WRITING ARGUMENTS

A RHETORIC WITH READINGS

CONCISE EDITION

JOHN D. RAMAGE

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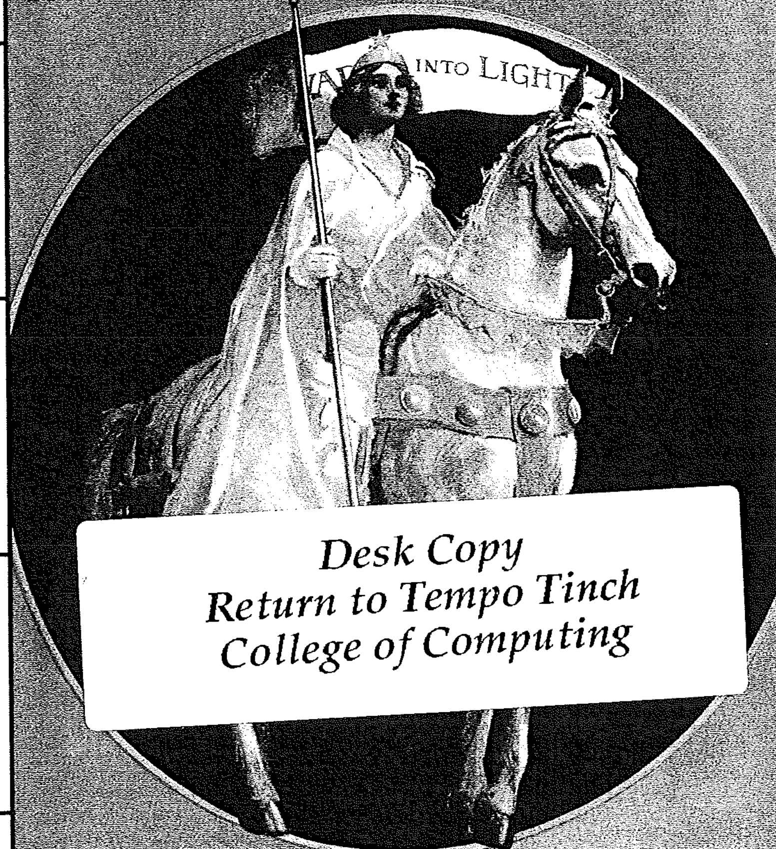
JUNE JOHNSON

THIRD EDITION



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1 Argument

An Introduction

One ought to begin a book on argument by telling the reader straight out what argument is. But we can't. Philosophers and rhetoricians have disagreed for centuries about the meaning of the term and about the goals that arguers should set for themselves. So in place of a simple definition, we'll show you several different ways of thinking about argument as a way of helping you become a more powerful arguer yourself.

After explaining how arguments make claims and provide justifications for those claims, we will consider argument from two different perspectives—as product and process. We'll also explain how arguments combine two distinct and sometimes conflicting purposes—truth seeking and persuasion. Because of the importance of this last distinction, we'll explore extensively the debate over truth versus victory as the goal of argument.

What Do We Mean by Argument?

Let's begin by rejecting two popular synonyms for "argument": *fight* and *debate.*

Argument Is Not a Fight or a Quarrel

The word *argument* often connotes anger, as when we say, "I just got in a huge argument with my roommate!" We may picture heated disagreements, rising pulse rates, and slamming doors. We may conjure up images of shouting talk-show guests or fist-banging speakers.

But to our way of thinking, argument doesn't necessarily imply anger. In fact, arguing can be pleasurable. It can be a creative and productive activity that engages our minds and our hearts in conversations with people we respect about ideas that we cherish. For your primary image of argument, we invite you to think not of a fist-banging speaker but of a small group of reasonable persons seeking the best solution to a problem. We will return to this image throughout the chapter.

Argument Is Not Pro-Con Debate

Another popular conception of argument is debate—a presidential debate, perhaps, or a high school or college debate tournament, in which, according to one popular dictionary, "opposing speakers defend and attack a given proposition." While formal debates can develop our critical thinking powers, they stress winning and losing, often to the detriment of cooperative inquiry.

To illustrate the limitations of debate, consider one of our former students, a champion high school debater who spent his senior year debating prison reform. Throughout the year he argued for and against such propositions as "The United States should build more prisons" and "We must find innovative alternatives to prison." One day we asked him, "What do you personally think is the best way to reform prisons?" "I don't know," he replied. "I've never thought about it that way."

