



## Techniques of Sound Argument in the English Essays of Nigerian Undergraduates

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**Abstract:** This study examined the techniques of sound argument in the English essays of Nigerian undergraduates. The aim was to see how these techniques were applied by the students in their argumentative essays. An essay writing test was administered on 221 students: 101 from the Department of English; 65 from the Department of Philosophy; and 55 from the Department of History and International Studies of Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria. The students were asked to argue for or against the proposition: “A Father is more Important than a Mother in the Family”. The method of stratified random sampling was used to select the sample size of 15 scripts for the study. The theoretical base for the study was Toulmin’s model of argument complemented by Applied Linguistics. At the end of the research it was found out that the participants applied the techniques of argument enunciated in the literature except textual evidence to a reasonable degree to present sound argument. It was recommended that debate sessions be organized for the students during lectures at some intervals to make them develop more argumentative skills and improve on the use of language.

**Keywords:** Argument, techniques, explaining, opposing, arguers, opinion, assertion, evaluation, acknowledging, accommodating, conceding, counter-arguing, overgeneralization, straw man, fallacy, analogy, ad hobernem, authorities, Refuting and statistics.

### INTRODUCTION

Arguing is a process of asserting one’s point of view and presenting reasons why others holding contrary opinion should drop theirs and adopt the opposite. It is by no means a simple task especially in the written form called argumentative essay. Axelrod and Cooper (2008) observe that arguing involves reasoning as well as making assertions. They maintain that when you write an essay in which you assert a point of view, you are obliged to come up with reasons for your point of view and to find ways to support your reasons. Besides arguing your point of view, you have to think carefully about what your readers or opposers know and believe to argue against. This to say that you have to counter-argue opposing point of view. Axelrod and Cooper warn that:

if you ignore what your readers may be thinking,  
you will be unlikely to convince them to take your  
argument seriously (Axlerod & Cooper.2008. p. 670)

The source identifies five types of argumentative essay: arguing a position, explaining opposing position, proposing a solution, justifying an evaluation and speculating about causes. Continuing, Axelrod and Cooper explain that central to any argument is the thesis – the point of view the writer wants readers to consider. The thesis statement may appear at the beginning of the essay or at the

end, but wherever it is placed, its job is simple: to announce as clearly and as straightforwardly as possible the main point the writer is trying to make in the essay (Axelrod and Cooper 2008. P.670).

In line with the five types of argumentative essay outlined above, five kinds of thesis have been delineated: assertion of opinion, assertion of policy, assertion of evaluation, assertion of cause and assertion of interpretation. Next, the source spells out the necessary conditions for argument. Reasoned argument, according to Axelrod and Cooper, seems called for when informed people disagree over an issue or remain divided over how best to solve a problem, as is often the case in social and political life. *Ipso facto*, the thesis statement in reasoned argument makes arguable assertions- possibilities or probabilities, not certainties. Argument becomes useful in situations in which there are uncertainties - situations in which established knowledge and facts cannot provide the answers (Axelrod and Cooper, 2008. P. 671). The source avers that statement of fact cannot be an arguable thesis statement because facts are easy to verify by either checking an authoritative reference book, asking an authority or observing the facts with your eyes. An example of fact is:

I am 1.67 meters tall.

Personal feelings though can be explained are also like facts unarguable. They are subjective.

According to Axelrod and Cooper, the wording of a thesis especially its key terms, must be clear and precise, must make appropriate qualifications such as probably, very likely, apparently and it seems. Argument thesis must also give reasons and support. Reasons can be regarded as the main points arguing for the thesis. Often they answer the “why do you think so?” The main types of support writers use are: statistics, authorities, anecdotes and textual evidence. The source asserts that thoughtful writers counter-argue. i.e. they anticipate and respond to their readers’ objections, challenges and questions. Three basic strategies for counter-argument have been enunciated by Axelrod and Cooper: acknowledging, accommodating or conceding and refuting. Research by rhetoricians and communication specialists shows that readers find argument more convincing when writers have anticipated their concerns and either accommodating or refuting them wins readers’ respect and sometimes even argument.

Logical fallacies are reasoning flaws in argument. Axelrod and Cooper (2008) maintain that although fallacies are essentially unsound, they seem superficially plausible and often have great persuasive power. Some of the fallacies include: begging the question, confusing analogy with causality, either/or reasoning, equivocating, failing to accept the burden of proof, false analogy, hasty generalization and overreliance on authority. Others are: oversimplifying, personal attack (*ad hominem*), red herring, slanting, slippery slope, sob story and straw man.

