

SUSAN RABINER & ALFRED FORTUNATO

"Destined to become *the* standard text for serious nonfiction writers for years to come."

—Herbert P. Bix, winner of the Pulitzer Prize



THINKING LIKE YOUR EDITOR

How to Write
Great Serious Nonfiction—
and Get It Published

A Question of Fairness and Other Limits of Argument in Serious Nonfiction

Earlier, I observed that every work of serious nonfiction should have a question it asks and an answer it wants to provide. How you get from question to answer, and whether you do so in a way that sustains reader trust in you as a credible guide to the topic, will depend upon your understanding of “argument.” In common usage, the word conveys a sense of disagreement, of nonphysical altercation. But here we are talking about the process of leading others to accept our positions, attitudes, or even our mere inclinations about issues under discussion.

Despite the proliferation of high school writing courses and the steady growth of such courses in undergraduate and graduate programs, I know of none devoted to the limits of argument in writing. In fact, while argument is a term frequently heard in book publishing, it is not, as far as I can tell, commonly used in academia. You have your research and your interpretation of what you have found, adding up to your thesis.

Where then does argument fit in? Argument is what you use to pull everything together into a self-supporting whole that has meaning and coherence. But it must do more than simply document that this change has occurred or that that relationship exists. Good argument draws readers through the very thought processes that brought the author to the positions he holds. Moreover, as discussed, if you seek commercial publication you must relate your book's findings to an issue of significance to a broad audience. To do so, you must employ argument.

Yet argument is more than a set of expository or rhetorical skills. Like art itself, a successful piece of argument communicates somewhat more than it says explicitly. It stimulates readers to think in new ways not only about the author's topic but about other aspects of their lives as well.

While many tools of authorship help identify you to your readers, how you argue goes furthest in defining you. As you present your interpretation of the research, yours or that of others, especially the way you measure your interpretation alongside past or competing interpretations, you reveal to your readers whether you are someone fully to be trusted, as to both competence and integrity or, at the other end, so aggressive an advocate that the reader must be wary of everything you say.

Yet as important as argument skills are to serious nonfiction authors, I have never come across a writing book that treats argument as a skill the would-be author should work on. Instruction books tend to focus on the creative rather than rational aspects of good writing. But because serious nonfiction authors deal with the communication of ideas rather than emotions, feelings, and sensibilities, they must meet standards very different from those against which most other writing is judged. Fiction, for instance, is an expressive medium; both those who teach it and those who criticize it look to divine from the finished product the creative impulses that

forged the work. Books that come out of investigative journalism seek to awaken outrage; the reaction of the author's next-door neighbor is as good a gauge as any as to the success of the project. A serious nonfiction author, on the other hand, must recognize that his most valued critics will come to judge his work almost solely on whether its major and minor theses are seen as intelligently posed, honestly tested, and credibly defended.

Further, professional reputation is of paramount importance to serious nonfiction authors, who see their careers hitched to how they continue to be perceived by their peers after publication of their work, rather than to how much flash the work itself generates. Even the desire for high sales, surely present with all authors, often takes a back seat in serious nonfiction publishing to protection of the author's reputation as a competent researcher, honest chronicler, and critical thinker.

As I talk about argument with my young authors, many say they associate argument in writing with a type of discourse long out of fashion—the deductively reasoned essay. Argument, I am often told, is what authors from another time employed to win over readers to the validity of their analysis *in the absence of data* to prove it. As one author put it, today one's data *is* one's argument.

Let me put this misconception to rest. While good argument is most effective when built on solid research, a piling on of facts does not an argument make. Absent an intellectual process that carefully marshals and positions these facts in support of a point, even the most thorough accumulation of data will come off as a boring recitation of all the author knows about the subject. This applies as well to books where the research yield is neither numerical nor tabular, such as, for example, most histories and biographies. The most intriguing tale, if told without an attempt to advance some insight larger than the story itself, quickly devolves into a MEGO manuscript (Mine Eyes Glaze Over).

It doesn't matter whether you argue deductively or inductively, if you are trying to persuade someone to accept your take on a subject, you are making an argument. How well you succeed will depend upon the degree to which the argument you make in support of your conclusions is effective. And to be effective, it must be intellectually defensible. We have said that it is your argument that establishes you as a credible guide to the topic. Indeed, since few readers will check your facts, trust in your data as well as in your conclusions will swing on how trustworthy you come off in your argument.

In relating research to argument, think of your work as operating simultaneously on two levels.

In its early pages, your book will focus on presenting material in coherent and, if possible, compelling fashion—in other words, in setting up the story. Woe to the author who belittles the importance of doing this part of the job well.

But not too deep into the book, the serious nonfiction author must begin adding a running commentary on the presentation. Initially, these comments need not be far reaching. They may simply relate the material to some experience or set of ideas more familiar to the reader. Or to the contrary, the author may want to preclude the reader's jumping to an intriguing but inappropriate analogy. Or author musings may be introduced as foreshadowing, to alert the reader to the more important implications of what at this point in the book may seem inconsequential.

As the author gets deeper and deeper into her research, less and less of her time will be used merely placing data before the reader. A reader can digest only so many pages of facts, or straight narrative, before thinking: "Okay, I see the individual pieces of the picture. Now let's go somewhere with all this. What does it all add up to?"

Here demands on the author increase, and she must begin to sketch out a picture of the topic greater than the sum of the facts

presented. She does this in many ways. First, she brings to the forefront those parts of the story that best illuminate the question driving the narrative. Simultaneously, she lets go of other threads that bear less on that question. As she gently begins to reveal her own thinking, by positioning the relevant parts of the research in one way or another, she asks the reader to accept certain interim conclusions that will later become the building blocks of the book's major conclusions.

Over the course of the book, this running commentary, this voice of the author putting his or her stamp on the research and extracting meaning from it, becomes the author's interpretation of the material. How—that is, by what reasoning standards—she introduces these observations, defends them, and allows them to build into a coherent, defensible, and ultimately persuasive statement is the book's argument.

Having defined argument as I have, let me warn once again that the publishing business is quite relaxed in its use of terms. Many editors use the word *argument* to describe the interpretation as well as the process through which the author strives to sell it to the reader. Further, if an editor asks, "What is this book's argument?" he may be looking to hear about its thesis. To minimize confusion, we will use the word *argument* in this chapter solely to describe the reasoning and persuasion processes, and thesis to describe the position the author takes on the book's issues.