Nothing in the atmosphere of pro-con debate had engaged this bright, articulate student in the important process of clarifying his own values and taking a personal stand. As we explain throughout this text, argument entails a desire for truth seeking, not necessarily Truth with a capital T but truth as a desire to find the best solutions to complex problems. Of course, arguers often passionately support their own points of view and expose weaknesses in other views. However, arguers' passionate defenses and relentless probings are not moves in a win-lose game but rather moves toward discovering and promoting the best belief or best course of action.

Arguments Can Be Explicit or Implicit

Before proceeding to some defining features of argument, we should note also that arguments can be either explicit or implicit. An *explicit* argument states directly a controversial claim and supports it with reasons and evidence. An *implicit* argument, in contrast, doesn't look like an argument. It may be a poem or short story, a photograph or cartoon, a personal essay, or an autobiographical narrative. But like an explicit argument, it persuades an audience toward a certain point of view. For example, a famous World War I poem (Wilfred Owen's "*Dulce et Decorum Est*") challenges the patriotic notion that it is "sweet and fitting" to die for one's country. Instead of using the ordered thesis, reasons, and evidence found in explicit arguments, this poem employs a horrible image—a soldier drowning in his own fluids from a mustard gas attack—to impel readers to see the gruesome senselessness of war.

Visual images can also make implicit arguments, often by evoking powerful emotions in audiences. The perspective that photos take, the stories they tell, or the vivid details of place and time they display compel viewers literally to see the issue from a particular angle. Take, for instance, Figure 1.1, a photo of homeless Albanian refugees during the Kosovo War. By foregrounding the old woman, probably a grandmother, perched precariously atop a heavily loaded wheelbarrow, her canes or crutches sticking out from the pile, and the six persons in the scene hastening down a stark road against an ominous gray background, the photographer conveys the nightmare of this war. Here *showing* the urgency of the Albanians' flight for their

FIGURE 1.1 *Albanian refugees during the Kosovo War*

lives and the helplessness of the two who can't walk is an effective strategy to arouse sympathy for the Albanians. Photographs of this kind regularly appeared in American newspapers during the war, serving to heighten U.S. support of NATO's bombing. Meanwhile, Serbs complained that no American newspapers showed photographs of KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) atrocities against Serbs.

For Class Discussion

Working individually or in small groups, describe a photograph that would create an implicit argument persuading (1) teenagers to avoid smoking, (2) teenagers to avoid becoming sexually active, (3) the general public to ban handguns, or (4) the general public to save endangered species.

EXAMPLE: To create an implicit argument against legalizing hard drugs, you might photograph a blank-eyed, cadaverous teenager plunging a needle into her arm.

We'll return to implicit arguments later, especially in Chapter 7, where we describe the persuasive power of stories, narratives, and visual images. For now, however, and in most of this text, our predominant focus is on explicit argument.

Argument Requires Justification of Its Claims

To begin defining argument, let's turn to a humble but universal site of disagreement: the conflict between a parent and a teenager over rules. In what way and in what circumstances do these conflicts constitute arguments?

Consider the following dialogue:

YOUNG PERSON (*racing for the front door while putting coat on*): Bye. See you later.

PARENT: Whoa! What time are you planning on coming home?

YOUNG PERSON (*coolly, hand still on doorknob*): I'm sure we discussed this earlier. I'll be home around two A.M. (*the second sentence, spoken very rapidly, is barely audible.*)

PARENT (*mouth tightening*): We did *not* discuss this earlier, and you're *not* staying out till two in the morning. You'll be home at twelve.

At this point in the exchange, we have a quarrel, not an argument. Quarrelers exchange antagonistic assertions without any attempt to support them rationally. If the dialogue never gets past the "Yes-you-will/No-I-won't" stage, it either remains a quarrel or degenerates into a fight.

Let us say, however, that the dialogue takes the following turn:

YOUNG PERSON (*tragically*): But I'm *sixteen years old!*

Now we're moving toward argument. Not, to be sure, a particularly well-developed or cogent one, but an argument all the same. It's now an argument because one of the quarrelers has offered a reason for her assertion. Her choice of curfew is satisfactory, she says, *because* she is sixteen years old.

