

Civilly Speaking

A Curriculum on Civil Discourse

Curriculum by Joel Lurie Grishaver and Ira J. Wise

UNIT 2

How to Argue



The Covenant Foundation

UNIT 2: How to Argue

Learner's Handout for Grades 6 and 7

ar·gu·ment (är'gyə-mənt)

1. An exchange of diverging or opposite views, typically a heated or an angry one.
2. A reason or set of reasons given in support of an idea, an action, or a theory.

Etymology: Middle English (in the sense 'process of reasoning'): via Old French from Latin *argumentum*, from *arguere* 'make clear, prove, accuse'.

Oxford English Dictionary

In logic and philosophy, an argument is a series of statements, called the premises, intended to determine the degree of truth of another statement, the conclusion.

Wikipedia

A form of expression consisting of a coherent set of reasons presenting or supporting a point of view; a series of reasons given for or against a matter under discussion that is intended to convince or persuade the listener.

West's Encyclopedia of American Law



Monty Python's Flying Circus: "The Argument Clinic"

- Man: An argument isn't just contradiction.
- Mr. Vibrating: It can be.
- Man: No it can't. An argument is a connected series of statements intended to establish a proposition.
- Mr. Vibrating: No it isn't.
- Man: Yes it is! It's not just contradiction.
- Mr. Vibrating: Look, if I argue with you, I must take up a contrary position.
- Man: Yes, but that's not just saying "No, it isn't."
- Mr. Vibrating: Yes it is!
- Man: No it isn't!
- Man: Argument is an intellectual process. Contradiction is just the automatic gainsaying¹ of any statement the other person makes.

Pirkei Avot 5:7

There are seven things that characterize an ignorant fool, and seven that characterize a wise person:

- A wise person does not speak before one who is greater than them in wisdom or age.
- A wise person does not interrupt his fellow's words.
- A wise person does not hasten to answer.
- A wise person's questions are on the subject and their answers are to the point.
- A wise person responds to first things first and to latter things later.
- Concerning what a wise person did not hear, they say, "I did not hear."
- A wise person concedes to the truth. With the ignorant fool, the reverse of all these is the case.

¹ Gainsay (verb) – To deny or contradict a fact or statement; to speak against or oppose someone.

How to Argue

Arguing Positively

1. Play fair.
2. Respect the other person.
3. Attack ideas, not the person to whom they're attached.
4. Admit when you are wrong.
5. Apologize when appropriate.
6. Be open to new ideas.

Arguing Persuasively

1. Make the other person feel smart.
2. Use evidence tailored to the argument and audience.
3. Look for logical fallacies.
4. Paint the other person as the hero or victim.
5. Curate your language.
6. Know when to stop.

Arguing Effectively

1. Don't provoke an argument.
2. Be real.
3. Stay on topic.
4. Explain, explain, explain.
5. Understand and acknowledge the other person's argument.
6. Argue from a good premise.
7. Don't require the last word.

www.wikihow.com/Argue

What other types of arguing or rules would you suggest to make arguments more constructive and meaningful?

UNIT 2: How to Argue

Leader's Guide for Grades 6 and 7

BIG IDEA

Learners will develop an understanding of what it means to argue in a meaningful way.

SET INDUCTION: 15 Minutes

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1. Ask students the following questions in sequence:
 - a. What is an argument?
 - b. Who is involved?
 - c. Are there different kinds of arguments?
 - d. Are arguments a good thing? A bad thing? Neither? Both?
 - e. Let's assume (for argument's sake) that arguments can be a valuable form of communication. How should we have an argument? What rules would you suggest in order to keep arguments valuable? Write some of the students' suggestions on the board.
 - f. Distribute the Learner's Handout. Draw the students' attention to the definitions.

ACTIVITY: 15 Minutes

Monty Python's Flying Circus: "The Argument Clinic"

Show the video of Monty Python's Argument Clinic. Before showing the video, provide a little context for it. It was first broadcast in November 1972 on *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. This was a sketch comedy show (in some ways similar to *Saturday Night Live*, but with significant differences) starring a troupe of five British men and one American. In its day, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was very cutting edge and was popular in both Britain and the United States.

