Developing a Perspective on Argument and Persuasion

1. The Aims of Argument and Persuasion

The introduction to Chapter 58 of *The Ready Reference Handbook* mentions the popular confusion of argument with heated dispute. In academic and career writing, when you argue, you may be involved with highly controversial topics, but you make the case for your opinion not with angry words but with reasoned deliberation.

Persuasive writing, too, is often misunderstood, perhaps because the examples we’re exposed to most insistently and frequently appear in advertisements. It’s easy to think that persuasion consists of emotional pressure or seductive appeal, that to be successful, you have to lean heavily on your readers.

Not so. The word “persuade” comes from Latin words meaning “to advise thoroughly.” Most successful persuasive writing depends heavily on the logic of argument. What distinguishes argument from persuasion is that argument focuses primarily on the topic being argued. In persuasion, the focus is on the audience being “advised.” Writers shape their arguments to appeal to specific readers, with distinct opinions, needs, and desires, and to convert them from skeptics or opponents into allies.

2. Assignments: Options for Argument and Persuasion

**Writing arguments.** Many of the *Thesis-Support Essays* or *Critiques* that you write in college are really arguments. When you’re asked to write an essay, consider “operator” words in the assignment. (For a list of these words, see *The Ready Reference Handbook*, 61a.) If you’re asked to “criticize,” “defend,” “discuss,” “evaluate,” “justify,” “prove,” “review,” or “rebut,” you’re being asked to argue. Most of your essay and research paper assignments will ask you to construct arguments.

So, too, will your on-the-job writing involve argument. In most cases, readers of your memos, letters, reports, and e-mails want more than information; they also want you to evaluate or recommend a person, product, or course of action, or show that your view of the facts is better than another view.

**Arguing persuasively.** In academic writing, your persuasion will be subtle, demonstrating that your information is trustworthy and your opinions logical. But in writing as part of your career or civic life—whether a job application letter, a letter to the editor, or a statement of your position
posted on a Web site--your argument won’t be convincing unless you energize it with persuasive appeals.
1. Choosing a Topic

Because argument involves personal beliefs, preferences, and desires, it’s usually easy to find topics to write about. But if an academic assignment gives you options, consider your topic in light of your answers to these questions:

- Can you imagine yourself changing your opinion about your topic? We hold some beliefs so deeply that it’s very difficult for us to change our minds, even when faced with compelling evidence. If you can’t see yourself changing your mind about a topic, then you’re probably not prepared to think critically about the materials of an argument. That stumbling block will make it difficult to argue logically, and you should probably find another topic, something about which you have opinions, yes, but about which you can think reasonably.

- Can you express practical opinions about your topic? We often have wishes and dreams about beliefs that we hold deeply, ideals we’d like to see fulfilled. But real-world arguments call for practical opinions and actions based on an awareness of the resources, time, money, and people involved. Choose topics for which you can make practical cases.

- Can you find the materials you need to make a logically convincing case for your opinion? See The Ready Reference Handbook, Chapters 47-49, for information-gathering tips and guidelines.

2. Exploring a Topic and Writing a Claim

Exploring. When you have a topic, begin building an argument by exploring its context. Do a brainstorm or freewriting to respond to the following prompts (see The Ready Reference Handbook, 2a, for guidelines to exploratory writing):

- The controversies involved with my topic are whether to . . . how to . . . what should be done to . . . why . . . when . . .

- Those involved with these controversies who disagree with each other are . . . (Identify these opponents by name, group, or the organization they belong to.)

- Summarize each side’s position. What does each side want or believe?

- Describe what you need to know to determine whose position is better or what is the best course of action.
- Divide your topic into its parts, key issues, or key questions.

- Identify what the assignment or the situation seems to require of your argument: proof, evaluation, rebuttal of your opponents, changing others’ opinions, establishing policies, or changing others’ actions.

- Write down your current opinions, if any, about your topic.

**Writing a tentative claim.** Write out a tentative version of the claim for your argument. This is a succinct statement of your central opinion, the point you want to prove, the policy you want to establish, the action you want taken. Begin as if you were writing a tentative *thesis statement:* “My point is that . . .” (See *The Ready Reference Handbook*, 58a.) This preliminary statement will guide you as you gather the materials for your argument.

### 3. Gathering the Support for Your Claim

**Building argument.** Through research, observation, interviewing, or experiment, gather the *evidence* and *warrants* that will prove your points and argue your case. If your assignment asks for argument alone, you’ll gather facts, figures, expert testimony, relevant comparisons, definitions, laws, and principles that apply to your situation (see *The Ready Reference Handbook*, 58b).

