

## From an argument to a project

In the second essay, most everyone had a strong sense of project, but in many cases it was *too* strong, making it too much like an argument. What's the difference, well . . .

Argument	Project
Is something you want to win	Is something you want to accomplish
Is reductive	Is complex
Is neat, all the evidence falling into place	Is messy, because evidence is
Points to the texts	Points <i>through</i> the texts to something more
Will help you pass a paper	Will help you do <i>well</i> on a paper

Another way to think of this is to say that arguments have no action horizons; they're concerned with proving something about the texts (one author right or wrong), but they don't use the texts to suggest any solution. Sometimes I'll use the terms interchangeably in class and elsewhere, because I don't want us to abandon argument. BUT, whenever you hear "argument" ALSO think "project," and whenever you hear "project" ALSO think "argument."

### On Textual Responsibility:

The problem with an argument is that because you *need* to prove it, in fact because you need to WIN it, you'll tend to let the argument override everything else, most especially the complexity of the texts. That means you'll "leave out" parts of the text that don't help you win your argument, or that hurt your argument, or that (more simply) complicate your argument.

But in order to do well in this class, your argument/project must be **responsible to the text**. What does that mean? Better to give some examples of what it means when you're *not* responsible to the text:

- Arguing that all men in Bedouin society think that women are always stupid, regardless of how much education they receive – without noting that this is Kamla's depiction of the situation.
- Arguing that Kamla "eventually becomes successful in her profession because of the education she received" or that she married an Egyptian man – indicates that the writer didn't read the essay enough to grasp the details.
- Arguing that Kamla's father feared that the Bedouin girls "could have a say or opinion about their own lives" without noting that Kamla expressed many opinions.

Being responsible to the text means that as you make your point, you take into account what *both* essays have to say about it. Of course, if you're JUST arguing, that's tricky, because arguments are supposed to be black and white. Projects aren't, because the texts aren't.

### **On Locating a Project with Textual Responsibility:**

Part of the problem may be the way in which you come to your argument. Basically, there are two ways to locate a project:

1. Read the essays, think about them, formulate an argument, and then go back into the essays to find the quotations you need to prove it.
2. Read the essays, think about them, look through the text for quotations, and then formulate an argument from them.

The problem with method one is that you're more likely to skip over (unconsciously even) the very passages you need to complicate your project. In other words, if you start with an argument and try to prove it, you're much more likely to end up with an argument that is not responsible to the text. On the other hand, if you begin with the texts, with the problems you find in the passages, if you think about these problems and think about how they resonate in passages from the other text, then your argument/project will have greater textual responsibility, because it will come from the text rather than being forced onto or mapped onto the text.

### **For Paper Three**

Think about:

- Action horizons. OK, so you've located a problem or conflict, how can you discuss the issues in a way that doesn't reduce or simplify the complexity of the issues?
- Projects. Yes, I still need a clear statement of what your paper is going to do, yes in many ways this is still an argument. But locate an argument that is complex, that acknowledges the essays, and that isn't concerned with proving someone right or wrong so much as it is concerned with finding a way to negotiate the problems the texts present.
- Stay responsible. Whether you start with project and move to text, or start with text and move to project, be sure to consider how all the parts of both texts impact your argument. Remember, if you find a passage that works against your argument that's not a problem—it's an opportunity! Modifying your position to take that passage into account will create a more nuanced and complex and sophisticated and better project/argument/paper.

(modified from a memo by Barclay Barrios)