

An Introduction to Argument: An Analysis of “The Declaration of Independence”

In June, 1776, members of the Continental Congress assigned the task of drafting a “declaration of independence” to Thomas Jefferson, one of the representatives from Virginia. Recognized for his skill in writing eloquent compositions and one of the most highly educated members of the Congress, Jefferson accepted the charge. For days, he labored over the draft, working meticulously late into the evenings at his desk in his lodging on Market Street in Philadelphia, carefully laying out the charges against His Majesty King George III, of Great Britain, and the justification for separation of the colonies.

The words of the final draft were not Jefferson’s alone—the opening includes now famous lines from his fellow Virginian, Richard Henry Lee, but the cogency of the total draft reflect Jefferson’s keen reasoning, constructing claim by claim, an argument for separation and, even further, the establishment of an independent state. The organization of the “Declaration of Independence” reflects what has come to be known as the classic structure of argument—that is, an organizational model for laying out the contexts and the claims for argument.

Definition of an Argument

An argument is a set of claims that includes 1) a conclusion, and 2) a set of premises, or reasons supporting the conclusion (Conway and Munson, Elements of Reasoning). Both the conclusion(s) and premise(s) are composed are claims, that is, declarative sentences that are offered by the author of the argument as “truth statements.” A conclusion is a claim meant to be supported by premises, while a premise is a claim that operates as a “reason why,” or a justification for the conclusion. All arguments will have at least one conclusion and one—and often more than one—premise in its support.

Structural Types of Arguments

Structurally, arguments are simple or complex (Elements), defined by the number of conclusions. A simple argument has only one conclusion (a final conclusion), while a complex argument contains one or more intermediate conclusions, each sub-argument of which leads to a final conclusion.

Semantic Types of Arguments

“Semantics” is the study of meaning. The conclusion is the “meaning” of an argument, a logical consequence of its premise(s). Arguments establish their meanings (conclusions) through two methods: deductive reasoning and non-deductive reasoning.

Deductive Arguments

A “deductive argument” is one in which the wording of the premises guarantees the precise wording of their conclusion.

Here’s an example of a deductive argument:

Only women hate roaches.
Men hate roaches.
Men are women.

Clearly, the wording of the conclusion, “Men are women,” is guaranteed (dictated) by the premises, and even though the argument itself is ridiculous, it is logical.

Non-deductive Arguments

A “non-deductive argument” is one in which the premises, at best, make their conclusion only likely or probable.

Here’s an example of a non-deductive argument:

Turner Falls is a popular campsite.
Turner Falls has many designated areas for sleeping outside.
Inside sleeping facilities at Turner Falls is limited.
When we go there next week on vacation, the weather is supposed to be warm and clear.
We generally prefer to sleep outside.
We’ll sleep outside.

While the premises above don’t guarantee the exact wording of (or dictate) the conclusion, they certainly make the conclusion “likely” or “probable.”

Clearly, the stronger argument is always the deductive argument, one that every prosecutor would like to bring before a judge and jury.

The Evaluation of Arguments.

While conclusions may be justified, then, either “deductively” or “non-deductively,” nevertheless, some are worthy and others are clearly unworthy. The “worth” or “value” of an argument always depends upon the quality of the premises (Elements). Sound deductive arguments are those in which the premises are either true, acceptable, or at least unquestioned. Unsound deductive arguments are those in which even one premises is judged as either false, unacceptable, or even questionable.

Successful non-deductive arguments are those in which the key premises are judged to be either true, acceptable, or at least unquestioned. An “unsuccessful” non-deductive argument is one in which key premises are judged to be false, unacceptable, or even questionable, so as to cause the conclusion to be judged as more unlikely than likely, more improbable than probable.

Jefferson’s Task

Not unlike the daunting task of the prosecutor, Thomas Jefferson faced the necessity of drafting the strongest argument possible for colonial independence and the establishment of the “United States of America.” Many colonists opposed separation, and even more, while suffering the heavy burdens of British occupation, feared initiating hostilities and the carnage that would follow. Furthermore, Jefferson was writing for a British population abroad that needed to understand the colonial perspective and the complexity of the decision that brought the Congress to such a drastic point.

The “Declaration” had to be expressed both clearly and persuasively. It had to explain the context—the political and social situation—that prompted the conclusion(s). It had to define precisely a set of broad, general principles—or criteria—that justified such conclusion(s). Then, it had to layout the facts that supported the conclusion(s). In articulating the facts, the “Declaration” had to strike a balance between reason and emotion so that any “reasonable” and “dispassionate” reader might arrive at the conclusion(s) out of reflection rather than reaction.

Jefferson elected to draft a deductive argument with every premise clearly defined, leaving nothing to implication or inference. In reality, he framed arguments for at least three different conclusions:

- 1) George III is a tyrant (absolute Despot).
- 2) The colonies have a right to be free and independent states.
- 3) All political connections between Britain and the colonies should be dissolved.
- 4) The “united states” have the right to do all things that free nations do.

1) George III is a tyrant (absolute Despot).