The parent can now respond in one of several ways that will either advance the argument or turn it back into a quarrel. The parent can simply invoke parental authority ("I don't care—you're still coming home at twelve"), in which case argument ceases. Or the parent can provide a reason for his or her view ("You will be home at twelve because your dad and I pay the bills around here!"), in which case the argument takes a new turn.

So far we've established two necessary conditions that must be met before we're willing to call something an argument: (1) a set of two or more conflicting assertions and (2) the attempt to resolve the conflict through an appeal to reason. But good argument demands more than meeting these two formal requirements. For an argument to be effective, the arguer must clarify and support the reasons presented.

For example, "But I'm sixteen years old!" is not yet a clear support for the assertion "I should be allowed to set my own curfew." On the surface, Young Person's argument seems absurd. Her parent, of all people, knows precisely how old she is. What makes it an argument is that behind her claim lies an unstated assumption—all sixteen-year-olds are old enough to set their own curfews. What Young Person needs to do now is to support that assumption.* In doing so, she must anticipate the sorts of questions the assumption will raise in the minds of her parent: What is the legal status of sixteen-year-olds? How psychologically mature, as opposed to chronologically mature, is Young Person? What is the actual track record of Young Person in being responsible? Each of these questions will force Young Person to reexamine and clarify her assumptions about the proper degree of autonomy for sixteen-year-olds. And her response to those questions should in turn force the parents to reexamine their assumptions about the dependence of sixteen-year-olds on parental guidance and wisdom. (Likewise, the parents will need to show why "paying the bills around here" automatically gives them the right to set Young Person's curfew.)

As the argument continues, Young Person and Parent may shift to a different line of reasoning. For example, Young Person might say: "I should be allowed to stay out until two A.M. because all my friends get to stay out that late." (Here the unstated assumption is that the rules in this family ought to be based on the rules in other families.) The parent might in turn respond, "But I certainly never stayed out that late when I was your age"—an argument assuming that the rules in this family should follow the rules of an earlier generation.

As Young Person and Parent listen to each other's points of view (trying to figure out why their initial arguments are unpersuasive), both parties find themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to examine their own beliefs and to justify assumptions that they have taken for granted. Here we encounter one of the earliest senses of the term *to argue*, which is "to clarify." In response to her audience's failure to understand or assent to her view, the arguer must reshape her argument to help her audience "see" her position. In the process she may, perhaps for the first time, come to understand that position herself. Thus Young Person might recast her argument so that it relates more directly to her parent's values:

> I should be allowed to stay out until two A.M. on a trial basis because I need enough space to demonstrate my maturity and show you I won't get into trouble.

The assumption underlying this argument is that it is good to give teenagers freedom to demonstrate their maturity. Because this reason is likely to appeal to her parent's values (the parent wants the daughter to mature) and because it is tempered by the qualifier "on a trial basis" (which reduces some of the threat of Young Person's initial demands), it may prompt productive discussion.

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*In Chapter 5 we will call the assumption underlying a line of reasoning its *warrant*.

Whether or not Young Person and Parent can work out the best solution, the preceding scenario illustrates how argument leads persons to clarify their reasons and provide justifications that can be examined rationally. The scenario also illustrates two specific aspects of argument that we will explore in detail in the next sections: (1) Argument is both a process and a product. (2) Argument combines truth seeking and persuasion.

Argument Is Both a Process and a Product

In the preceding scenario, argument functioned as a *process* whereby two or more parties sought the best solution to a question or problem. But if we stopped the process at a given moment and looked at each person's contribution to the conversation, these contributions would be *products.* In an informal discussion, these products are usually brief, comprising a few sentences. In a more formal setting, such as an open-mike discussion of a campus issue or a PowerPoint presentation at a business meeting, the oral argument might be considerably longer.

Written versions of informal conversations occur online among members of chat groups or listservs. These e-mail messages are usually short and informal, albeit more carefully crafted than real-time oral rejoinders. And as these discussions (or *threads*) play out over several days, you may well see participants' ideas shift and evolve as they negotiate some sort of collectively agreeable view, or perhaps a simple truce.

Written versions of formal speeches may take the form of an academic argument for a college course; a grant proposal; a guest op-ed* piece; a legal brief; a letter to a member of Congress; or an article for an organizational newsletter, popular magazine, or professional journal. In such instances, the written argument (a product) enters a conversation (a process)—in this case, a conversation of readers, many of whom will carry on the conversation by writing their own responses or by discussing the writer's views with others.