You can find a trimmed version of the video at <https://youtu.be/ohDB5gbtaEQ>. It eliminates the ending where the sketch wanders into other kinds of clinics and has nothing to do with our lesson.

After showing the clip, ask the following questions:

1. What did you think of the video? Let's take this comedy a bit seriously for a moment. Did this add anything to our definition of an argument?
2. Does it suggest any rules we should add to our list?

3. Look at the portion of the script on the handout. How does it impact our understanding of how to have a meaningful argument?

TEXT STUDY: 15 Minutes

Pirkei Avot 5:7

Ask the students the following questions:

1. What does this Talmud text tell you about arguments?
2. Why are the rabbis concerned about the difference between a wise person and a fool?
3. How does a wise person argue? How does a fool argue?

When they have provided answers, give the students the following assignment:

In teams of two or three, write your own guide as to how to argue. You may use our list from the board and ideas that occur to you from this text.

When each group has finished, have the students share their rules. Compare them to the following text:

Arguments don't have to be hurtful, but they can easily turn that way if you're not careful. Luckily, there are several techniques and tricks you can try, which will allow you to get your point across without turning the discussion into a full-on fight. The ability to argue effectively is actually a great skill to learn; it can come in handy in a wide variety of situations, giving you the confidence to stand up for yourself and what you believe in. Remember to pick your battles, though – some things just aren't worth arguing over!]

CONCLUDING ACTIVITY: 15 Minutes

How to Argue

This final activity can be a close study of the text or just a conversation. The whole point is to bring together the work we have done so far and to develop a plan for being constructive arguers.

This text comes from wikiHow, which is not connected to Wikipedia. wikiHow is a worldwide collaboration of thousands of people focused on one goal: to teach anyone in the world how to do anything. A wiki is a server program that allows users to collaborate in forming the content of a website. The term comes from the word “wikiwiki,” which means “fast” in the Hawaiian language.

1. First, have the students read through the list and work together in teams to answer the question on the page. (What other types of arguing or rules would you suggest to make arguments more constructive and meaningful?)
2. Then, choose one of the following methods:
 - a. Ask students to compare the rules the class made with the rules from wikiHow.

- b. Have the students look at both their own list and the one on the page and try and distill them into a mutually agreed upon list of ten principles.
- c. Simply read through and discuss the ideas on the page. Below you will find elaborations on each of them to help your discussion.

Arguing Positively

1. **Play fair.** Odds are you know exactly how to push the other person's buttons. However, it's important to resist if you want to have a civil argument. Resolve that no matter how upset he or she makes you, you will *not* say the one thing you know would push the argument over the edge.
2. **Respect the other person.** Respect what the other person has to say. An argument has to be two-sided; if you fail to hear the other side out, the other person will return the gesture and not listen to you. Refuting a person's opinion is fine, but refusing to hear it makes a debate pointless. Always be respectful when arguing with another person. Remember, that's who you are arguing with – another person. Treat that person the way that you would want to be treated. Don't immediately dismiss their ideas just because the other person does not agree with you. Listen to them.
3. **Attack ideas, not the person to whom they're attached.** When you argue with someone, you should remember to only attack that person's ideas. You should never attack the person instead. That means you shouldn't call the person stupid for thinking what he or she thinks. In addition, you shouldn't devolve to attacks on the person's physical appearance either.
4. **Admit when you are wrong.** When you make a mistake, admit it. Admit that you misunderstood or were misinformed. Being wrong doesn't make you a lesser person, but admitting you're wrong does make you the bigger person.
5. **Apologize when appropriate.** If you've hurt someone or your argument caused problems, you should apologize. Be the adult in the situation and take responsibility for your actions.
6. **Be open to new ideas.** The best way to argue positively is to be open to new ideas. You don't want to be wrong in an argument again, do you? Open yourself to the possibility of a better way of thinking or new, fascinating information.

Arguing Persuasively

1. **Make the other person feel smart.** When you make people feel stupid, they tend to shut down. The result is likely to be an argument that leads nowhere. If you make the other person feel smart, on the other hand, you'll have an easier time turning the argument in your favor.
2. **Use evidence tailored to the argument and audience.** Using evidence from reliable sources that specifically supports and deals with what you're arguing about can be one of the easiest ways to win an argument. You should also tailor the type of evidence you use to the person you are arguing with, using more logical or more emotional evidence based on what you think your opponent will respond to best.