**Gathering appeals.** The more the situation requires you to make persuasive appeals in addition to argument, the more you should look for *examples, anecdotes,* and *analogies* (see *The Ready Reference Handbook*, 6b5 and 7) to dramatize your case and make it emotionally compelling.

**Making rebuttals.** If you know of people who disagree with your position, especially if they’re your readers or if your assignment calls for rebuttal, you should prepare responses to your opponents’ position. Make a rebuttal by answering these questions:

- What is your opponents’ claim? How does it differ from yours?

- What proof do they have? Can you show their position to be erroneous, incomplete, over-simplifying, or missing the point?

- What are their priorities: ethical, practical, or matters of pleasure or satisfaction? Can you show that your readers have different priorities?

- What are the strengths of their case that you’ll have to concede? Should you propose compromise with your opponents? If so, what?

### 4. Focusing Your Writing

**Profiling your audience.** As you gather support for your claim, you learn more about your readers, what they think, and what they expect from you. Do the following audience profile:
Who are my readers by age, sex, education, politics, or group membership? (You’ll appeal to different groups in different ways.)

What does my audience know about my topic? (Summarize their knowledge.)

What do they believe about my subject? Are they my opponents? Skeptical or undecided? What do they know or think of me, if anything?

What are the omissions, weaknesses, or errors in my audience’s thinking?

How are they involved with my subject? Can they act upon it themselves or encourage others? What role do I want them to play with respect to my opinion (believer, financial supporter, actor, or some other role)?

What are their priorities? Are they concerned with morality (justice, fairness, honor, virtue, and so forth)? With practical matters (whether something is efficient, effective, workable, and so forth)? Or with comfort, health, safety, pleasure, and so forth?

What is the most appealing part of my argument, given my audience’s priorities? What descriptive details, anecdotes, examples, or quotations will make my position most appealing?

5. Focusing Your Argument

To be successful, your argument and persuasion should speak directly to the readers described in your audience profile. These readers, like most people, don’t like hassles. And their differences with you will seem like one big hassle--enough to stop them from reading--unless you make your case attractive. They should feel it like a magnet, drawing them toward agreement along the path of least resistance.

Revising your claim. Begin tracing this path of least resistance by adapting your claim based on the support you’ve gathered and your knowledge of your readers. Write it to speak to them, perhaps, in non-academic writing, addressing them directly as “you” or connecting with them as “we.” Answer this question: Based on the support for my case and my readers’ beliefs and resources, what’s the most I can ask of them? Here, for example, a writer proposes legislation to replace the US national anthem and urges that passage of this legislation would have wide support:

Congress should enact legislation replacing “The Star-Spangled Banner” with “America the Beautiful.” Our new national anthem would be easier to sing and, more important, would celebrate a broader range of American virtues. Members of Congress can vote with the knowledge that such a change has widespread support.

--Adam Pasterski
**Identifying your purpose.** As your claim takes shape, consider the argument that will support it. Knowing what to do will make your argument easier to write. You may have to:

- Establish the truth of the matter.
- Identify causes and effects.
- Argue for the value of something.
- Propose action or policy.
- Make a rebuttal.

In the preceding example about the US national anthem, the writer makes a propositional claim appealing for active support. For more on these kinds of argument, see *The Ready Reference Handbook*, 58c.
5c. Planning Argument and Persuasion

1. Building a Logical and Persuasive Argument

Selecting the most effective support. The audience for your argument won’t need to read everything you could say in support of it. In fact, some of what you say might even distract from your central point or raise issues that would weaken your case. Given your audience’s needs, interests, and expectations, select facts and figures, descriptive details, quotations, comparisons, examples, anecdotes, and visual materials most likely to be convincing to your readers.

Testing and modifying your argument. As you select support for your claim, make sure that your case is logical. Apply the tests described in The Ready Reference Handbook, 58d1. Then strengthen your claim and support using the guidelines in 58d2.

Organizing your writing. Persuasive arguments consist of two and often three messages: “What I’m saying is reasonable”; “You can believe what I’m saying”; and “You’ll feel good if you accept my position.” Whether you send two or three messages and how you arrange those messages depend upon the situation (whether you’re writing in college, as part of your job, or for personal reasons) and the identity of your readers. The Ready Reference Handbook, 59a3, provides several patterns for arranging these messages for the most persuasive effect. Choose the one right for your claim, purpose, and readers.

2. Planning an Introduction and Conclusion

Academic arguments. Arguments assigned in school tend to be straightforward, two-message projects. Your introduction and the body of your writing will send the “What I’m saying is reasonable” message.