Argument Combines Truth Seeking and Persuasion

In producing her argument, the writer will find herself continually moving back and forth between truth seeking and persuasion—that is, between questions about the subject matter (What is the best solution to this problem?) and about audience (What reasons and evidence best speak to my audience's values?). Back and forth she'll weave, alternately absorbed in the subject matter of her argument and in the persuasiveness of her argument to her audience.

*Op-ed stands for "opposite-editorial." It is the generic name in journalism for signed arguments that voice the writer's opinion on an issue, as opposed to news stories, which are supposed to report events objectively.

Rarely is either focus ever completely ignored, but their relative importance shifts during different phases of the argument's development. We could thus place "concern for truthfulness" at one end of a continuum and "concern for persuasiveness" at the other, and fit any argument somewhere along that continuum. At the far truth-seeking end might be an exploratory piece that lays out several alternative approaches to a problem and weighs the strengths and weaknesses of each. At the other end of the continuum would be outright propaganda, such as a political campaign advertisement that reduces a complex issue to sound bites. (At its most blatant, propaganda obliterates truth seeking; it will do anything, including distorting or inventing evidence, to win over an audience.) In the middle ranges of the continuum, writers shift their focuses back and forth between truth seeking and persuasion but with varying degrees of emphasis.

To illustrate the need for a shifting focus, consider the case of Kathleen, who in her college argument course addressed the definitional question "Should American Sign Language meet the university's foreign language requirement?" Kathleen had taken two years of ASL at a community college. When she transferred to a four-year college, her ASL proficiency was dismissed by the foreign language department chair. "ASL isn't a 'language,' " he said summarily. "It's not equivalent to learning French, German, or Japanese."

Kathleen disagreed and immersed herself in her argument. In her initial research she focused almost entirely on subject matter, searching for what linguists, neurologists, cognitive psychologists, and sociologists had said about ASL. She was only tacitly concerned with her audience, whom she mostly envisioned as her classmates and those sympathetic to her view. She wrote a well-documented paper, citing several scholarly articles, that made a good case to her classmates (and her professor) that ASL was indeed a distinct language.

Proud of the big red A the professor had placed on her paper and more secure in her position, Kathleen resubmitted her request (this time buttressed with a copy of her paper) to count ASL for her language requirement. The chair of the foreign language department read her paper, congratulated her on her good writing, but said her argument was not persuasive. He disagreed with the definition of *language* she used in the paper, and he took issue with several of the linguists she cited. He again turned down her request.

Stung by what she considered a facile rejection of her argument, Kathleen embarked on a second ASL paper for her argument class—this time aimed directly at the foreign language chair. She researched the history of her college's foreign language requirement and discovered that after being dropped in the 1970s, the requirement was revived in the 1990s, partly (her math professor confided) to revive flagging enrollments in foreign languages. She also interviewed foreign language teachers to uncover their assumptions about ASL. She discovered that many of them thought ASL was "easy to learn" and that given the option, many students would take ASL to avoid the rigors of "real" language classes. Additionally, she learned that foreign language teachers valued immersing students in a foreign culture; in fact, the foreign language requirement was seen as a key component in the college's attempt to improve multicultural education.

With her newly acquired understanding of her target audience, Kathleen reconceptualized her argument. She emphasized how difficult ASL was to learn (to counter her audience's belief that learning ASL was easy), how the deaf community formed a distinct culture with its own customs and literature (to show how ASL met the goals of multiculturalism), and how few students would transfer in with ASL credits (to allay fears that accepting ASL would threaten language enrollments). She concluded by citing her college's mission statement, which called for eradicating social injustice and for reaching out to the oppressed. Surely, she argued, encouraging hearing people to learn ASL would help integrate the deaf community more fully into the larger campus community. In sum, all her revisions—the reasons selected, the evidence used, the arrangement and tone—were guided by her desire to persuade.

Our point, then, is that all along the continuum writers are concerned both to seek truth and to persuade, but not necessarily with equal balance. Kathleen could not have written her second paper, aimed specifically at persuading the chair of foreign languages, if she hadn't first immersed herself in truth-seeking research that convinced her that ASL was indeed a distinct language. Nor are we saying that her second argument was better than her first. Both fulfilled their purposes and met the needs of their intended audiences. Both involved truth seeking and persuasion, but the first focused primarily on subject matter whereas the second focused primarily on audience.

