

8 Why Johnny Can't Argue

IN FACT, THIS CHAPTER TITLE HAS IT WRONG. Johnny *can* argue competently when he is in a real conversation that requires him to be persuasive. As I have pointed out, children learn to argue as soon as they are old enough to lobby parents or babysitters to let them stay up late or buy them an ice cream cone, a bike, or a skateboard like the one the kid across the street has. But Johnny—and Susie—do often run into problems when it comes to the kind of argumentation that is recognized and rewarded by academic institutions. School argument seems so remote from arguing with your parents or friends that there seems little carryover in these practices.

Schools should be tapping far more than they do into students' youthful argument cultures, which are not as far removed as they look from public forms of argument. I observed earlier that twelve-year-olds debating the merits of a Michael Jackson concert or a Mariah Carey video are making the same kinds of claims, counterclaims, and value judgments as those made by published book reviewers and media critics; there's even a continuity between the shrugging adolescent who says, "It sucks" or "That's cool," and the scholar or journalist who uses more sophisticated language. Instead of taking advantage of the bridges between youthful argument worlds and those of public discourse,

schools generally make it hard for students to recognize their argumentative practices in those of academia. At worst, students get the impression that to do well in school or college they have to check whatever argumentative inclinations they have at the classroom door. I have heard high school teachers say that they've given up teaching argument because their students find it "boring." And in a post-Columbine High School age, anxieties about school violence can lead educators to discourage contentiousness in students. This is short-sighted, however, for arguably the real prescription for violence is to bottle up youthful passions and give them no legitimate outlet. Properly channeled, argument can be a substitute for violence rather than an incitement to it. As Deborah Meier has said, "Fighting with ideas rather than fists or guns or nasty sound bites could be a welcome relief."¹

To be sure, students' problems with academic argument are often traceable to academic subject matter, which may have little connection with what they care about. But even when we change the subject and invite students to write about what personally interests them, if making an argument is part of the assignment the quality of students' writing doesn't necessarily improve. Once students have to translate their personal interests and experience into the formalized conventions of written Arguespeak, their interests and experience no longer seem their own.

There are ways, however, to make Arguespeak less foreign—and less boring—and the first step is to make clear to students that this language is an extension of everyday conversation. In the real world, we make arguments within some motivating conversation, whether we are chatting about last week's party or writing a letter to the newspaper in response to an editorial. Countless expository essays launch themselves by constructing a version of the "standard view" move, as it might be called: "The standard view of X runs like this. Here, by contrast, is what I think." In making the standard view move, we write a conversational partner into our text in order to set up our response. This summary-and-response pattern represents the deep structure of most written argument. In casual conversation, students unconsciously follow this structure, obeying what the linguistic philosopher Paul

Grice calls "the conversational principle," which enjoins that we make our speech responsive to what our interlocutors have just said.² Academic assignments, however, often violate this conversational structure, asking students to come up with a thesis in a vacuum rather than to draw on their tacit conversational knowledge. I am thinking especially of the traditional five-paragraph theme in which students are asked to state a thesis and back it up. The five-paragraph theme does give students useful practice in stating a thesis and supporting it, but it fails to reproduce the conditions of real-world argument, where writers form their thesis in response to other writers or speakers.

WHAT CONVERSATION ARE YOU IN?

I want to suggest in this chapter how a more conversational view of argumentation can demystify academic writing and help high school and college students write better. The first step is to recognize that when student writing is flat and unfocused, the reason often lies in a failure to provide students with a conversation to argue *in*. I come to this conclusion the hard way, after teaching argument badly for many years. During that time, my most frequent critical comment on student papers was, "What's your argument?" or "What's your point?" My students' lack of improvement suggested that the exhortation to get an argument or a point is about as helpful as advising someone to "Get a life." Eventually it dawned on me that what counts as a makable "point" or "argument" is not as simple a matter as it seems. How do you go about finding a point if you haven't already got one? How do you know you've got one when you see it?

