What Am I Going to Argue About?

I n Chapter 2 we stated that argumentation always takes place over a figurative piece of ground in a given field and its limits are defined by a proposition stating a change in belief or behavior. A clearly stated proposition is crucial to establishing the responsibilities of advocate and opponent in the process of argumentation. In this chapter, we define propositions, present three classifications of propositions, and offer guidelines for phrasing propositions and defining their terms.

THE NATURE OF PROPOSITIONS

The proposition identifies the limits of the topic of argument, places the burden of proof on the advocate, and gives presumption to the opponent. Propositions are formed about controversies in a field. A *controversy* is a dispute or difference of opinion about something. In any field, several controversies may be occurring at the same time. For instance, Alison Alexander and Janice Hanson (2005) identified a series of controversies in the field of mass communication, which included:

- Are American values shaped by the mass media?
- Is television harmful to children?
- Does the media's emphasis on body image affect men as much as it does women?
- Does entertainment television programming perpetuate stereotypes of African Americans?
- Has negative political advertising harmed the American political process?
- Are American news media politically biased?
- Should the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) do more to police the public airwaves?

Note that each of these controversies is phrased as a question. In referring to a controversy, we often use the phrase, "the question before us is. . . ." This signals a lack of agreement, that there is no universally accepted answer to the issues posed by the question.

Because controversies commonly occur over questions of "what happened," "what judgment shall I make in this situation," or "what is the best course of action to follow," the boundaries of a given controversy must be identified so that both advocate and opponent know how these boundaries shape the argumentative ground. The proposition statement serves as the beginning point for the process of argumentation.

> The **proposition** is a statement that identifies the argumentative ground and points to a change in belief or behavior.

The proposition defines the locus of disagreement in a controversy. This locus of disagreement is the clash of positions—the point at which your position diverges from someone else's position.

Suppose that as you read the questions identifying controversies in the field of mass media, you found yourself thinking about the connection between television and children. Also suppose that the question about whether television is harmful to children stirred up childhood memories of many positive experiences you had with television, such as learning to count with *Sesame Street* and learning to be polite to others with *Mr. Rogers*. Now suppose the person who sits next to you in class has a four-year-old daughter. As he read the same question, he flashed on his daughter's favorite cartoon in which the characters frequently say rude things to one another. He begins to form the position that some television programs may be harmful to children. You could both voice your experiences with television, exchanging viewpoints with each other. If, however, you wanted to convince the members of your class that your position is the better answer to the question "Is television harmful to children?" you need to find a way to state the locus of your disagreement so that the audience knows what the two of you are arguing about. This is why the process of argumentation begins with a proposition.

Because argumentation is a communication process used to influence an audience, propositions are phrased in terms of a change in belief or behavior, stating the locus of disagreement and whether that disagreement is over a proposed change in belief or behavior. To argue effectively in ways that will offer sound reasons to your audience, state the controversy in a way that readily identifies what the argument is. By identifying the locus of disagreement in the form of a proposition, you will be able to fulfill three objectives for effective argumentation.

Selecting Terms for Definition

The first objective is to define the key terms that describe the argumentative ground. We phrase the locus of disagreement as a proposition so that important words and phrases that may need clarification are made more obvious to arguers and their audiences. One question frequently arises: What do the advocate and opponent mean when they use particular words or phrases? The proposition provides a semantic framework for argument and allows the advocate and opponent to make interpretations of its key words and phrases. This interpretation is absolutely essential to effective case construction because language use is a complex human activity.

Kenneth Burke (1966) described a fundamental property of being human as our proclivity to use and misuse symbols. He said that we use symbols to create

complex systems and, in turn, we make symbols using a complex process. Word-symbols are our verbal system for assigning meaning to the objects, processes, ideas, and experiences we encounter. The nature of human-symbol use underscores the importance of selecting key terms and phrases in a proposition for definition.

Beyond the ability to exchange information with one another, we use language to identify, categorize, and organize objects, processes, ideas, and experiences. This is the *denotative function* of language use. We also use language to react to what happens around us, to make judgments, and to express our feelings. This is the *connotative function* of language use. A given word or phrase can function both denotatively and connotatively for individuals in an audience. In communication, language is said to act as a *terministic screen*; choosing a particular word sets limits, directs attention a certain way, or creates a feeling based on the symbol chosen. For example, if every reference to people in general used *mankind*, *men, he*, or *manpower*, your word choices all function as a male terministic screen. Your audience may perceive that you view the world as male dominated and feel that only men are important. Terministic screens are a product of the connotative dimension of language, and, at a minimum, you would be guilty of using sexist language. Further complicating the nature of language is that the assignment of meaning to a word is arbitrary.

A "word" is a set of visual or auditory markings we assign to symbolize something. There is no necessary or direct connection between the word-symbol we have for something and the thing itself. You are reading these observations on the nature of language in the object that users of English identify with the word-symbol "book." There is no reason for calling this object a "book." Users of English could just as easily have agreed to call this object a "blomp" or a "krub." The word-symbol we use for something, and the meaning we assign that word-symbol, are a matter of our experience of a thing and the word-symbol we assign to it. The only connection between our word-symbol "book," and the object you are reading, is the ancient Teutonic word-symbol for the bark of the beech tree, "boc." This language is a source for many English word-symbols and beech bark was a common material literate ancient Teutons wrote upon.

Let's examine a sample proposition for argumentation and the key words and phrases that need interpretation to clarify its argumentative ground: *The federal government should significantly strengthen the regulation of mass media in the United States.* This is a proposition for what is called "policy argumentation," but the objective of selecting key words and phrases for definition also applies to propositions for other kinds of argumentation. The advocate has a burden of proof to fulfill by developing a prima facie case. She begins to build this case by selecting the key words and phrases that she will use to communicate her interpretation of the figurative ground. For this proposition, she selects three key phrases to interpret the figurative ground as she wants her audience to understand it: (1) federal government, (2) significantly strengthen the regulation of, and (3) mass media. The advocate has several options for defining these terms. The meaning she assigns to them conveys her interpretation of the figurative ground and what her burden of proof includes.

Although the opponent does not begin the process of definition, he too should select key words and phrases for definition. He wants the audience to view the figurative ground from his perspective. The opponent has the option of

using the advocate's definitions or providing his own. In some instances, one of the first points of clash between advocate and opponent is over what meanings should be given to key words and phrases. Some instances of argumentation are wholly a disagreement over what meaning should be assigned to something. Once terms have been selected for definition, they must be defined in a way that clarifies the interpretation of the figurative ground. Later in this chapter, we offer some guidelines for determining which terms to define and techniques for defining them.