Sadly, an editor learns early on that solid research does not always predict a satisfying argument interpreting it. A well-researched book may draw valid interim conclusions, all acceptable to the reader, but put forward an analysis neither intellectually challenging nor satisfying. All that research just to say this? the reader wonders.

Or the book may have the makings of a very interesting thesis, but an argument that fails to persuade readers to accept the significance of the author's thesis. Perhaps the author has stayed so tight to

her research findings because she is still in student mode, afraid to think too independently on the page. Had she risked more, she might have had a very provocative discussion with her readers about the broader implications of what she found. Instead, she stopped short of the challenging statement she could have made. Her book doesn't quite seem worth the read. It is axiomatic that if you want to assume the mantle of authorship, you must simultaneously accept the onus of leadership, and be prepared to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous critics. If in your daily life you are particularly sensitive to the criticism, "Who does he (she) think he (she) is?" you will have to work on a new persona for your role as author.

Far more troubling is the situation in which the argument is only tenuously connected to the very research it should draw upon. The research, while substantial, does little to support the author's thesis. The reader wonders why he is being given all this detail, while simultaneously growing impatient with an argument that has no grounding in the facts presented. Editors refer to this as argument by declaration.

Early on in my career as an editor, I asked a young author to explain just which parts of his research had led him to draw certain conclusions. He responded, defensively, "Why? Don't you agree with them?" I explained that I was not challenging the conclusions, but just wanted to know which parts of his data he saw as supporting them. He told me that he believed—or had been taught in school, I forget which—that if you got your facts straight, after that you could say anything you wanted. Not surprising, little of what he concluded had that sense of having come irresistibly out of the facts he had presented.

Later on in this chapter, I'll talk about what makes an argument both worth the read and persuasive. You may have guessed from the title of this chapter that I judge argument in good part on whether or not the author deals fairly with competing interpretations. This,

more than anything else, will determine whether or not an author has me in his camp.

But we are not quite ready to get into what makes better argument. While I hope to have persuaded you that your data is not your argument, there is no getting around the fact that all argument begins with command of your subject matter. And in today's book world, that generally means with your research.

Indulge me while I make three points that may seem too obvious to warrant inclusion here. Experience has taught me that even the most intelligent and diligent author can lose sight of certain connections between research and argument.

1. Command

The indispensable predicate for effective argument is command of your subject matter. You will not be comfortable putting disparate elements together, distinguishing this from that, generalizing from specifics, and suggesting a new, maybe counterintuitive reading of the data unless you have done your research thoroughly and know what you have.

Many authors decide their interpretation too early in the research process and so narrow their search at the very time they should be opening it to the broadest possible base of information. They close off certain critical leads, often out of fear they will stumble onto support for competing interpretations. Having decided upon their thesis, they don't want to be exposed to information in conflict with what they set out to say. The research is just about providing examples.

Some, despite their best efforts, find themselves face to face with material they wish they had never seen, so they ignore it, hoping it will go away. Spare yourself grief. This is a research problem an author can't hide from. There is a sort of Murphy's Brother's Law in publishing: Whatever You Think You Know That Nobody Else Does

Will Be Revealed and at the Very Moment Most Embarrassing for the Author.

Other authors shut down the research stage prematurely because they find themselves getting tense as their research leads to complexity. Perhaps causality is becoming clouded, or blame broadening. They are afraid of losing themselves, and their thesis, in a maelstrom of conflicting data.

Research is always time consuming and labor intensive, and often frustrating. Fortunately, bookstores offer a number of books that communicate broadly acceptable standards. Moreover, my experience with college students I have taught and my own authors indicates that students, especially graduate students, are given a sounder footing in the uses of research, including established standards for attribution and citation, than in the limits of argument. What I am talking about here is an attitude, not research skills. Think of the transition from data to reader as a funnel, in which the wide end must be at the interface with your data, not the reader. If the other way round—for instance if you limit your sources of information, or reject information early on in the research process, when you should be most open to everything—what comes out of the wide end of the funnel is quickly spotted as diluted, stretched too thin, as having too much breadth for its substance.

This is not to say that you must use everything you find. On the contrary, you must limit yourself to material that bears relevance to the question your book is asking. Including material too peripheral to your story, simply because you found it and don't want it to go to waste, waters down your manuscript. A reviewer who wants to praise an author will often say she has an ear for the telling anecdote. If one anecdote after another tells nothing relevant, that same reviewer will likely say the book suffers from a lack of editing. So when in doubt, leave it out. There is an old Hollywood saying that you can judge a good movie by the quality of what was left on the

cutting room floor. And you can measure the quality of a serious nonfiction book by the amount of good stuff that never made it from research to final book. Remember, however, the selection or rejection must be based on relevance to the issue, not on whether the data supports your own thesis.

Let me mention one other problem in regard to research. Some authors minimize the research period to maximize the time they leave themselves for writing, a more intimidating task for many. After all, writing skill, our culture has taught us, says something large about our very core, while research is nerd work. When such authors sit down to write their book and can't shape their material into a cohesive and coherent whole, their worst fear seems to have come true—that they do not have the creative writing skills to pull off the book. The more likely problem is that they lack either command of their material or confidence that their data truly and irrefutably supports their thesis. The computer people have their own expression for this: Garbage in, garbage out. No program can yield results more precise or reliable than the data that's plugged in. And your argument can be no stronger than the research upon which it is founded. Spend the time to do this part of your job properly.

You can't write your way out of a research problem that results in a skimpy, pat, or vulnerable interpretation. The clear solution is to go back and do more research. But human nature being what it is, most authors find it painfully daunting to go back to square one, especially with a manuscript delivery date marked on their calendar. So they end up struggling to protect a vulnerable interpretation.

Putting your data before the reader always threatens your control of it, but you cannot order your reader to view the data only in ways that support your thesis. It's like throwing a pebble out on a pond. The ripples go out in all directions, to all shores. You cannot simply say, "Follow only the ripple going to the north shore, because that's the only one that's important." Only a thorough command of your

subject matter allows you to address those silent questions your reader will have about the other ripples.

What do you do when you get into this kind of trouble? First admit to yourself what has happened. Then let your editor and agent know you will not be able to deliver your manuscript on time and need an extension. A first extension on your contract of six months to a year is virtually never a problem. And some books delivered much later than that are still welcomed by their editors and published well. While I certainly would not advocate starting out with this escape hatch in mind, if you find yourself scrambling for supporting facts when you thought you were ready to write, remember that all you can pull out of a skimpy research hat is a scrawny rabbit.