I thought back on my own writing struggles—how did I know when something I said qualified to be a main point or argument? I realized that it had as much to do with what other people were saying or thinking as it did with the intrinsic qualities of my text. Without those others out there and the conversations they were having I had no chance to have an argument of my own, even if—especially if—I wanted to change that conversation. Any hope I had of being original depended on others, since without them and their conversation my writing would literally be pointless. Here was a clue to why the student

writing I was seeing often lacked a clear point: my students were trying to make a point without having a conversation in which to make it, an impossible feat.

Their difficulty was doubtless increased by the nebulous nature of the conversations of the academic humanities, where the kinds of arguments typically made are often mystifying. The problem, however, also arises in other academic disciplines, whose central conversations are often kept from students on the ground that they don't yet know the fundamentals of the subject, when in fact those conversations are the most fundamental thing of all. But if we can let students in on the secret that intellectual writing and discussion are extensions of their normal conversational practices, much of the mystification can be dissipated and the struggling students have a shot at catching up.

The point I make in this chapter, that students write better when they have conversations to enter, is implicit in much current composition and rhetorical theory, where conversation has become a central concept. The idea that discourse is inherently "dialogical," that we internalize external conversation in virtually everything we say, has been developed in various ways by influential thinkers such as Bakhtin, Rorty, Derrida, McIntyre, and Vygotsky. The idea is implicit in Kenneth Burke's celebrated depiction of intellectual history as an endless parlor conversation into which as individuals we drop in and out. My effort in this chapter will be to reduce "conversationalism" to its essential elements, making it more user-friendly for writing instructors and students than existing writing textbooks have done. The key point is that in order to make your own argument you have to write someone else's voice into your text.

PLANTING A NAYSAYER IN YOUR TEXT

Let's try to apply this principle. Here is a typically flat piece of student prose by an eleventh-grader, Ellen, writing on Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*: "In the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, an African man known as Okonkwo struggles with Ibo life and traditions. He can be characterized as a tragic hero and was acknowledged as the man with title and honor. Okonkwo was portrayed as a hero because of the way he defended and what he tried to prove to his village

and for his village."³ Note that Ellen has no problem with the mechanics of grammar, punctuation, and syntax. Nor does she lack a clear thesis; she argues that Okonkwo, the main character of Achebe's novel, is a tragic hero. Why, then, does her writing seem flat and one-dimensional, lacking force and emphasis?

What is missing, I submit, is not an argument but an indication of *why* Ellen thinks her argument needs to be made at all. Her opening fails to survive the "So what?" or "Who cares?" test: Achebe's Okonkwo is a tragic hero. So what? Who cares? Why say it? Who needs to hear it? Who would argue otherwise? I hasten to add that high school students are not the only writers who fail this "So what?" test. Is there anyone who has attended talks at a professional conference who has not wished that certain speakers had asked themselves the "So what?" and "Who cares?" questions?

Ellen's failure to address these questions helps explain why her writing sounds as if it is not addressed to anybody, why it doesn't give the impression that Ellen thinks there is anyone out there who needs to know that Okonkwo is a tragic hero. I don't know the assignment Ellen was responding to, but her writing sounds like the kind that tends to be elicited by instructions like "Discuss Okonkwo as a tragic hero," assignments that ask students to do something without knowing why it could be worth doing. The goal of this kind of assignment is usually to check up on whether Ellen has read the novel, knows basic information such as the standard definition of a tragic hero, or can write coherent sentences. Such assignments assume that Ellen needs *first* to master these elementary operations of reading and summarizing a narrative before she is ready to enter a higher-level conversation in which she engages with real issues and readers. Unfortunately, this kind of an assignment not only fails to prepare Ellen for that next step of engaging with real issues and readers; it probably will convince her that academic paper writing has nothing to do with engaging with real issues and readers.

Some will argue that the unimpassioned quality of Ellen's writing is a result of her not really *caring* about abstract literary questions like whether Okonkwo is a tragic hero or not. This could be true, and asking Ellen to write about something closer to her own experience may draw

more engaged writing from her, though it also may not. My point, however, is that asking Ellen to write about such questions in a conversational vacuum itself helps ensure that she won't care. She may find it easier to care, however, if we provide her with a sense of the kinds of conversations that can take place about tragic heroes.