Specifying Direction of Change

The arguers' second objective is to identify the locus of disagreement with a proposition sentence and to specify what belief or behavior the advocate wants to change. If the arguers and their audience do not know what the locus of disagreement is, the potential for confusion is immense. Stating this locus of disagreement, along with clarifying the meaning of key words and phrases, can help avoid confusion. Also, by identifying the change sought, the proposition identifies both the advocate's burden of proof and the sort of presumption the opponent may use to deny that this change is good or necessary.

Using the sample proposition, assume the advocate has offered these definitions:

federal government—the FCC

significantly strengthen the regulation of—impose a specific code of decency standards for entertainment and sports programming

mass media—broadcast, cable, and satellite radio and television

These definitions suggest that the locus of disagreement will be over what constitutes "decency" in radio and television programming. The advocate's arguments will have to further clarify what she means by "a specific code of decency standards," but the disputed territory in the argumentative ground is beginning to take shape. The advocate wants her audience to accept the necessity of having the FCC empowered to do more to clean up the public airwaves. The opponent has the benefit of presumption that the FCC and, possibly, other elements of the federal government are presently doing a good job of maintaining standards of decency in radio and television.

Even without these definitions, the proposition points to the kind of change the advocate is expected to support. Stating that the federal government should significantly strengthen the regulation of mass media in the United States points the advocate in the direction of greater control. The proposition identifies the agency for change the advocate must employ—some aspect of the federal government. It identifies the type of change—significantly strengthen regulation. It points to the target of change—American mass media.

Change is also specified when the proposition is one of fact or value. The direction of change specified in a proposition of fact is one of movement toward accepting that something is true, acceptable, or probable. Propositions of fact may also assert movement toward a new understanding of, or perspective on, something. A fact proposition asserting that *mass media play a significant role in shaping the values of Americans* asks the audience to orient their thinking about American mass media toward the belief that there is a significant relationship

between media consumption and American value structures. In a value proposition, such as *American entertainment television programming is morally deficient,* the direction of change involves the advocate's evaluation of television on the basis of some standard of morality that she must specify. In both of these propositions, the audience is asked to make a mental commitment to a belief offered by the advocate's interpretation of the proposition's figurative ground.

As with the policy proposition, even before definitions for key words and phrases are supplied, fact and value propositions set general boundaries for the figurative ground and direction of change toward which the advocate asks the audience to move.

Fact

Mass media play a significant role in shaping the values of Americans.

Direction of Change: The probability that a *significant* connection exists between mass media and the values we hold; the accuracy of the assertion that mass media are a *significant* source of our values.

Benefit of Presumption: Whatever link might exist between mass media and our values is not *significant;* other, presently agreed-upon sources of our values are more accurately described as being significant sources of our values.

Value

American entertainment television programming is morally deficient.

Direction of Change: Acceptance of the belief that entertainment television programming does not measure up to a specified standard of morality.

Benefit of Presumption: Depends upon the audience's knowledge of and beliefs about the moral standards depicted in programming. Value clash will be over what moral figurative ground is most appropriate for evaluating the entertainment programming delivered by television.

Our sample fact, value, and policy propositions are flexible enough to allow both advocate and opponent opportunities for interpreting the figurative ground. This characteristic—flexibility—is often found in propositions used for argumentation class work and competitive intercollegiate debate. Flexibility may not always be present in propositions in other academic contexts and across many fields. Fact propositions, for example, dominate the legal field. A jury is asked to accept or reject the factual proposition that the defendant has violated a particular law or statute. As a student, you may find yourself placed in the position of advocating value propositions when you tell your parents "a study abroad experience would benefit me" or "a summer internship will increase my value to a prospective employer." In business, policy propositions shape decision making when a company contemplates moving production facilities to another country.

Identifying Key Issues

The arguers' third objective in framing a proposition is to aid the advocate and opponent in the identification of key issues. In Chapter 4 we devote more attention to the identification of intrinsic or stock issues in a proposition; for now, it is

sufficient to say that **issues** are central questions suggested by the wording of the proposition and the definitions provided for key terms. "An issue is an inherent and vital question within a proposition: inherent because it exists inseparably and inevitably within the proposition, and vital because it is crucial or essential to the meaning of the proposition" (Mills, 1968, p. 96). Issues become the contested points in argumentation, the areas of disagreement between advocate and opponent, the internal structure or framework for argumentation.

Earlier, we offered this policy proposition: *The federal government should significantly strengthen the regulation of mass media in the United States.* We also provided possible definitions for the key terms:

> *federal government*—the FCC
>
> *significantly strengthen the regulation of*—impose a specific code of decency standards for entertainment and sports programming
> *mass media*—broadcast, cable, and satellite radio and television

Our broad proposition has now come to mean something more specific: The FCC should place restrictions on the transmission of indecent words and actions via broadcast, cable or satellite radio and television in sports and entertainment programs. If the opponent accepts these definitions as reasonable, argumentation can proceed on the issues that derive from the narrowed proposition. These issues become the advocate's burden of proof.

What might these issues be? They are questions that a reasonable person might seek the answer to before accepting the change in the FCC's role in regulating what we hear and see on radio and television.

> What language and action found in sports and entertainment programs constitute indecent content?
>
> Does sports and entertainment programming on radio and television contain significant amounts of indecent content?
>
> Does some significant harm result from media transmission of indecent content?
>
> What are reasonable standards of decency for sports and entertainment programming?
>
> Would there be specific advantages or benefits from imposing decency standards on sports and entertainment programming on radio and television?
>
> Is the way the FCC presently regulates language use and behavior in radio and television programming inadequate?
>
> Is the FCC the best government agency to monitor and regulate decency for radio and television?
>
> What might the consequences be, in terms of the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech and a free press, if the FCC is further empowered to monitor and regulate decency?

These questions represent some of the issues that would give shape and structure to the process of argumentation over the figurative ground of this policy proposition. By locating areas of disagreement, potential and actual, the arguers clarify for each other, and their audience, specific aspects of belief or behavior that are contested. Issues, which sharpen the locus of disagreement, constitute the audience's basis for deciding whether to change or maintain their current position on the contested ground.

Selecting key terms for definition, specifying the direction of change the advocate seeks, and identifying key issues are necessary objectives achieved by having a proposition sentence that establishes the figurative ground at the outset, because they guide you in your management of the figurative ground for argumentation. "Somebody should do something" or "that's just wrong" will not serve as effective guides for meeting your responsibilities as an advocate or opponent. Equally, making a snap judgment about what to do or what to believe can lead to poor decision making when you are the audience for another's arguments. Good, effective argumentation begins with a clear answer to this chapter's title question: What am I going to argue about?