Argument and the Problem of Truth

The tension that we have just examined between truth seeking and persuasion raises an ancient issue in the field of argument: Is the arguer's first obligation to truth or to winning the argument? And just what is the nature of the truth to which arguers are supposed to be obligated?

In Plato's famous dialogues from ancient Greek philosophy, these questions were at the heart of Socrates' disagreement with the Sophists. The Sophists were professional rhetoricians who specialized in training orators to win arguments. Socrates, who valued truth seeking over persuasion and believed that truth could be discovered through philosophic inquiry, opposed the Sophists. For Socrates, Truth resided in the ideal world of forms, and through philosophic rigor humans could transcend the changing, shadowlike world of everyday reality to perceive the world of universals where Truth, Beauty, and Goodness resided. Through his method of questioning his interlocutors, Socrates would gradually peel away layer after layer of false views until Truth was revealed. The good person's duty, Socrates believed, was not to win an argument but to pursue this higher Truth. Socrates distrusted rhetoricians because they were interested only in the temporal power and wealth that came from persuading audiences to the orator's views.

Let's apply Socrates' disagreement with the Sophists to a modern instance. Suppose your community is divided over the issue of raising environmental standards versus keeping open a job-producing factory that doesn't meet new

guidelines for waste discharge. The Sophists would train you to argue any side of this issue on behalf of any lobbying group willing to pay for your services. If, however, you followed the spirit of Socrates, you would be inspired to listen to all sides of the dispute, peel away false arguments, discover the Truth through reasonable inquiry, and commit yourself to a Right Course of Action.

But what is the nature of Truth or Right Action in a dispute between jobs and the environment? The Sophists believed that truth was determined by those in power; thus they could enter an argument unconstrained by any transcendent beliefs or assumptions. When Socrates talked about justice and virtue, they could reply contemptuously that these were fictitious concepts invented by the weak to protect themselves from the strong. Over the years, the Sophists' relativist beliefs were so repugnant to people that the term *sophistry* became synonymous with trickery in argument.

However, in recent years the Sophists' critique of a transcendent Universal Truth has been taken seriously by many philosophers, sociologists, and other thinkers who doubt Socrates' confident belief that arguments, properly conducted, necessarily arrive at a single Truth. For these thinkers, as for the Sophists, there are often different degrees of truth and different kinds of truths for different situations or cultures. From this perspective, when we consider questions of interpretation or value, we can never demonstrate that a belief or assumption is true—not through scientific observation, not through reason, and not through religious revelation. We get our beliefs, according to these contemporary thinkers, from the shared assumptions of our particular cultures. We are condemned (or liberated) to live in a pluralistic, multicultural world with competing visions of truth.

If we accept this pluralistic view of the world, do we then endorse the Sophists' radical relativism, freeing us to argue any side of any issue? Or do we doggedly pursue some modern equivalent of Socrates' truth?

Our own sympathies are with Socrates, but we admit to a view of truth that is more tentative, cautious, and conflicted than his. For us, truth seeking does not mean finding the "Right Answer" to a disputed question, but neither does it mean a valueless relativism in which all answers are equally good. For us, truth seeking means taking responsibility for determining the "best answer" or "best solution" to the question for the good of the whole community when taking into consideration the interests of all stakeholders. It means making hard decisions in the face of uncertainty. This more tentative view of truth means that you cannot use argument to "prove" your claim, but only to make a reasonable case for your claim. One contemporary philosopher says that argument can hope only to "increase adherence" to ideas, not absolutely convince an audience of the necessary truth of ideas. Even though you can't be certain, in a Socratic sense, that your solution to the problem is the best one available, you must ethically take responsibility for the consequences of your claim and you must seek justice for stakeholders beyond yourself. You must, in other words, forge a personal stance based on your examination of all the evidence and your articulation of values that you can make public and defend.