Others will argue that what Ellen lacks is a real reader, who could be supplied if she were asked to write the paper to her classmates, or perhaps to a small group within the class. This standard tactic is certainly worth trying, but it isn't likely to make a significant difference in Ellen's writing. For what Ellen needs is not just a real audience, but the understanding that she has to write that audience into her text. This is not something Ellen has to worry about when she engages in face-to-face conversations with her friends, family, and classmates, for in such oral situations the agenda is set by what others present have just said. In written discourse, however, which is implicitly addressed to an audience not present, the agenda (or context) has to be constructed explicitly by the writer.⁴ To give point to what she says in writing, Ellen has to construct a conversation in which to say it.

In order to write a conversation into her text, Ellen needs to do something that can be hard for everyone but especially hard for young people: to imagine a person whose beliefs are different from her own. In order to motivate her argument that Okonkwo is a tragic hero, Ellen needs to imagine someone who doesn't already think what she thinks and then write that person into her text. That is, Ellen needs to imagine a person who is sufficiently "other" to her that that person needs to hear what Ellen wants to say. In other words, Ellen needs to think about her thesis in a contrastive or counterfactual way, something that means asking herself, *tragic hero as opposed to what?* To give point to her essay, Ellen needs to plant a hypothetical naysayer into her text, someone who would argue that Okonkwo is *not* a tragic hero but something else.

Now for reasons I suggested earlier, planting a naysayer in your text, a move in which you deliberately make trouble for yourself, is likely to seem counterintuitive if you have been socialized to think of school as a place you get through by *staying out* of trouble. The five-paragraph theme and other typical assignments reinforce this view by

influencing students to think of writing (and academic study generally) as a business of stringing together true statements, statements that can't be challenged. Teachers need to help students see why this apparent common sense is not only misleading, but a sure-fire recipe for dull writing and student boredom. Unless we produce some problem, trouble, or instability, we have no excuse for writing at all.

How, then, can Ellen plant a naysayer in her text, and thereby produce a motivating problem? The easiest way is to imagine other plausible readings of the text besides hers. If you've read *Things Fall Apart* you'll recall that it's tempting to regard Okonkwo as an unqualified villain rather than a tragic hero. In fact, teachers who have taught the book tell me that students tend to find Okonkwo so repulsive that it's a challenge to get them to take him seriously. Okonkwo is rigid, overbearing, and unyielding with other tribal members, he behaves brutally to his wife and his mistress, and among the tribal traditions he defends and carries out is the ritual slaying of a child. Reflecting on these plot details and the negative views of her classmates might enable Ellen to construct the naysaying conversational partner whose counterfactual voice of otherness her argument needs to give it point, someone who sees Okonkwo as a simple villain.

If Ellen can think along these lines, she might eventually rewrite her opening in this way: "For many readers of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the novel's main character Okonkwo may be so clearly repulsive as to seem a simple villain. Yet it is important to recognize that Achebe presents Okonkwo not as a mere villain but a tragic hero. Okonkwo, after all, is honored by his village for defending its traditions, however offensive those traditions may seem to us." By constructing a hypothetical reader who finds Okonkwo "so clearly repulsive as to seem a simple villain," this revision furnishes the naysayer whose "as opposed to what?" perspective would justify Ellen's argument. Someone could still ask, "Who cares if Okonkwo is a tragic hero?" or "So what?" but at least now Ellen's text anticipates and implicitly answers these questions: "Some readers care—those who think Okonkwo is just a straight villain; they care, so my claim is consequential."⁵