2. All your conclusions must come out of the facts you make available to the reader on the page.

For every conclusion there must be a trail of facts available in the text. I mean on the page, capable of being independently evaluated by the reader. Why do I mention this problem? It comes about in one of two situations.

Some inexperienced writers, nervous that their readers will put down their book if they don't say something provocative in the first fifty pages, will attempt too-broad generalizations well before they have established a factual predicate for them. In essence, they let their argument run ahead of their facts.

As I suggested, your early chapters will be largely factual or narrative. Yes, you'll have small comments to make—interim observations giving context, distinguishing one thing from another—but don't worry if you haven't yet said anything novel or profound. Your readers will be satisfied with you as a guide to the topic if you use these early chapters to get them up to speed on the basics of the topic. In Chapter 7, I'll show you how to write an introduction that relieves you of pressure to impress your readers early on, by tipping

them off to the fact that an interesting and significant argument awaits them if they patiently allow you do the necessary groundwork.

A second situation in which conclusions seem to rest on weak foundations results from an author's failure to respect his readers as his equals. In this case, I'm not talking about authors who make pronouncements as if their saying so makes it so, that is, argue by declaration, but about authors who have all the research needed to back up what they have to say but just don't have it on the page. As one author responded when I explained this to him, "Don't authors have a right to be trusted? After all, I've spent twenty years studying this topic."

The answer is no. What you say is only as good as the facts and analysis you present to support it. While your reader may be willing to cut a serious author some slack, he still has a right to test what you say against his own life experiences and against the facts you put before him.

Let me take this one step further. This same obligation to present facts comes into play when you quote others. Borrowing a respected authority's credibility to support your position can be useful or counterproductive, depending on how it is done. If I come across the line "John Fielding, the eminent epidemiologist, agrees that business causes 90 percent of all pollution problems in the United States," I am no more convinced that business causes 90 percent of all pollution problems than I was before you brought in Fielding. But if you were to write: "John Fielding, the eminent epidemiologist, conducted a twenty-year study in which he discovered that the vast majority of pollutants in the water, air, and soil in the period from 1965 to 1985 could be traced to perfectly legal dumping by industry of previously unidentified contaminants," I am much more willing to accept this information as supporting your position. Leaving out your own facts, or the facts upon which those you cite came to their conclusions, is asking your reader to suspend his own judgment and just nod in agreement with whatever you put before

him. And that gives him good reason to put your book down. Keep in mind that the excitement of reading nonfiction lies in retracing with the author the trail that brought the author to his conclusions.

3. Your research is trying to tell you where your argument lies. You just have to learn to listen to it.

There is an old expression among doctors who train medical students in diagnosis: “The patient is trying to tell you what’s wrong with him. You just have to shut up and listen.” A similar statement may be made about research. It is trying to give you a picture of what really happened, so that you can tell that story in a more meaningful way. But if you confront it, challenge it, twist and distort it, instead of listening, you will never hear its full message.

During the research stage, some authors, especially those who have their thesis well established early on, may be disappointed with what the data seems to be telling them. Maybe the answer to their book’s question is not what they presumed it would be. Or the answer the data supports will not likely change the nature of the debate on their topic all that much. But at least they know what the research supports and what it does not. One option here is to change the book’s question to one that the data can answer.

It does happen that an author’s research neither reinforces old interpretations nor openly calls out for a new interpretation. Yes, it has led to a treasure trove of great details, vivid scenes, sharper characters, a much clearer sense of the tensions and personalities of the period, or a better understanding of the forces at play during a certain period. But if you ask such an author what it all adds up to, you may get a long helpless stare. “What *does* it all add up to?” one author asked me. Some don’t even realize that the research has to add up to something. “Can’t I just tell a story, especially if it’s an interesting one?” another author asked me. By now I hope all of you know the answer to that question.

Here is an example of someone pulling a very interesting interpretation out of a story that could easily have been presented as a narrow fight between two competing scientists of another time.

In *Boltzmann's Atom*, the author, David Lindley, quickly summarizes what his research revealed about the intellectual conflict between the protagonist Boltzmann, a scientist who believed that all matter was made up of atoms, and his nemesis, a scientist named Mach, who argued that until atoms were verified, that is, until their existence could be proved, science was better off sticking to what it could measure directly.

In his introduction, the author informs us that although the story's characters were preoccupied with atoms, he, the author, came to see early on that the debate between Boltzmann and Mach was less about atoms themselves and more about a new way of doing science. Essentially, the Boltzmann-Mach conflict was over whether or not scientists, whose task it is to gather hard evidence, can get a better handle on how the world works by testing possible mechanisms against informed but nonetheless speculative theories (in this case, the atomic theory of matter). In its jacket flap copy, the publisher went one step further, referring to this as the story of "the man who single-handedly invented twentieth-century theoretical physics."

It is much easier to listen to your research when it describes a conflict of another time and place. It is more difficult when we are talking about our own time and its debates, always highly colored by our own passions. Later on, we will talk about the pitfalls to avoid in those situations.

Let's say that instead of trying to ground your argument in your research, you decide to get very pragmatic and shortcut the process. Perhaps you say to yourself, I went into this topic because I believed that in the end I would be able to prove that X is really responsible for . . . long-term poverty, or the failure of the U.S. to unseat Saddam Hussein, or that all politicians lie. And I still believe that, and that's

the basis on which I am going to write this book. Or you say to yourself that from the beginning you were sure that the guilty people in your story are A, B, and C, and even if I can't really "prove" it, that's how I am going to write the story because my gut instinct tells me that's true and the rest is pettifoggery. I'll just pull out of my research enough stories and some data to write the book I know should be written, focusing on the data that supports what I know to be true. Following the murder trial of O. J. Simpson an embarrassing glut of such books managed to get into print. Many of these books were motivated by a gut knowledge that Simpson was guilty, and that his acquittal was an outrage. It should not be surprising, then, that in most of these books each and every piece of data presented supported the starting presumption.

This type of thesis-driven, rather than data-driven, manuscript comes with strong conclusions but weak argument, for argument is the data-arraying process that makes your conclusions inevitable. Let me distinguish between thesis-driven and data-driven books another way. In the latter, it is the totality of the data, not every scrap of data, that argues for the author's thesis. There is a sense of the argument confirming a broad natural thrust of the research. But in a thesis-driven book, the impression is of isolated bits of evidence being brought in only if and when they support the author's conclusions. The sole reason the author has chosen facts for inclusion is that they lend themselves nicely to a supporting role in this preordained interpretation of the material. A subtle distinction, maybe, but one that determines just which kind of reader will find your book tolerable and which won't.