Begin by identifying your chosen controversy or problem, perhaps demonstrate its importance or the need for action, and then state your claim. Follow with your support. Conclude by discussing the implications of your argument, the implementation of your proposals, or what the future holds.

That part of your writing that sends your second message, “You can believe what I’m saying,” will be expressed by your careful use of source materials, accurate quotations, and thorough documentation of your sources. (For more or the use of source materials and effective documentation, see The Ready Reference Handbook, Chaps. 50-57.)

Professional and “real-world” arguments. Arguments that you write for your job or to express personal concerns may be shorter than academic arguments, but usually you’ll need to send all three messages to be successful: “What I’m saying is reasonable” (your argument); “You can believe what I’m saying” (your credentials or whatever makes you trustworthy to your readers); and “You’ll feel good if you accept my position” (the emotional appeals that will urge your readers’ support or rouse them to action).
In your *introduction*, focus on yourself and your credentials or write about your topic in such a way that you sound like someone trustworthy to your readers (see *The Ready Reference Handbook*, 59b). For example, listen to student Eric Martínez begin an essay on overcrowding in US national parks:

What a disappointment! For months my friend Peter and I had been planning a trip to US national parks in Utah and Colorado. Our high point was to be Rocky Mountain National Park and Trail Ridge Road winding across the summit of the Rockies at over 12,000 feet. The air might be thin and the weather chill, but what views! Snowy peaks. Subalpine valleys. Forests and streams. Arctic tundra. Wildlife. What we didn’t anticipate was how many others had the same plans.

Trail Ridge Road was jammed bumper to bumper with cars and RVs. Medicine Bow Curve, the visitor center at Fall River Pass, and the Gore Range Overlook might as well have been New York City at rush hour. I could see the mountains, all right--through a forest of other people’s heads, elbows, and camera straps. Peter and I ended up as two of the 3.4 million visitors who yearly stand where we stood and like us, probably, wondered whether there were more people than trees in these mountains. One of my keenest memories is of two park workers straining to lift a barrel of garbage into their truck as the wind sent candy wrappers and hamburger bags scudding in an ugly blizzard across the snow fields. This was the high point of my vacation? Next year I’m doing something different.

Now, I’m no hermit. People and the pace of city life suit me fine. But from time to time I want something under foot besides concrete, long for the wind in trees, wild flowers, colors that are not dyed, the feel of rock and leaf and moss, the sight of animals not tamed into pets. And, like most people these days, I consider myself an environmentalist and believe with Henry David Thoreau that “in wildness is the preservation of the world.”

So my disappointment at Rocky Mountain National Park comes from more than irritation that I wasn’t first in line at the sightseeing overlook. . . .

See how Martínez establishes himself as an expert witness--he’s been to the parks and experienced the crowds. Note, too, that he provides personal information to show his suburban and urban readers that he shares their values. His readers have two reasons to trust what he will say.

In the *conclusion* to a persuasive argument, you will probably use description, examples, anecdotes, or even emotionally charged language to make your case attractive to your readers and your opinion easy to accept (see *The Ready Reference Handbook*, 59c and the sample student essay in 59d). Watch how writer Eric Martínez encourages his student readers to accept his proposal to find new nature places for their vacations, giving advice, information, and a moving anecdote to make his advice appealing:
The next time I plan a vacation, I’m going to leave national parks out of my plans—at least the most popular, most crowded ones during their most popular seasons. I urge you to do the same. I say, give the harried park staff, the trampled landscape, and the threatened wildlife a rest. With reduced pollution and use, the air will clear, the scars will heal themselves, the plants will regenerate, the animals return. Where to go instead? Consider state parks, Bureau of Land Management Lands, or National Forests. Any good map, atlas, or travel guide will identify them. Better yet, go to the Internet and check out the “Best of the Best State Parks” Web site. Instead of the Great Smoky Mountains, there is the Joyce Kilmer Wilderness in North Carolina. In Arizona, instead of Grand Canyon, there are Red Rock and Tonto Natural Bridge state parks. In Alaska, instead of Denali National Park and Preserve, consider Denali State Park, 324,240 acres, with a great trail system, abundant wildlife, and wonderful views of the Alaska range. There’s the important point. Most alternative vacation spots offer their own attractive vistas and activities made more so without all those other vacationers to block the view or clog roads and trails. What will you find off the beaten track? Here’s an example.

