

The Woolly-Thinker's Guide to Rhetoric

Be Courageous

Tell us how brave you are. Talk about how marginal, revolutionary, lonely, out there, edgy, pioneering, strange your ideas are compared to all the old safe boring tame ones everyone else has. Stand up straight, square your shoulders, squint a little as if facing a strong wind. Stifle a sigh now and then. If you can (this is difficult), make a muscle in your jaw twitch.

Be dismissive

Go on, don't hesitate. Brush people off, especially if they know about something you don't know about. If they later turn out to be Nobel economists or widely-read philosophers, just pretend you've forgotten the whole episode. "When? Where was that? I don't remember that at all, you must have me confused with someone else."

Cheers and catcalls

Use hoorah and boo words.

Hoorah: heart, feeling, spiritual, holistic, instinct.

Boo: intellect, cold, analytical.

Claiming is Succeeding

Blur the distinction between claiming to make your case, and actually making it. If anyone notices this, act surprised and wounded. Notice someone you need to talk to across the room.

Clumsy sarcasm

Say things like 'Of course I could be just as wrong as you.' Or 'Well naturally I'm not as subtle as you are, I don't know how to pick words apart until there's nothing left.' Or 'Certainly, you're right and the rest

of the world is wrong.' Or 'Where did you read that, TV Guide/The Sun?'

Define words in your own special way

Define truth, for example, as hegemonic discourse, or monoculturalism, or Eurocentrism. Define education as privilege. Define science as an arbitrary game, or a story, or a power-play.

Develop sudden hearing loss

When your opponent makes a good point, a crushing argument, an incontrovertible case, simply fail to hear, and keep talking as if no one had spoken at all. Talk a bit louder. Lean toward your opponent with an intent, listening expression on your face, then continue to ignore what anyone else says.

Do a Procrustes

Make the evidence fit the case you're trying to make. Force it. If it doesn't fit, don't give up, don't be shy, just keep pushing and hammering and chopping until it does. No one will notice.

Embrace contradiction

Be ostentatiously anti-elitist, and sprinkle your writings equally ostentatiously with references to Foucault, Irigaray, Derrida, Kristeva and such salt-of-the-earth types along with words like 'problematize', 'phallogocentric', 'hegemonic discourse', and similar folksy slang.

Emotional Blackmail

If someone expresses skepticism about religion, demand how anyone can cast doubt on something that consoles people. This tactic can of

course be used for any otherwise untenable system of belief.

Evasive Tactics

1. Wrap yourself in a flag.

The martyrdom flag. The victim flag. The spiritual flag.

2. Change the subject.

Fly under the radar

1. Use subtle pejoratives, so subtle that they're almost invisible but prejudice the discussion anyway.

2. Use words that are pejorative to one group and the opposite to the other. 'Science' and 'scientist' are good for this.

Go Ahead, Contradict Yourself

Don't be afraid to make two mutually incompatible statements in one sentence. For instance, if you are a bishop, declare that the Church is not afraid of critical examination, but at the same time guards the 'truths' of its faith very jealously. If anyone asks how you can do both of those, exactly, just look vague and perhaps hum a little sacred music.

Histrionics

Use emotion. If you don't feel any, work it up. Let your voice quiver and tremble. Sound indignant, outraged, self-righteous, passionate, 'courageous', 'defiant'.

Imply

Imply things. Be careful not to be explicit, because then it would be obvious that you are not telling the truth.

Mention the Armchair

Call your opponent an 'armchair' something. Armchair psychologist, armchair shrink, armchair historian. Whatever. Indicates that the other party is sheltered, lazy, housebound, nerdy, reclusive, uninformed, unhealthy, and out of touch, whereas you are out there with your sleeves rolled up, down in the muck with the other therapists and archaeologists and coal miners. When there is digging to be done you get out there and dig, you don't just sit in the comfy chair and ponder.

Moral One-upmanship

If people disagree with you, accuse them of Eurocentrism or elitism or intolerance or narrowness or conventional thinking or scientism or homophobia.

Pat yourself on the back

Say things like "This is a trivial issue, there are much more important battles to fight," and then go right on arguing. That way you give yourself credit for having a sense of proportion but still get to go on trying to win the argument.

Pave With Good Intentions

Make it clear that you mean very well, that all the benevolence and right feeling and compassion and tolerance are on your side, and all the other thing on your opponent's.

Play the theory card

Talk about 'theory' a lot. Use the word 'theory' in every sentence. Say 'theory' with a special tone of hushed reverence. Ask people if they're well up on 'theory'. Everyone will be very impressed and very intimidated.

Pretend to be amused

Say things like, 'Not at all, I'm not angry/cross/offended, I'm amused.' Pretend to find the other person hilariously ineffectual and cute. Disguise the tremor in your voice and the bulging veins on your forehead.

Repetition

If your ideas are weak, if you have neither logic nor evidence to back them up, simply keep asserting them over and over and over again. This will convince everyone that they must be true. If they were not true, surely we wouldn't keep hearing about them all the time?

Say the methodology was flawed

When your opponent presents evidence (and it always happens, so be ready) that would undermine or completely contradict your argument, simply say everyone knows the methodology of that particular study was deeply flawed. Never mind if you know nothing about it, that this is the first you've heard of the study, just say they went about it in quite, quite the wrong way. If there's another study with a different methodology that also proves you wrong, no matter, just say it again.

Say the outcome was predictable

When your opponents point out flaws in your argument, smile cheerfully and say you think this outcome was entirely predictable.

Translate

If your opponent talks of evidence, you talk of proof. If your opponent mentions probability, you turn that into certainty.

If your opponent disagrees with your facts, say your opponent is offended. If your opponent claims to know something about the topic under discussion, call your opponent an elitist.

Translate Even More When the Subject is Religion

If someone expresses doubts about the truth claims of religion, translate that into a statement that science can solve all of humanity's problems, and mock the statement. When your opponent disavows that statement, ignore the disavowal and continue the mockery. Eventually your opponent will get bored and leave the field.

Use 'Obscure' as a First Name

Always refer to people who disagree with you (unless they are so undeniably famous it simply won't work) as 'obscure' while referring to people who agree with you as 'notable' (which sounds so much more dignified than 'famous'). E.g. if you have call to mention the Sokal hoax, be sure to say 'an *obscure* physicist named Alan Sokal', as if obscurity were not the natural state of nearly all physicists and indeed academics generally.

Use obscurity

Generate such a tangled clot of verbiage that opponents cannot be sure you haven't said something profound.