Writing Argument

Now, surely, it is time to talk about argument itself.

Wherever most of us learn to argue, little in our formal educations alerts us to the possibility that argument habits we picked up

informally may harm our writing. And that's an important part of the problem. I'd guess that the earliest exposure most of us had to argument came around the dining room table, as we observed our parents trying to resolve their conflicts with each other and with us, and as we, in imitation, tried to resolve conflicts with our annoying siblings.

Unfortunately, too many who have learned to argue around the house come to assume that contention and its cousin contentiousness are the natural processes of every argument. Worse, if our parents were below-the-belt arguers who said terrible things to each other and to each of us in the heat of family arguments, there's a strong probability that we tend whenever our ideas are challenged to reach for an "ad hominem" retort, that is, an attack not on the other person's facts or argument but on some personal vulnerability unrelated to what is being argued. If you grew up in this type of argumentative household, the very idea of juxtaposing "reasoned" with "argument" may seem lame, if not oxymoronic. Once you become an adult, argument crafted with just one goal in mind—winning—becomes the standard. Good argument techniques are those that win for us, allow us to have our way, get others to accept a resolution of a conflict that favors us. Or through any means, honest or dishonest, to win others over to our position on a current controversy.

I must concede a nasty fact about publishing: Every time a hot political controversy breaks into the news—confirmation of Clarence Thomas, charter schools or school vouchers, free speech versus decency advocates—commercial publishing dashes toward a certain type of book in which the author provides little new information or insight, but says precisely what everyone on one side of the controversy is already saying. Just about always, the author says it more aggressively, in ways that wound leading advocates for the opposing side. These books are often best sellers, possibly because buying such books becomes a statement of support for the cause.

Unfortunately, we are a stubborn species, highly evolved to resist

having our minds changed. It has been said that there is no pain like that caused by a new idea. This may explain why too often those books that have the greatest appeal with the general public are not those that cause a reader to rethink his position but those that arm him for his next discussion on a contentious issue in the news—with colleagues, intellectual friends, or just Uncle Ned. But there is a price such a reader pays. If we are open only to material that reinforces our prejudices, our circle of friends soon narrows to include only like-minded people, with the other side's position less and less likely to be seen as having any basis in rationality. I worked with an editor at a very distinguished publishing house who regularly referred to the “good guys” and the “bad guys.” We all knew precisely which side was which in any controversy.

So what's wrong with this type of argument, argument that reinforces with more apt phrases the favored side's position, while undermining by any effective means the position of the other side? Isn't that just what the adversary system is all about? Getting at the truth by allowing both sides to lie through their teeth? If it works for the legal system, what's wrong with applying such a successful model to public discourse?

The answer is nothing and everything. If winning is most important to you, nothing I say here will likely change your mind. Our society, however, is undermined when we fail to honor reasoned argument in public discourse. When we don't rely on it to inform the opinions of our citizenry, and thereby effect reasonable public policies that have reasonable prospects for success, the commonweal is ill served. An us-against-them spirit leads us to strive to place in positions of power or influence people who share our attitudes and tastes (or, if you like, read prejudices) and expect them to promulgate policies that advance only those goals that find favor within our own referent group. A person I know well, and love dearly, is fond of saying that *homo sapiens* is not a thinking animal, that the “sapiens” in his name derives from the Latin *sapere*, which means “to know,” not “to think.”

This taste for aggressive advocacy is reflected in the growth and influence of op-ed pages in most newspapers, and the increased presence on cable TV of confrontational political shows such as CNN's *Crossfire*. These shows do so much better in their ratings than say, PBS's *NewsHour*, and C-Span programming, which are generally more measured discussions, not marked by sneer, scream, and thrust.

What is my point in all this? That those who regularly buy and read serious nonfiction books are not a cross-section of the American public and tend to be much more interested in reasoned analysis. Authors who want to reach this market must recognize this.

Aside from the fact that some subsets of the general population have special attitudes toward fair argument, we must also take into account that all of us read with a special awareness of where we find the material we are reading. I have called this the "credibility calculus." To explain, let me use as an example the typical daily newspaper. We read the front pages of a newspaper expecting that the facts as known to the reporter will be set down relatively undistorted, with representatives of both sides of an issue given an opportunity to comment, the reporter acting as a sort of moderator. While television, with its immediacy, has become the medium the public turns to first for hard news, leading newspapers to provide much more magazinelike analysis on its news pages than they once did, most readers still assume (hope?) that what they read on the news pages has been put together with the aim of providing the complete factual story.

Not so when we read editorials. Here we adjust our credibility calculus with no conscious effort, assuming that we are being fed a point of view, though in editorials we expect to find a sagacious, almost paternal voice, rather than a strident advocacy. It is in a newspaper's op-eds that we expect, and arm ourselves against, attempts to bring us around, by any means possible, to the author's position. Further down the credibility line are the paper's advertisements, which we trust least and read

most suspiciously. Ironically, of all the newspaper's material, only here are consumer protections against direct misrepresentation codified.

I have long believed that the absence of these lines of separation in television news reporting contributes powerfully to the lack of public confidence in television news. While some local stations run legends across the bottom of the screen identifying station-management editorials, no distinction is made between hard news reports and the advocacy pieces that network news divisions produce. For all the good that shows like *60 Minutes* do—and I can think of many individual shows that exposed and through their influence reversed hideous injustices—nothing warns viewers that they are watching not a hard news show but rather a presentation strongly edited to favor one particular understanding of the conflict chronicled. This is not to say that the producers did not come to the issue with an open mind, but only that once they determined where justice lay, the show was crafted to advance that position.

This lack of a clear division of standards between straight news and what might be called electronic op-eds was illustrated several years ago in the celebrated libel case brought by General William Westmoreland against CBS over a piece called “The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception.” While CBS's own internal investigation found the show's producer had violated many of the network's own guidelines for the presentation of news stories, CBS stood behind the show's conclusions as reasonable inferences to be drawn from the material the producers had to work with.*

As a demonstration of how far support for no-holds-barred

* The case ended anticlimactically, when General Westmoreland settled for a vague and meaningless statement of regret. Under *Times v. Sullivan*, the case that federalized libel law, a public figure, which the general surely was, cannot prevail as plaintiff unless he proves malice, defined for the purpose of libel law as a reckless disregard not of fair play but of the truth as the author understands it to be. Thus, CBS did not have to demonstrate that the show's producer was fair but only that wherever he tipped the scales he did so to convince others of a truth in which he believed.

advocacy has taken us, let me mention another settled lawsuit and press reaction to the settlement.