This summer, after nearly a week of weaving through crowds at Utah’s Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks, my friend Peter and I headed across Utah toward Arches National Park. Along the way, east of Escalante, we happened upon Dry Hollow, the tiny town of Boulder (population 65), and Boulder Mountain. Before we arrived, they were just names on a map, unremarked by us and most other vacationers. But surprise! This became the best part of our trip. Except for the welcoming residents of Boulder glad for two new faces, we were alone, away from the crowds, the enticements of un-natural “theme park” activities, and the souvenir stands packed with trinkets stamped out who knows where.

Over two days a wonderful experience opened to us. The cliffs of the hollow were as sheer and deeply red as Zion or Bryce, the textures of rock as sharp to the touch and the eye, the rush of wind as constant, the road even steeper in its hairpin turns dropping to the canyon floor. On the floor of the hollow, not dry at all, rippled a muscular ribbon of creek flowing into the Escalante River. Everywhere were flowers: desert marigold, thornapple, Sego lily, desert paintbrush, blue flax, Tahoka daisy, and wild rose. Up on Boulder mountain, aspens shimmered, streams sang, snow glistened. And there was this: in purple dusk, in the middle of Boulder, deer bounded in silent arcs from the playground of the one-room school, across a meadow, over a fence, and into the evening. Above them in the distance, like sentinels watching over our two-days’ travel, stood the Henry
Mountains. To be in such a place and have such experiences was, in the words of Chief Luther Standing Bear of the Oglala Sioux, to live “surrounded with the blessing of the Great Mystery.” The pleasure of this mystery is there for you, too, out there somewhere along a road less traveled.

3. Planning a Trustworthy Persona

To make yourself sound trustworthy, at the beginning of your writing and throughout your argument, present yourself as someone who is fair, knows your subject, speaks your reader’s language, and cares more for their benefit and the common good than your own. Answer the following questions and see *The Ready Reference Handbook*, 59b.

- What credentials can I give to establish my authority with my readers? Consider your knowledge, research, experiences, and background.

- Which of my interests, values, or experiences can I share with my readers to make them comfortable with me?
1. Creating Your Persona

While drafting an argument or persuasion, listen for an emotional tone right for your subject and readers. In academic writing, you should sound objective and informed, almost like a reporter. In public, “real-world” writing, you may express concern, hope, anger, indignation, irony, and sarcasm to rouse readers and enlist their support. But be careful; you don’t want to sound naive, insincere, strident, or unfair.

2. Creating a Persuasive style: Words and Sentences

Given the emphasis on logic and information in most academic writing, you’ll choose words precise in meaning and, generally, neutral or subtle in emotional associations (see The Ready Reference Handbook, Chap. 25). In “real-world” public writing, however, you may use more words that have clear emotional meanings. You may also use repeated words and sentence patterns for their emotional effect (see The Ready Reference Handbook, 20c, d, and e). Reread the conclusion to Eric Martínez’s persuasive essay. Consider his use of vivid concrete language and the pleasant feelings expressed by his description. Who wouldn’t want to visit the scenes he describes? Such frank emotional appeal is appropriate in most persuasive writing. As creatures of reason and feeling, readers want to know what is right and to feel its rightness.

3. A Revision Checklist

- Study your paragraphs carefully to be sure they contain the topic sentences that link them to your central claim and that introduce the supporting evidence in the body of your paragraph. Such informative paragraphs are an important way to build logic into your argument and to create the “path of least resistance” leading to reader acceptance of your position.

- Consider the individual assertions of your argument to see whether you’ve written any fallacies, errors in reasoning (for a list of common fallacies, see The Ready Reference Handbook, 58e).

Examine your words for undue bias that will make you sound unfair or untrustworthy to your readers.
4. Questions for Peer Reviewers of Arguments and Persuasions

**Writers:** If you’re passing out copies of your writing for peer reviewers to read, number your paragraphs to make your writing easy to discuss. Then make a brief introduction:

1. Identify your audience--your intended readers.

2. Describe your intentions. “In my writing I’m trying to tell/show. . . .”

3. Tell your peer reviewers about the feedback you want from them. Ask questions, describe problems, or pose alternative solutions for which you want opinions. Then take notes as you listen to this feedback. Use the your reviewers’ suggestions where they’re helpful, but remember, this is your writing. It should say what you want.

**Peer reviewers:** To help this writer see his/her writing clearly and begin planning revisions, answer the questions in the “How to Revise and Edit Persuasive Writing” box in 59c of *The Ready Reference Handbook*. 

**ASSIGNMENT:** Persuade us to accept a claim about which you have considerable conviction.

**Considering Children? Start Earlier, Finish Earlier!**

by Mary Jo Mayerck

The following scenes are based on actual conversations I have had with high school friends.

