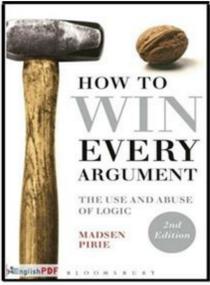


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I absolutely love Thanksgiving. Still, I understand that if there's anything worse a big argument at Thanksgiving dinner, it's losing a big argument at Thanksgiving dinner. With that in mind, I'm here to help. Before I became an author, I was a trial and appellate lawyer. (My dad is, too.) I was quite successful at it. I've stood up at the podium or counsel's table at least a few hundred times--trying cases, winning motions, arguing appeals in federal court--and I almost always won. Short version: I know how to construct and execute a successful argument. Here's how it's done--by the numbers--so you can win your big Thanksgiving dinner argument. (Want to read more, make a suggestion, or be featured in a future column? Contact me or sign up for my weekly email.) First off, I'm just going to say it. Thanksgiving is a wonderful holiday, so why do you want to ruin it? That said, if you're certain that arguing is inevitable, be prepared first by thinking about your goals. Do you really want to crush your brother in law's spirit by destroying his opinion of his preferred political candidate? Or do you just want everyone to open their eyes to the possibility of your position before dessert? With that disclaimer out of the way, here are the real weapons. Your first job is to remember that a good argument usually contains a story. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. It has an arc, it has compelling characters, and it leaves people hanging on their seats to find out how it turns out. At the least, be sure you know how you're going to end your story before you begin it. Gone are the days when you could bluff your way through an argument; now every person at the dinner table has a handheld device that connects to the entire history of the world's collective knowledge. So know the facts you'll be drawing on, cold. For an added bonus, anticipate the facts your opponent will rely on, and know them as well. (See #7, below.) Don't just be prepared--employ drama and props to make the other side think there's no way he or she can win. When the discussion turns to immigration for example, you can smile and unfold a five-page, single-spaced matrix of facts and quotes that you've kept hidden below the table. "Uncle John," you can say--always with a smile--"I thought you might want to talk about this..." Almost every appellate argument begins with a declarative statement about "the theme of the case." For example, one lawyer might open by saying, "This case is about whether the state can prohibit two people from getting married," while his opponent might say, "No, this case has nothing to do with marriage, per se; it's about the highly complex intersection of federal and state laws." This can be the most important part of any argument. It's really the question of what you're actually arguing about. Think about your frame ahead of time--it's the one moment when you can be reasonably sure people are still listening to you. Caveat: this does not mean "be emotional." It means that when you make points based on logic and reasoning, you present them in ways that buttress your argument with an emotional appeal. For example, you don't simply say that you're in favor of a broad admission program for Syrian refugees; instead, talk about wanting to avoid a repeat of the M.V. Saint Louis in 1939. (Seriously, if you don't know that reference, please read the link, which takes you to the Wikipedia page about it.) In preparing for big court cases, lawyers sometimes go through elaborate mock trial preparations, with colleagues playing the roles of opposing attorneys. You don't need to go that far of course, but if you anticipate that your argument will be with your 19-year-old sophomore niece, who absolutely loves Sen. Bernie Sanders, maybe read a couple of articles written by Sanders supporters before dinner. It's said that a good lawyer never asks a question he doesn't know the answer to. A great lawyer, however, does something more--she guides the witness or her opponent to give the answers she needs to build her argument. That's usually easiest with yes or no questions. Example: "You'd agree that if not for the fear of terrorists, than we would absolutely want to help the Syrian refugees, right?" Either someone will answer that question with a "yes," or they'll probably look like a jerk. Somehow I envision that a lot of people will be reading this article on their smartphones in the bathroom, about 10 minutes before sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner. (If that's case, check out my earlier article, 7 Things to Do When You Have to Give a Short Speech.) Otherwise, while you don't have to overdo it--Thanksgiving dinner isn't the Supreme Court--a little preparation can go a long way. At the very least, go back to #5 on this list, and make sure you know how you want to frame your argument. Once again, think about your goals. You're not trying for total annihilation here (at least I hope not!). You're also probably not going to convince your millennial "Bernie baby" niece that she should actually support Donald Trump. (Or vice-versa.) So, build exit ramps into your argument where you can concede that the other side has made some interesting points. Find ways to help your opponent save face. In truth, if you really employ the contents of this article and other argument preparation resources, you'll be way ahead of your opponent and probably win hands down. But you want to be sure she can concede and walk away without feeling stupid. Besides, there's dessert on the buffet