The first set of premises support the claim that George III is a tyrant (absolute Despot). Jefferson lists 27 charges against the British king that characterize him as a “despot” and his rule as an “absolute Tyranny” over the colonies. This is the easier of the arguments to define since the charges (premises) are offered as “Facts submitted to a candid world.”

2) The colonies have a right to be free and independent states.

The second conclusion, that the colonies have a right to be free and independent states, is more problematical. The first premises supporting this claim aren’t facts, but rather, a set of philosophical assumptions that Jefferson characterizes as “self-evident truths and [consequential] rights.” Governments, claims Jefferson, are organized—by the will of the governed—solely to “secure these rights.” When governments abuse these rights, they abuse the people they are organized to support, and consequently, the people have a right to “throw off such Government.” Since he has demonstrated the tyranny abuse of George III against his the citizens of his own colonies, these colonists, so the argument reasons, have a right to free themselves from the British crown.

The problem for the Continental Congress was the colonists’ acceptance of the set of “self-evident truths” and the alleged rights derived from them. Would they agree that these “truths” are indeed “self-evident,” but more significantly, would they be willing to fight and die to defend them? What seems so clearly “true” to citizens of free states so far removed from 1776 was, for the representatives of the Continental Congress, the great gamble. There were no modern democracies when they signed their names to “The Declaration of Independence.”

3) All political connections between Britain and the colonies should be dissolved.

Conclusion #3 above is really a corollary of Conclusion #2; “political connections” is a contradiction of “free and independent states.”

4) *The “united states” have the right to do all things that free nations do.*

Conclusion #4 derives from the following syllogism:

- 1) Free and independent state have the full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and do other Acts.
- 2) The “United States of America” are free and independent states.
- 3) The “United States of America” have the full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and do other Acts. 1, 2

Jefferson’s Intention: Deductive or Non-Deductive?

Thomas Jefferson intends nothing short of “sound” deductive arguments. “It is necessary to dissolve the political bands,” he claims in the opening paragraph. In his definition of despotism, Jefferson adds, “It is the right of the People to alter or to abolish” tyrannies. “It is [a people’s] right . . . duty, to throw off such Government.” In the conclusion, he insists that these “United Colonies *ought to be* Free and Independent States”; that “all political connection . . . *ought to be* totally dissolved.” These verbal markers in argumentation denote deductive arguments.

An Analysis of Argument in “The Declaration of Independence”

The following composition contains the text of the “Declaration of Independence” and the analysis of the elements of its argument(s).

An Exercise in Analyzing Argument

The example of the outline of the argument for conclusion #4 above is called a “standard form analysis” of an argument. To create a “standard form analysis,” number all claims and list those meant to be read as premises on top of the conclusion they support. Place the numbers of the premises at the end of any claim that is meant to be read as a conclusion.

Construct the “standard form analysis” of the argument supporting the conclusion, “The colonies have a right to be free and independent states.”

An Annotated Edition of “The Declaration of Independence”

The Continental Congress’s “printing committee” took the draft of the “Declaration” to the printer, John Dunlap, where they set the draft into type. This was the first time that the name, “The United States of America,” ever appeared in print.

Jefferson anticipates the needs of a “candid world” to read the reasons for separation of the English colonies from Great Britain.

The late seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke, often referred to as “the philosopher of democracy,” is credited with the formulation of the innate principles enunciated in this analysis of opening paragraph of the argument for independence.

Anticipating reluctance on the part of many colonists who feared a revolution, Jefferson acknowledges the long-suffering of his peers.

In a “point/counterpoint,” Jefferson emphasizes the “right” and “duty” of the colonies to “provide new Guards for their future security.”

Jefferson defines the first conclusion of his argument: “The present King of Great Britain is a tyrant.”

Jefferson introduces his evidence (premises supporting this first conclusion).

The Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen Colonies

In CONGRESS, July 4, 1776

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain [George III] is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

Jefferson initiates his list of 27 grievances, or premises supporting his conclusion, "King George III is a tyrant."

Each of the grievances Jefferson lays at the feet of the King himself, even though the British Parliament usually supported the harsh strictures of control over the colonies. Only Edmund Burke pleaded in Parliament to let the colonies go their own way and not to risk the sons of Great Britain in a war of independence across an ocean.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained, and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the meantime exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies, without the consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:
For protecting them by a mock Trial from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:
For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:
For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:
For depriving us in many cases of the benefits of Trial by Jury:
For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences:
For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:
For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:
For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

Jefferson accounts for the colonists' many attempts to seek relief through institutional channels.

Jefferson generalizes the causes against the British crown to embrace the British people themselves as "enemies in War," no doubt punctuating his argument with a sobering reminder of the broad but personal consequences of any war of independence.

The reference to "Divine Providence" in the closing is perhaps a more perfunctory declaration rather than a heartfelt testimony to faith. The term itself reflects the assumption of a "general" rather than a "particular providence"—Franklin's term—embraced by Deists. Like Franklin, Jefferson, Paine, and many of the other "founding fathers" were "dissenters," reluctant to accept many of the principles of orthodox Christian faith and took comfort in the broad universalities of Deism.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms. Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren.

We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us.

We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here.

We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence.

They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by the authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare: That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.