A network produced a show charging that high-level officers in one of the tobacco companies knew of the addictive nature of nicotine and so were disingenuous when they argued that their customers were only consumers who consciously decided to accept the health risks of smoking in exchange for the pleasure it provided. Unfortunately, the show included the charge that the company “spiked” their product with nicotine. The company sued.

This case too was settled before it came to trial, with the network retracting only the one statement that the tobacco company had “spiked” its cigarettes with nicotine. The network withdrew none of its many other serious charges, for instance, that the tobacco companies favored tobacco strains that had more nicotine rather than less.

But surprising to me, the press strongly condemned the network for having caved in under the pressure of a lawsuit, even though the retraction dealt with only one of the many charges the show had made. Naturally, we don’t want criticism of tobacco companies, or for that matter of any corporation, to be chilled by the threat of lawsuits. But do we really want to live in a world where someone who has said something that is untrue cannot with dignity correct the error without being accused of faintheartedness or fecklessness to a just cause?

Answering charges of unfair coverage, many in the media respond that no one can be neutral about important matters that have an impact on all of us. We all come to our work, whatever it is, with our own peculiar set of biases, programmed into us by all we have experienced throughout our lives, including both everything done to us and everything we have done to others. As true as this response rings, it does not address the charge. *Fairness in argument does not require that we purge ourselves of every emotion the issue being treated has ever provoked in us.* No matter how strongly we hold certain posi-

tions, we can present facts and analysis fairly, provided only that we come to the debate with a set of standards for fairness formulated before we are in the thick of it and are keenly aware of just which standards serve which side of the debate.

Often the unfairness will not even derive from a bias but from a belief that assuming capricious discretionary power is part of the job. An overly aggressive writer will often say that both sides are complaining, so he must be doing a good job. This is not necessarily true. Some judges are accused of being pro prosecution and others of being pro defendant, but it is with the worst judges, not the best, that criticism comes from every direction. If you go to a ball game and both sides are railing against the umpire, he is much more likely doing a bad job than a good job.

The broad acceptance of all this aggressive advocacy in the press causes a spillover into serious book publishing; I often receive proposals that would do honor only to a cross-examining attorney. And yet, whenever I have talked with people about this book, describing its contents, I am surprised at the number of people who have commented that the chapter of greatest interest to them is the one on argument. Or as one person said to me, “I would love to be able to read an op-editorial in the *New York Times* or a long article in a magazine such as *Commentary* or the *New York Review of Books* and have some better basis for knowing if this person has fairly earned my concurrence.” So in full recognition of the reality that I may be vainly trying to restore a time and place forever gone, I will devote the rest of this chapter to rules that have guided me in working with authors over twenty-five years. I come with an advantage over most editors in that I entered publishing at a time when argument-based books were still being published and spent thirteen of those twenty-five years in university press publishing, where argument-based books are still common.

Readers of book-length serious nonfiction factor into their

credibility calculus an expectation of fairness far greater than they expect to find elsewhere. A sort of contract is presumed—the author does not have to hold the reader by the lapels in fear of losing him to an adjacent story, as he does in a newspaper story or television piece, and in exchange the author promises to lay out the story in whatever time it takes to get it fully right and in relevant context.

Let's establish that fairness does not require that you write a book such as President Truman's proverbial two-handed economist might write: "On the one hand this, but on the other that." On the contrary, I will never forget a sales conference in which a new editor was presenting his first book to the sales force, proudly telling them it was the most evenhanded, nonpartisan presentation of the facts he had ever read. He thought he was praising the book. He was actually pronouncing its death sentence. "That's a book we can't sell," the head of the sales force responded politely.

Your editor, booksellers, reviewers, and readers all want a book that takes a position. And argues it with gusto. Few readers will shy from a book that in making a reasoned argument is also funny, contrarian, and perhaps downright ornery in arguing its position. Still, a serious nonfiction author can't get around certain rules of fairness without paying a price.

If you don't make the best case for the other side's position, you will sorely challenge your best readers to do so.

Let's say you are writing about the 2000 presidential election and want to make an argument that it was proper or not proper to count hanging chads. In an op-ed, you can get away with arguing that unless you do, "all the votes weren't counted," end of discussion. But if you write a book about this moment in American political history, you want that book to stand as more than a partisan, heat-of-the-moment bit of spin. That means you must present the other side's position at its best—not its weakest. It has been said that every man

is rational unto himself, and it's an important part of your job to determine and discuss fairly the rationale of both sides. It's not enough to say the other side takes a position because that position serves its ends, because your reader will say "Yes, as with you." If after you've presented to your readers the best, most reasonable case for why hanging chads should *not* have been counted, you continue to believe they *should have* been counted, go ahead and make your argument, as passionately and as powerfully as you can, demonstrating that the reasons for counting them overwhelm the reasons for not doing so.

Again, fairness is determined not by your own lack of a position but by the integrity and respect with which you deal with the other side's position. It is always so tempting to undercut the other side, or the competing interpretation, by presenting a weak case for that position. But your contract with your reader requires that you make the *best* case possible for the side you don't believe in.

Meeting this responsibility does more than protect your credibility with your reader. It also helps protect against a reviewer's criticism that you have overlooked some important part of the picture. When the coauthor of this book taught our children to play chess, he used to tell them they weren't to make a move until they had figured out, and written down, the other side's very best response to the move they intended to make. To help them develop this mind-set, he would have them play each other with each at the wrong side of the board. If our daughter were playing white, she'd have the black pieces in front of her and our son the white in front of him. This gave each a sharper picture of the other side's rationale. And you should do the same. Get up, in your mind's eye, and go around and take a look at the debate from the other side of the board.

Failure to keep reminding yourself of the other side's rationale can lead to being carried along by your passion to the point where you polarize yourself and lose even the reader who came to your book as an ally. While I was writing this chapter, I came across a

review of a book whose thesis is that serious damage is done to medicine by attempts to have it address political issues, for example, that women are underrepresented in trials for new treatments; that diseases that affect primarily men are better funded than those affecting primarily women; and that career opportunities as physicians and investigators are far less plentiful for women than for men. The author was fortunate in the reviewer she drew. Indeed, the review opens with a description of an incident in which the reviewer himself, acting as a member of a foundation board, had cast the sole vote against a grant for a program that promised to redress the built-in anti-women bias that pervades medical practice. As we would expect, the review is generally positive, yet toward the end of it we find this:

Sometimes [the author's] enthusiasm for her subject gets the better of her, and she forgets—or prefers not to remember—that certain of the issues with which she deals would better be painted in shades of gray. . . . [H]er descriptions of biological differences in disease patterns read like feeble protests in the face of the experience of anyone who has trained in the teaching divisions of a large hospital. . . .*

Sadly, to make her point that too much focus on political goals might be compromising the independence of medical research, the author did not have to trivialize the very important concerns that had led others to seek redress.