and football in the other room. Happy Thanksgiving everyone! Play All You are, I'm afraid to say, mistaken. The position you are taking makes no logical sense. Just listen up and I'll be more than happy to elaborate on the many, many reasons why I'm right and you are wrong. Are you feeling ready to be convinced? Whether the subject is climate change, the Middle East or forthcoming holiday plans, this is the approach many of us adopt when we try to convince others to change their minds. It's also an approach that, more often than not, leads to the person on the receiving end hardening their existing position. Fortunately research suggests there is a better way -- one that involves more listening, and less trying to bludgeon your opponent into submission. Related: The more inept you are the smarter you think you are A little over a decade ago Leonid Rozenblit and Frank Keil from Yale University suggested that in many instances people believe they understand how something works when in fact their understanding is superficial at best. They called this phenomenon "the illusion of explanatory depth". They began by asking their study participants to rate how well they understood how things like flushing toilets, car speedometers and sewing machines worked, before asking them to explain what they understood and then answer questions on it. The effect they revealed was that, on average, people in the experiment rated their understanding as much worse after it had been put to the test. What happens, argued the researchers, is that we mistake our familiarity with these things for the belief that we have a detailed understanding of how they work. Usually, nobody tests us and if we have any questions about them we can just take a look. Psychologists call this idea that humans have a tendency to take mental short cuts when making decisions or assessments the "cognitive miser" theory. Why would we bother expending the effort to really understand things when we can get by without doing so? The interesting thing is that we manage to hide from ourselves exactly how shallow our understanding is. It's a phenomenon that will be familiar to anyone who has ever had to teach something. Usually, it only takes the first moments when you start to rehearse what you'll say to explain a topic, or worse, the first student question, for you to realise that you don't truly understand it. All over the world, teachers say to each other "I didn't really understand this until I had to teach it". Or as researcher and inventor Mark Changizi quipped: "I find that no matter how badly I teach I still learn something" Related: Why we don't always know the true causes of our actions Explain yourself Research published last year on this illusion of understanding shows how the effect might be used to convince others they are wrong. The research team, led by Philip Fernbach, of the University of Colorado, reasoned that the phenomenon might hold as much for political understanding as for things like how toilets work. Perhaps, they figured, people who have strong political opinions would be more open to other viewpoints, if asked to explain exactly how they thought the policy they were advocating would bring about the effects they claimed it would. Recruiting a sample of Americans via the internet, they polled participants on a set of contentious US policy issues, such as imposing sanctions on Iran, healthcare and approaches to carbon emissions. One group was asked to give their opinion and then provide reasons for why they held that view. This group got the opportunity to put their side of the issue, in the same way anyone in an argument or debate has a chance to argue their case. Those in the second group did something subtly different. Rather than provide reasons, they were asked to explain how the policy they were advocating would work. They were asked to trace, step by step, from start to finish, the causal path from the policy to the effects it was supposed to have. The results were clear. People who provided reasons remained as convinced of their positions as they had been before the experiment. Those who were asked to provide explanations softened their views, and reported a correspondingly larger drop in how they rated their understanding of the issues. People who had previously been strongly for or against carbon emissions trading, for example, tended to become more moderate -- ranking themselves as less certain in their support or opposition to the policy. So this is something worth bearing in mind next time you're trying to convince a friend that we should build more nuclear power stations, that the collapse of capitalism is inevitable, or that dinosaurs co-existed with humans 10,000 years ago. Just remember, however, there's a chance you might need to be able to explain precisely why you think you are correct. Otherwise you might end up being the one who changes their mind. Related: Does non-belief in free will make us better or worse? The Day After 9/11, This Family-Owned Jam Company Lost All of Its Airline Business. But One Son's Strategic Rebrand Has Brought Lasting Success. The Art of Active Listening Requires Leaving Your Ego Behind Using This Color in Your Facebook Ads Could Increase Your Click-Through Rate Almost 3 Decades Ago, I Wrote Myself a Check for \$1 Million, When I Had Nothing. Here's Why. This Entrepreneur's Wellness Tech Platform Was Inspired By His Grandma's Garden Here Are the 7 Traits You Need to Get Rich in the Restaurant Industry Yankee Candle Founder's \$23 Million Estate Comes With an Indoor Water Park and Two 'Car Barns'

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