

Advanced Strategies in Argumentation

Lacking Field Specialization or Subject Expertise in an Argument

Is it possible to hold your own in an argument if you lack field specialization or expertise on a particular subject or topic? Can you win such an argument?

Some heuristics to consider:

How well-read is your opponent(s) on the particular topic? In the overall subject matter?

Where should you place yourself when first presenting your argument to an expert in a field* or discipline**? Choose associates that are supportive toward your argument?

What agendas, political-leanings, or preferences might be at play in the argument (this goes for all participants)?

How to best prevent your opponents from using tactics that allow them to stray from your argument that you originally presented?

When to notice that you have dug yourself in a hole and how to best dig yourself out of it.

Differentiate/Discriminate/Distinguish (for the individual instigating the argument): Depending on your argument, individuals will have various levels of knowledge, expertise, or experience, as well as connections within a particular field or discipline in which the argument is situated.

Alignment and Adjustment (for the individual instigating the argument): Seek out potential associates (experts supportive toward your argument) in presenting your argument. These associates could encompass experts within the field or individuals that are well-versed on the topic or subject matter of your argument. They can remain behind the scenes until it is necessary for them to reveal their involvement. They can act as your “aces.”

Identify and Locate (for the individual instigating the argument): Identify the purpose in your argument before engaging in it. Locate your potential opponents' placement in your argument. Individuals identifying as experts on the topic, using their firsthand knowledge or training in that field to maintain a level of comfortability or assurance of their knowledge, might not readily reveal or present their agenda, political-leaning, or community/individual preference. Perhaps let all participants (supportive and opposing) air-out their leanings and preferences beforehand or early on in your argument if possible.

Recognize and Redress (for the individual instigating the argument): If an expert(s) is/are suspected to have a particular agenda, leaning, or preference in the dialogue, discourse, article, study, presentation, address it or ask tactfully, perhaps in an offside conversation (this includes supportive and opposing sides in your argument). While listening to what others say about an opposing expert(s) when pertaining to a field or topic involved in your argument, it is useful to also seek it from the horse's mouth as well. Perhaps read other writings (articles, blogs, or videos) that they have presented within a public forum to help you deduce their alignment. Also, take note of what kinds of sources they cite in their own writings and/or videos.

Individuals specializing in a particular field, whether it is in the social sciences (such as those associated with focusing on various forms of social and cultural phenomena, related to sociology and some realms of psychology) or natural sciences (where objectivity is highly prized, testable predictions, conducting

controlled experiments, and eventual consensus among experts), will sometimes use their credentials or position as a way to undermine or employ tactics that will hopefully prematurely silence critics and criticism of their work, theories, or studies. This might include a premature rejection or dismissal of “outliers,” which is individuals outside of the discipline or field in which your argument is situated.

How to present a substantial argument on a topic or subject area where you lack field or discipline specialization

Be well-read on the topic before entering your argument. Have an understanding of the subject matter as much as possible. Align yourself with credible associates (supportive experts toward your argument) associated with the field or discipline as well as with those that are experts on that certain topic. This could be done using primary and secondary sources. Do not reveal your sources unless asked by your opponents. Otherwise, maintain your composure once the argument has started or when being rebutted. Be conservative in your discourse.

If rifts develop between you and your associates, resolve them quickly, even if it means re-correcting previous positions or understanding of the topic or subject matter in your argument.

Do not label yourself a “non-expert” if you lack particular expertise in the field or discipline in which your argument is situated. If your opponents or credible associates do so, let them use the label, otherwise, avoid repeating such labels during your argument.

Do not assume that the oppositional expert(s) are automatically allowing their agenda, political-leanings, or preferences to dominate their vision in regards to their actual work. They might not. Let it come from the horse’s mouth. If not, do not force it or ascribe it indiscriminately. If this is your goal, to reveal your opponents’ agenda or their leanings or preferences, which they might be favoring in the interpretation or presentation of their or others’ research or study(ies), allow it come from them or their work (writings, videos, publications, or statements).

Try not to flood the opposing expert(s) with statistics to justify your argument. If they do this to you, acknowledge the data or statistics, but move on with your original argument. If you can detect this move from them early, ask whether such data or statistics are conclusive key elements in your argument. Let the opposing experts answer and then move ahead with your argument. Always have your own data and statistics ready as well when they present theirs. Act in a conservative fashion. Do not delineate points or statements unless requested by your opposition. Be as economical as possible in your discussion.

Use your own research or others’ studies that present or suggest findings that contradict your opposition’s main claims/key points in your argument. Address any limitations or criticism that your own research or the studies you have cited might have upfront. Do not let your opposition point out the limitations or criticism first. Try not to only hinge your argument on them, though. Instead, use them as evidence that there exists contention on the topic or subject matter within the opposing experts’ field or discipline. This can undermine consensus.

If the opposing expert(s) sway, oscillate, to their expertise on the topic being argued instead of directly addressing your argument, remind them gracefully that they are doing so and continue with your argument. If your opponents are acting somewhat dismissive of your argument and the claims issued forth in it, use unobtrusive heuristics in the form of questions that get them to explain to you what is causing them to do this. Hopefully they will respond respectfully.

Oscillate in your argument. Save your rationalizing and reasoning to your heuristics; save them for the “philosophical moments” when deemed acceptable by all of the participants in your argument. Do not

force this oscillation, though, let it happen naturally such as when there might be a lull or if there is time within the discourse. This can lead your argument in new directions that could be spurred on by all participants. This will allow the discussion to seem as if it is developing organically and, hopefully, in your favor.

Keep your opponents nailed to your original argument. Do not let them stray or introduce new topics or tangents. Avoid trying to directly answer any tangential or rhetorical questions that they might present. Avoid doing this yourself, too. Do not allow the dialogue or discussion to become too cluttered and confusing.

Stay true to your original purpose and once that purpose is achieved, whether fully clear to all involved in your argument or not, remain resilient and conclude your argument. Let the dialogue lie where it is so others might pick it up again at a later date.

*Field – This can include a wider range of things that might fall under a given area of research or activity

**Discipline – This is usually associated with training and expertise within an academic context, which includes the presentation of research and studies in credible publications