Also troubling is the work of a scholar who puts all the facts on the page fairly, honestly, and even forcefully, and yet fails to bring his

*The review “Indoctrinology” appeared in the *New Republic*, February 19, 2001, p. 34. The review itself, especially in its opening, is a fine example of an author with a strongly held position struggling to put the position he opposes in its best light. Read it and see if this treatment doesn’t increase the reviewer’s credibility with you.

audience on board, not because he is insufficiently persuasive but because he is too dogged. Every piece of data is given a loyalty test. Those that do not serve the author's thesis are dismissed as worthless. In his argument he is so unwilling to concede anything to the other side, so tendentious, so relentlessly "on message," that after a couple of chapters the reader loses interest—or patience.

There is yet another reason you should be looking to strengthen the side you consider the weaker side, a reason that has little to do with fairness. I was recently working with an author whose historical manuscript dealt with the resistance of establishment scientists, under the aegis of the church, to certain new scientific speculations. The danger here was in dismissing as spineless toadies all scientists of that time, other than the author's hero. Yes, the establishment scientists had made a dishonest bargain with religious orthodoxy, which allowed them a certain freedom of inquiry as long as they respected an outer boundary determined by religious authority. But done as a battle between the good guys and the bad guys, the story is a hard write. A much better narrative is of scientists who late in life and career had to face the truth about the price they had paid for respecting that religious boundary, intelligent and learned people with a lifetime of professional and emotional investment in theories they knew in their heads, not their hearts, would soon be consigned to the dustbin of history.

We have said many times that serious nonfiction writing differs in substantive ways from fiction. But in at least two ways they are alike. The first is in the power of narrative tension to engage readers in all writing. This we will discuss in the following chapter. The second involves conflict as an ingredient essential for success. Real conflict, not phony-baloney conflict. The genius of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is that the playwright's clear favorite is Brutus, who in the first act plunges a dagger into his best friend's side. If in fiction or drama the good guys are all good and the bad guys all bad, we dismiss the

work as melodrama. If you don't create full-dimensional conflict in your nonfiction you run the risk of having it dismissed as polemic.

What happens when seeking out the best case for the other side starts eroding your commitment to your position? Occasionally, some piece of evidence you find so strengthens a competing interpretation that it threatens to undermine your confidence in your own thesis. When this occurs, you have two good options and a bad one. The first good one, of course, is to go back and reexamine the thesis. Better to do it yourself than have reviewers force that course on you. But a good thesis will survive a troubling piece of data. Thus, the second good option: Admit to your reader that you have not been able to accommodate this troubling piece of data fully within your overall interpretation and that you must leave the tension to another scholar or investigator to resolve. Serious readers understand that we do not live in a perfectly consistent world and appreciate such candor on the part of an author.

The bad option is forcing a fit with argumentative gymnastics. Indeed, some books seem to have a sense about them of the author relentlessly beating back challenges, on every page, in every chapter. These are unpleasant reads. If the full picture supports your thesis, minor inconsistencies can actually enrich your book.

The Uniform Applicability of Standards Rule.

Set reasonable standards against which to evaluate whatever it is you are treating. Then remember that those standards must be uniformly applied. What do I mean by that?

I went to college during the late sixties and was involved in my share of protests—free speech, women's rights, the struggle for racial equality. But unlike most of my friends, I had trouble committing myself on whether or not the United States belonged in Vietnam. By what standards was a nation ever justified in going to war? My father had been in the army in World War II; like so many of his genera-

tion he had willingly if not gladly allowed himself to be shipped overseas to save the world for democracy. What was the difference here? Was it heroic to protect democracy against fascism but not against communism? Some said that Vietnam was none of our business. Was that because in World War II we were primarily saving Europeans and in Vietnam those of another race? It became almost mantra to say that American servicemen were eight thousand miles away in a war they could not win. When had Mind Your Own Business become a liberal position? And when had a guarantee of victory become a prerequisite for trying? Such attitudes seemed more consistent with a conservative worldview than with an enlightened liberal view. It was said that the leaders of South Vietnam, our ally, were corrupt and undemocratic. Yet our World War II allies had been Joseph Stalin, one of the century's three most prolific mass murderers, and Winston Churchill, who proclaimed that he had not become prime minister to preside over the dissolution of the British Empire. The most persuasive argument against U.S. involvement held that we were destroying a country to save it from communism, but even here an inconsistency with standards we had applied to World War II jumped out. We had shelled France to liberate it, and even our enemies, Germany and Japan, whom we had bombed savagely, were now better off for having had their totalitarian regimes defeated.

It's not that the two wars could not have been distinguished—they surely could have been—but just that no one of the time was making an attempt to do so. Years later, by which time I was in university press publishing, I regularly received manuscripts essentially trying to argue a “just” war theory. In other words, they sought to identify overarching standards for when nations could morally go to war. It was comforting to know that others were troubled by the contradictions that had troubled me.

Another issue of controversy involving shifting standards, this one

also with echoes from the past, involves free trade, including debates on NAFTA and the WTO. One side argues that opening the American market to goods manufactured under regulations very different from those that govern American manufacture threatens to weaken environmental and workplace protections, here and abroad. The other side holds that free trade has driven a great worldwide prosperity, that globalized trade, with multinational companies free to move their plants across national borders, creates broad-based wealth that trickles down to those within even the lowest economic strata.

You can take either side in the debate, but do recognize that if you argue that workers in developing countries are happy to have jobs paying three dollars a day, you risk having many of your arguments echo those made by opponents of workplace reform in the early twentieth century. In effect, you will be arguing that in the absence of unions and government regulation, workers considered fungible can effectively negotiate wages and working conditions with huge, deep-pocketed corporations. This position abandons the hard-won and broadly cherished notion that workers have a right to bargain collectively and that government has a responsibility to set minimum wages and regulate workplace safety standards. You certainly can set out those factors you believe distinguish this time from that earlier time, but to protect your credibility you must take cognizance of this history. What you cannot do is ignore it as if it were irrelevant to the debate.

