

## Using Texts in Arguments

**Read the five excerpts from student papers below.** (You may find it easier to print the excerpts.) While you are reading, pay attention to how each author is using one or more texts to build his or her argument.

### **Some Questions to Consider:**

- Does the text take the place of an argument?
- Is the author relying on expert opinions instead of his or her own interpretation of the evidence?
- Does the text take a backseat to the author's opinion?
- Does the author balance textual evidence with his or her synthesis of the issues?
- Does the use of texts convince you?

### **Sample One:**

The under representation of women in science has been prevalent throughout the ages, but slowly this gender gap is being eradicated. As stated by the author of, "Choices and Successes: Women in Science and Engineering", Gerhard Sonnert, "Women have successfully increased their overall numbers in the science community, but significant patterns of gender segregation have become prominent in the process. It is not clear yet whether an increase in women's participation in a science field lessens gender-related obstacles or rather heightens them". Over the past twenty-five years the number of women in science careers has greatly increased, but data shows that the increase hasn't occurred in a linear pattern, but unevenly across fields (Sonnert). A 1997 study from the National Center for Education Statistics noted that while girls have taken more math and science courses in school there is still a gender gap, especially in physics and computer science (Ballatine, 97). In a 1991 report the National Research Council stated that while women received fifty percent of bachelor's degrees in the life sciences, they received thirty-one percent in computer and information sciences, thirty percent in physical sciences, and fourteen percent in engineering (Rayman and Brett). In 1993, women achieved a notable presence among the doctoral-level scientists in psychology (40.7%) and biological sciences (28.2%), whereas other fields, such as computer and mathematical sciences (11.4%), physics/astronomy (5.1%) and engineering (4.3%) contained relatively few women Ph.D.s (Sonnert). Even within these disciplines, there is often an under representation of women in subspecialties. An example is that among 1995 Ph.D. recipients in physics/astronomy, the astronomy contingent contained 20.2 percent women and "solid state" 15.4 percent, but "elementary particles" only 3.8 percent (Sonnert). Many women who earn computer science degrees are not pursuing careers in academic computer science. Looking at data taken from a 1988-99 Taulbee Survey, out of the 158 computer science and computer engineering departments in the survey, 6.5 percent of the faculty was female and one third of the departments has no female faculty (Frenkel). This data has led to the conclusion that there still is an under representation of women in certain science related careers, such as engineering, physics/astronomy, computer and mathematical sciences.

### **Sample Two:**

Throughout his speech, Conwell never mentions the less-than-honorable practices that many wealthy men has committed. Many of them were capitalists who exploited their workers. In

Samuel Gompers' testimony before the Senate, Gompers discusses the inhumane conditions of many working and living conditions experienced by the poor. The employers of this mass of people paid them next to nothing just to reap profits. When Conwell is told by a young man in one of his audiences that the Bible says "money is the root of all evil" (473), Conwell asks the young man to show him the exact passage in the Bible where this is stated. Conwell is proud to admit that the holy book read "love of money is root of all evil" (473). Conwell begins to argue that rich men can remain wealthy without becoming avaricious, as long as they hold true to their faith. Obviously, Conwell has no real evidence to back up his claim. There is no way for him to actually prove that wealthy men aren't greedy. He just wants to convince the audience to his beliefs.

### **Sample Three:**

The reader begins to detect a certain amount of pride and anger in the nature of Oedipus. "Nothing! You, you scum of the earth, you'd enrage a heart of stone! You won't talk? Nothing moves you? Out with it, once and for all!" Oedipus' flaw helps him fit Aristotle's criteria, because it shows that Oedipus is not preeminently virtuous. Pride drove him to fight with Laius at the crossroads. The resulting anger caused Oedipus to reject the words of the prophet Tiresias. "You shameless, aren't you appalled to start up such a story? You think you can get away with this?" These flaws together offset Oedipus' strong points, and ultimately sealed his fate.

### **Sample Four:**

Like functionalist and symbolic interactionist, the conflict perspective "recognized the diversity in the elderly population: race, class, and gender differences affect elderly in the same way as younger generations" (Schwartz, 329). The difference is that this perspective bases everything on conflicts within our society. In the book *Women and Aging: Transcending the Myths*, by Linda R. Gannon, she mentions the conflict of androcentrism: "an ideology in which males are recognized as the standard or norm of a species and females are acknowledged only as different or other" (Gannon, 2). This conflict in conjunction with ageism can have negative repercussions. Another conflicting issue with the elderly is health care. In the book *The Evolution of the Aging Self*, by Jon Hendricks is addressed. Hendricks states that,

"We want the undivided attention of those from whom we seek help [when we are ill]. However, the health care system acts in almost the opposite way" (Hendricks, 183).

Technology use has increased in the United States resulting in an impersonal health care system. Technology is not the only reason for an impersonal health care system. People in our society have become more impersonal. When Mrs. Hummel went to the hospital to get surgery on her wrist, the medical staff was incredibly impersonal. She said everything was a command. Sign this, take you close off, put this on, stay here, lay down, do not move, etc. The stripping of the self is a significant issue when dealing with health care for the elderly. Hendricks said, "The cost of health care should not include the diminution of one's sense of self, but too often, such is case" (Hendricks, 183). One problem with the conflict perspective is that it overemphasizes the conflicting parts in society, and does not mention how the quality of life has improved for the elderly.

