advantageous**, you are making a value argument.

**Example:** Y is good/beneficial/helpful/etc.  
Quitting smoking will improve your health.  
Putting a person away for life protects society.  
[the proposal permits or causes beneficial outcomes]

When you argue a proposal is **disadvantageous**, you are making a value argument.

**Example:** This proposal's outcomes are bad/hurtful/hazardous/harmful/etc.  
Invading Iraq will hurt the U.S. in the Arab world.  
[the proposal permits or causes negative outcomes]

## HOW ARE YOU USING VALUES IN ARGUMENTS?

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**A value judgment can be the “primary point” of your argument.**

**Example:** Capital punishment is wrong.

**A value judgment can be the “grounds” (i.e., the “evidence”) supporting a proposed policy or course of action.**

**Example:** We should ban capital punishment because it is wrong.

**A value judgment can be the “warrant” (i.e., the “justification”) connecting your grounds/evidence to its “primary point.”**

**Example:** Abortion is wrong because it takes human life.  
[Connecting the grounds of taking human life to the primary point that abortion is wrong is an implicit warrant that taking human life is wrong]

When examining an argument, look for all the values. You will find at least one value judgment somewhere in the argument, and often a number of value judgments. You might find a value judgment stated explicitly in a point that is being forwarded in the argument. You might find a value judgment in the grounds (or evidence). You might find a value judgment (often implicit) in the warrant or justification that ties the evidence to the point being forwarded by an argument. Your first goal is to examine each argument and find the underlying value(s).

## WHAT SHOULD YOU DO WITH THE VALUES YOU IDENTIFY IN ARGUMENTS?

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After identifying the values used in forwarded arguments, each value should be considered for criteria used in its definition, its relevance, importance, and consistency. Important values, applied consistently and embedded in compatible value systems, are the foundation of effective arguments.

**Issue 1: What criteria are being used to define the value, and are these criteria acceptable?**

All values rely on criteria (facts and other values) to define the value. These criteria define what is meant by the value.

**Example: The case of Elian Gonzales**

Elian’s relatives argued that “Staying in the U.S. was in the best interest of Elian.” The value here is found explicitly in the words “in the best interest”. What is meant by “in the best interest”?

The criteria being used to define the value of “in the best interest” are found in facts and other values that “support” and explain what is meant by “in the best interest”:

Eliau can be free [the criterion is that being free is in Eliau’s best interest]

Eliau’s mother wanted him to live in the U.S. [the criterion is that what Eliau’s mother wanted for him is in Eliau’s best interest]

The issue is this: Are each of these criteria ACCEPTABLE or GOOD definitions of what is in a child’s best interest?

**Example: “My alma matter is an excellent university.”**

The criteria used to define excellence in universities are often found in evidence such as the university is highly rated, the faculty has a Nobel Prize winner, the students have high SAT scores, and so on.

The issue is this: Are ratings, a Nobel Prize winner, and high student SAT scores really signs of excellence? Are each of these criteria ACCEPTABLE or GOOD definitions of university excellence? Some advocates might argue that university excellence should be judged solely by the achievements, *after college*, of its students (alternative criterion being offered).

## **Issue 2: How relevant is the value?**

Not all values are equally relevant to a dispute, and people will disagree about which are relevant and which irrelevant.

**Example:** Children fighting with parents

Children, when fighting with parents, will often say “All the other kids get to do this” to which parents retort “I don’t care what other kids get to do.” The underlying value here, for the children, is one of *equity/fairness* while the underlying value for the parent is one of *best interest of their own child*. The parent finds the equity value irrelevant, while the child finds it relevant.

Identify the underlying values, and generate reasons for why specific values are relevant or irrelevant. For each value, ask yourself:

### **1. Is the value appropriate to the nature of the decision that the message bears upon?**

Many years ago, the actor who played Marcus Welby, MD was employed in an aspirin commercial under a value of “science” – the only problem was that the actor wasn’t a doctor, and using this actor in this way was a distortion of scientific value.

## 2. Is the value distorted or misrepresented to apply to this argument?

The courts do not consider freedom of choice an appropriate value when applied to children, which is why children have relatively few rights when it comes to high school newspapers and school dress codes.

### Issue 3: How important is the value?

#### Individual Values

Many different values exist. Rokeach differentiates “instrumental” and “terminal” values (i.e., values about means and values about ends).

**Instrumental Values (i.e., values for *how* you want to be *perceived*)** include: ambitious, broadminded, capable, cheerful, clean, courageous, forgiving, helpful, honest, imaginative, independent, intellectual, logical, loving, obedient, polite, responsible, self-controlled

**Terminal Values (i.e., values for *what* you want to *achieve*)** include: a comfortable life, an exciting life, a sense of accomplishment, a world at peace, equality, family security, freedom, happiness, inner harmony, mature love, national security, pleasure, salvation, self-respect, social recognition, true friendship, wisdom

Not all values are equally important. Some values are more “fundamental” than others.

**Example:** cleanliness, peace – which is more fundamental?

**Example:** fair trial, free press – which is more fundamental?

Learn to recognize *what* values are used and *how fundamental* those values are. Ask yourself two questions:

1. **Where does the value fall in the listener’s value hierarchy?**
2. **Is the value a higher priority than other (potentially competing) values?**

For your own arguments, you want to be able to argue that the value(s) you use are more important than competing values and, if possible, that the value is “most important” in the value hierarchy.

#### Value Systems

Values do not usually appear alone; usually, values appear in value systems, that is, in sets of coherent and interlinked values. Value systems embrace certain ideals while

spurning others, which can be identified through words understood as positives and negatives by each system.

