

On Communicating Arguments

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I like the idea of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* being a place that helps encourage and cultivate the idea that undergraduate and graduate students could be scholars. That they could start and contribute to conversations on popular culture. That is what popular culture studies should be: critical discussions on why popular culture texts and practices are important for what they say about society and how they shape society.

For that deep discussion, you need to start with being critical and having a space to do that. That space is needs to encourage students to be willing to fail. You cannot be afraid to be wrong. You will never get everyone to agree with you, but that is not the point. I tell my students all the time that I like your viewpoint, even when it is different from mine.

The point is to explain to me why that was the best choice. Why is your viewpoint important? Why is your conclusion worth my knowing? Because you telling me this is what you did, and not giving me any kind of argument to justify what you did, that is the problem. Not your having a different argument than mine. The problem is not knowing how to state, build, and organize your argument to communicate your viewpoint. To give us something to have a conversation about.

For example, one day in my media and society class, we were looking at the history of media technologies and the advancement from print and chemical to electronic and digital. And I asked them to tell me which of these categories was the most important and made the biggest impact on society. So many of the students just picked digital. I said, okay, let's talk about this. Can you have any of this digital without electricity? Without the computer being created? But can you have any of that without print? Can you really say one or the other? Then, what if we frame the question as which is the most important for mass communication: is it print, or is it photography and the chemical processes?

Overall, I was trying to make the point that all of them were correct because it depends on the insight, where they are coming from, and how they present their argument for their insight. That is something I try and foster in every class. I want you to think about this from your unique perspective, and my job is not to tell you what to think. It is to help you create and support your argument. Then, when people

do come at you and say, “Well, but what about this?” – then you are able to stand where you are and support your insight. It is your unique perspective; not everyone will agree with it, but you cannot worry about that. You cannot control that. All you can control is how well you craft and communicate your argument. Most popular culture scholars are going to want to hear your unique perspective. Your insight is not the same as mine; and I did not think about that popular culture that way, so let me hear more about that. Then we can actually have conversations.

But instructors and established popular culture scholars do not teach enough that it is okay to be wrong. It is okay to have a different viewpoint, and for us to look at this or that popular culture artifact from two different sides and see it from two different ways. Popular culture studies is all about how you are seeing the world. Keeping that in mind, we can have a conversation about the argument that you make and support, and you also need to make sure that you are listening to other people's viewpoints to have those discussions.

This journal can help foster that sensibility by being a safer space to recognize that no one viewpoint is right or wrong. That in popular culture analysis there will always be a different viewpoint from your own. It is not about being right, but it is about having viewpoints, making arguments, and impacting the conversation.

When it comes to writing, to communicate your argument, you do not need to preview the argument. Do not tell me what this paper will do – just do it. I do not need you to say “in my opinion” and “I think” – I know these thoughts and opinions are yours because you are the one communicating your argument. The key is to clearly convey that this is your argument. Support your argument with literature, theory, and original research, but always remember that what you are writing is your argument. Do not tell me this is your argument: show me this is your argument and that it is important for me to read.

In your first drafts, just get all your ideas out. Dump all your ideas in your writing and then step back to see what you actually have. Then reorganize them. Pretend you are explaining your ideas to your family and friends who do not have as much academic experience as you do. How would you present and explain your argument so that they could understand it? Write it in first person if that helps you explain yourself. But then let it sit before returning to it, sentence by sentence, to make sure you only have what you really need to clearly convey your ideas. You should be able to justify each sentence as important to what you are trying to argue. If you cannot justify a sentence, then take it out.

This is your popular culture as much as it is mine. Help me understand your argument, your viewpoint, and your experience of it.