Of course if the naysaying, counterfactual reading is not plausible,

then Ellen will seem to be creating a straw man. This would happen, for example, if readers could not plausibly see Okonkwo as *anything but* a tragic hero, as might be the case if, say, Achebe had repeatedly described Okonkwo in the text as a tragic hero, or had subtitled the novel *An Ibo Tragedy*. Ellen would either have to find another alternative reading to contrast with hers or change her thesis. Then, too, we can imagine more sophisticated critical conversations Ellen might try to enter—trying to get her essay published or submitting it as a master's thesis—that would require her to write a more complicated set of other voices into her text: "Though in obvious ways an evil man, Okonkwo nevertheless achieves a kind of tragic stature in the colonialist setting of the novel. As a residual African tribesman whose culture is being destroyed by the forces of colonialism and modernization that arrive in the novel's final chapters, Okonkwo is as much the tragic victim as the victimizer of others. On the other hand, though Okonkwo might be a victim to most postcolonial readers, he would certainly be a victimizer to feminists."

Instructing students to write a naysayer into their text is the single most effective device I have come up with in teaching writing. (Supplying lists of standard transitional words and phrases—*but, therefore, thus, on the other hand*, etc.—and requiring students to use them comes in second.) This device works even more effectively when I borrow the "argument templates" designed by my wife, Cathy Birkenstein-Graff, which we will look at in a moment, templates that give students standard formulas like "At this point my reader will probably object that . . ." and "Now I do not mean to suggest that . . ." In my experience, instructing students to write a naysayer into a text as part of the assignment and providing templates for doing so enables them right away to make argument moves they have never made before. This technique is far more effective than explaining in the abstract processes like how to have a point.

But what if students have trouble inventing the naysaying conversational partner they need in order to write argument? Constructing such a reader may be too hypothetical and abstract a process for inexperienced students. It becomes easier if you can refer to a specific person

who says something you can respond to. After all, even experienced writers of argument often find their task easier when they come upon an article or book that serves as a foil for what they wish to say. In fact, it's probably by engaging with real people in this way that writers learn to construct hypothetical interlocutors. Furthermore, when the interlocutor is real rather than imagined, writers gain a leg up in answering the "Who cares?" question and warding off charges of creating a straw man, since they can point to at least one person who cares. We tend to write better, in short, when we are in conversation with actual others.

CONVERSATIONALISM TESTED

As you can see, I am steering toward making a case for assigning secondary commentary—criticism—especially in the humanities, where primary texts have ruled the roost. (I make this case at greater length in the next chapter.) My argument was informally field-tested by my former student and collaborator, Andrew Hoberek, when he taught English as a visiting instructor at the University of Puget Sound. In a course on the fiction of Flannery O'Connor, Hoberek assigned a paper in which each student was to choose an O'Connor short story from the reading list and do a close reading of it. Students were given the option of addressing specific questions such as "What is the meaning of the monkey at Red Sammy's BBQ restaurant in 'A Good Man is Hard to Find'?" On reading the papers, Hoberek found that most of the class had difficulty with the assignment, producing unfocused and disorganized essays.

Hoberek decided to follow up with a second assigned essay. As in the first, students were to perform a close reading of an O'Connor story of their own choosing. This time, however, they were to compose their reading in response to one of O'Connor's published critics. As Hoberek put it in a handout, "Choose an article or book chapter on the Flannery O'Connor short story you have chosen, summarize its argument, then disagree with it." To make sure the students' disagreements with their chosen critic led back to rather than away from the literary work itself, Hoberek also stipulated that the students must make specific reference to the story in question.

The two assignments thus constituted a fair, if unscientific, test of how having an actual critical conversation to enter affects student writing. Hoberek found that his students' writing in the second assignment was discernibly better focused and more sharply argued than in the first. Entering a conversation with a critic gave his students a clearer sense of what they wanted to say and why it needed saying. Hoberek also thought that the conversational second assignment lessened the distance between the struggling students and those who had been doing best in the class. Whereas the open-ended invitation to explicate a text had left the strugglers at sea (even when given explicit suggestions like "explain the symbol of the monkey"), being asked to summarize and respond to a critic gave them clearer guidance on how to produce an explication. This result shouldn't surprise us, seeing that these students had little experience discoursing about the deep meaning of monkeys and other literary symbols, but they had plenty of experience conversing with other people. Having a specific critic's claims to respond to helped them write with more authority about symbolism. It also helped them begin to produce a bridge discourse that mingled the critics' analytic language with their own.