And finally, as I go over this chapter one last time before turning it in, a controversy is raging over pardons granted by President Clinton in the last hours of his presidency. While “Everyone does it” has never been a defense, not with your mother and not in any court of law, critics of the former president have a responsibility, and defenders a right, to put the matter in context by comparing Mr. Clinton’s pardons with those issued by other presidents.

The difference between telling a lie and not telling the entire story is technical only.

An author invites trouble when what he writes is couched in such a way that those who know less than he does about the topic—presumably a heck of a lot of his readers—will come to an erroneous conclusion. Let me give you an example.

Recently I was sent a query for representation that included an analysis of the Supreme Court ruling that decided the 2000 presidential election. Within a couple of paragraphs I knew that this author's proposal had to be read skeptically, if I continued to read it at all. Here's why.

The opening paragraph stated that “by a 5–4 vote the conservative majority on the Court decided the election in favor of the conservative Mr. Bush.” The author went on to report, accurately, that “these five justices took it on themselves to decree that the recount plan ordered by the Florida State Supreme Court was violative of the equal protection provisions of the U.S. Constitution, and that there was no time left to bring it into conformity.”

I was concerned not by what the author said—true enough, if read carefully—but by what he coyly tried to get his readers to believe that was not true.

Those of you who followed the case closely know that seven justices, not five, found the state-wide recount ordered by the Florida Supreme Court unconstitutional. The five conservatives lost the support of their two more liberal colleagues in also deciding that there was no time for the Florida Supreme Court to devise a new recount plan that would be constitutional. So it may fairly be said that the five conservative justices in effect decided the election. But a reader would not know that the decision to overturn the Florida Supreme Court recount as it had been proceeding was 7–2 and not 5–4.

Now read the author's words again: “these five [conservative] justices took it on themselves to decree that the recount plan ordered

by the Florida State Supreme Court was violative of the equal protection provisions of the U.S. Constitution, and that there was no time left to bring it into conformity.” While true that the five conservatives came to both findings, the sentence is cast so as to create the impression that it was five, not seven, justices who reached the first finding, as well as the second.

Why did this disturb me? I was aware that there were several divisions in the Court’s opinions, not all of them 5–4. Thus alerted, I was only momentarily put at a disadvantage by the author’s failure to put all the information on the table. But what happens when this author gets into areas I know less about? Why should I trust that he will not do the same again and again, in situations where my ignorance might leave me vulnerable to such language machinations? It will not be easy to discover precisely when the author is engaging in such practices, because nothing in his presentation jumps out as factually untrue. It’s just not the whole story. Here’s a harsh but useful rule to follow: Any attempt to cause others to believe something you know to be untrue is a lie, no matter how defensible the words you have chosen.

Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.

Don’t let your *Eureka!* reaction over the discovery of some bit of new information that seems to be dispositive in your favor seduce you into abandoning the skepticism with which you should view any new information. As with most things in life, if it sounds too good to be true, it likely is. One critic of President Clinton devoted several articles and a book to trying to convince America that there was something fishy about the death of Vince Foster and the investigations that concluded it had been a suicide. The pistol that killed Foster, went one of the author’s arguments, was found in his right hand, positioned close to his head. This was unnatural, the author argued. Recoil from the shot should have thrown the hand well away from the firing point.

Then came the Trojan Horse. Somebody told the author that Foster was left-handed. Eureka! Triumphant, the author went into print with the information, without the double or triple checking that such an important find warranted. When it turned out that Foster was in fact right-handed, every comment on the author's work thereafter featured the gaffe; inevitably the author's credibility was destroyed.

Here's another example. Several years ago I received a manuscript taking the position that the United States should not have dropped the atom bomb on Japan, a not unreasonable position to argue. As I read into the proposal, the author averred that the U.S. military thought that an invasion of Japan would cost only thirty thousand American casualties. No doubt some military person somewhere had written the words that were the basis for this statement. But I am just as sure that other military people produced other, much higher estimates, and that the author chose to use the thirty-thousand figure because it so well supported his position. However, those who know about the Pacific War, and about Japanese tenacity in defending Iwo Jima and Okinawa, inflicting casualties nearly that high in the defense of these off-shore islands, would find it incredible that conquest of Japan's home islands could be managed as cheaply. In effect, the statement was what Churchill once described as "the thirteenth chime which cast doubt on all that had preceded it." Sadly, questioning the propriety of dropping an atom bomb on unsuspecting civilian populations did not require this pragmatic calculation.

Do not assume that the presumptions and biases of your own informational network are universally shared.

Especially if you are in academia or the communications business, two sectors from which come many serious nonfiction authors, failure to observe this caveat can cause you to sound like an arrogant elitist to those outside your network and like a panderer to those within it. During the 1980s, I seemed to receive a proposal a week that

opened with the words, “In this age of Reaganomics. . .” I’m not sure just which message each author was trying to convey, but whenever I saw the line I heard: “I’m in the smart group, just like you.”

You must win a reader over to your presumptions. Only after you have him on board with your givens can you try to take him to the next step. Many years ago, a heated clash broke out at a publishing panel between a panelist and a member of the audience over the issue of American and Chinese societies. When one of the two referred to the United States as an undemocratic society, the other expressed disbelief that his interlocutor could possibly consider the People’s Republic of China more democratic. The debate quickly deteriorated into a contest in exasperation, neither side able to tolerate the other’s position on this one point. It eventually became clear that the problem was one of presumptions. The person defending China defined democracy as serving the people, Lincoln’s “for the people,” while the one defending the American system saw the defining characteristic of democracy as free elections, Lincoln’s, “by the people.” Because the two were talking past each other, the confrontation went on and on, without making any progress. If each had understood the presumptions of the other regarding how democracy should be defined, a productive discussion might have ensued. The one could have argued that America’s free elections were seriously distorted by corporate influence in the media and on both major parties, and the other that China’s continuing poverty fifty years into communist rule illustrated how little the system had produced “for the people.” The moral: Establish your givens and do your best to win concurrence on them before attempting to build on them.

Anticipate other possible interpretations for every piece of your data.

Take this as a reminder only. The validity of this rule should be self-evident. A good proposal I saw recently cited a government-funded study suggesting that kids who listened to classical music

ended up with higher IQs, which the author saw as supporting a nurture-over-nature point he was trying to make. As soon as I raised the alternative explanation with him, that he could have the direction of causality reversed, he smiled sheepishly and promised he'd strike it.