Flashback, ten years ago. The scene is a local bar:

“Hey, you guys made it! Found a babysitter this time, huh?”

“Yeah, and none of the kids got sick at the last minute either – what a miracle!”

Present day. Girl’s night out:

“I wish my kids were old enough to drive themselves back and forth to school and activities and friends’ houses; I’m ready to put the meter in my car and start charging for rides.”

“It really does free up a lot of time. I have time now to do stuff for myself, like taking classes at Harper, and even simple things like actually reading a whole magazine at one sitting.”

The future, ten years from now. Telephone conversation:

“You two just got back from a weekend away! Where are you going this time? We’d join you but you know how it is to have teenagers; for them to go anywhere with their parents would be the ultimate in boredom, and we certainly can’t leave them home alone for a weekend!”

“I remember those days. Hang in there, they’ll be over soon!”

As this fictional dialogue suggests, the events of my life have followed quite a different course than that of my peers. While a young adult, I made one major decision that determined that alternate course: I decided to begin having children while I was still in my twenties. Over the years, there were many times when I questioned and even regretted that choice. But now, when I weigh the pros and cons, I believe my decision was a good one. And I suggest that all young couples consider the now radical idea of starting a family when they are in their twenties rather than postponing this part of their lives until later.
Ten years ago, unlike most of my peers, I was changing diapers, chasing preschoolers, and going to T-ball games. My husband and I, in our twenties, were young and energetic enough to deal with the challenges of having young children around the house without exhausting ourselves or our fun-loving attitude. Many of my friends, who waited until their mid-to-late thirties to begin a family, now have toddlers and children in elementary school. They feel the physical demands of parenting young children much more than we did.

When kids reach the older child/preteen years, their worlds expand, and so, too, the physical demands on parents expand. These are some of the busiest years of a child’s life; I have survived endless baseball practices and games, music lessons, trips to the mall, homework assignments and school functions, all of which required one or both parents to be involved. Many of my peers are just now beginning to be swept up in the whirlwind of activities of this age group. They have little time or energy to indulge any interests of their own and can only rarely break away for a dinner out with friends.

In my household, the children have advanced to their teenage years; they are constantly planning outings with their friends; they are newly licensed or soon-to-be licensed drivers; they are beginning to think of post-high school options. They need to be as closely monitored as young children. But since the energy expended by parents is less physical and time consuming and more mental at this stage in a child’s life, the parents are able to pursue other interests and continue their education at a stage in their own lives when they can truly appreciate that opportunity. Many in my age group did not take seriously the chance to attend college after high school; we either dropped out or used the college years as a chance to further our social skills. Some who did earn a bachelor’s or master’s degree worked for a few years, and are now home raising young children. I was one of the few who had children while still in my twenties and now finally have another opportunity to continue my education. I bring to my studies life experience, appreciation, and attentiveness that were absent twenty years ago. Other advantages of this
delayed educational fulfillment directly involve my kids: we help each other with homework; we
cheer each other for good grades; we motivate each other to continue learning at any age.

Another beneficial consequence for couples who have children earlier is that the children
will be more likely to have a longer and closer relationship with their grandparents. And if we
look further into the future, these couples will more likely have the same relationship with their
own grandchildren. In my own family, my parents (who had all five of their children before age
35) have been able to join us on family vacations and keep up with the kids in activities such as
mountain climbing, biking, and canoeing. My three children have wonderful memories of those
experiences with their grandparents. I hope to be able to do the same with my grandchildren;
even if my oldest waits until age 30 to have children, I’ll only be 51!

A more serious issue in favor of having children before age 35 involves the risk factors of
pregnancy and childbirth, all clearly pointed out by The Johns Hopkins University in an
electronic posting titled, “Pregnancy After 35.” Women waiting until after 35 to become
pregnant may have a difficult time conceiving since there is a general decrease in fertility
beginning in the early thirties, and there is a higher risk of miscarriage than for women aged 20
to 35 years. During pregnancy, women over 35 have an increased risk of developing high blood
pressure, diabetes, placental and bleeding problems, and cardiovascular problems. When the
time comes to deliver the baby, first-time mothers over age 30 typically have harder labor with
more fetal distress and are twice as likely as younger women to deliver by cesarean section. And
finally, pregnancies of older women have a much higher risk of producing babies with genetic
disorders, most commonly Down Syndrome. The chance of having a child with Down
Syndrome increases steadily from one in 1,250 at age 25 to one in 106 at age 40. One-fourth of
the cases of Down Syndrome are attributed to the advanced age of the baby’s father, making this
a consideration for dads-to-be also. Obviously, these should be serious considerations for
couples planning their families.
The most compelling argument against couples beginning their families before age thirty is financial. My husband and I sometimes struggle to and sometimes simply cannot provide our children with non-essential items they want. It may have been much more practical for both of us, after completing college, to devote our time and energy to earning as much money as we could to prepare financially for raising a family. I have to agree that it is much easier to save for a house and contribute to long-range savings plans when there are no expenses involving children to account for. But in my observations, some parents carry this thinking too far. Does a newborn baby really need a home with four bedrooms, two-and-a-half baths, and a three-car garage? Does a toddler really need designer duds and a pint-size electric-powered SUV? And do elementary school age children really need all the latest state-of-the-art video games and birthday parties at the arcade with fifty of their closest friends? I think it might be good for kids these days to experience a world with financial limits; it would temper their exposure to the negative influences of advanced technology, encourage more imaginative and physically active play, and force them to take a look at the most natural things in the world around them.

