

Civilly Speaking: A Curriculum

UNIT 2—How to Argue

by Joel Lurie Grishaver and Ira J. Wise



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Learners Handout for 6th/7th Grades

ar·gu·ment (är'gyə-mənt)

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

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

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 him/her in wisdom or age.
- A wise person does not interrupt his fellow's words.
- A wise person does not hasten to answer.
- Their questions are on the subject and their answers 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.

How to Argue

Arguing Positively

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

Arguing Persuasively

1. Make them feel smart.
2. Use evidence tailored to the argument and audience.
3. Look for logical fallacies.
4. Paint them 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 their argument.*
6. *Argue from a good premise.*
7. *Don't require the last word.*

<https://www.wikihow.com/Argue>

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

Leader's Guide for 6th/7th Grades

Big Idea

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

Set Induction – argument (är'gyə-mənt)

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 their suggestions on the board
2. Distribute the learner's handout.
 - a. Draw their attention to the definitions.

Activity – Monty Python's Flying Circus: The Argument Clinic

1. Show the video of Monty Python's Argument clinic
 - a. Before showing the video, you might want to 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 (not completely unlike Saturday Night Live, but completely different) starring a troupe of five British men and one American. It was very cutting edge in its day and was popular in both Britain and the United States.
 - b. **Note:** If you used Unit 1, an attentive student might notice that like the Curtain/Ackroyd clip in that unit, this is another clip from over 40 years ago. It may encourage revisiting 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 will be silly enough for your students to enjoy it. Please let us know if we are wrong.)
 - c. You can find a trimmed version at <https://youtu.be/KMsJOy4GzAw>. It eliminates the ending where the sketch wanders into other kinds of clinics and has nothing to do with our lesson.
 - d. After showing the clip ask:

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

Text Study – Pirkei Avot 5:7

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?
4. 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.
5. When each group has finished, have them share their rules. Compare them to the text below.

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, and 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!

Conclusion Activity – How to Argue

1. 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 develop a plan for being constructive arguers.
2. This text comes from wikiHow – which is not connected to Wikipedia. wikiHow is a worldwide collaboration of thousands of people focused on one goal: teaching 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 Web site. The term comes from the word "wikiwiki," which means "fast" in the Hawaiian language.
3. First please have the students read through the list and in their teams answer the question on the page.
4. Then choose one of the following methods.
5. One way to approach this text is to compare the rules we have made with the rules from wikiHow.

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6. Another approach is to look at their own list and the one on the page and try and distill them into a mutually agreed upon list of ten principles.
7. A third method is to simply read through and discuss the ideas on the page. Below you will find elaborations on each of them to help your discussion.

How to Argue

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Arguing Positively

1. **Play fair.** Odds are you know exactly how to push the other person's buttons, but 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, they 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.
 - o You should always be respectful when arguing with another person. Remember, that's what they are: another person. Treat them the way that you would want to be treated. Don't immediately dismiss their ideas just because they don't agree with you. Listen to them.
3. **Attack ideas, not the person they're attached to.** When you argue with someone, you should remember to only attack that person's ideas, not the person themselves. That means you shouldn't call the person stupid for thinking what they think, and you shouldn't devolve to attacks on their 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.

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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 them feel smart.** When you make people feel stupid, that makes them shut down and tends to quickly lead an argument nowhere. Make them feel smart and you'll have an easier time turning the argument in your favor.
2. **Use evidence tailored to the argument and audience.** 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 what kind of person they are, using more logical or more emotional evidence based on what you think they'll respond to best.
3. **Look for logical fallacies.** Pointing out fallacies in their 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:
 - o Watch out for arguments with incorrectly assume that correlation means causation. For example, rates of autism diagnosis increased with the usage of cell phones. Therefore, autism is caused by cellphone usage. Post-hoc fallacies are similar, but are based on the idea that because A preceded B, B was caused by A.
 - o An Argument from Silence fallacy is the idea that because there is no evidence for something, it must not exist. For example, God/germs/evolution/aliens do not exist because we have never physically witnessed them.
 - o Non-Sequiturs are when the conclusion of an argument 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.
4. **Paint them as the hero or victim.** People like to think of themselves as the main character in their life story. Keep them thinking this and charm them into changing their views by carefully tailoring how you talk about the issues.
 - o 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

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misuses their 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 brings your opponent into thinking of the two of you as a single unit with singular interests, rather than driving you apart.
6. **Know when to stop.** Sometimes, someone won't be able to change their mind right in front of you. Sometimes you have to just back off and their mind will change slowly over the course of time, as they think about what you said. Of course, sometimes you just have to persist too. It's a subtle art that you may just have to experiment with.
 - Generally, if someone seems like they're 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 but, 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 you argue with. 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 makes you more sympathetic and less angering to the people you argue against. Explain why you believe the thing that you believe and be willing to admit when an idea is your own, rather than using 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 and when the other person derails, get them back on track. Solving a single disagreement is better than getting nowhere with 20 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 subject changes. 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 rather 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",

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"Whatever, that's my opinion.", etc.), or insist they acknowledge their error.

4. **Explain, explain, explain.** Explain why you have the belief that you have, where you got your information from, and how you come to your conclusions. This can expose misunderstandings but it also forces your opponent to enter your head-space and follow your line of reasoning. It can be an effective way to win people over!
5. **Understand and acknowledge their argument.** When you argue with someone, acknowledge their argument and make sure that you actually understand what they're saying. Clarify with them 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 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.** Both of you feeling the need to have the last word in an argument can quickly lead a conversation into a Bottomless Anger Pit of Doom. Don't go into the Bottomless Anger Pit of Doom. You wouldn't like it there. Just "agree to disagree" and go cool down.
 - o 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 the relationship.

