

3 Ways to Have a Good Argument

The Virus

There is a virus going around in our culture these days. It's the virus of bad argumentation. Disagreeing with someone is an art, and we have forgotten how to do it well.

If you've been on YouTube lately, you may have seen [the now famous interview](#) between Cathy Newman and Jordan Peterson. Cathy Newman's appalling display of poor argumentation certainly does not define her—maybe she was having an off-day. However, her interview method was indicative of a broader problem infecting countless conversations.

All across college campuses—as Steven Crowder [has observed](#)—university students resort to verbal abuse faster than their opponents can express their views. How ironic that the university—the marketplace of ideas—seems to be the place where argumentation is at its worst. One would expect civil discourse to be thriving where people are constantly engaging with the great thinkers of the world. Sadly, universities are often the places where respectful exchange of ideas [is most absent](#).

Though this problem seems more common among younger generations, millennials are not the only ones to blame. Piers Morgan had his share of [failed disagreements](#). Nor is the issue solely the fault of the Left. The Right has many [examples](#) of terrible [public discourse](#). The point is: the virus of bad argumentation has infected us all.

The Side Effects

The tactics that bad arguers use are easy to spot. Among other things, bad arguers:

1. Interrupt and divert people's attention to unrelated topics.
2. Accuse and insult their opponents.
3. Claim victimhood for themselves in order to secure the moral high ground.
4. Assume they know what someone believes before listening.
5. Throw up their hands in frustration rather than lean in with compassion and intention.

What we may not realize, however, is that these tactics stem from one major side effect: a disinterest in learning.

In his book, [A Rulebook for Arguments](#), Anthony Weston put it this way: "If you can't imagine how anyone could hold the view you are attacking, you probably just don't understand it yet." In other words, you cannot call someone's beliefs ridiculous until you can explain why they are ridiculous.

The Cure

So how do we fight the infection, get rid of the side effects, and start disagreeing well? Three things come to mind: words, attitude, and tone.

When it comes to our words, we must speak factually and fairly. Are we well-informed about the topic? Are we interpreting and representing the data well? If not, perhaps it's time to do some research and hold our tongues until we know more information.

Second, we must check our attitudes. If we would rather prove ourselves than *improve* ourselves, or burn our opponent rather than learn from our opponent, then we must take a step back

and adopt the attitude of humble learner. If you really want to be successful in arguments, strive to learn from those who oppose you.

Finally, consider your tone. As the saying goes, “They won’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” There’s some truth to that. We want our opponents to believe our position. But believing something involves more than merely understanding statistical data. Humans are more than just brains processing facts; we have desires and emotions. So persuading someone to agree with you requires more than just appealing to their reason; you must appeal to the whole person. You must show them you care in some way. And that requires a kind and congenial tone.

America has a problem with bad argumentation and it’s time we fought that tendency. Use your words and tone to perfect the art of good disagreement. And strive to learn from those who oppose you.

—

[Image Credit: Flickr-Joi Ito [CC BY 2.0](#)]