I have experienced one other negative effect from my choice to have children earlier than have my high school friends. Because our lives were progressing on such different paths, there were times over the years, especially when we were in our twenties, when I felt we could not relate to each other; my peers and I were essentially living on two separate planets. But we remained friends, and now they understand what I was doing and I understand what they are going through. The mutual recognition of parental pitfalls makes for some interesting and amusing discussion on our occasional, much-needed, kid-free outings.

The decision to commit to a relationship and have children is, of course, one that requires much thought and planning. To marry and begin a family too soon could be disastrous for a young adult; for committed couples, delaying this stage of life could also produce unfavorable consequences. I believe that for parents and children alike, the personal, developmental,
familial, and physical benefits of having children before age 35 outweigh the economic challenges and minor social frustrations. I recommend that young people give this idea serious consideration when planning their future.

WORKS CITED

2. Cinder Block vs. Supercomputer (a persuasive value judgment essay)

ASSIGNMENT: Write a persuasive value judgment essay.

Cinder Block vs. Supercomputer

By Bryan Clodfelter

One of my pet peeves afflicts me whenever I visit my dad’s office or friends’ homes, walk through school labs, and cross college campuses. On the vast majority of desks sit Windows computers. This can’t be right! I grew up watching my dad working on an original 128k Macintosh, and learned at an early age how to open things up, type, and play games (I loved the original MS Flight Simulator and KidPix—a kiddy drawing program). Since I grew up using a Mac, some people might say that I’m biased. But I’m not. My dad worked on PCs in his office, and I grew to know the ins and outs of Windows almost as well as the Mac OS. Minesweeper was a fun game that the Mac didn’t have, and I liked the way the Start menu—in later versions of Windows—gave me access to all of the applications without having to go through folders. About the only thing that I don’t know how to do on Windows is to network two computers together. That said, let’s talk about the strengths and weaknesses of each system, and see which would be a better choice for most users.

The answer that I get when I ask, “Why do you have a PC instead of a Mac?” is almost always the same. “There’s no software for the Mac. All the applications I need to run are only for Windows.” This is simply not true. While certain applications designed specifically for certain fields are written for the PC and never make it to the Mac, almost all mainstream software that is on the PC is also on the Mac. At the moment, there are over 16,000 Mac applications available! Although many of them are ported (copied from one computer format to another) from the PC, the porting process insures that Mac users get only the best applications because the companies who port them must look at the program and decide which programs are most likely to sell. Mac users have all of the important mainstream apps, and they don’t have to wade through stacks of look-alikes and cheap copies. Who cares if the PC has 80,000 applications; you don’t need 50 different versions of Bob’s Word Processor 3 and Joe’s Super
Spreadsheet when you have Microsoft Office—the superior office productivity application! You simply don’t need 80,000 apps. With the Mac, it is simpler to choose between software packages.

Another complaint that PC users often voice is how terribly expensive the Mac is. A comparable Mac costs about twice as much as a PC, they claim. All I can say is that they’re right about the cost of acquisition. My Mac cost $2,600, while my friend bought a comparable PC with a monitor for about $1,400. Looking down the road, however, I will pay next to nothing to maintain my computer, while my friend will be constantly paying for updates and replacing hardware as things go bad on his Dell. Thus, the total cost of ownership evens out as I save time and money by not troubleshooting and restarting my computer after every crash. The UNIX underpinning of the Mac OS system deserves much of the credit for this stability. According to Compuworld Magazine, Mac OS X has an “extremely stable kernel that's almost impossible to kill” (Thompson 72).