To seek truth, then, means to seek the best or most just solution to a problem while observing all available evidence, listening with an open mind to the views of all stakeholders, clarifying and attempting to justify your own values and assumptions, and taking responsibility for your argument. It follows that truth seeking often means delaying closure on an issue, acknowledging the pressure of alternative views, and being willing to change one's mind. Seen in this way, learning to argue effectively has the deepest sort of social value: It helps communities settle conflicts in a rational and humane way by finding, through the dialectic exchange of ideas, the best solutions to problems without resorting to violence or to other assertions of raw power.

For Class Discussion

On any given day, newspapers provide evidence of the complexity of living in a pluralistic culture. Issues that could be readily decided in a completely homogeneous culture raise many questions for us in a society that has few shared assumptions. Use the following story as the subject for a "simulation game" in which class members represent the points of view of the persons involved in the mosh pit controversy.

MOSH PITS: IT'S NOT ALL FUN AND MUSIC

This article begins with the case of a fourteen-year-old boy who suffered brain damage when he was dropped while crowd surfing at a Rage Against the Machine concert in Seattle. The article then discusses the controversy over crowd safety at grunge concerts:

> Most concerts do not result in injuries and deaths. But the increasing frequency of serious injuries—including broken bones, brain damage and paralysis—is shining a spotlight on what some critics see as fun and freedom pushed to irresponsible limits.
>
> The injuries have prompted a handful of U.S. cities and some bands to ban crowd surfing and stage diving, but there are no national standards for concert safety, and no one has exact numbers on how many people are injured in mosh pits every year. One survey cites at least 10 deaths and more than 1,000 injuries resulting from just 15 U.S. concerts last year.

Your task: Imagine a public hearing in which city officials are trying to develop a city policy on mosh pits at concerts. Should they be banned altogether? If not, how might they be regulated and who is responsible for injuries? Hold a mock hearing in which classmates present the views of the following: (a) a rock band that values crowd surfing and stage diving; (b) several concert fans who love mosh pits; (c) parents of a teenager seriously injured in a mosh pit accident; (d) a woman who was groped while crowd surfing; (e) local police; (f) concert promoters; (g) a venue owner fearing a liability lawsuit; (h) a city attorney fearing a liability lawsuit.

quotations are placed in parentheses after the quotation and complete bibliographic information is placed in a Works Cited list at the end of the paper. See Appendix Two for a brief explanation of the MLA and APA documentation systems.

ONE-PARAGRAPH SUMMARY OF TURNER'S ARGUMENT

Identification of author and source

Insertion of short quotation; MLA documentation shows page numbers in parentheses

Attributive tags

Continued use of attributive tags

In an article entitled "Playing with Our Food" from the magazine Better Nutrition, health food advocate Lisa Turner warns readers that much of our food today is genetically modified or irradiated. She describes genetic engineering as "artificially shuffling genes," which differs completely from "traditional cross-breeding" (21). She argues that the potential, unforeseen, harmful consequences of this "new, weird science" (21) offset the possible benefits of increasing the food supply, reducing the use of pesticides, and boosting the nutritional value of foods. Turner asserts that genetic engineering is imprecise, untested, unpredictable, irreversible, and also uncontrollable due to animals, insects, and winds. She also objects to the use of irradiation to enable foods to stay fresh longer and to kill harmful microorganisms. Claiming that the FDA has not tested irradiation at the levels that it allows, she suggests that irradiation has many harmful effects: depleting vitamins in foods, causing cancer and cardiac problems, and increasing amounts of radioactive material in the environment. Turner concludes by saying that the marketing of these products has proceeded much more quickly than scientific knowledge about them warrants. If we don't ban genetic engineering and irradiation completely (a course that some people propose), Turner argues that at the very least more safety testing and labeling are needed. We consumers must know how our food has been manipulated. (220 words)

Works Cited

Correct citation of article in MLA format. (In a formal paper the "Works Cited" list begins a new page.)

Turner, Lisa. "Playing with Our Food." Better Nutrition June 2002: 56-59. Rpt. in Writing Arguments: A Rhetoric with Readings. John D. Ramage, John C. Bean, and June Johnson. 3rd Concise ed. New York: Longman, 2004. 21–24.

ONE-SENTENCE SUMMARY OF TURNER'S ARGUMENT

In her article in Better Nutrition, health food writer Lisa Turner warns readers of the prevalence, risk, and potential health and environmental dangers of genetic modification and irradiation of food, arguing that these products should undergo more stringent testing for safety and should be labeled for consumer protection.