Don't try settling a point by citing Webster's dictionary.

A dictionary is a chronicler of usage, not an arbiter. One author went a step further and cited "the first usage in the OED." The OED is "based on historical principles," meaning the first listed meaning of an entry is that implied by context in the earliest found usage, not the most important meaning.

The post hoc, ergo propter hoc fallacy.

This means, literally, "After this, therefore on account of this." It describes the faulty logic in attributing causation based solely on the chronological arrangement of events. Since B followed A, it was caused by A. Let's face it. We all, especially historians, use chronological sequencing to suggest a picture of what or who caused what and even, at times, why. "King John ascended the throne in 1350, accounting for the remarkable increase in the nation's prosperity in the latter half of the fourteenth century." The important thing to remember is that the temporal arrangement of events can suggest a causal relationship, but never prove it. Let your analysis concede this. Best of all is finding and citing the mechanism of causation.

Analogy.

Here again, the problem is that we try to make an argument device do too much. Analogies can be effective when used to suggest a relationship that we believe exists in an issue under discussion by reference to a well-recognized and broadly conceded relationship. But analogies can be illustrative only, and prove nothing. Analogies also come with a special caveat: They are extremely vulnerable to

criticism if they reach for extremes, especially when they use as examples villains of history. For instance:

The relationship between Smith and Jones was odd. It resembled the relationship between that historical odd couple, Hitler and Mussolini, in that the stronger of the two had greater psychological need of the weaker, rather than the other way round.

You can be sure that unfriendly reviewers will accuse the author of comparing Smith to that mass murderer Hitler.

Another example:

In trying to understand why William Clinton risked such vehement criticism by granting those last-minute pardons, we must remember his truly remarkable record of never having been deserted by the American public, through scandal after scandal. Almost like John Gotti, the man reporters called the Teflon Don for his many acquittals, and who until he was finally convicted and sentenced to life strutted around town with an air of invincibility, Bill Clinton may too have come to think of himself as living a charmed life.

The author is not at all equating the offenses of the two men, only the perception of personal invincibility both came to believe in. But critics will surely say he compared Clinton to a convicted murderer.

Attributing motivation.

An author should exercise caution about attributing motivation to another without compelling evidence, most reliably from an intimate who has heard the person describe his own motivation. Egregiously, some fictionalized nonfiction will put words into the mouths of others. Attributing motivation goes one step further. It puts ideas into the heads of others.

There's also a logical fallacy that frequently accompanies the attribution of motivation. In current usage, the two words *motive* and *motivation* are distinguished in this way: *Motive* describes a valid reason to do something; *motivation* describes the impulse to do something. That a person has a valid reason to do something does not mean that he will do it, even less that if he has done it, he did it for that reason. Criminal prosecutors have trouble getting a conviction unless the prosecutor can establish motive. But of course establishing motive does not prove guilt. Every person who might benefit from the death of another does not kill that person. In serious nonfiction writing, we usually know who did what. The error we find most often in manuscripts is a presumption that of all the reasons a person might have had for doing something, it was the most nefarious reason that motivated him.

My experience warns me that this last rule I now offer will cause many of you to be angry with me, for it has often provoked an emotional response when I have raised it with my own authors.

Respect the right of causes and movements to choose their own names for themselves.

People who call themselves “pro-life” on the abortion issue cannot abide referring to the other side as “pro-choice.” They argue that the unborn fetus (or baby) has no choice in the matter. Pro-choice people, who selected their name to protect themselves from being seen as advocates of abortion rather than of a woman's right to choose, suffer as much when they have to refer to the other side as pro-life, preferring to describe it as anti-choice. Today we are very much aware that many social issues will be decided on the basis of who gains the language advantage, and so the more effective the name a movement has chosen for itself, the more likely that it will be challenged by the other side of the debate. Both these names are highly effective, and so each provokes anger and indignation from the other side.

However, civilized discourse requires conceding certain rights to the other side. And there is a long tradition of allowing movements as well as people to choose the names by which they will be known. “Nazi,” for example, is an acronym for the German *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, “National Socialist German Worker’s Party,” hardly an accurate description of what Adolf Hitler stood for. But referring to them as “so-called national socialists” would have wasted a lot of energy better spent fighting the evil.

That’s it for my favorite rules. You have likely seen every one of them broken, often by people you respect. But there is a practical reason that certain tactics that work elsewhere don’t work in book-length works of serious nonfiction. A lawyer or television editor controls the flow of the material being presented. He can skim over uncomfortable information, moving ahead briskly to keep you focused on what is being said at the moment. But your reader doesn’t have to get through your book at your rate. If he senses that you are being unfair, employing shifting standards, for example, he flips back and compares what you’re saying now to what you said earlier. When he finds he missed nothing and figures out that you just fudged your way past some ill-fitting point, he will be forced to make a decision about you. Do it once and he may say, “Tsk, tsk.” Continue doing it and you risk his putting your book aside and seeking out a more reliable guide to your topic.

If there is a theme to this book, it is that you are always writing to your audience. In formulating your argument, think of your audience as being comprised of three rough groupings. One is made up of those who come to your book sympathetic to the position you will be taking. At the other extreme are those with whom you are most in conflict. The middle are not yet fully committed on the issue.

You will have separate goals in mind for each of these groups as you write your book. You will get the most satisfaction writing to the first group, for it will provide you an opportunity to make yourself a hero within a group with which you are happy to be identified. Here you will get the most enthusiastic nods and maybe even a few amens. But just remember that you are preaching to the choir.

As to the second group, you'll have poor prospects for finding converts here, no matter how persuasive your argument. But fair argument will ensure that these people will come away from your book with a respect, albeit grudging, for you as a commentator.

Your primary target should be the undecideds, those marginals on the issue who are looking for guidance. It is this group, the least blinded by passion, who will hold your argument to the strictest standards of fairness.

If there is one overarching caveat that will help you fashion fair argument, it is that you should be wary of any situation in which you are tempted to elevate position over process. When the hottest issues of our time have been decided, or compromised, or overtaken by events, all that will be left standing are the rules by which we conduct public discourse and, through the enlightenment such discourse can provide, fashion rational solutions to pressing problems.

I hope this chapter helps you write more defensible argument. But on this issue, even more important than how your critics respond to your work is how you feel about it yourself. I have had authors tell me that their attempts to be scrupulously fair throughout their book left them with an improved feeling about themselves. Now that goes up as a win!

Now on to a fun chapter, one that deals with humanizing your book.