

Chapter Five - Building a case



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To persuade your reader or an audience that you have a sound case against someone or in favor of something, you must amass convincing evidence and then present it with compelling logic.

In many cases, you will not reach your decision or formulate a position until after you have conducted considerable research with an open mind. While you may have inklings as you begin your research, you will not let your preconceptions blind you to new evidence and new understandings.

The antithesis of research

Back when the Internet first came to schools, a high school student interviewed me on the phone for half an hour.

She asked me many questions about the Internet, about libraries and about books. I enjoyed the conversation, but at the end she finished with words I found distressing.

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“Thanks so much for your time, Dr. McKenzie,” she said.

“Unfortunately, I will not be able to use most of what you told me.”

I was, of course, taken aback.

“Why?” I asked. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Not at all,” she said. “You were great. It’s just that I have a thesis to defend. My thesis is that we will not need books, libraries or librarians because of the Internet.”

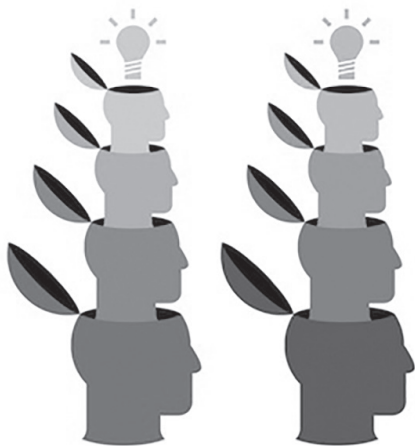
I paused and thought for a moment.

“Well,” I said, finally, “Is it possible you could change your thesis when you learn something new?”

While this seemed perfectly logical and normal to me, she claimed they were not allowed to do so.

Surely this is the antithesis of research — to take a clear stand on a subject before you know much about it and then set about gathering only that information which might support your position.

A truly open mind



Fundamental to the creation of new knowledge and insight is the process of suspending bias, challenging assumptions and noting premises. Your final product will consist of three related elements: assumptions, evidence and logic. All three must be opened to careful review and examination.¹

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What is an open mind? A mind that welcomes new ideas. A mind that invites new ideas in for a visit. A mind that introduces new ideas to the company that has already arrived. A mind that is most comfortable in mixed company. A mind that prizes silence and reflection. A mind that recognizes that later is often better than sooner.

¹ Much of this section appeared first in an article “Grazing the Net” first published in 1994 in *From Now On* and then subsequently in the September, 1998 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*.

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An open mind is somewhat like Silly Putty. Do you remember that wonderful ball of clay-like substance that you could bounce, roll and apply to comics as a child?



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An open mind is playful and willing to be silly because the best ideas often hide deep within our minds away from our watchful, judgmental selves. Although our personalities contain the conflicting voices of both a clown and a critic, as mentioned earlier in this book, the critic usually prevails in our culture. The critic's voice keeps warning us not to appear foolish in front of our peers, not to offer up any outrageous ideas, and yet that is precisely how we end up with the most inventive and imaginative solutions to problems. We need to learn how to lock up the critic at times so the clown can play without restraint. We must prevent our internal critic from blocking our own thinking or attacking the ideas of others.

An open mind can bounce around in what might often seem like a haphazard fashion. When building something new, we must be willing to entertain unusual combinations and connections. The human mind, at its best, is especially powerful in jumping intuitively to discover unusual relationships and possibilities. An open mind quickly picks up the good ideas of other people, much like Silly Putty copying the image from a page of colored comics.

The open mind is always hungry, looking for some new thoughts to add to its collection. The open mind knows that its own thinking is almost always incomplete. An open mind takes pride in learning from others. It

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would rather listen than speak. It loves to ask questions like, “How did you come up with that idea? Can you tell me more about your thinking? How did you know that? What are your premises? What evidence did you find?”

The open mind has “in-sight” — evaluating the quality of its own thinking to see gaps that might be filled. The open mind trains the clown and the critic to cooperate so that judgment and critique alternate with playful idea generation.



