Textbook Review for *inReview*
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Now in its seventh edition, Annette Rottenberg’s *Elements of Argument* is viewed by many as the gold standard for argument texts. (According to the publisher, it is the all-time best-selling textbook in this category.) I have used the book off and on for the past decade, and while it has never been a perfect fit for my courses, it has always succeeded in providing a solid foundation for the kind of work I want my students to do. What I like most about it is its seriousness in tone; it does not condescend to students, but rather addresses them as participants in critical social debates. The ability to analyze arguments, and to craft one’s own arguments responsibly and intelligently, is described in the first chapter as absolutely vital in a society dependent upon an informed citizenry, and the examples and readings throughout the book reflect this high-minded focus.

The book is divided into four main sections. Part One, which introduces the “elements of argument,” is the heart of the book. The main terms—Claim, Support, Warrant/Assumption—are derived from the Toulmin model of argument, but Rottenberg also stresses the importance of audience and motivational appeals (i.e. “appeals to needs and values”). One of the greatest strengths of this section is the way it repeatedly models textual analysis. Every text (including the seven advertisements and one Web page) is followed by discussion questions or Rottenberg’s own analysis, providing students with a strong sense of what it means to approach texts critically.

Part Two comprises three chapters, the first of which walks students through the stages of producing their own written arguments. It addresses how to identify and narrow
a topic, how to develop a working thesis and outline, and how to draft the body, introduction, and conclusion of an essay. The approach it describes is process oriented, but perhaps a little more tidy and linear than some writing instructors would like. I usually supplement this chapter with a lot of my own materials on composing strategies. The second chapter in Part Two describes research methods: how to find and evaluate both print and Web sources, how to take notes, how to incorporate source material, how to avoid plagiarism, etc. This chapter includes sample MLA and APA citations and two full-length sample research essays (one in MLA and one in APA style) with clear and useful annotations. The third chapter addresses how to plan and deliver an oral argument.

Next comes the book’s reader. Part Three contains the bulk of the reading selections—almost 60 by my count. Most of these are magazine articles, op-ed pieces, and book excerpts, all clustered around specific themes: “Corporate Responsibility,” “Criminal Justice: Trial by Jury,” “The Family,” “Freedom of Speech,” “Privacy in the Information Age,” “Reparations for Slavery,” “Responding to Terror,” and “Sex and Violence in Popular Culture.” The readings are framed by pre-reading questions, questions “for discussion and writing,” ideas for further research, and lists of related Web sources. Part Four contains “classic arguments” from Plato, Jonathan Swift, Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Margaret Mead, George Orwell, and Martin Luther King Jr., with each text followed by discussion questions and a couple of writing prompts.

The shorter fourth edition of the book (titled The Structure of Argument) excludes the Part Three readings and offers a smaller selection of “Classic Arguments.” Otherwise, it is identical to the seventh edition. Both include an appendix on “arguing about literature” which, while brief, offers a straightforward explanation of how fictional
texts can be said to contain arguments, and sketches an approach to argument analysis of
fictional texts.

I used the fourth edition (i.e., the brief edition) for several years in a first-year
composition course that focused on argument analysis, and it served its main purpose
well: it provided the students and me with a rich analytical framework and common
vocabulary for discussing arguments. I made only limited use, though, of the readings
included in Part One. Instead, students read selections from a required course packet, the
majority of which were written for discipline-specific rather than general audiences.
There was, therefore, a bit of a mismatch between the textbook and the course packet.
Moving from the short, engagingly written, and fairly straightforward pieces selected by
Rottenberg to the much more dense and lengthy readings in the course packet, students
would begin to lose confidence and would express reluctance to engage the academic
readings critically. Some resented being asked to read and write about texts that they had
difficulty understanding. (For their formal essay assignments, students were asked to
select a reading from the course packet and write an in-depth analysis of it). Rottenberg’s
remarks on the matter of challenging texts are helpful, but brief. She writes: “If the
subject matter is unfamiliar and the writer an acknowledged expert, you may have to
expend a special effort in penetrating the language. But you may also rightly wonder if
the writer is making unreasonable demands on you” (249). What I would like to see
added to this comment is a more explicit acknowledgment that not all texts are written for
a general readership, yet it is often necessary—in the university, at work, and in daily
life—for us to grapple with texts that were not intended for us.
Another part of the text that could, I believe, benefit from further elaboration is chapter 7 on “language and thought.” For example, I would like to see more discussion of context in the section on “slanting.” While I certainly agree with Rottenberg that students should write argumentative essays that address potential counterarguments and that they should adopt a posture of reasonableness and restraint in their academic essays, these criteria do not necessarily apply to all contexts. As examples of “slanting” Rottenberg offers an excerpt from a heated debate between two Salon.com columnists, and another from a leaflet distributed by London Greenpeace activists. Online debates and political leaflets have their own rhetorical conventions, so I am reluctant to suggest to students that these texts should be dismissed as faulty arguments because they do not follow academic conventions of argumentation.

Just as there are different kinds of contexts, there are different kinds of audiences. This is another point that occasionally gets lost, as when Rottenberg predicts how “readers” or “an audience” will respond to certain rhetorical gestures—i.e., when they will be “repelled” (243, 246) and when they will be drawn in (246). I suppose these moments stand out most for me when my own reactions do not match the book’s predictions. For example, I found myself chuckling in response to some of the book’s examples of immoderate language, contrary to predictions that I, the reader, would be “embarrassed” and “repelled.”

In spite of these reservations, I like very much Rottenberg’s close attention to language. Indeed, this emphasis on language provides students tools they can use to analyze Rottenberg’s own language choices. (I have found this to be a particularly useful exercise, because it lets students know that even texts that seem to speak with a kind of
“objective” authority in fact have human authors who have made specific rhetorical choices with specific implications.) Perhaps my favorite section in the entire textbook is the one on “clichés of thought.” Too often students write arguments that turn on familiar phrases (e.g., “you can do anything you put your mind to”; “we’ve come a long way”) rather than allowing their ideas to take shape through a process of genuine thinking and investigation. Rottenberg’s discussion of clichés of thought encourages students to question that which they take for granted—a skill at the heart of critical thinking.

The course in which I am currently using Rottenberg’s book (the third course in a three-part writing sequence at a different institution) is a research writing course, and it is set up rather differently from the course I have previously described. There is no supplemental reader, and students select their own sources and topics for their final essays. The midterm essay is more structured, with students basing their essays solely on sources in Part Three (seventh edition) of the textbook and its companion website. What makes this arrangement workable is Rottenberg’s generous selection of interesting and engaging readings—at least 6 on each topic followed by references to at least 6 web sources. To be sure, there are some readings I would get rid of, if I could, and replace with arguments that I find more personally palatable. Overall, though, I am happy with Rottenberg’s choices. They are almost all highly readable, and they provide students with a good initial sense of the range of positions that have been taken on each of the Part Three topics.

In the end, no textbook is going to be a perfect fit for any one instructor or course (I suspect that this is true even for textbook authors), and instructors will map out their own unique paths through the book, supplementing this, challenging that, and generally
making the best possible use of the materials that they can. With this reality in mind, I would not hesitate to recommend Rottenberg’s book to other instructors—the seventh edition for those who are happy with the Part Three reading selections, and the fourth edition for those who wish to combine Rottenberg’s text with their own course readers.