Summary of the Nature of Propositions

1. The proposition specifies the scope of the controversy by setting up the boundaries for the figurative ground over which argumentation takes place. Defining key terms in the proposition helps to clarify these boundaries.
2. The proposition states the advocate's goal, asserting the change in belief or behavior for which the audience's assent is sought.
3. The proposition delineates the advocate's responsibilities for the burden of proof, the opponent's opportunities resulting from the identification of presumption, and it suggests potential issues that constitute the figurative ground for argumentation.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF PROPOSITIONS

We classify propositions according to the end an advocate seeks, a change in either belief or behavior. There are three common classes of propositions: *fact*, *value*, and *policy*. These classes correspond to common sources of controversy: (1) disputes over what happened, what is happening, or what will happen; (2) disputes asserting something to be good or bad, right or wrong, effective or ineffective; and (3) disputes over what should or should not be done.

Propositions of Fact

Factual propositions seek to alter our beliefs. They assert that relationships between things exist, that there are appropriate interpretations of the observable world, or what is found in a quest for knowledge. Consider the proposition: *The lyrics of country-western music convey negative images of marriage and fidelity.* This proposition asserts a relationship between the word-symbols in lyrics from this music genre and potential attitudes its listeners may develop as a result of listening to this music. We may not accept the probable truth of this proposition without further explanation. Proof of the asserted relationship would require analysis of the lyrics of country-western songs to determine if such negative images exist in them.

Propositions of fact are further classified in terms of time frame—whether the change in belief is about the past, present, or future.

Past Fact
The American entertainment media were an adjunct of the military during World War II.

Life evolved naturally from existing conditions on earth.

Present Fact

The American mass media are relatively free from government regulation compared to media in other countries.

Illegal immigration deprives U.S. citizens of jobs.

Future Fact

New technology will make the present system of broadcast regulation irrelevant by 2020.

Most large species of wildlife will cease to exist outside zoos and game preserves in the next decade.

In each of these factual propositions, the controversy concerns the relationship between something and what we are asked to believe about it. All factual propositions have the structural pattern of "something was/is/will be . . . something." To determine the truth of the relationship in the case of past or present factual propositions, the process is similar: Discover what is required to establish the probable truth or the statement and proceed to verify it. Propositions of future fact depend on discovering the probability that something will occur in the future. In Chapter 9, we explore proving propositions of fact in more detail.

Propositions of Value

Value propositions attempt to alter belief by examining our subjective reactions to things and our opinions of them. The proposition of value establishes a judgmental standard or set of standards and applies them to the subject of the value proposition sentence. Value propositions take one of two forms. A *singular value proposition* is a straightforward evaluation of something based on a standard of judgment the advocate supplies. A *comparative value proposition* suggests that two things are measured or contrasted to determine which of them is more "valuable" in a given context or situation.

Singular Value

Reality television programming sacrifices quality for Nielsen ratings.

Comparative Value

The rights of endangered animal species are more important than the rights of indigenous human populations.

Sentence structure is particularly important in understanding how the value proposition sets up the figurative ground for argumentation. The subject of the value proposition is the **value object**. The value object is the thing being evaluated. It names some idea, person, action, agency, tradition, practice, or custom that exists or is proposed. In singular value propositions, the value object is relatively easy to locate—*reality television programming*—in our example, and often requires definition.

The sentence structure of a comparative value proposition can make determining the value object a bit trickier. In our example, the "thing" being evaluated by the advocate is the abstract concept of *rights,* modified by two descriptors: *endangered animal species* and *indigenous human populations.* In our example of a comparative value proposition, the advocate and opponent have a two-part value object, the

rights of endangered animals and the rights of indigenous humans. This two-part structure for a value object is typical of comparative value propositions, and the advocate will want to define what she means by a *right*. The opponent may have his own ideas about what constitutes a *right*.

In value propositions, whether singular or comparative, there is a second term or set of terms essential to the figurative ground and making value judgments. The **value judgment term**, found in the predicate of the proposition, serves as the source of criteria used to evaluate the value object. An important part of the advocate's burden of proof is to define the value judgment term in such a way that it provides reasonable, appropriate standards of evaluation.

In our singular value proposition, the value judgment term is *quality.* The advocate will define *quality* to produce specific criteria she will use to evaluate how *reality television programming* fails to meet her standards for quality television programs and, in so doing, fulfill her burden of proof. The opponent is free to use these same criteria or to define *quality* in terms of his own standards in defending reality programming.

In our comparative value example, presumption suggests that when it comes to whose rights take precedence, we currently believe that the rights of people who live in an area are of greater importance than those of any endangered species who share the area with them. The value judgment term is *more important,* and the advocate defines this term to produce the criteria she will use in fulfilling her burden to prove that animal rights are more important than those of people in certain situations. The opponent may use her criteria or supply his own as he argues for presumption favoring people over animals.

For both advocate and opponent, it is important to determine which words in the proposition represent the value object and make the value judgment in their proposition's figurative ground. In Chapter 10, we discuss the development of cases for value argumentation in more detail.

Propositions of Policy

Whereas fact and value propositions are aimed at altering beliefs, **policy propositions** recommend a change in behavior or create a call to action. They suggest that something should be done. Recall the series of controversies we identified earlier in the field of mass media. Many of these controversies suggest problems that need remedies.

The policy proposition is common in most fields. It is characterized by the word **should**, which suggests that something ought to be done, not necessarily that it will be done. The word "should" requires that the advocate indicate the direction of change she supports and prove that it is "necessary," "desirable," and "viable" in meeting her burden of proof. It may have occurred to you that the words "necessary," "desirable," and "viable" suggest making value judgments about something. That is one of the secrets to successfully advocating or opposing policy propositions: A prima facie case in policy argumentation is developed through a series of fact and value subpropositions. These subpropositions function as the main points of case construction as the advocate (1) uses factual main points to establish a rationale for believing problems exist, (2) evaluates existing policies to determine what causes these problems, and (3) demonstrates why her proposal is the superior policy option. The opponent uses factual main points to

encourage the audience to believe problems do not exist, uses evaluative main points to characterize the strengths of existing policies, and uses value judgments to demonstrate the weaknesses of the advocate's proposal.

Policy propositions are commonly used as the topics for academic debates in argumentation classes and intercollegiate debate competition, although some divisions of intercollegiate debate use fact and value propositions. In our discussion of presumption in Chapter 2, we indicated that academic debate typically takes the form of hypothesis testing. Consider the following examples of policy propositions that have served as the national topic for intercollegiate debate competition. What aspects of fact and value do you find in these policy propositions?

> *Resolved:* That the federal government should guarantee an opportunity for higher education to all qualified high school graduates.
> *Resolved:* That greater controls should be imposed on the gathering and utilization of information about United States citizens by government agencies.
> *Resolved:* That the Commander-in-Chief power of the United States President should be substantially controlled.

Each proposition suggests issues that presently are of great concern to many Americans, so it may surprise you to learn that some of these propositions are several decades old. To see the entire list, and the year in which each was the national topic, go to www.wfu.edu/NDT/HistoricalLists/topics.html.