### **Sample Five:**

My attitude is not one of enmity toward the Mexican Revolution. . . But when the people who revolt lack the necessary reactionary power to reconstruct their country, they perish as a nation. . . I am not an enemy of the revolution, but I do look with horror upon its progress, because Mexico is my native land and from the final, supreme test of the revolution may result in the loss of its independence.

With this statement, Francisco Bulnes prefaces *The Whole Truth About Mexico*, a critique of the Mexican Revolution which testifies to the culpability of then-President of the United States Woodrow Wilson in seeking to implant in Mexico an Anglo-Saxon notion of liberty that lacks mandate, logical basis, or understanding of the Mexican people and their history. According to Bulnes, such a program orchestrates the demise of Huerta and nurtures the "de facto anarchy" and despotism of Caranza. To change US policy, Bulnes constructs from this thesis a caustic polemic that is occasionally confusing. Until we understand Bulnes' underlying argument, we will respond to him as merely one more Mexican nationalist and not as the deeply philosophical polemicist that he is. Some have claimed that Bulnes' critical re-thinking of the Porfiriato represented only a crisis of Nineteenth Century Positivism. But that view underestimates his role as a seminal transitional thinker. In fact, we believe that it was an attempt to adjust to an intellectual perspective more attuned to the context of Twentieth Century Modernity. This "Cientifico" perspective coupled with Bulnes' compelling rhetorical skills and intellectual originality distinguish him as perhaps the most interesting among a group of otherwise neglected counter-revolutionary thinkers. He provides an unexpected link between the late Nineteenth Century Cientifico program and the post-Revolutionary, Twentieth Century organization of Mexican political and social life. Bulnes represents a minority of Cientificos willing to engage in self-criticism, seeking innovative ways to confront demands of groups displaced by rapid social changes.

While we may marvel at Bulnes' visionary ability to predict programs later implemented by the "institutionalizing" forces of Revolutionary Mexico, there is also evidence that Bulnes was widely read and debated in the later literature of the 30's and 40's - suggesting that he may have influenced later policy-makers, as well. This paper will clarify three areas of Bulnes' interpretation of the issues of the Mexican Revolution: the agrarian question, the collapse of the Porfiriato, and U.S./Mexican relations to explain how Bulnes elucidated a connection between the Porfiriato and the formation of the modern Mexican state and hinted at ways in which various sectors were able to maximize social and political restructurings to advance Mexican development.

### **Using Texts in Arguments -- Commentary**

Once you've read over the excerpts, take a look at the commentary on the writers' use of texts to construct their arguments.

#### **Commentary on Sample One:**

This writer has done some impressive research. She has compiled a great deal of data on her subject, and wants her readers to know that she's worked hard on collecting evidence. Unfortunately, her paragraph reads like a list of facts. The reader gets a sense that these pieces of information must be important, but the writer does not explicitly discuss how these diverse facts

fit together or why they are significant. This excerpt could be strengthened by working in an explicit sense of how these ideas connect to one another and to the writer's overall argument, rather than leaving these connections up to the reader.

**Commentary on Sample Two:**

This writer does a pretty good job of balancing text and interpretation. He paraphrases parts of Conwell's and Gompers' speeches, and then comments on an inconsistency in Conwell's logic. The paraphrases are well done ~ in particular, the writer does a nice job of summarizing Gompers' central points in a single sentence. This writer could demonstrate the connection between Gompers and Conwell a bit more clearly, but overall, this excerpt is a good balancing act.

**Commentary on Sample Three:**

This writer relies almost exclusively on plot summary and uncited quotations in this excerpt. Rather than using a text to support his interpretation, this writer lets the text of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex dominate the paragraph. He then includes a single, brief line of interpretation at the end of the paragraph. A stronger version of this approach would blend text and commentary. Instead of re-telling the entire story, this stronger version would highlight only the elements that support the writer's argument.

**Commentary on Sample Four:**

This writer follows her assignment carefully ~ she is required to include information on each sociological perspective discussed in class and to apply each perspective to a personal situation. She does adhere to the assignment, but allows the texts she quotes to stand on their own with no interpretation or contextualization. She does not clarify vocabulary, elaborate on the authors' ideas, or explain how these ideas connect to her situation. She relies on the readers to make these leaps of logic on their own. To strengthen this excerpt, the writer could include expanded commentary on how these quotes relate to each other and to the specific context of her situation.

**Commentary on Sample Five:**

This writer employs a very sophisticated method of working text into his argument that may at first be difficult to identify. Except for the opening quote (taken from one of Bulnes'own books), this writer never specifically identifies a text. However, readers can recognize that this writer has done extensive research and reading on his topic. His use of text is sophisticated because it is nearly invisible. The writer synthesizes numerous texts to give readers a general sense of scholarship about his subject. He then asserts his own interpretation of the materials, one that challenges (and claims to correct) the traditional interpretations. This level of textual sophistication takes practice, so don't be discouraged if your writing doesn't look like this.