To let you judge these claims for yourself, here are two excerpts from Hoberek's student papers. Granting the inevitable degree of subjectivity in judgments on these matters, I think the examples show that the two students did write better when presented with critical conversations for them to enter:

In the first assignment, one student, Zach, opened his essay as follows:

"You might as well put those up," she told him. "I don't want one."

"I appreciate your honesty," he said. "You don't see any more real honest people unless you go way out in the country" (O'Connor, *CW*, p. 271).

In this passage from "Good Country People," Manly Pointer has just learned that Mrs. Hopewell has no intention to buy a bible from her. She comes flat out and tells

him that she does not plan to buy one. He appreciates her honesty and touches on his belief that the only real, good honest people live way out in the country.

What Pointer says here could be interpreted in a couple of different ways, depending on how the tone of the statement is taken. . . .

Zach here does hint at a conversation that his paper will try to enter—one between readers who interpret a statement by Pointer in "Good Country People" in "a couple of different ways" that Zach presumably will arbitrate. He leaves unclear, however, how the possibility of several interpretations of Pointer's statement is a problem and what the stakes are if it is. He leaves the reader groping, I think, to get a handle on what Zach thinks the issue is.

Here is how Zach approached the second assignment, where he was asked to put himself explicitly into conversation with a critic:

Jon Lance Bacon, in chapter eleven of his book *Flannery O'Connor and Cold War Culture*, links the issues of modernization in the south and a loss of heterogeneous culture, with that of conformity and mass consumption. . . . At one point in his chapter, Bacon looks at this issue specifically in regards to Coca-Cola. He mentions instances where Coke appears in O'Connor's work to "indicate the reach of American consumer culture within the region (Bacon, p. 120)." . . .

I disagree with this, however. Coca-Cola, while representing "the American way of life" is still by and large a product of the South. . . ."

The second version shows a clear gain in focus and rhetorical purpose. For one thing, it is easier to summarize Zach's argument: Bacon claims that Coca-Cola functions for O'Connor as a symptom of the invasion of Southern culture by American mass consumerism, but this can't be right since O'Connor shows Coca-Cola itself to be a Southern product.

Not only is it clearer in #2 than in #1 to whom and to what claim

Zach is responding, but the stakes are also clearer: it matters if O'Connor shows Coca-Cola coming from outside the South or not since she would be suggesting in the first instance that the South is being destroyed by external social forces, but in the second that it is contributing to its own destruction. Zach still needs to work on sharpening his points and making himself more reader-friendly. For example, his statement that Coke "is still by and large a product of the South" would become more pointed if he added, "—and is not something imposed on the South from outside, as Bacon would claim." But he and his instructor are now in a better position to address such surface-level problems, since Zach's argument now has a firm conversational structure and setting.

In a second example, a student named Danielle opened her first paper as follows:

In Flannery O'Connor's short story, *Good Country People*, Mrs. Hopewell found herself very disturbed by some of the literature her daughter Hulga was reading. She noticed words that had been underlined in blue pencil in a random book, amongst them: "We know it by wishing to know nothing of nothing" (269). The question of believing in nothing came up frequently in the story and each character had their own interpretation of belief. However, the outcomes for the characters who believed in something were more of a negative experience than for those who believed in nothing. In other words, the characters who believed in something in *Good Country People* were the ones who ultimately were led to disappointment, disillusionment, and pain. O'Connor portrays belief and faith as negative experiences.

Danielle here has the makings of a conversation that would open a space for her claim: since we would normally think of "belief and faith" as positive things, why does O'Connor portray them as "negative experiences"? But since Danielle is not quite able to construct such a conversation, her opening flunks the "So what?" test: so what if O'Connor

portrays belief and faith as negative? Why is that important and to whom?