The topics selected for intercollegiate debate competition have all considered significant and highly complex political, economic, and social issues. If you were advocating or opposing one of these propositions, you would need to do a thorough examination of underlying factual and judgmental issues to make your case. The policy propositions for academic argumentation are phrased to offer students some flexibility for interpreting them. Recall that in academic argumentation your role is usually that of hypothesis tester. The goal is to evaluate which side, advocate (affirmative) or opponent (negative), does the better job of testing the hypothesis. Policy propositions used in other contexts may be more focused and specific. Chapter 11 provides a complete discussion of argumentation over policy propositions.

Summary of the Classification of Propositions

1. Propositions of fact assert a relationship between things or between persons and things; with the exception of propositions of future fact, the advocate's burden of proof is to prove by direct verification that the asserted relationship is probable.
2. Propositions of value make a singular evaluation of something or compare two things to determine which is of greater value in a given context; the advocate's burden is to prove the evaluation probable through the application of criteria.
3. Propositions of policy assert that a course of action or behavior should be taken; the advocate's burden is to prove that the policy change is reasonable by using subpropositions of fact and value in creating a prima facie case for the policy.

PHRASING THE PROPOSITION

When you phrase your proposition, choose language that will clearly establish the argumentative ground. The importance of wording a proposition cannot be overemphasized. Clear phrasing is needed to provide a meaningful basis for the

process that follows. A failure in proposition wording is an invitation to misunderstanding and poor analysis of its component issues (Ziegelmueller, Kay, & Dause, 1990).

First, the proposition should be phrased as a clear statement of the change in belief or behavior the advocate seeks. Failure to clearly state the proposed change confuses the assignment of presumption and the scope of the burden of proof. Consider the problem with phrasing in this proposition: *Something should be done about strikes by professional athletes.* This proposition fails to meet the first rule for effectively phrasing a proposition. "Something" is vague, and determining the burden of proof and presumption is very difficult. "Something" could involve taking steps to restrict the athletes' right to strike by imposing a federal ban on strikes by professional athletes, but it also could involve restricting the owners' right to use replacement players during a strike. If the idea of arguing this subject is to consider the viability of a policy of arbitration that does not disrupt the professional sports season, a more appropriate wording for this proposition would be: *An independent labor relations board for professional sports contract negotiations should be created to arbitrate all labor–management disputes.*

The second rule to observe in phrasing a proposition is that a proposition should be phrased as a simple-declarative sentence. A *simple sentence* expresses one complete thought. Its structure is subject–verb–object and it has one central idea. A *declarative sentence* makes an assertion: "something is something" or "something should be something." A *simple-declarative sentence* makes an assertion that something is a fact, something is valued in a certain way, or some action should be taken. Your proposition should always be a straightforward assertion of a fact, value, or policy. It should never have a dependent modifying clause attached to it. If you violate this rule, you once again create potential problems for assigning presumption and burden of proof.

Let's see what happens when more than one central idea is included in a proposition. *An independent board should be created to arbitrate all labor–management disputes and to mandate the use of video replay in professional sports.* This is no longer a single assertion of policy. It now contains two separate topics, related only to the extent that both deal with professional sports.

A proposition with more than one central idea saddles the advocate with separate burdens of proof for each idea—mandatory use of video replay, along with labor–management disputes—and the opponent now finds himself with two separate areas of presumption to defend. Both topics certainly represent important controversies in the field of professional sports, but trying to focus on both in one argumentative exchange unnecessarily complicates the process. Phrasing the proposition as a simple-declarative sentence facilitates and improves the process of analysis. As an arguer breaks down a proposition into its component issues, he or she looks for questions that are central to it. If the proposition contains multiple central ideas, identifying issues becomes more difficult and establishing an internally consistent argumentative position may prove impossible.

Attaching a dependent (subordinate) clause to the proposition sentence can also create problems. The structure of the simple-declarative sentence, subject–verb–object, conveys a sense absoluteness. It is natural inclination to want to attach a dependent clause that modifies, sets limits, or provides descriptions for our declarative sentences. Resist this temptation in phrasing the propositions or you may end up with something like this: *An independent labor relations*

board for professional sports contract negotiations, made up of people with no involvement in professional sports, should be created to arbitrate all labor–management disputes.

Why is attaching this clause a bad idea? Adding this clause limits interpretive options for both advocate and opponent by indicating who may serve on this labor relations board. Although it may turn out to be a good idea, analysis and research may also suggest that experience with some aspect of professional sports would be beneficial. Determining the specific provisions for who serves on this board is part of the advocate's burden of proof. She needs some flexibility in making those determinations. The opponent's thinking may also be hampered. He may be led to think only about the drawbacks of board members having "no involvement in professional sports" and neglect consideration of the broader implications of compulsory arbitration.

A dependent clause attached to the object of the proposition can also create problems. *An independent labor relations board for professional sports contract negotiations should be created to arbitrate all labor–management disputes, such as the 2004–2005 strike by National Hockey League players that ended the season before it could even begin.* At first glance, this modifying clause may seem like a good idea because it provides an example of labor–management strife in professional sports. This modifier also has the potential to limit thinking. It leads both advocate and opponent to focus on the rare instance of a season-ending strike. Any modifier that limits thinking or directs research efforts too narrowly may be problematic.

Phrasing the proposition is your starting point in the process of case development. It is desirable and necessary to start with a topic sentence that clearly specifies the direction of change the advocate seeks and gives the advocate and opponent enough specificity to enable them to identify key issues, but it must allow room for analysis and critical thinking. Ideas about limits, examples, and other modifiers that come to you while you are phrasing the proposition should be recorded and saved. These ideas may turn into issues, areas for research, details for a policy proposal, definitions for key terms, and the like. Avoid attaching them to your proposition at the outset.

Propositions for class activities and competitive debate help develop skills and test ideas. In intercollegiate competitive debate, the same proposition is used for the entire academic year and is argued by thousands of debaters. These propositions need to be flexible enough to allow many people to argue them. When argumentation is used to seek knowledge, the proposition is a provisional statement of belief about the nature of things. The idea of controversy is artificially induced to encourage open-mindedness in seeking knowledge. A starting point with limitations and exceptions attached to it closes off certain channels of thought. Even the more narrow applications of argumentation, such as the public-policy making that takes place in city government, benefits from flexible starting points.

The final rule for phrasing propositions is that a proposition should be phrased in neutral terms. The wording should favor neither side in a controversy. The advocate might be tempted to express her feelings by using emotive language: *An independent labor relations board should set the terms of contract settlements between greedy owners of professional sports teams and overpaid players.* Emotive language contains value judgments. These judgments should be

saved for the development of arguments about the proposition. In academic argumentation, we strive to phrase the proposition neutrally so that advocates and opponents have equal opportunity to interpret facts and make value judgments based on research and reasoning. Phrasing the proposition with emotionally loaded language undermines that sense of equal opportunity. In other contexts, neutral language is equally desirable so that the linguistic deck is not stacked against one side or the other.