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Mucking about

When you are building a case, it pays to invest in a significant discovery phase. Most people do not know what they do not know when they start their thinking. This ignorance is often responsible for questionable premises and faulty thinking. Discovery is most successful if you repeatedly pass through the stages of *The Research Cycle*²:

QUESTIONING
PLANNING
GATHERING
SORTING & SIFTING
SYNTHESIZING
EVALUATING

² *The Research Cycle* was first developed in 1995. A brief version appeared in *Multimedia Schools* in June of 1995 and a much fuller description was made available in a six article series in *Technology Connection*. In November of 1996, a revised, short version appeared as part of an article in *Educational Leadership*.

The best current version is at <http://questioning.org/rcycle.html>

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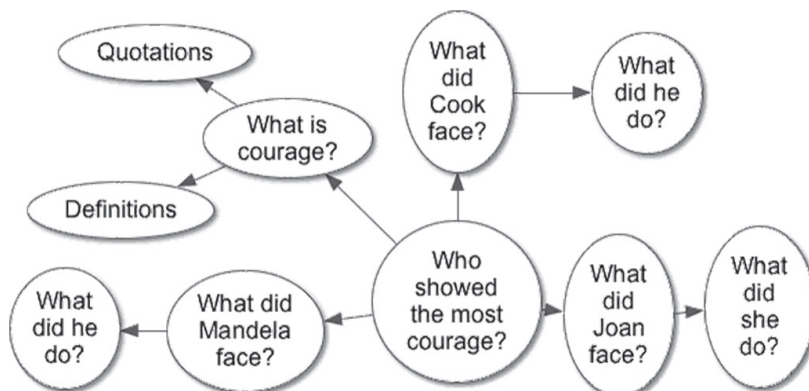
QUESTIONING
PLANNING
GATHERING
SORTING & SIFTING
SYNTHESIZING
EVALUATING

DECIDING & REPORTING

During the first *Questioning* attempt, you will open up your mind mapping software and list all of the questions that come to mind when you think of the issue at hand. Until you muck around a bit and learn more about this issue, your questions will be inadequate. You do not know what you do not know. That is why you must pass through *The Research Cycle* several times.

To illustrate this process, imagine you have been asked which of the following three figures from history showed the most courage: Joan of Arc, Captain James Cook or Nelson Mandela?

This is a demanding and difficult task, for sure, but you sketch out questions before doing any reading.



It will take considerable time to *Plan* how you will begin

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answering these questions and several days to *Gather* the information you find. You identify many Web sites that will supply pertinent quotations about courage, and you have favorite thesaurus and dictionary sites in mind for definitions. In the first hours, you begin saving quotations and definitions, struggling a bit with how and where to save them so they are not a big mess. You *Sort & Sift* thoughtfully. You also start reading about the three figures' lives, collecting stories that will illustrate the challenges and risks they faced — stories that will demonstrate the character they exhibited. These stories will provide the evidence you will need to compare and contrast them and make your final choice.

As you move through this research process, it is a bit like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. From the scraps and pieces you collect, a picture begins to emerge. This thought process is the *Synthesis* we explored in some detail in earlier chapters.



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A rush to judgment

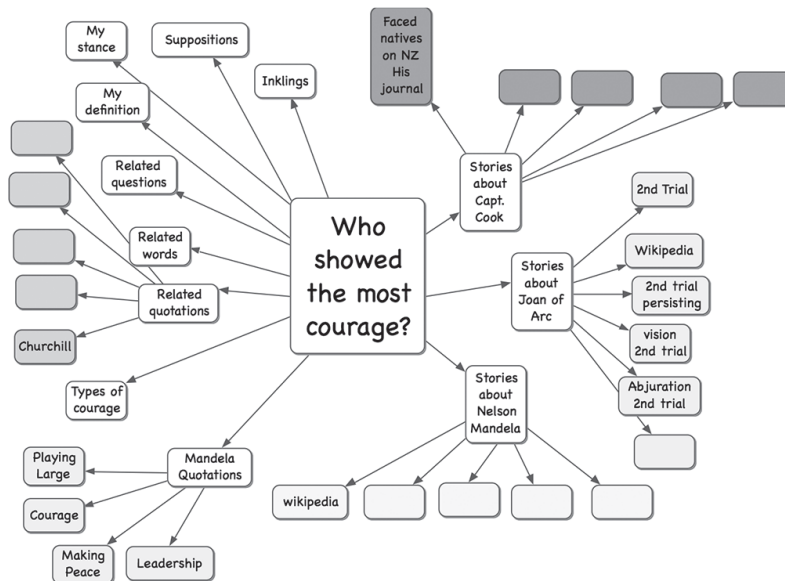
It may be tempting to oversimplify a complex question. In looking at courage, for example, it turns out that there are many different kinds. If you ignore most of these and seize upon a battlefield version, Joan of Arc is likely to come out on top of our trio without much of an intellectual struggle. All