Here is Danielle in the second paper writing with the benefit of a real critic as interlocutor:

In Chapter 2 of Dorothy McFarland's studies of Flannery O'Connor, she says that O'Connor intended that both the peacock and Mr. Guizac be identified with Christ in her short story "The Displaced Person." McFarland asserts that this identification is clear and sees Mrs. McIntyre's responses to both the peacock and Guizac as symbolic of her attitude toward Christ (indifference and rejection). Mr. Guizac is killed in the end like a sacrificial Christ and the peacock lives on "symbolizing the glorified Christ" (35). Although this view of Guizac and the peacocks is highly interesting, I assert that both can be seen outside of a Christian context and still give light to "The Displaced Person." Both the peacock and Mr. Guizac can be seen beyond the Christ symbols, as symbols of change which bring about reactions from Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley ultimately displacing them.

Again, it seems evident that being in conversation with a critic has enabled the student to give clearer focus and consequentiality to her writing: after conceding McFarland's claim that the story's symbolism may refer to Christian beliefs, Danielle argues that it can just as plausibly be read as a comment on social change and displacement. Who cares? Well, at least one critic does.

Someone could still ask, "But who cares about *that*?" So what if some professor can squeeze Christ symbolism out of a story that somebody else can use to squeeze out something else? Would anyone care about such intramural debates who wasn't an academic or trying to get a grade from one? It is certainly true that claims and disputes that academics consider significant often seem trivial and petty to those outside the club. If we really value tolerance and respect for others' views,

we can't be reminded too often that what seems manifestly weighty to ourselves and our circle may not amount to a hill of beans to others. "Let there be light" might draw a "So what?" from an atheist. This is precisely why it is always important when reading student work—or one's own—to keep asking "So what?" with a range of different possible audiences in mind.

Zach's and Danielle's examples help answer the objection that being asked to read literary criticism can only distract students from primary works of art. This is a risk, to be sure, but it is one that teachers can anticipate and correct for, as Hoberek did when he required his students to refer closely to their chosen short story while disagreeing with its critic. Responding to a critic does not draw Zach and Danielle's attention from the particulars of the work, but actually helps them focus on those particulars in a more pointed and purposeful way than they did in their first effort.

Granted, Hoberek's students were well-motivated college English majors who could be turned loose in the library to find critical articles they could understand and use. This is not an assignment that all undergraduates and certainly most high school and elementary students can do, though I suspect many would rise to the challenge if they had to. As I argue in the next chapter, even beginning students (and even students in the elementary grades) can engage with expert commentary if that commentary is made simple and accessible enough. Again, students are already engaging in spirited conversations outside school about films, music, sports, and other subjects. If we teachers can configure expert conversations in accessible ways, we can draw students into them.

ARGUMENT TEMPLATES

But before students can effectively enter intellectual conversations, many will need help to produce the conventional formalizations that characterize written argument. When Hoberek's Puget Sound undergraduates took issue with Flannery O'Connor's interpreters, they had to perform sophisticated operations such as gracefully negotiating the transition from quoting or paraphrasing a critic to generating their own formulations. These moves seem disarmingly simple, but they are

often hellishly perplexing for inexperienced writers and sometimes even for experienced ones. Yet as educators we often shy away from giving students explicit instruction on such moves, partly in order to avoid overemphasizing surface features of language, partly out of the recognition that students learn better when they discover things on their own rather than have them told to them.

The problem is that we will probably wait forever for some students on their own to produce formulations like "Whereas X argues that . . . , I contend that . . ." or "My reader will probably object. . ." Most of us learned to imitate such Arguespeak by osmosis through our reading, but many students don't read in that imitative way, in which one identifies with the voice of persuasive authorities whom one wants to be like. For such students, not to provide explicit help in using Arguespeak amounts to concealing secrets from them and then punishing them with low grades when they fail. In other words, withholding crucial formulas from students is at least as disabling as teaching such formulas too mechanically. It is simply condescending for educators to withhold tricks that they themselves have mastered.