Summary of Rules for Phrasing Propositions

1. Propositions should be phrased to indicate the direction of change in belief or behavior the advocate is responsible for supporting.
2. Propositions should be phrased as a simple-declarative sentence containing one central idea.
3. Propositions should be phrased in neutral language so that neither advocate nor opponent are given an unfair advantage.

DEFINING THE KEY TERMS

People normally do not make changes in belief or behavior until someone gives them good and sufficient reasons for doing so. Because she seeks change, the advocate has the initial responsibility for defining terms and providing these reasons. The key terms in the proposition are defined to locate issues and to help the audience understand what the arguers mean in their use of these terms. Once you have phrased the proposition appropriately, select the key terms that you believe need clarification and then formulate definitions.

The definition of a key term may become a contested part of the advocate's argumentation. The opponent may want the audience to understand a key term from his perspective. Both advocate and opponent should be familiar with the rules and techniques for defining terms. The need to define a key term, and disputes over how a term should best be understood, also apply to key terms in the statement of issues. The advice provided here can be used for all your definitional needs.

To meet those needs, we provide some general rules for defining terms, categories of terms that require definition, and techniques for defining. When asked to define a term, most of us are likely to head for a print or online dictionary. These "standard" dictionaries are useful, but using a standard dictionary can also pose a problem when one is seeking the best way to define a key term.

The Dictionary Problem

As stated earlier, the meaning assigned to a word-symbol is arbitrary. What a word or phrase *means* is based on people's experience and their common usage of it. A standard dictionary does not tell us the *real meaning* of anything; it just lists the conventions of agreement among users of the language. A standard dictionary can provide some useful information. It will tell you the "part of speech," such as noun, verb, or adjective, the word is most commonly used for. You can also discover the historical origin of the word, its etymology. And, you can find the range of conventional meanings that people have assigned to it. Using the proposition of fact, *viral*

video has significantly changed our concept of celebrity, let's explore what we can and cannot achieve using a standard *Webster's Unabridged* dictionary.

Two key terms in this proposition need to be defined to help identify issues and to clarify the contested ground: *viral video* and *celebrity.* Our *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Unabridged,* is from 1983, and the term, *viral video* does not appear in it. Looking up each word, we found *viral,* "involving a virus," and *video,* "of, or used in television" neither of which are very helpful. However, a very specific explanation *viral video* is provided by *Time*'s Lev Grossman.

> One by one, then hundreds by hundreds, people started downloading the video, e-mailing it, linking to it, sharing it, copying it and reuploading it . . . the little video went viral—it multiplied and reproduced and spread out of control on the Internet like a virus. (2006, p. 64)

Viral video is a new term created to refer to the practice of digitizing a video file and posting it somewhere on the World Wide Web or spamming it through e-mail. Standard dictionaries, even the newest unabridged ones, cannot keep up with all of the new terms, especially those spawned by the latest developments in computer technology. Search the news media or publications that are field specific.

Will a standard dictionary be of more help in defining our second key term, *celebrity?* First, we tried two online dictionaries.

> famous person: somebody who is famous during his or her own lifetime; fame: the state of being famous (Encarta)
> a person who has a high degree of recognition by the general population; a famous person; fame; renown; the quality of being a celebrity (Wiktionary)

Our *Webster's Unabridged* tells us that common usage for *celebrity* is:

> fame; renown; the distinction of honor publicly bestowed on one because of noted character or exploits; a famous or well-publicized person (p. 290)

Webster's also tells us that the historical origin of *celebrity* comes from two Latin terms, *celebritas,* meaning a multitude or fame and *celeber,* meaning frequented, populous, and fame. Because our proposition of fact asserts that the concept of *celebrity* has changed as a result of using the Web to spread a video clip similar to the way a viral illness is spread, standard usage and the etymology of *celebrity* might serve our definitional needs.

Remember, however, that we also want the definition of key terms to help us identify issues. What would happen if we looked for a definition of *celebrity* from a more field-specific source? We turned to cultural studies scholar Graeme Turner's work, *Understanding Celebrity.* Turner defines *celebrity* as:

> a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produce these representations and their effects; and it is a cultural formation that has a social function. . . . (2004, p. 9)

We may want to paraphrase Turner's definition for presentation to our audience, but we can find several issues suggested by this definition from the field perspective of cultural studies:

- Celebrity is the generic system of exhibiting people.
- A celebrity is a commodity that is both created and traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries.

- Celebrity can be understood as an "industry" that exists to produce celebrities.
- Celebrities are created from elements of a culture.
- Celebrity has a social function.

We may not necessarily use all of these issues, but notice how this field-specific definition helps generate potential issues we could use to argue whether or not the phenomenon of *viral video* should cause us to change our thinking about what constitutes a *celebrity* in our culture with its technology for instantly spreading images. A standard dictionary, whether print or electronic, would not have given us this kind of head start on analysis.

There is one feature of standard dictionary definitions that you may find useful. A standard dictionary, especially an unabridged one, provides a list of synonyms for words, usually at the end of an entry. Defining the *value judgment term* in a value proposition must be done in such a way that your definition provides the criteria you will apply to the value object. Value judgment terms are frequently vague, abstract concepts. They also have strong emotive, connotative properties. Field-specific dictionaries and other sources may not instantly lead you to recognizing potential criteria. An unabridged dictionary or a synonym finder can be useful for parsing one of these value judgment terms.

Earlier we gave you this example of a value proposition: *Reality television programming sacrifices quality for Nielsen ratings*. The value judgment term is *quality*. What constitutes *quality* television programming is often a matter of personal taste. In Chapter 10 we discuss **criteria discovery** and **criteria development** as methods for turning the value judgment term into the specific criteria used to evaluate the value object. This chapter gives you a few tips for using a standard dictionary to aid in defining the value judgment term.

One technique for developing criteria is to use synonyms. A synonym finder can give you an extensive list of words with similar usage. We looked up *quality* in J. J. Rodale's *The Synonym Finder* (1978, p. 971) and found dozens of synonyms. From Rodale's synonym list, these terms fit our personal notions of *quality* television programming:

distinction   kind
virtue   tone

Notice that these synonyms for *quality* are themselves abstract concepts that suggest emotive properties. They do give us some ideas for parsing our value judgment term to develop specific, concrete criteria for evaluating television programs.

A *quality* television program achieves *distinction* when it is affirmed by parents and educators.
A *quality* television program demonstrates *virtue* through the actions of its characters.
A *quality* television program is one in which the characters are *kind* to one another, and they engage in acts of kindness.
A *quality* television program has a *tone* of respect for people and ideas.