3. **Look for logical fallacies.** Pointing out fallacies in the other person's logic and politely explaining why that logic is bad is a good way to start to change someone's mind. Learning to recognize logical fallacies can be challenging, but here are a few common ones:
 - Be on the lookout for arguments that incorrectly assume that correlation means causation. For example, rates of autism diagnosis increased with the usage of cell phones. Therefore, autism is caused by cell phone usage. Post hoc fallacies are similar, but they are based on the idea that because A preceded B, B was caused by A.
 - An "Argument from Silence" fallacy is the idea that something does not exist because there is no evidence for it. For example, God/germs/evolution/aliens do not exist because we have never physically witnessed them.
 - A non sequitur is a conclusion to an argument that is unrelated to its premise. For example, the argument that we can't pay teachers more because policemen and firefighters do not make that much money is a non sequitur.

4. **Paint the other person as the hero or victim.** People like to think of themselves as the main character in their own life story. Keep your opponent thinking this and charm them into changing their views by carefully tailoring how you talk about the issues.

For example, "I know you really, really want to help people. You're one of the most generous people that I know. But if you really wanted to help people, you wouldn't donate to a charity that misuses its money like that. Don't you want to be sure that your money is directly saving lives?"

5. **Curate your language.** When you argue, avoid language like "you" and "me." Instead, use words like "we." This tactic makes your opponent think of the two of you as a single unit with singular interests, rather than as separate units with interests that drive you apart.

6. **Know when to stop.** At times you will have an opponent who cannot change their mind in front of you. Sometimes you have to just back off and give your opponent time to think about you said. Over the course of time, he or she may end up being persuaded to your opinion. Of course, sometimes you just have to persist, too. It's a subtle art with which you may just have to experiment.
 - Generally, if someone seems to be getting really upset, it's time to stop.
 - Close the argument with something like, "Okay, I can see that I can't change your mind. Please, just think about what I said."

Arguing Effectively

1. **Don't provoke an argument.** Starting an argument – clearly provoking one – will get noticed by the people with whom you argue. They'll be much less likely to take you seriously, because they know you just want to shout for a while. Avoid looking like a troll if you want to have an effective argument.

2. **Be real.** Let your humanity and who you are as a person show through. This will make you appear more sympathetic to the people against whom you argue and will make them less angry. Explain why you believe what you do and be willing to admit when an idea is your own. Don't use the "devil's advocate" cover up for an idea you know won't be popular.
3. **Stay on topic.** The fastest way to make an argument totally pointless is to let it get derailed. Stay on topic when you argue; when the other person derails, get them back on track. Solving a single disagreement is better than getting nowhere with twenty separate issues. Discuss one issue at a time, covering everything you want to say about it. When it's been settled, or you've reached an impasse, move on to the next topic.

Don't allow the subject to change. The other person might try to change the subject in order to cover up a mistake. Many people, when proven wrong in some area, will be dismissive of their mistake rather than acknowledging their error. Either leave the argument if the person refuses to acknowledge mistakes ("It doesn't matter," "Whatever, that's my opinion," etc.), or insist that they acknowledge the error.

4. **Explain, explain, explain.** Explain why you have the belief that you have, where you got your information from, and how you came to your conclusions. Your explanations could expose some misunderstandings, but the process also forces your opponent to enter your headspace and follow your line of reasoning. It can be an effective way to win people over!
5. **Understand and acknowledge the other person's argument.** When you argue with someone, acknowledge that person's argument and make sure that you actually understand what they're saying. Ask the other person to clarify if you have to.
6. **Argue from a good premise.** Make sure that you understand the basis of your argument before you argue. You should also make sure that you agree with the premise of your opponent's argument. If you don't agree with the example they're using, or if you think it isn't representative or the idea is flawed in some way, say so before getting knee-deep in an argument. Letting your opponent work from a flawed premise makes it harder to show them the correct ideas.
7. **Don't require the last word.** If you both feel the need to have the last word in an argument, it can quickly lead a conversation into a "Bottomless Anger Pit of Doom." Don't go there. You wouldn't like the Bottomless Anger Pit of Doom. Just "agree to disagree" and go cool down.