The reason I pay more for a Mac is that Apple Computer builds every Mac in-house. Apple has control over every aspect of each machine’s construction, and thus it can be perfectly integrated with the Mac OS X operating system. Obviously, the main reason PCs are unstable (and cheaper), is that computer manufacturer A—who has no control over Windows—makes a case for the computer, then buys a processor from Intel or AMD, the memory from manufacturer B, the hard drive from C, and so on for every component. Nearly every piece of every PC is made by a different manufacturer and mixed together with an OS (Windows) that has to make large compromises to run on all sorts of different machines. The result is the chaos that Windows users know all too well as they enjoy the benefits of erratic system behavior. Naming these problems has become an art; “plug and pray,” the “blue screen of death,” and “system clog” (the odd tendency of Windows to slow down over time for seemingly no reason at all) are some of the humorous terms for Windows errors!

To sum up with a comparison: you pay less for a Chevy or Honda, but if you really want a great machine, you spend more and get a Cadillac. Since you’ve bought a better car, you enjoy
it more, and it lasts longer. In the long run you save money! For example, my dad’s original “128k” Mac from 1984 still works fine! Most PCs last only 4-5 years, and by the third year they’re often unstable and fussy. If his (and my) computing needs didn’t grow more demanding every year, we could have saved at least $10,000 by refusing to purchase another computer! Although the cost of acquisition may be lower for the PC, the stable, higher quality Mac evens out the total cost of ownership over the course of a few years.

But the holiest of holy wars in the computing world has raged over whose GUI (GUI stands for graphical user interface—pronounced “gooey”) is the most stable and easiest to use. Apple has always had the advantage (and curse) of a vocal, fanatical user base that debates every feature and shortcoming of the Mac OS. Microsoft is notorious for disregarding its customers’ requests—if it needs to innovate, it simply looks toward Apple for new inspiration. Although the line between Mac OS X and Microsoft XP is narrower than it was in the early days of Windows, there are still key differences that make the Mac OS X GUI the clear winner. Windows is still subject to certain oddities, such as crashes (even when nothing is running), startup freezes, sound glitches, and even random hard drive corruption! It still spews incomprehensible error messages, and its various controls are in odd places. Even though some praise the mandatory organization of files and documents on the PC, the ability on the Mac to clutter your computer and desktop with all sorts of files pushes the clutter from your head into the computer, allowing you to work more efficiently. One of the major headaches of Windows is that there are drivers for everything—even the mouse and keyboard! In Windows before you can plug in a mouse, printer, scanner, or a digital camera, and expect it to work with the computer, you have to first insert a CD and run through the driver installation. Although Microsoft claims that you can “plug and play” with many devices, I still save my work, and cringe as I plug-in anything to my laptop for fear that I’ll have to restart the computer and repair damage to my files.

On my Mac, I confidently plug and unplug everything that I can lay my hands on, whether or not it was designed with the Mac in mind. Such random plugging and unplugging of devices would wreak havoc on a PC, even if the proper drivers were already installed. But I
don’t even need to bother with them. It’s practically impossible to overload a Mac. A while back I simultaneously plugged in two modems, a PC Firewire hard drive, a USB Compactflash card reader, a game controller, scanner, two printers, and an Ethernet crossover cable connected to another Mac, and the whole thing ran fine while I surfed the net, downloaded new system software, and burned a CD. Years ago, Microsoft became a laughing stock when its version of plug-and-play horribly backfired with Windows 95. It even crashed (the world’s introduction to the blue screen of death) during Bill Gates’s demo! Users who tried to plug-in devices without installing drivers were greeted with the blue screen of death, lost documents, and worse, corrupted system files—requiring them to reinstall Windows 95. Mac users dubbed the process “plug and pray”! Many business users stubbornly stuck with Windows 3.1, citing Windows 95’s instability. Fortunately for me, my Mac hums along, calmly mounting and un-mounting devices with nary a hitch. The worst thing I’ve experienced is a PC scanner that refused to mount. No crashes, reboots, or reinstalls! I love it!