Wood, N. V. (2009) avers that the goal of argument is to bring about a change in an audience’s initial position on a controversial issue. Depending on the situation and the audience, at times this goal is achieved by an arguer who presents a claim along with reasons and evidence to convince an audience to agree with the position taken; at other times, arguers create the possibility of agreement by acknowledging different points of view and working to identify one view or a combination of views that are acceptable to most or all audience members.

In their observation Mauk, J. and Metz, J. (2009) aver that argument is the act of asserting, supporting and defending a claim. It is an intellectual process – and a social process. In addition to counter-arguing, Mauk and Metz add concession and qualifiers. According to them, conceding certain points and qualifying others are important strategies for strengthening an argument; qualifiers are closely related to concessions, but while concessions focus on others’ ideas, qualifiers focus on others’ claims. They acknowledge the limits of those claims.

## METHODOLOGY

Direct method of data elicitation was applied in the collection of data for this research. One hundred and one students from the department of English, sixty-five students from the department of Philosophy and fifty-five students from the department of History and International Studies offering GSS 102: Use of English and Communication Skills II in Akwa Ibom State University participated in the language test. The students were asked to write an argumentative essay for or against the

proposition: “A Father is more Important than A Mother in the Family”. The length of the essay was 300 words to be completed in 40 minutes. The test was administered under strict examination conditions. At the end of the exercise 221 scripts were collected from the students.

Stratified random sampling was used to arrive at 5 scripts per department making a total of 15 as the sample size. The essays were scored and analyzed on the variables of strands of argument, types of thesis statement, kinds of reason and support, counter-argument strategies and types of fallacy. Under strands of argument are the following sub-variables: arguing a position, explaining opposing position, proposing a solution, justifying an evaluation and speculating about causes. Types of thesis statement comprise: assertion of opinion, assertion of policy, assertion of evaluation, assertion of cause and assertion of interpretation. Types of reason/support consist of statistics, authorities, anecdotes and textual evidence. Counter-argument strategies are: acknowledging, accommodating/conceding and refuting. Types of fallacy consist of overgeneralization, straw man and false analogy. The value of each variable was measured by its frequency of occurrence. Simple percentages were used to calculate the values.

## QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE LIMITATIONS

Only three departments out of the thirty-eight departments of the University participated in the language test. Furthermore, only 15 students’ essays were analyzed out of 221 scripts that were collected. Qualitatively, grammatical and lexical infelicities were not analyzed and discussed for the fact that they have been exhaustively handled in previous researches by the same researcher.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical base for this work is Stephen Toulmin’s model of argument. Toulmin introduced the concept of argument fields. In *The Uses of Argument* (1958) reported in <https://en.m.wikipedia.org> Toulmin claims that some aspects of argument vary from field and are called “field- dependent” , while other aspects of argument are the same throughout all fields , and are hence called “field-relevant”. The flaw of absolutism, Toulmin believes, lies on its unawareness of the field-dependent aspect of argument; absolutism assumes that all aspects of argument are field-invariant. Toulmin’s theory progresses from fact to warrant through backing and then to rebuttal and conclusion. (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org> Argumentation Theory.)

The Toulmin’s model has three main components: claim, data and warrant in addition to qualification and rebuttal. In this theory the claim is the conclusion of an argument i.e. the point that the speaker is trying to make, the essence of the argument. The data refer to the supporting material, or evidence presented as the grounds or backing of an argument, i.e. the foundation of an argument. The warrant in Toulmin’s model is the sequence of reasoning that links the data to the claim in the argument. Warrants are part of logical reasoning such as deductive, inductive, causal or analogical. A qualifier in this model is the limit or boundary of the argument while rebuttal refers to counter-argument. (<https://www.study.com/academy/les...>) Toulmin’s model of argument correlates well with argumentation procedures enunciated by authorities reported and applied in this work.

Another theory that covers this work is applied linguistics. Catford (1965) states that applied linguistics is a term used to cover all those applications of the theory and categories of general linguistics which go beyond (I) the elucidation of how language works and (II) the description of a particular language or languages for its/their own sake. For Lyons (1981) applied linguistics is a sub-field of general linguistics which has as its concerns the application of the concerns and findings of linguistics to a variety of practical tasks.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data gleaned from the study show that under strands of argument, all the 15 participants in the language test argued a position i.e. took a stand on one side of the pendulum. Subject A , for example, argued in support of the proposition that a father is more important than a mother in the family while subject K opposed the position. Only 7 subjects explained opposing position; 3 subjects proposed a solution; 8 subjects justified an evaluation; and 2 participants speculated about causes. Subject B, for instance, arguing for the position, succinctly explained opposing position by stating

that no woman can compete with his uncle in terms of cooking and execution of house chores. Subject D justified an evaluation when he stated that the father is the head of the family and went on to say that he is being consulted for solutions beyond the mother's control. Subject H arguing against the motion speculated the cause a mother understanding the children more than the father in the sense that the newly born child is cared for by the mother while the father goes for work.