If you've been talking for a long time and neither one of you is budging, consider calling it a day. There are some arguments you can't win – no matter how good your argument is – if the other person isn't willing to rethink the problem. If you know when to quit, you might still be able to preserve your relationship with the other person.

www.wikihow.com/Argue

UNIT 2: How to Argue

Learner's Handout for Grade 8 to Adult

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Bereshit (Genesis) 4:3-8

In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to God from the fruit of the soil; and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. God paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering He paid no heed. Cain was much distressed and his face fell. And God said to Cain, "Why are you distressed, and why is your face fallen? Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin couches at the door; Its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master." "Cain said to his brother Abel ... and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him.

Bava Metzia 59b

Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eliezer were having a halachic argument over the purity of an oven owned by Achnai. Rabbi Eliezer brought them all the evidence he possibly could to legitimize his argument, but Rabbi Joshua rejected him.

Upon being rejected, Rabbi Eliezer said to Rabbi Joshua, "If the *halakhah* is with me, then let the carob tree prove it!" to which the carob tree uprooted itself and moved 100 cubits (approx. 50 yards). Some say 400 cubits (approx. 200 yards). Rabbi Joshua responded by saying that one cannot prove anything from a carob tree.

Rabbi Eliezer then said to him, "Then if the *halakhah* is with me, let the stream prove it!" to which the water responded by flowing in the opposite direction. Rabbi Joshua responded by saying that one cannot prove anything with a stream.

Rabbi Eliezer then said, "Then if the *halakhah* is with me, let these walls prove it!" to which the walls of the academy began to cave in. Rabbi Joshua then rebuked the walls by saying that the walls had no authority in an *halakhic* debate. The walls then stopped, remaining at angles in respect to both of the rabbis.

Finally, Rabbi Eliezer said, "If the *halakhah* is with me, then may it be proven by heaven!"

In response to this, a voice came down from heaven and said to Rabbi Joshua, "Why do you argue with Rabbi Eliezer? The *halakhah* is in accordance with him in every way".

Rabbi Joshua said to the heavenly voice, "The Torah is not in heaven, so we take no notice of heavenly voices, since you have already written in the Torah to follow the majority."

The heavenly voice then exclaimed with delight, "My sons have defeated me; my sons have defeated me!"

After this, Rabbi Eliezer was excommunicated from the group.

How to Argue

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SET INDUCTION: 15 Minutes

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 - c. Are there different kinds of arguments?
 - d. Are arguments a good thing? A bad thing? Neither? Both?
 - e. Let's assume (for argument's sake) that arguments can be a valuable form of communication. How should we have an argument? What rules would you suggest in order to keep arguments valuable. Write some of the students' suggestions on the board.
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ACTIVITY: 15 Minutes

Monty Python's Flying Circus: "The Argument Clinic"

Show the video of Monty Python's Argument Clinic. Before showing the video, provide a little context for it. It was first broadcast in November 1972 on *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. This was a sketch comedy show (in some ways similar to *Saturday Night Live*, but with significant differences) starring a troupe of five British men and one American. In its day, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was very cutting edge and was popular in both Britain and the United States.

Note: If you used Unit 1, an attentive student might notice that, like the Curtain/Ackroyd clip in that unit, this clip is over 40 years old. You may want to revisit the question of whether or not mores have changed over the past two generations. Or it may be time to use more modern clips! In either case, we think this video will be silly enough for your students to enjoy it. (Please let us know if we are wrong.)

You can find a trimmed version of the video at <https://youtu.be/ohDB5gbtaEQ>. It eliminates the ending where the sketch wanders into other kinds of clinics and has nothing to do with our lesson.

After showing the clip, ask the following questions:

1. What did you think of the video? Let's take this comedy a bit seriously for a moment. Did this add anything to our definition of an argument?
2. Does it suggest any rules we should add to our list?
3. Look at the portion of the script on the Learner's Handout. How does it impact our understanding of how to have a meaningful argument?

