According to Wilhelm (2007), argument is the most important text type to teach students because it is central to critical inquiry, to knowledge making, and to democracy itself. The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association, 2010) require that students explore opinions in the early grades and that by middle school they read, write, and analyze arguments and counterarguments. While many middle grade teachers are comfortable teaching persuasion, far fewer feel the same level of comfort with teaching argument. For that reason, this column will address resources to help teachers support students in reading and writing argumentative texts using multiple text types.

Newspapers offer rich resources for teaching argument. The New York Times and other newspapers offer teachers models of argument on the editorial pages and in Letters to the Editor. Room for Debate is a Times blog (http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate) in which different arguments about issues or news events are discussed by four or six contributors. Each response is only four or five paragraphs, making this a very accessible resource for middle graders. Topical issues include: Do we still need libraries? Is organic food worth the expense? Is Facebook a fad? When should young people be considered adults? Students can analyze the arguments and counterarguments found in specific postings and write their own responses to the questions posed.

Teachers in Delaware have created excellent sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade units of study on argument for the Delaware Department of Education (see http://www.doe.k12.de.us/commoncore/ela/teachertoolkit/litorg/literacy_con_lessons.shtml). The lesson plans teach students the language of argument and how to analyze and write arguments. All are designed in sync with the Common Core State Standards.

The eighth-grade unit, for example, titled “Constructing Text-Based Arguments about Social Issues” (Bradley, McGuire, McGuire, Salvatore, & Albertson, 2012) (http://www.doe.k12.de.us/commoncore/ela/files/writing/GRADE-8_ARGUMENTATION_Sep.pdf) frames an American History unit on Prohibition around the teaching of argument. Lesson plans incorporate the analysis of literature, videos, political cartoons, and other texts, gradually encouraging students to consider argument in relationship to contemporary issues such as gay marriage, the death penalty, and gun control.

Recent nonfiction titles can help students explore multiple sides of compelling contemporary issues. Steve Sheinkin (2012) won the Robert Siebert Informational Book Medal for Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World’s Most Dangerous Weapon. This fast-moving nonfiction book reads like an adventure story, capturing the drama surrounding the race for the United States to develop the atomic bomb before Germany. After reading this book, students can decide for themselves whether they think the development and dropping of the atomic bomb was justified, crafting arguments pro and con. Advanced middle graders might find the grisly For the Good of Man-
kind: The Shameful History of Human Medical Experimentation (Wittenstein, 2013) an interesting read. This book examines how human medical experiments have violated human rights and put people at risk at the same time they have saved thousands of lives. The author cites numerous horrific examples of human suffering perpetrated in the name of scientific advancement, including the injection of active smallpox into children without parental consent. Students could first debate whether causing this suffering was justified and then craft written arguments detailing their positions.

Another important aspect of teaching argument is helping students learn to weigh evidence. CC Standard RI.8.8 states that students will “Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; recognize when irrelevant evidence is introduced.” Chew on This: Everything You Don’t Want to Know about Fast Food (Schlosser & Wilson, 2007) is an adaptation of Schlosser’s (2001) bestselling Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal. It cites a plethora of data indicating that fast food is detrimental to teens’ health, the environment, and more. Students can weigh the evidence for the authors’ arguments and determine whether they adequately address counterarguments about the convenience and low cost of fast food (O’Dean, 2013).

How We Know What We Know about Our Changing Climate: Scientists and Kids Explore Global Warming (Cherry & Braasch, 2010) examines the evidence for global warming provided by both scientists and schoolchildren; data sources include butterflies, the rain forest, and the tundra, among others. Here, too, students can weigh the quality and quantity of the evidence the authors provide in support of their position that global warming is occurring.

For teachers seeking professional books about teaching argument, look no further than Hillocks’s (2011) Teaching Argument Writing Grades 6–12: Supporting Claims with Relevant Evidence and Clear Reasoning. This comprehensive title examines theoretical aspects of argument, but is replete with classroom examples of how to teach critical aspects of argument, including claims, warrants, evidence, and many more. Other excellent titles for this purpose that combine theory and practice include Smith, Wilhelm, and Frederickson’s (2012) Oh, Yeah??: Putting Argument to Work Both in School and Out (Exceeding the Common Core State Standards) and They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing (Graff, Birkenstein & Durst, 2012), a popular college textbook that can provide teachers and students with deeper understanding of the nature of argument. All these resources provide teachers with a starting point for beginning the important work of teaching today’s students to understand, evaluate, and craft logical arguments—skills they will need in college and beyond.

References


