[You read this once already—or were supposed to, if you followed my instructions on the first day of class. But even if you did read it once, read it again: everything they say about an argument when it comes to writing a paper applies equally in oral presentation, including interviews]

Writing in College: A Short Guide to College Writing  
by Joseph M. Williams and Lawrence McEnerney

Lawrence McEnerney is Director of the University of Chicago Writing Program. Joseph M. Williams (1933-2008) was Professor of English Language and Literature and the founder of the University of Chicago Writing Program.

Argument: a key feature of college writing

Now by "argument" we do not mean a dispute over a loud stereo. In college, an argument is something less contentious and more systematic: It is a set of statements coherently arranged to offer three things that experienced readers expect in essays [CMC: or oral presentations] that they judge to be thoughtful:

• They expect to see a claim that would encourage them to say, "That's interesting. I'd like to know more."

• They expect to see evidence, reasons for your claim, evidence that would encourage them to agree with your claim, or at least to think it plausible.

• They expect to see that you've thought about limits and objections to your claim. Almost by definition, an interesting claim is one that can be reasonably challenged. Readers look for answers to questions like "But what about . . . ?" and "Have you considered . . . ?"

This kind of argument is less like disagreeable wrangling, more like an amiable and lively conversation with someone whom you respect and who respects you; someone who is interested in what you have to say, but will not agree with your claims just because you state them; someone who wants to hear your reasons for believing your claims and also wants to hear answers to their questions.

At this point, some students ask why they should be required to convince anyone of anything. "After all," they say, "we are all entitled to our opinions, so all we should have to do is express them clearly. Here's my opinion. Take it or leave it." This point of view both misunderstands the nature of argument and ignores its greatest value.

It is true that we are all entitled to our opinions and that we have no duty to defend them. But universities hold as their highest value not just the pursuit of new knowledge and better understanding, but the sharing of that knowledge. We write [or speak: CMC] not only to state what we think, but also to show why others might agree with it and why it matters. We also know that whatever it is we think, it is never the entire truth. Our conclusions are partial, incomplete, and always subject to challenge. So we write in a way that allows others to test our reasoning: we present our best thinking as a series of claims, reasons, and responses to imagined challenges, so that readers can see not only what we think, but whether they ought to agree.

And that's all an argument is—not wrangling, but a serious and focused conversation among people who are intensely interested in getting to the bottom of things cooperatively. Go this site for one further point.

Those values are also an integral part of your education in college. For four years, you are asked to read, do research, gather data, analyze it, think about it, and then communicate it to readers in a form in which enables them to assess it and use it. You are asked to do this not because we expect you all to become professional scholars, but because in just about any profession you pursue, you will do research, think about what you find, make decisions about complex matters, and then explain those decisions--usually in writing--to others who have a stake in your decisions being sound ones. In an Age of Information, what most professionals do is research, think, and make arguments. (And part of the value of doing your own thinking and writing is that it makes you much better at evaluating the thinking and writing of others.)