Arguers are obligated to make clear exactly what they mean when they use a particular word or phrase. Knowing the limitations and uses of standard dictionaries can help you find definitions for the key terms in your proposition. There are additional guides to defining terms that we cover in the remainder of this chapter.

Rules of Definition

The Inclusionary Rule. Phrase definitions in such a way that they include things that appropriately fall under the term. Recall our policy proposition: *The federal government should significantly strengthen the regulation of mass media in the United States.* The advocate defined *mass media* as "broadcast, cable, and satellite radio and television." Radio and television are generally recognized as two forms of *mass media*. This definition automatically rules out print media and other forms of electronic media. If both advocate and opponent agree that radio and television constitute a suitable definition of *mass media*, there is no problem. The advocate, however, should be prepared to defend narrowing the definition of *mass media* to exclude magazines and newspapers if her definition is questioned by the opponent because they are also forms of mass media.

The Exclusionary Rule. Phrase definitions to exclude those things not appropriate to terms (just the opposite of the inclusionary rule). Your definition should not be so broad as to include things that do not properly fall into the category of the term. For instance, defining *mass media* as "communication" would include interpersonal and intrapersonal communication, types of communication not aimed at a mass audience. Although the advocate and opponent may both be interested in what constitutes "decent" communication in our culture, the proposition they are arguing focuses their consideration on *mass media*. The language and behavior individuals engage in interpersonally is excluded from their proposition.

The Adaptation Rule. Phrase definitions so that the meanings are appropriate to the proposition's figurative ground. Definitions need to make sense to the audience and the field in which you are arguing. Concerned parent and educator groups, people in the mass media, and legislative bodies represent potential audiences for argumentation about the regulation of the mass media. Although you can define the *federal government* using the names of the FCC's chairperson and members, it probably would not make much sense to people in at least one of these potential audiences to use such a definition if you are arguing about things the FCC ought to regulate. Likewise, *mass media* might be defined in terms of technical specifications for the transmission of radio and television signals, but this definition may not be appropriate for much of the figurative ground for arguments about significantly strengthening federal regulation of decency.

The Neutrality Rule. Phrase definitions to avoid unnecessary emotionality. We have already suggested that your choice of terms for phrasing propositions should avoid emotionally laden language. The same is true for defining key terms from a proposition. It would be inappropriate to define the *federal government* as "a group of nearsighted reactionaries more concerned with protecting industry profits than promoting the public good" or to define *mass media* as "the purveyors of vulgar language and soft core pornography over the nation's airwaves." Definitions should be descriptive of the term defined, not your feelings about it. In arguing the actual issues of your case, you will have ample opportunity to make criticisms, evaluations, interpretations, and the like through proof and reasoning that will make your feelings very explicit.

The Clarity Rule.   Phrase definitions so that they will be understood more readily than the terms they define. To define *federal government* as "that central government, commonly known as the United States government, to which the fifty states have agreed to subordinate certain powers as specified in the U.S. Constitution" does little to improve our understanding of the figurative ground for arguing the pros and cons of increasing federal regulation of the mass media. Definitions that use a term itself as part of the definition are both unclear and circular.

The problem of cloudy definitions is common, especially as arguers grapple with the jargon and "insider" meanings of a field. In some fields, especially those that involve rapid technological change, not everyone will be comfortable with the jargon. You are part of the field of "higher education." Do you know what a "helicopter parent" is? In college-administrator speak, this is a parent who "hovers over" every aspect of his or her child's college experience, especially during his or her freshman year.

Summary of Rules of Definition

1. *Inclusionary Rule:* Phrase definitions to include that which appropriately falls within the scope of the term's meaning.
2. *Exclusionary Rule:* Phrase definitions to exclude that which does not fall appropriately within the scope of the term's meaning.
3. *Adaptation Rule:* Phrase definitions to fit the field and the audience's range of understanding and experience.
4. *Neutrality Rule:* Phrase definitions with emotionally neutral language.
5. *Clarity Rule:* Definitions should make the meaning of the term more clear, not less, and should avoid circularity.

Terms Needing Definition

Five categories of terms usually require definition: equivocal, vague, technical, new, and coined terms. As an advocate, you define terms so that both the opponent and audience have a clear idea of what *you* mean. How you define key terms shapes the issues and arguments that make up your case and helps you meet your burden of proof. As an opponent, you also define terms so that the advocate and audience will know your meanings. More importantly as an opponent, you may want to contest the advocate's definitions of key terms and provide *your own* version of their meaning.

Equivocal terms have two or more equally correct meanings. Many common words in the English language have more than one common-use meaning. Consider the word *bridge.* Arguments in the fields of music, engineering, and dentistry may be about bridges, but each field has a distinctly different meaning for the term. Also consider the word *enemy.* We normally think of an enemy as a foe, someone who is hostile, an unfriendly agent. Can *enemy* be defined as something more positive? For many years, a foreign-policy maxim, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," has been used to define relationships with groups and individuals that do not measure up to certain standards, but are perceived as useful allies because of who they oppose. This definition of enemies as friends has begun to carry over into interpersonal and professional relationships. Sometimes the context in

which a term is being used will help determine which meaning best fits, but you cannot always rely on context as a guide. When you encounter an equivocal term, make clear the meaning you want people to assign to it.

Vague terms, also called "ambiguous" terms, have shades of meaning; they lack clear-cut definitions, so that each person is free to supply his or her own meaning. Consider the phrase *freedom of speech,* which can have as many meanings as there are political views. Some terms, such as *democracy,* can be both equivocal and vague. There are different versions of democracy, such as a "democratic people's republic" and a "Jeffersonian democracy." Even when Americans use the term, what constitutes a *democracy* is subject to a great deal of variation. Earlier we talked about the terms that express value judgments and how these are frequently abstractions with emotive connotations. What does the term *good* or *inferior* mean to you? Value terms, terms of ideology, and terms that express attitudes are often vague. You need to define vague terms clearly so that you specify the interpretation you want the audience to give them.

Technical terms include jargon or specialized terms that belong to a particular field or profession. Every field has its own specialized jargon, but certain fields seem to have an abundance of technical terminology. Many controversies are over issues in medicine, energy production, computer technology, and other technical fields. Understanding technical terminology and jargon is necessary to understanding the issues and figurative ground of these fields. We often ask audiences to make decisions about issues and problems in fields that require knowledge of technical terminology. Exact definitions of a term, such as *bioeugenics,* is necessary for meaningful argumentation and good decision making to occur.