Under the types of thesis statement, 8 subjects asserted their opinion, 5 subjects asserted policy, 5 subjects asserted evaluation, 8 asserted cause, and 7 subjects asserted interpretation. Subject O asserted opinion in her essay by stating: "without the mother a child cannot survive..." Similarly, subject N asserted an evaluation when he wrote: "The role of the mother in the family is more important for the health development of the children and the overall wellbeing of the family than that of a father". The data from the study also indicate that 2 subjects used statistics in their arguments; and 2 participants resorted to authorities to support their argument while 1 subject used an anecdote to illustrate his point. None of the subjects applied textual evidence in his argument. Subject B, for example, drew an anecdote from his uncle, Mr. Aniekan Okon Felix and his wife saying that the latter only stays in the house and admires his beauty all the time without contributing to the running of the house.

From the data of the study 5 subjects acknowledged the strength of the opponents in their arguments; 7 subjects accommodated and/or conceded opposing views; and 6 subjects refuted the points of the opponents. Subject F, for instance, stated: "Yes, a woman cooks and does chores, but when it comes to protection, she cannot stand as a barrier and block danger from coming in". In the data 7 participants exhibited fallacy of overgeneralization in the presentation of their argument; 1 subject portrayed the fallacy of the straw man; and 1 subject showed the fallacy of false analogy. Subject I, for example, wrote: "As we all know, the father is the one who rules the home." In another instance, subject M stated: "Furthermore, without a father in the family, providing good education in the family will be very complicated for the mother because of being a weak vessel and her inability to do hard work..." This a fallacy of false analogy. The data are presented in the tables below:

**Table 1 Showing General Performance in Argumentative Essay**

S/n	Subjects	Score	Percentage
1	A	14	93
2	B	12	80
3	C	13	86.7
4	D	13	86.7
5	E	13	86.7
6	F	13	86.7
7	G	11	73
8	H	10	66.7
9	I	10	66.7
10	J	8	53
11	K	11	73
12	L	10	66.7
13	M	10	66.7
14	N	8	53
15	O	8	53

**Table 2 Showing Strands of Argument**

S/n	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
1	Arguing a position	15	100
2	Explaining opposing position	7	46.7
3	Proposing a solution	3	20
4	Justifying an Evaluation	8	53
5	Speculating about Causes	2	13

**Table 3 Showing Types of Thesis Statement**

S/n	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
1	Assertion of opinion	8	53
2	Assertion of policy	5	33
3	Assertion of Evaluation	5	33
4	Assertion of Cause	8	8
5	Assertion of interpretation	7	46.7

**Table 4 Showing Types of Reason/Support to Back up Argument**

S/n	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
1	Statistics	2	13
2	Authorities	2	13
3	Anecdotes	1	6.7
4	Textual Evidence	0	0

**Table 5 Showing Counter-argument Strategies**

S/n	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
1	Acknowledging	5	33
2	Accommodating/Conceding	7	46.7
3	Refuting	6	40

**Table 6 Showing the Types of Fallacy**

S/n	Fallacy	Frequency	Percentage
1	Overgeneralization	7	46.7
2	Straw man	1	6.7
3	False analogy	1	6.7

## Discussion

### STRANDS OF ARGUMENT

The different strands of argument in an essay include arguing a position, explaining opposing position, proposing a solution, justifying an evaluation and speculating about causes. In the language test for this study, all the participants argued a position in the sense that they took a position for or against the proposition which said: "A Father is more Important than the Mother in the Family". Any participant who did not argue on one side of the divide automatically failed the language test. Fortunately, none in the sample for the study sat on the fence. Explaining opposing position is a form of counter-argument. Axelrod and Cooper (2008) warn that if you ignore what your readers may be thinking, you will be unlikely to convince them to take your argument seriously.