TEXT STUDY: 15 Minutes

***Pirkei Avot* 5:7**

Ask the students the following questions:

1. What does this Talmud text tell you about arguments?
2. Why are the rabbis concerned about the difference between a wise person and a fool?
3. How does a wise person argue? How does a fool argue?

When they have provided answers, give the students the following assignment:

In teams of two or three, write your own guide as to how to argue. You may use our list from the board and ideas that occur to you from this text.

When each group has finished, have the students share their rules. Compare them to the following text:

Arguments don't have to be hurtful, but they can easily turn that way if you're not careful. Luckily, there are several techniques and tricks you can try, which will allow you to get your point across without turning the discussion into a full-on fight. The ability to argue effectively is actually a great skill to learn; it can come in handy in a wide variety of situations, giving you the confidence to stand up for yourself and what you believe in. Remember to pick your battles, though – some things just aren't worth arguing over!

ACTIVITY: 20 Minutes

***Bereshit* (Genesis) 4:3-8**

1. Explain to the students that this is an exercise in *midrash*. Among other things, *midrash* is the art of interpreting Torah. Let's look at the final sentence of the quote:
"Cain said to his brother Abel ... and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him."
2. The Torah does not tell us what Cain said or how Abel responded. It just says that Cain spoke, they were in the field, and then Cain killed Abel.
3. Let's imagine the conversation that took place between the two brothers. In pairs, create a short dialogue for actors playing the roles of Cain and Abel. Think about the stage directions you give them. What emotions should they show behind the words? What should the words be?

4. Have one pair of students act out their script. Have the group discuss the performance. Continue the process for a few more pairs, asking students who think their scripts are substantially different to share them.
5. What do the scripts have in common? Were they simply conversations between two brothers trying to resolve a conflict? Or were they something else?
6. Rashi was one of the greatest and most prolific interpreters of Torah. He lived in Troyes, France, in the 11th century. Following is his interpretation of what happened:

AND CAIN SPOKE TO ABEL — He began an argument, striving and contending with him, to seek a pretext to kill him. There are midrashic explanations of these words, but this is the plain sense of the text.

What do you think he meant by the “plain sense of the text”?
7. How could the story have ended differently?

ACTIVITY: 30 Minutes

Bava Metzia 59b

NOTE: There is a lovely animated version of the story available from Bimbam at www.bimbam.com/achnai. If you feel your audience will enjoy it, please show it!

1. This Talmudic story is a bit fantastic. It includes events that seem supernatural and God’s voice speaking to the rabbis. Yet, it features people who really lived. Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus was born in the last half of the first century in the Common Era (C.E.). He was a student of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai (who escaped the destruction of Jerusalem and established the rabbinic court in Yavneh in 70 C.E.). He was a very learned rabbi.
2. What is the dispute between the two rabbis? How do they settle it?
3. Rabbi Eliezer states that, because he is correct, God will change reality in support of his claims. And reality changes. However, each time Rabbi Joshua dismisses the miracle, it stops. Why do you think the miracles stopped?
4. What does Rabbi Joshua mean when he says, “The Torah is not in heaven, so we take no notice of heavenly voices, since you have already written in the Torah to follow the majority”?

In Deuteronomy 30:11-12, it says: Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?”

The rabbis took this to mean that once we were given the Torah, it becomes our responsibility to interpret it. We do not ask God to tell us what it means. We do not expect God to answer.
5. So what is the problem with how Rabbi Eliezer argued his case? Why did he fail?

He did not argue persuasively with logic. He relied on God, rather than logic, to verify his answer. He did not provide arguments that we can understand.

6. In the end, God laughs. Why is God happy that the rabbis have outthought their creator?

One answer is that God recognized from Rabbi Joshua's rebuke that the rabbis truly understood God's intentions for the Torah. Just as parents want their children to learn how to stand on their own, so, too, does God.