Terms with a limited or specialized meaning should also be defined. Even within a field, not everyone will know all of the specialized terminology. When we are unsure of a term's meaning, the natural inclination is to guess at meaning from context or supply what we think the meaning should be based on our own experiences. Have you *pinged* someone lately? If you did not know that "pinged" is jargon for contacting someone via e-mail or instant messaging, you might conjure up all sorts of possibilities. Providing definitions that clarify insider jargon is especially important when concepts are stated as acronyms. An HMO is a health maintenance organization, a form of PPGP, prepaid group practice, not to be confused with HBO, a premium cable television service and PPG, the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company. E-mail and instant messaging have added a new wrinkle to the jargon problem.

New terms are additions to the language, words or phrases that do not exist in the common vocabulary. These words may begin as jargon in a particular field and then spread to other fields and general use. In Chapter 1, we referred to Bernie Madoff's fraud as a Ponzi scheme, named after Charles Ponzi, an Italian immigrant who got people to invest millions of dollars from 1919 to 1920 by promising 50% profits in 90 days. "Ponzi schemes—in which a swindler touts outsize returns . . . and creates the illusion of solvency by paying off early investors with capital raised from later entrants" (Altman, 2009, p. 18), did not originate with Charles Ponzi, but his name has been linked to this type of scam for almost a century thanks to the once new term used to describe.

Coined terms are those invented when a convenient term does not already exist. Many coined terms are shorthand for complex ideas. *Infobia* is the fear

you will discard some bit of information that will later turn out to be useful. *Charitainment* is the merger of *charity* and *entertainment.* It refers to the involvement of high-profile celebrities in good works, such as Brad Pitt's project for building environmentally friendly, low-cost housing for residents of New Orleans who lost their homes to Hurricane Katrina or George Clooney's efforts on behalf of African famine victims. *Agritainment* is the merger of *agriculture* and *entertainment,* referring to tourist attractions and festivals that center on farming culture.

Coined terms are also created to describe developments in an evocative manner. *Oprahtization* was coined to describe how Americans use talk shows, such as "The Oprah Winfrey Show," as a source of information and opinions. It is used in such contexts as "the Oprahtization of American politics" to describe the extensive use of radio and television talk shows by political candidates. A person influenced by this form of Oprahitization is characterized as part of the *telectorate* (half television viewer and half voter). Coined terms often become part of standard usage; *television* was a coined term long ago.

Summary of Terms Needing Definition

1. *Equivocal terms* have two or more equally correct meanings.
2. *Vague* (also called "ambiguous") *terms* lack a clear-cut meaning or have shades of meaning.
3. *Technical terms* are the jargon or specialized language of a field or profession.
4. *New terms* are recent additions that are not part of the common vocabulary.
5. *Coined terms* are invented terms, often an amalgam of existing words, or evocative expressions.

How to Define Terms

Key terms, whether from the proposition or other statements you make during argumentation, are defined to clarify meaning. Your objective in defining key terms is to name the properties that set your preferred meaning apart from all other potential meanings your audience might assign to the term. In talking about phrasing propositions and guidelines for selecting and defining terms, we have already given you some ideas for how to define terms. In this section, we identify specific methods for defining that are particularly useful.

Definition by Synonym. Terms may be defined by using a *synonym*—a more familiar word similar to the term in both denotative and connotative meaning. This is how standard dictionaries typically define terms. For the term *celebrity*, our *Webster's Unabridged* (1984, p. 290) gave us these synonyms: *fame*, *honor*, *glory*, *reputation*, *distinction*, and *renown*. Earlier we discussed using a synonym finder to help define the value judgment term in a value proposition. Synonym finders will usually give you a more extensive list of synonyms than a standard dictionary. Our synonym finder (Rodale, 1978, p. 154) gave some additional options for celebrity: *personage*, *notable*, and *dignitary*. It also provided an extensive list of more connotative synonyms, including *big shot*, *lion*, *star*, *superstar*, and from the French, *grand fromage* (big cheese).

Definition by Authority. We have mentioned using "field-specific" sources for definitions that will be appropriate to the field in which you are arguing. One option for finding a field-specific definition is to use an *authoritative definition* from a source in the field of your topic. Scholarly studies, textbooks, research reports, and a variety of publications relevant to a field can all provide authoritative definitions. Searching through the literature in a field can be time-consuming, so you may want to turn to a field-specific or specialized dictionary or encyclopedia.

You will find a variety of specialized dictionaries for scientific fields such as the *Dictionary of Genetics* and the *Dictionary of Virology*. Many publishing houses offer well-known specialty dictionaries, including the *McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Scientific and Technical Terms*, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Space Technology*, *Black's Law Dictionary*, and *The Blackwell Dictionary of Political Science*. Such dictionaries are compiled by experts in the field and are reliable sources for field-specific definitions. Even the federal government creates field-specific dictionaries such as the *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. Along with dictionaries (which usually have shorter entries), a wide variety of field-specific and topical encyclopedias provide definitions and background information. If you were working on a proposition concerning mass media, you might find the *Encyclopedia of New Media: An Essential Reference to Communication and Technology* helpful.

Definition by Example. Terms may be defined by providing a relevant *example* to explain how something is to be understood. Explaining something by providing an example is a common technique in textbooks, including this one. When you define by example, you clarify meaning by giving a concrete, representative instance of the term. In the proposition on strengthening media regulation, the scope of "regulation" was narrowed to the idea of a specific code of *decency standards*. The most efficient way to clarify what the advocate means by *decency* might be to provide some examples. Two well-known examples were the stimulus for Congress and the FCC to consider the need to cleanse the airwaves.

> Live awards broadcasts, during which celebrities make off-the-cuff remarks, are a venue for profanity. During the 2003 Golden Globe Awards, U2's lead singer Bono proclaimed, "this is really, really f__cking brilliant." Later in 2003, Paris Hilton and Nicole Riche dropped "f__k" and "s__t" into their banter several times during the Billboard Music Awards. In response to complaints about both instances, the FCC initially decided that using "f__k" or other profanity as an insult or an adjective was not "indecent use" under their *Pacifica* ruling. (Cascerceri, 2003; Morast, 2003; and Zelezny, 2011).
>
> As part of the 2004 Super Bowl half-time show, Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake performed a song-and-dance number that scandalized many viewers. Timberlake grabbed the bodice of Jackson's costume, exposing her breast in what was subsequently called a "wardrobe malfunction" as millions of American families watched the live broadcast. (Nikolai, 2004; Sanders, 2004; and Zelezny, 2011)

These two examples demonstrate important aspects of defining by example: *behavioral definition* and *definition by negation*. When you are trying to define a concept such as "indecency," which involves specific behaviors, providing examples of those behaviors is an effective technique. There are also instances when the clearest way to explain what something is will be to explain what it is not. Although it would be possible to provide examples of people behaving "decently,"

it is more efficient and clearer to explain decency in terms of "indecent" behavior. When you are searching for the best examples, especially for vague concepts, consider using examples of behavior or negative examples.