Proposing a solution is like suggesting a way to solve a puzzle. For instance, in the essay of subject J who wrote: "But surely everyone knows that it has to be a united effort of both parents to raise a family" the subject started his argument with this statement before swerving to his opinion. In another instance, the essays we are using for this study contain a lot of justification for evaluation. Evaluation in this argument means a qualification for certain opinions. An example is subject G who argued against the proposition. He averred that the father won't have time to sit down with his child to teach him or her things in education that the child needs to know while growing up. This statement was made to justify his position that mothers are the home teachers of their children.

### THESIS STATEMENT

Types of thesis statement consist of assertion of opinion, assertion of policy, assertion of evaluation, assertion of cause and assertion of interpretation. Participants arguing on the opposite side of the proposition asserted their opinions. For example, subject A averred that a father is the one who provides finance for the upkeep of the family and also argued vehemently that it was a matter of policy. On the other hand, the subjects who opposed the proposition stated that mothers have strong bonds with children because of carrying babies for nine months of pregnancy, nurturing the children with breast milk and consequently were more important to the existence of the children than their

fathers. It should be noted that the arguers have forgotten that the proposition did not say children rearing but family. The assertion of the interpretation of the roles of the father and the mother in a family and using same to justify a position of superiority of a mother over a father is therefore lopsided.

### **REASONS/SUPPORT FOR ARGUMENT**

Ways of validating positions in an argument include statistics, authorities, anecdotes and textual evidence. The statistics quoted by two subjects in this essay had no source. Subject B stated: "Out of a hundred marriages more than eighty men cook better than their wives". He went on to cite an example of his uncle who shouldered everything in the house while the wife only stared at her beauty. Subject B appealed to authorities in her argument though she didn't cite the actual source. She stated: "Studies show that dads give kids more physical space to explore while moms' protective instincts discourage kids from taking physical risks". Subject B's essay contains an anecdote. He reports how his uncle provided money and also carried out domestic chores while the wife only stared at her beauty for hours on end. He used this anecdote to support his argument that a father is more important than a mother in the family. Like in the case of those using carriage of pregnancy and antenatal care of the baby as factors to prove that a mother is more important than a father in the family, the argument by subject B is also lopsided. If his uncle's wife only stares at her beauty how are the children cared for?

### **COUNTER – ARGUMENT STRATEGIES**

An average population of the arguers counter-argued in the forms acknowledging, accommodating/conceding and refuting. One participant that exhibited all the above strategies in her essay is subject F: "Yes, the woman cooks and does chores, but when it comes to protection, she cannot stand as a barrier to block danger from coming in" – acknowledging. "And I know some may argue that giving the children proper upbringing is the job of the mother, but it is indeed false because a father makes it embedded in them" – refuting. "A father is much more disciplined when it has to do with character. Don't get me wrong, a mother is disciplined as well, but a father takes it more seriously...." – accommodating/conceding. Arguing in this way shows that the essays have actually fitted into the model enunciated by Toulmin and his followers.

### **FALLACIES IN ARGUMENT**

The few fallacies that were spotted in the essays were those of overgeneralization, straw man and false analogy. Subject M stated: "The family believes that the father will be able to provide all their needs". This is a case of overgeneralization. Of course the father cannot breastfeed the baby. A typical case of straw man is in the argument of subject E who stated: "The mother will only report to the man what the son or daughter needs but will never provide anything even if she is well to do; she will allow the man to suffer all day, all night, in the rain, in the sun in order to meet up with his expenditure". The tone reflects the straw man's attack and not actually the issue. The submission by subject M portrays the fallacy of false analogy. This subject argued that it is only the father that can pay for the children's education and that the mother cannot do because she is a weaker vessel and cannot carry out hard task. This position is oblivious of mothers who are occupying top positions in government and corporate organizations who fend for their husbands in addition to children. It is an analogous error.

For the discussion of grammatical and lexical infelicities in this study refer to Okono (2020) and Okono (2021).

### **CONCLUSION**

The study has revealed several techniques of argument as displayed by the participants in the language test. Strengths and weaknesses of the arguments have been exposed. The performance of subject A is worthy of commendation. Table 1 indicates that she scored 93% in the language test, and her script which cannot be published alongside with the study is almost without blemish. However, three subjects scored 53% as can be seen in table 1. Their performance was quite unimpressive. This study has contributed interesting parameters for argumentative essay in L<sub>2</sub> situation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Students at this level should be made to participate in a classroom debate on a subject of contemporary interest twice a semester. This should be done during lecture period. The debaters can be selected by the lecturer or through volunteering. At the end of each session of debate, the lecturer carries out correction on both the language and the techniques of argument. This measure can assist greatly in the development of language and logic in students.

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