In an earlier chapter, I mentioned compositionist David Bartholomae's suggestion (cited approvingly by Mike Rose) that "when stuck, student writers should try the following 'machine': 'While most readers of _____ have said _____, a close and careful reading shows that _____.'" Cathy Birkenstein-Graff, who has taught composition at Loyola and DePaul Universities in Chicago, has actually developed a version of such an argument machine. Birkenstein-Graff found that her struggling students wrote better when she provided them with the following argument template:

Title: _____

The general argument made by author X in her/his work, _____, is that _____. More specifically, X argues that _____. She/He writes, "_____." In this passage, X is suggesting that _____. In conclusion,

X's belief is that _____
 In my view, X is wrong/right, because _____
 More specifically, I believe that _____
 For example, _____
 Although X might object that _____,
 I maintain that _____
 Therefore, I conclude, that _____

Birkenstein-Graff's template gives students a sense of what it feels like to live inside the language of written argument, to hear what they would sound like using a voice of intellectual authority that most have never tried.

Birkenstein-Graff anticipates the objection that such templates squelch creativity. In an explanatory handout, she notes that the template in no way dictates or limits students' *thinking*, only the conventional forms for it. She argues that the template actually facilitates creative thinking by helping students negotiate stumbling blocks that often prevent them from doing justice to their best ideas. Once students get the hang of the argumentative moves—quoting and summarizing others' arguments, restating them in the students' own language, framing a response—they are free to deviate from the template as they choose. Birkenstein-Graff recognizes that there are many different forms of argument, that a formula like "Whereas X says, I argue . . ." is only one (though one that is pervasive). She believes, however, that students will gain more from mastering this basic form than from trying to learn many forms all at once and thereby learning none. She and I are currently at work on a book on how to write argument that will make central use of her argument templates.

In a freshman composition course that Jane Tompkins and I co-taught at UIC this year, we devised the following template to help our students make arguments out of their personal experiences:

In *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*, Jane Tompkins tells the story of her experience as a student and a teacher, emphasizing [HERE STATE THE THEME YOU

WANT TO DEAL WITH] _____
 Tompkins believes/describes/asserts [HERE ELABORATE ON THE THEME] _____
 My own experience as a student was very much the same/both similar and different/quite different. Whereas Tompkins _____,
 I _____. [NOW ILLUSTRATE YOUR POINT WITH AN INCIDENT FROM YOUR OWN LIFE.]

Here is another templatelike device devised by Paul Fortunato, a graduate teaching assistant at UIC. Asking his students to respond to a critical essay on the literary work they chose to write about, Fortunato provides the following:

There are various ways and combinations of ways to respond, including:

- *disagree* with some key statement
- *agree* with something the critic says and then say even more about it than he or she did
- point to something the critic says that seems *to go contrary* to something else he or she says
- point to something the critic says and give a *counter example* from the text
- argue with the critic by showing that he or she is *leaving out* some key aspect of the story or some key issue or argument
- blow your critic out of the water by showing that he or she is *totally wrong*
- praise your critic for making an extremely important point, and *add something* important to that point

A final example of an argument template comes from the National Academy of Education postdoctoral fellowship program, which contains the following question, designed by Howard Gardner:

In fifty words or less, complete this sentence: Most scholars in the field now believe . . . as a result of my study . . .

Incorporating such templates into standardized tests for high school students might help raise the intellectual level of such tests while making them less confusing:

In fifty words or less, complete this sentence: The author of this [set] passage argues . . . I, however, would argue . . .

There is always the risk that teachers will use such templates in a mechanical and sterile way, just as there is a risk that prescriptions like “write a naysayer into your text,” “enter a conversation with a critic,” or “summarize a critic and then disagree” will turn students into robots. But I hope this chapter has persuaded you that these are risks that need to be taken, especially if you agree that the alternative is to keep students in the dark, desperately trying to guess what the teacher “wants,” a predicament that produces its own kind of robotic response. Ultimately it seems better to give students the frameworks they need than to leave them to figure everything out on their own. It is better for teachers to be up front about what we “want” than to be coy and ultimately obscure. Johnny and Susie are often forceful arguers out of school, and they can be forceful arguers in school if the moves of the game are not kept from them.