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you have to do is collect stories of her battles and compare them with battles fought by Cook and Mandela. It is not much of a contest, really, and you can build a case that is quite clean and clear. Unfortunately, if you dismiss other definitions of courage, you have shortcut and shortchanged the truth.

You must decide for yourself if the truth matters. If you explore more than the simple definition of courage, you may be doubling or tripling the time you will invest in tackling this challenge. Is it worth it?

Sadly, academic institutions do not always welcome or reward the original thought celebrated and encouraged throughout this book. If you sincerely entertain a half dozen definitions of courage, your comparison task is radically more challenging but ultimately more rewarding than a narrow focus on battles. All of us will be called upon to show courage from time to time in our own lives, whether we are struggling to overcome a handicap, argue against mob prejudice or protecting our family in the face of a terrible storm. This is in no way meant to minimize the extraordinary courage required on the battlefield, but a full comparison of Joan, James and Nelson requires a broader conception of courage.



Profiles in courage

Before you can formulate a position, you must read extensively about the three people. You are compiling three “profiles in courage.”³

3 *Profiles in Courage* was published in 1957 by then Senator John F. Kennedy and won him the Pulitzer Prize. He profiled eight U.S. Senators.

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Each time you come to a story that shows courage, you will enter it in your mind mapping software. Later on, these stories will become evidence to substantiate your decision.

As you read and gather these stories, you will be testing them against the half dozen definitions of courage you chose as most cogent. How do the stories you collected for Joan stack up against those you found for Nelson and James?

Thirty years ago you probably would have copied each story onto an index card. At the end of your searching you would have a stack of cards several inches thick and the task of sorting and sifting would have been far more difficult than it is now. There are still some who write notes down on sheets of paper or in soft cover notebooks, but that more than doubles the labor involved compared with copying and pasting, since you may end up repeating the process when you move your findings into your document.

Deciding

How do you convert all of this reading and gathering into a position and a set of supporting premises?

After doing a thorough review of definitions and stories, you will form a decision. You will make a choice.



Perhaps you will select Nelson Mandela? If so, that becomes your position.

It must be clearly stated, and then you will set about identifying the underlying premises upon which you have based this decision. The text below the image is an example of how you might accomplish this.

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<http://rileypitzen.deviantart.com>

While all three historical figures showed great bravery and courage, I have chosen Nelson Mandela because he was able to stand up to the apartheid system over many decades and work successfully for its end, even though his fight kept him in prison for many years.

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In comparing Nelson Mandela with Captain James Cook and Joan of Arc, I defined courage as more than the ability to face physical danger on the battlefield or the high seas. All three had that kind of courage. All three also challenged the thinking of their times. The deciding factor for me was the length of time Mandela stuck with his convictions despite horrible prison conditions and a number of attempts to seduce him into betraying the movement. He had the courage to maintain his stance against an evil system regardless of the price even in the face of discouraging possibilities.



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With regard to this question about courage, the case you build will depend on how you define courage. You must make your definitions explicit. The same is true whenever you are taking a stand with regard to a choice — whether it be the best city, the best playwright, or the worst restaurant. You must clarify your definitions, your criteria and your standards.

Others may disagree with your premises, but you must be clear about them in your own mind and should state them early in your document.

Using the strategies outlined in Chapters Three and Four, you will state your position, explain your premises and lay out the evidence you have collected to support your position. If you picked Nelson Mandela, you will list a half dozen examples of his courage and connect them to the definitions you chose. But you will also mention Joan of Arc and Captain Cook. You will share some stories of their courage and explain how they differ from Nelson's. You will not ignore them or dismiss them.