The vast majority of Americans subscribe to some combination of 6 typical American value systems. R. D. Rieke & M. O. Sillars described these six value systems in their book entitled *Argumentation and the Decision-Making Process* (Scott, Foresman & Co., Glenview, Illinois, 1984). The 6 common American value systems are:

### **Puritan-Pioneer-Peasant**

The Puritan-Pioneer-Peasant value system is rooted in the idea that persons have an obligation to themselves and those around them, in some cases to their God, to work hard at whatever they do. This value system takes on a moral orientation and is what most Americans refer to when they speak of the “pioneer spirit,” “puritan morality,” and/or “Protestant ethic.” Some of the words associated with the Puritan-Pioneer-Peasant value system are:

Positives: activity, work, thrift, morality, dedication, selflessness, virtue, righteousness, duty, dependability, temperance, sobriety, savings, dignity

Negatives: waste, immorality, dereliction, dissipation, infidelity, theft, vandalism, hunger, poverty, disgrace, vanity

### **Enlightenment**

The Enlightenment value system is rooted in the idea that people find out about the universe through the power of reason. In this system, humans are perceived as basically good and capable of finding answers; people should never be restrained in matters of the mind (i.e., reason must be free); and government is an agreement among individuals to assist society in protecting inalienable rights. Some of the words associated with the Enlightenment value system are:

Positives: freedom, science, nature, rationality, democracy, fact, liberty, individualism, knowledge, intelligence, reason, natural rights, natural laws, progress

Negatives: ignorance, inattention, thoughtlessness, error, indecision, irrationality, dictatorship, fascism, book burning, falsehood, regression

### **Progressive Value System**

The Progressive value system is rooted in the idea that progress is inherently good, that progress continually makes things get better. Some of the words associated with the Progressive value system are:

Positives: practicality, efficiency, change, improvement, science, future, modern, progress, evolution

Negatives: old-fashioned, regressive, impossible, backward

### **Transcendental Value System**

The Transcendental value system is rooted in the idea that intuition, as a way of knowing, is a faculty higher than reason (i.e., intuition and emotion transcend reason). In this system, an emphasis exists on humanitarian values, the centrality of love for others, and the importance of feelings. Some of the words associated with the Transcendental value system are:

Positives: humanitarian, individualism, respect, intuition, truth, equality, sympathetic, affection, feeling, love, sensitivity, emotion, personal kindness, compassion, brotherhood, friendship, mysticism

Negatives: science, reason, mechanical, hate, war, anger, insensitive, coldness, unemotional

### **Personal Success Value System**

The Personal Success value system is rooted in a highly pragmatic concern for the material happiness of the individual. This value system stresses personal achievement and success. Some of the words associated with the Personal Success value system are:

Positives: career, family, friends, recreation, economic security, identity, health, individualism, affection, respect, enjoyment, dignity, consideration, fair play, personal

Negatives: dullness, routine, hunger, poverty, disgrace, coercion, disease

### **Collectivist Value System**

The Collectivist value system is rooted in the idea of cooperative action and a perceived need to control the excesses of freedom in a mass society. Some of the words associated with the Personal Success value system are:

Positives: cooperation, joint action, unity, brotherhood, together, social good, order, humanitarian aid and comfort, equality

Negatives: disorganization, selfishness, personal greed, inequality

*Note:* Not all value systems are equally important to individuals. Republicans often prefer the pioneer and personal success value systems, while Democrats often prefer the progressive value system. Many Asian countries encourage their citizens to prefer the

collectivist value system. The most persuasive arguments use the value system(s) most preferred by the arguments' intended listeners/readers.

Some of the value systems are compatible with each other, while other value systems conflict with each other.

**Example:** The Puritan-Pioneer-Peasant value system is often paired effectively with the Personal Success value system while conflicting with the Progressive value system.

**Example:** The Enlightenment value system is often paired effectively with the Progressive value system while conflicting with the Transcendental system.

**Example:** The Progressive value system is often paired effectively with the Enlightenment value system while conflicting with the Puritan-Pioneer-Peasant Value System.

**Example:** The Transcendental value system is often paired effectively with the Collectivist value system while conflicting with the Enlightenment system.

**Example:** The Personal Success value system is often paired effectively with the Puritan-Pioneer-Peasant value system while conflicting with the Collectivist value system.

**Example:** The Collectivist value system is often paired effectively with the Transcendental value system while conflicting with the Personal Success system.

The most persuasive arguments use only one value system *or* rely on values from compatible value systems. Arguments that use values from incompatible value systems generally are less persuasive.

Important values, embedded in compatible value systems, are the foundation of effective arguments.

#### **Issue 4: How consistently is the value applied?**

Some values are applied only on certain, limited occasions, while others span a range of instances. Ask yourself if the value used in an argument is something people routinely rely on and apply, and something in which you should place your faith because it has been confirmed across situations.

**Example:** Is happiness always more important than money?

The issue being addressed here is whether the value is consistently acceptable.

## **Issue 5. What is the consequence of applying the value?**

What would be the effects of adhering to the value in regard to one's self, others, society, etc.?

**Example:** If the value is on "honesty," you could ask about the effects of being honest? Are the effects positive? negative? for you? for others? for society?

The issue of "consequence" is a critical issue in the balancing tests often used by courts to determine the admissibility of evidence (prejudicial versus probative) or whether to televise a trial (fair trial versus freedom of the press).

### **SUMMARY**

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All arguments involve one or more value judgments. These value judgments may be stated explicitly or left implicit. The value judgments are defined by criteria, and the criteria should be examined for their acceptability. The values themselves vary in importance, relevance, consistency and consequence. Effective arguers are aware of the value(s) in used in their arguments, can identify appropriate criteria to define the value, and can support the importance, relevance, consistency and consequence of the value.