Tracing the Development of an Argument

Learning the Skill

Have you ever heard a speech and wondered what the speaker was trying to say? To help you understand a speaker’s argument, you first need to analyze his or her point of view, or bias. Are there aspects of the topic that the speaker has emphasized or excluded? You also need to determine how the speaker arrived at his or her conclusion by examining the evidence given. This will help you evaluate the speaker’s points.

As you listen to a speech, ask yourself the following questions to help you trace the speaker’s argument:
• Why is the speaker discussing this topic? What does the speaker seem most interested in?
• What is the speaker’s point of view about this subject? What biases does the speaker seem to have?
• Is there a single, main point the speaker is trying to express? What is it?
• What details does the speaker give to support the main idea? Are they accurate and reasonable?

✓ Practicing the Skill

Vladimir Lenin became the leader of the Communist Party when it seized power during the Russian Revolution in 1917. One of his first acts as head of the new Soviet government was to abolish private ownership of land and distribute it to peasants. He also began to introduce new ideas about workers’ rights and the rights of women.

Directions: In 1919 Lenin delivered a speech to working women who were NOT members of the Communist Party. Read excerpts from this speech below, and then answer the questions that follow.

I should like to say a few words about the general tasks facing the working women’s movement in the Soviet Republic... The first part of that task is relatively simple and easy. It concerns those old laws that kept women in a position of inequality as compared to men.

Participants in all [freedom] movements in Western Europe have long since... put forward the demand that [outdated] laws be [ended] and women and men be made equal by law, but none of the democratic European states... have succeeded in putting it into effect, because wherever there is capitalism [an economic system with private ownership]... the men retain their privileges. It was possible to put [freedom] into effect in Russia only because the power of the workers has been established here since October 25, 1917.

Soviet power, the power of the working people, in the first months of its existence
effect a very definite revolution in legislation that concerns women. Nothing whatever is left in the Soviet Republic of those laws that put women in [an inferior] position. . . . We may now say proudly and without any exaggeration that apart from Soviet Russia there is not a country in the world where women enjoy full equality and where women are not placed in the humiliating position felt particularly in day-to-day family life. This was one of our first and most important tasks.

. . . Owing to her work in the house, the woman is still in a difficult position. To . . . make her the equal of the man it is necessary for the national economy to be socialised [ownership of property and industry shared by all] and for women to participate in common productive labor. Then women will occupy the same position as men.

We have abolished private property in land and almost completely abolished the private ownership of factories; Soviet power is now trying to ensure that all working people, non-party as well as [Communist] Party members, women as well as men, should take part in this economic development. The work that Soviet power has begun can only make progress when, instead of a few hundreds, millions and millions of women throughout Russia take part in it.

. . . We are setting up model institutions, dining-rooms and nurseries, that will [free] women from housework. . . . The working women must themselves see to it that such institutions are developed, and this activity will bring about a complete change in their position as compared with what it was under the old, capitalist society.


1. **Explaining** Why did Lenin give this speech to a group of working women who were not members of the Communist Party?

2. **Identifying Points of View** How did Lenin’s argument address the particular needs and interests of his audience?
Speaking and Listening Skills Activity

Applying the Skill

Directions: On the lines below, write a paragraph tracing the development of Lenin's speech. Summarize his argument in appealing to non-Communist working women. Use the listed items in the Assessment Checklist when writing your paragraph.

Assessment Checklist
Assess your paragraph using the checklist below:

☐ Thought about author's purpose in giving speech
☐ Tried to determine author's point of view
☐ Considered author's possible biases
☐ Examined argument to see what author emphasized or excluded
☐ Tried to determine author's main point
☐ Examined supporting details for accuracy and logic