<https://www.wikihow.com/Argue>

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Learners Handout for 8th Grade - Adults



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Bereshit (Genesis) 4:3-8

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“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 Halacha 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

Arguing Positively

1. **Play fair.**
2. **Respect the other person.**

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3. Attack ideas, not the person they're attached to.
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Leader's Guide for 8th Grade - Adults

Big Idea

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

Set Induction

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 their suggestions on the board

Activity – Monty Python's Flying Circus: The Argument Clinic

1. Show the video of Monty Python's Argument clinic
 - a. Before showing the video, you might want to 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 (not completely unlike Saturday Night Live, but completely different) starring a troupe of five British men and one American. It was very cutting edge in its day and was popular in both Britain and the United States.
 - b. **Note:** If you used Unit 1, an attentive student might notice that like the Curtain/Ackroyd clip in that unit, this is another clip from over 40 years ago. It may encourage revisiting 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 will be silly enough for your students to enjoy it. Please let us know if we are wrong.)
 - c. You can find a trimmed version at <https://youtu.be/KMsJOy4GzAw>. It eliminates the ending where the sketch wanders into other kinds of clinics and has nothing to do with our lesson.
 - d. After showing the clip ask:
 - i. What did you think? Let's take this comedy a bit seriously for a moment. Did this add anything to our definition of an argument?

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- ii. Does it suggest any rules we should add to our list?
 - iii. Look at the portion of the script on the handout. How does this impact our understanding of how to have a meaningful argument?
2. Distribute the learner's handout.

Text Study – Pirkei Avot 5:7

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?
4. 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.
5. When each group has finished, have them share their rules. Compare them to the text below.
6. 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, and 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 –Bereshit (Genesis) 4:3-8

1. EXPLAIN:
This is an exercise in midrash. Midrash is (among other things) 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."

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.
2. Let's imagine what the conversation was. 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?
3. Have one pair act out their script. Have the group discuss the performance. If another group has a script they think is substantially different. Continue the process for a few more pairs if they are different.

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4. What do the scripts have in common? Were they simply conversations between two brothers trying to resolve a conflict? Or were they something else?
5. Rashi was one of the greatest and most prolific interpreters of Torah. He lived in Troyes, France in the 11th Century. This is what he imagined 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?”

6. How could the story have ended differently?

Activity – Bava Metzia 59b

NOTE: There is a lovely animated version of the story available from Bimbam at <https://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.) and 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? How do they settle it?
3. Eliezer claims that because he is correct, God will change reality in support of his claims. And reality changes. Each time Rabbi Joshua dismisses the miracle and it stops. Why do you think the miracles each stopped?
4. What does he 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

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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 Eliezer argued his case? Why did he fail?
He did not argue persuasively with logic. He relied on God to verify his answer, not logic. Not 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 understood from Joshua's rebuke that the rabbis truly understand. 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) Eliezer?

Conclusion Activity – How to Argue

1. 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 develop a plan for being constructive arguers.
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2. **Use evidence tailored to the argument and audience.** 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 what kind of person they are, using more logical or more emotional evidence based on what you think they'll respond to best.
3. **Look for logical fallacies.** Pointing out fallacies in their 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:
 - Watch out for arguments with incorrectly assume that correlation means causation. For example, rates of autism diagnosis increased with the usage of cell phones. Therefore, autism is caused by cellphone usage. Post-hoc fallacies are similar, but are based on the idea that because A preceded B, B was caused by A.
 - An Argument from Silence fallacy is the idea that because there is no evidence for something, it must not exist. For example, God/germs/evolution/aliens do not exist because we have never physically witnessed them.
 - Non-Sequiturs are when the conclusion of an argument 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.
4. **Paint them as the hero or victim.** People like to think of themselves as the main character in their life story. Keep them 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 their 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 brings your opponent into thinking of the two of you as a single unit with singular interests, rather than driving you apart.
6. **Know when to stop.** Sometimes, someone won't be able to change their mind right in front of you. Sometimes you have to just back off and their mind will change slowly over the course of time, as they think

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about what you said. Of course, sometimes you just have to persist too. It's a subtle art that you may just have to experiment with.

- Generally, if someone seems like they're 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 but, 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 you argue with. 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 makes you more sympathetic and less angering to the people you argue against. Explain why you believe the thing that you believe and be willing to admit when an idea is your own, rather than using 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 and when the other person derails, get them back on track. Solving a single disagreement is better than getting nowhere with 20 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 subject changes. 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 rather 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 they acknowledge their error.
4. **Explain, explain, explain.** Explain why you have the belief that you have, where you got your information from, and how you come to your conclusions. This can expose misunderstandings but it also forces your opponent to enter your head-space and follow your line of reasoning. It can be an effective way to win people over!
5. **Understand and acknowledge their argument.** When you argue with someone, acknowledge their argument and make sure that you

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- actually understand what they're saying. Clarify with them 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 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.** Both of you feeling the need to have the last word in an argument can quickly lead a conversation into a Bottomless Anger Pit of Doom. Don't go into the Bottomless Anger Pit of Doom. You wouldn't like it there. Just "agree to disagree" and go cool down.
 - o 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 the relationship.

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