As the Mac works, it does so with unsurpassed style. The beige box of the PC looks horribly boring compared to the sculpted crystal, chrome, and silver of the new Mac G5s. Apple Powerbook G4 laptops are encased in titanium and crowned with 15.2” widescreen displays. The new iMac looks like a snow and chrome easel. Adorning Mac OS X’s Aqua interface are gently throbbing buttons, slightly transparent fade-away menus, and the flashy Dock. One of the smallest—yet most pleasing—features of the Mac OS is anti-aliased text. Words can’t describe seeing web pages and word documents in smooth sculpted text; it makes reading articles and documents a joy, not an eyestrain. All of this flash would be nothing without function, however! Stability is the keyword of the Mac OS X operating system—its foundation is laid on the UNIX operating system on which most universities, governments, and Fortune 500 companies base their servers. I’ve had my new Mac (running Mac OS X 10.2.2) for a year now and I’ve only experienced two crashes (both of which occurred in the original version of OS X). What about my friend with the Windows XP Dell? His computer crashes at least two times a week! My two-year-old Windows 98 laptop crashes about twice a day. Honestly, how can you work at
your best when your computer robs you of your energy and creativity? It’s a well-known fact that people who use Macs dominate the creative field of filmmaking, digital photography, and art. Many professionals have high praise for the Mac.

“I’ve run every Unix GUI that’s ever shipped -- for about 30 minutes. I hate them all,” says Chuck Goolsbee, vice president of technical operations at Digital Forest Inc., a Bothell, Wash.-based application service provider with 400 Macintosh servers in its data center. His conclusion: “Apple has done a great job with the GUI.” (Hall 30)

Even if you’re not a creative artist, the creative power that the Mac can unleash in you can be extraordinary. If you switch to the Mac, you’ll experience an unbelievable amount of mental relief from having a computer that works for you, instead of against you. Windows crashes too often for you to really be able to concentrate, and its interface raises the stress level of most users without their even realizing it! Working on a PC often gives me a headache. When that happens, I run to my Mac! Even though I don’t particularly look forward writing to long essays, I’m having fun writing this essay on my Mac, while blasting John Williams’ “March of the Ewoks.” It’s impossible to have fun with an unstable, uncreative computer!

Nothing represents America’s history of tinkering better than the history of the Mac. Back in the late 1970s, two college students, Steve Jobs and Steven Wozniak, dropped out of college and got jobs at Atari and HP. Working together, they started Apple Computer in 1976 with the Apple I. Back then DOS was the only computing standard—no one ever dreamed of a better way to run computers. Soon after the first Macintosh was released in 1984, Microsoft, headed by Bill Gates, copied the Mac OS and called it Windows, simply changing the names of objects. The trash can became the “Recycling Bin,” and the Macintosh HD became “My Computer.” Of course, it took them three versions to get it working. People still call Windows 3.1 “Mac ’84.” Bill Gates copied the Mac and is rich because of it—not because he’s creative; he just recognized a great product and had a big enough company beforehand to mass-produce it and swamp all competition with its overwhelming marketing clout.

Some people might argue that Microsoft is maintaining fair business practices and is allowing competition. I need to incorporate Bill Cosby’s favorite sarcastic remark here:
“Riiiiiiight!” Apple lives simply because Microsoft allows it to live. There’s always been the dream that Apple will grow and unseat Microsoft from its throne. If Apple Computer ever did threaten Microsoft’s market share, Bill Gates would instantly squash Apple. So why doesn’t Microsoft kill Apple right now while it only has a 5% market share? If Apple didn’t exist, the Feds would cry, “Monopoly!” and Microsoft would be broken up. So for the time being, Microsoft needs Apple to keep up its pretence of a fair market. It is interesting to note that Steve Jobs, the CEO and co-founder of Apple, has a voluntary annual salary of $1! A businessman like Steve Jobs would never do that unless he loves the cause. Contrast that with Bill Gates, who has earned an average annual salary of about $2 billion per year! That’s about $63.80 per second. Who loves the computer, and who loves the money? It’s not going to make you a bad person if you go out today and buy a Windows PC, but you should support Apple’s creative inspiration and its tinkering spirit which makes it and so many inventors before it great, instead of the inferior, megalith copy-cat.

With these comparisons, we see that the Mac is clearly the superior machine. Although Windows users claim more titles, Mac users have all of the important ones—without the hassle of going through tons of extra applications of dubious quality. Since the Mac works better and longer, since you don’t waste time dealing with crashes, the total cost of ownership is about equal that of the PC. Mac OS X is clearly the smarter and more stable option of GUIs. Mac users take for granted abilities and conveniences that PC users only dream about. Finally, the Mac works with unsurpassed style. I want people to see my computer—hiding my Mac beneath my desk seems to be an insult to its painstaking design. If you want a computer that looks like a cinder block, stifles innovation, ruins your work, and funnels your money into Microsoft, buy a Windows PC. The makers of Advil and Tylenol will love you. If you want a computer that looks like a 22nd century supercomputer, pushes you to your creative limit, and gives you extra time to do what you wanted to do in the first place (play games, watch movies, socialize), buy a Mac—and get on with your life. Friends don’t let friends do Windows. Don’t you either.
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