7. Finally, why do you think the rabbis excommunicated (cast out) Rabbi Eliezer?

CONCLUDING ACTIVITY: 15 Minutes

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1. First, have the students read through the list and work together in teams to answer the question on the page. (What other types of arguing or rules would you suggest to make arguments more constructive and meaningful?)
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 - Be on the lookout for arguments that incorrectly assume that correlation means causation. For example, rates of autism diagnosis increased with the usage of cell phones. Therefore, autism is caused by cell phone usage. Post hoc fallacies are similar, but they are based on the idea that because A preceded B, B was caused by A.
 - An "Argument from Silence" fallacy is the idea that something does not exist because there is no evidence for it. For example, God/germs/evolution/aliens do not exist because we have never physically witnessed them.
 - A non sequitur is a conclusion to an argument that is unrelated to its premise. For example, the argument that we can't pay teachers more because policemen and firefighters do not make that much money is a non sequitur.
4. **Paint the other person as the hero or victim.** People like to think of themselves as the main character in their own life story. Keep your opponent thinking this and charm them into changing their views by carefully tailoring how you talk about the issues.

For example, “I know you really, really want to help people. You’re one of the most generous people that I know. But if you really wanted to help people, you wouldn’t donate to a charity that misuses its money like that. Don’t you want to be sure that your money is directly saving lives?”

5. **Curate your language.** When you argue, avoid language like “you” and “me.” Instead, use words like “we.” This tactic makes your opponent think of the two of you as a single unit with singular interests, rather than as separate units with interests that drive you apart.
6. **Know when to stop.** At times, you will have an opponent who cannot change their mind in front of you. Sometimes you have to just back off and give your opponent time to think about what you said. Over the course of time, he or she may end up being persuaded to your opinion. Of course, sometimes you just have to persist, too. It’s a subtle art with which you may just have to experiment.
 - Generally, if someone seems to be getting really upset, it’s time to stop.
 - Close the argument with something like, “Okay, I can see that I can’t change your mind. Please, just think about what I said.”

Arguing Effectively

1. **Don’t provoke an argument.** Starting an argument – clearly provoking one – will get noticed by the people with whom you argue. They’ll be much less likely to take you seriously, because they know you just want to shout for a while. Avoid looking like a troll if you want to have an effective argument.
2. **Be real.** Let your humanity and who you are as a person show through. This will make you appear more sympathetic to the people against whom you argue and will make them less angry. Explain why you believe what you do and be willing to admit when an idea is your own. Don’t use the “devil’s advocate” cover up for an idea you know won’t be popular.
3. **Stay on topic.** The fastest way to make an argument totally pointless is to let it get derailed. Stay on topic when you argue; when the other person derails, get them back on track. Solving a single disagreement is better than getting nowhere with twenty separate issues. Discuss one issue at a time, covering everything you want to say about it. When it’s been settled, or you’ve reached an impasse, move on to the next topic.

Don’t allow the subject to change. The other person might try to change the subject in order to cover up a mistake. Many people, when proven wrong in some area, will be dismissive of their mistake rather than acknowledging their error. Either leave the argument if the person refuses to acknowledge mistakes (“It doesn’t matter,” “Whatever, that’s my opinion,” etc.), or insist that they acknowledge the error.

4. **Explain, explain, explain.** Explain why you have the belief that you have, where you got your information from, and how you came to your conclusions. Your explanations could expose some misunderstandings, but the process also forces your opponent to enter your headspace and follow your line of reasoning. It can be an effective way to win people over!

5. **Understand and acknowledge the other person's argument.** When you argue with someone, acknowledge that person's argument and make sure that you actually understand what they're saying. Ask the other person to clarify if you have to.
6. **Argue from a good premise.** Make sure that you understand the basis of your argument before you argue. You should also make sure that you agree with the premise of your opponent's argument. If you don't agree with the example they're using, or if you think it isn't representative or the idea is flawed in some way, say so before getting knee-deep in an argument. Letting your opponent work from a flawed premise makes it harder to show them the correct ideas.
7. **Don't require the last word.** If you both feel the need to have the last word in an argument, it can quickly lead a conversation into a "Bottomless Anger Pit of Doom." Don't go there. You wouldn't like the Bottomless Anger Pit of Doom. Just "agree to disagree" and go cool down.

If you've been talking for a long time and neither one of you is budging, consider calling it a day. There are some arguments you can't win – no matter how good your argument is – if the other person isn't willing to rethink the problem. If you know when to quit, you might still be able to preserve your relationship with the other person.

www.wikihow.com/Argue



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