Definition by Function.   Terms may be defined by the *function* an object, instrument, agency, or concept performs. Definition by function tells us how something works. For the proposition, *the federal government should significantly strengthen the regulation of mass media in the United States*, the advocate specifies that the FCC is the appropriate agency of the federal government for media regulation. She clarifies this further by providing a functional definition of the FCC as the federal agency responsible for making and enforcing rules governing the operation of the broadcast system in the United States; this is the FCC's function as part of the federal government.

Defining by function can be particularly useful when you need to define an abstract concept. The term *theory* is a good example of such abstraction. Our *Webster's* (1984, p. 1893) defines *theory* as "an idea or mental plan of the way to do something." A clearer definition would give the audience more functional information about this "mental plan" as in this definition of *theory:*

> A theory begins by observing phenomena and then organizing concepts/variables to explain what is observed. A theory organizes by isolating a set of relevant concepts/variables and specifying how they are related to one another. Organizing is an explanation of a phenomenon; it tells us why things occur regularly. Models, or visual depictions of relationships, are often used to illustrate the organization/explanation of theories. A theory allows for predictions; we anticipate what outcomes and effects will occur. Gravity predicts that if we throw a ball into the air, it will hit the ground and that the higher we throw the ball, the harder it will hit the ground. (Heath & Coombs, 2006, p. 198)

Definition by Operation.   When you want to clarify the meaning of a term by explaining it as the result of a series of steps, you might use an *operational* definition. Operational definitions are similar to functional ones in that they can be used to explain how something works. They differ in that an operational definition focuses on how *you* want the audience to understand the meaning you stipulate for the term. An operational definition makes obvious your intention to assign a particular meaning to a term through a series of steps or parts. Operational definitions are most frequently used to define the *policy term* in a policy proposition. In defining what *significantly strengthen the regulation of mass media* means, a dozen different advocates could come up with a dozen different versions of what a policy of regulation should be. Our advocate wants her audience and opponent to know exactly what she means by "impose a specific code of decency standards," so she would operationally define the policy of regulatory practices that she proposes having the FCC employ in monitoring the media. This operational definition specifies the policy she argues should be put in place, about which we will have more to say in Chapter 11.

Summary of How to Define Terms

1. *Definition by Synonym:* Using a denotatively or connotatively more familiar term.
2. *Definition by Authority:* Using a field-specific definition or a definition by a source deemed reputable by the audience.

3. *Definition by Example:* Providing a concrete, representative instance of something; negative and behavioral examples can be effective in some situations.
4. *Definition by Function:* Explaining what an object, instrument, agency or concept is by telling how it works.
5. *Definition by Operation:* Explaining how something is to be understood in terms of its steps or parts, most frequently used to define the policy term of a policy proposition.

Definitional Arguments

We define terms to clarify meaning. The advocate and opponent do not always agree about how the argumentative ground should be defined. When there is disagreement over how a term should be defined, your definition is simply a claim that must be proven. As we have suggested in this chapter, many terms do not have a single, absolute definition. You need to be prepared to defend your definition as being the most appropriate or effective one for defining the argumentative ground.

An argument from definition specifies how something should be classified or understood. To prove that your definition is the most appropriate or effective, you must provide a clear explanation of the contested term—make sure your definition really does clarify meaning. You must also demonstrate that your definition draws from a source of knowledge common to the field in which you are arguing. For instance, if you are defining a term by example, will your audience be familiar with the example? Will it make sense to them? An example that is far removed from the audience's experience can be problematic, and a barrier to their understanding what you mean. We have repeatedly referred to using field-specific sources to define terms. A primary reason is that the appropriateness of such a definition to the given field will be self-evident. It would be difficult to prove that a definition from a standard dictionary fits the terms particular to that field better than definitions that come from sources in the field.

We titled this chapter "What Am I Going to Argue About?" because conventional wisdom suggests that before you jump into argumentation, it is a good idea to have some sense of what you are arguing about first. The proposition states the central idea of the controversy, identifies potential issues, and establishes the field in which the argumentative ground is set. Sometimes, as with competitive debate, you are given a proposition phrased by someone else. More frequently, it is up to you to come up with the actual wording of the proposition. At this stage in the process, consider your phrasing as preliminary. Propositions do not just spring forth. They grow out of situations, events, and people's experiences. As you research the topic, think about the issues and then begin preparing your arguments. You may want to revisit the way you have phrased the proposition.

This chapter has provided you with the principles of propositions; their function in argumentation; their classification as fact, value, and policy; phrasing them appropriately; and defining their key terms. The proposition sets boundaries for the argumentative ground and serves as the topic or thesis sentence for speaking or writing. Propositions are accepted or rejected by the audience on the basis of whether the advocate makes a prima facie case for them, or whether the opponent

offers effective counterarguments and a defense of existing beliefs or behaviors as worth maintaining. The next step in the process of arguing is learning how to analyze the proposition to determine which specific issues you will argue.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. Examine the following propositions. Identify the kinds of propositions—fact, value, and policy—represented. Be prepared to discuss how each example does or does not meet the rules for wording propositions suggested in this chapter.

   ### Energy
   a. Renewable energy sources are preferable to fossil fuels.
   b. By 2020, the United States will run short of fossil fuels.
   c. The federal government should implement an accelerated program of conversion to renewable energy sources.

   ### Ecology
   a. The present system of environmental protection creates toxic waste dumps.
   b. The United States should significantly improve its environmental protection policy.
   c. The protection of the environment ought to take precedence over the expansion of industrial production.

   ### Law Enforcement
   a. The judicial system should reform the system of juvenile and family courts.
   b. Crimes by juveniles are the most serious crimes against persons.
   c. The American judicial system unfairly favors the juvenile offender over the victim.

   ### Foreign Policy
   a. United States foreign policy commitments overextend the federal budget.
   b. United States foreign policy commitments ought to reflect the American belief in the principle of democratic government.
   c. The United States should substantially reduce foreign aid to nations that fail to protect the rights of their citizens.

   ### Education
   a. The quality of education in American public schools ought to be the nation's first priority.
   b. The education of college professors does not place sufficient emphasis on teaching techniques.
   c. The Department of Education should create and maintain a core curriculum for all public schools.

2. Taking the propositions in Activity 1, imagine you are listening to an advocate's speech on each topic. As a member of the audience, identify what words or phrases in each proposition you feel would need to be defined.

3. Select a topic area that you might like to investigate in greater depth in completing future assignments. Formulate specific fact, value, and policy propositions that the topic area suggests to you. Search the reference section of the library for possible sources within the field of the topic that provide definitions of key terms in your propositions. Compare these definitions to those in standard dictionaries and discuss the similarities and differences between them. What are the advantages of using specialized sources to define key terms in your propositions?