

**Writing Assignment #1: Analyzing Arguments**

By A. Sharkbrain,—Section 11, with Rowdi Brand  
Complete draft for peer review, with cover letter  
Due via email Monday 10/9, 10:00 a.m.

**Cover Letter:**

Dear Peer Editors,

Well, I did my best with this first draft in the time I had. I could use your help with the following questions & problems: a) Is my paraphrase of Speth's assertion complete and accurate? Does my language there avoid plagiarism? Did I throw in too many of my own ideas & opinions? Is the paragraph too long? If so, how could I shorten it? b) I think my main problem is that I present a possibly inadequate and maybe even inappropriate counter-argument, and I didn't do enough research on this. Do you agree? If so, what parts could I cut or tighten to make room for more on counter-arguments? Also, my concluding paragraph doesn't really say much; I ran out of both space and time. Any suggestions? c) Should some of my direct quotes be replaced with summaries/paraphrases? If so, which ones? d) Throughout the paper, I wondered if I was supposed to be drawing on more of *Red Sky at Morning*, rather than just the chapter where my assigned quote appears. e) I know I tend to be wordy; please identify places where I could make the prose more succinct. f) Finally, feel free to point out any additional weaknesses you see or questions that come up. Thanks in advance for your careful attention to my draft.

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**James Gustave Speth Quote from *Red Sky at Morning* assigned for Section 11:**

*If there is one country that bears most responsibility for the lack of progress on international environmental issues, it is the United States. (p. 109) ...At the root of America's negative role is what can only be described as a persistent American exceptionalism, at times tinged with arrogance. (p. 110)*

**What Speth Is Arguing:**

In my opinion, Speth's point here seems to be fairly clear—and it's an assertion that most students have probably heard before. Speth takes the position that the United States, more than any other country, has stood in the way of international efforts to address global environmental problems. According to the quoted passage, the main reason why the U.S. blocks global environmental progress is because of what Speth calls “a persistent American exceptionalism.” By this I think he means two things: 1) that our country has a tradition of refusing to sign, or in some cases actively opposing, international environmental agreements such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (signed by 192 countries at the time Speth was writing), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (173 countries), the Land Mine Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Law of the Sea Treaty, and the Kyoto Protocol (p. 110); and 2) that the U.S. has failed to initiate or contribute to any international measures with more teeth than the “treaty-protocol approach” (p. 101). In other words, our government refuses to recognize its own extensive contributions to

global environmental problems or to accept any obligation for helping to ameliorate them—as if we are immune from such responsibilities, even while other nations pitch in. (While Speth doesn't say so specifically in the passage, I feel compelled to add that sometimes the U.S. even refuses to recognize that the problems *exist*—as in the current Administration's denial, until recently, of global climate change as a real and pressing issue.) I think the “arrogance” that Speth alludes to lies in our government's attitude that any energy-, development-, agriculture-, or resource-related policies adopted by the U.S. (and U.S.-based corporations) are bound to be good for the rest of the world. If other nations disagree—well, too bad.

Speth's implication, of course, is that this attitude is deeply inappropriate and has caused severely harmful consequences around the globe.

**How Speth Supports His Argument:**

Speth offers several lines of evidence and reasoning in support of his claim. Two in particular stand out. First, he observes that national government's positions on global environmental issues tend to reflect their countries most powerful economic interests. To bolster this assertion, Speth quotes an “excellent analysis” by David Levy and Peter Newell demonstrating how closely a particular nation's environmental policies tend to correlate with the “stances” of that nation's major industries, “such that the achievement of global environmental accords is impossible if important economic sectors are unified in opposition.” As a result, writes Speth, [e]conomic pressures can lead to political decisions that undermine even well-crafted treaties. Since some of the world's most powerful industrial interests are based in the United States, it's therefore not surprising

that the U.S. obstructs global environmental progress with particular frequency and obduracy. He cites the example, among others, of our country's blocking of the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants. (p. 107)

Speth also points out that the U.S. remains dead last among OECD [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development] countries in development assistance as a percentage of GDP. (p. 109) In other words, our nation is the stingiest among the wealthier nations when it comes to providing economic aid to poorer countries. US policymakers, Speth says, tend to cite "trade, not aid" as their working assumption (p. 111)—seeing corporate globalization as obviating the need for the kind of sustainable development envisioned by the Earth Summit. This directly affects global environmental problem-solving because, as Speth explains in the preceding passage, international environmental cooperation cannot be achieved without equity between the Global North and South—which in turn cannot succeed unless the richer Northern nations provide sufficient & appropriate development assistance to the poorer Southern ones. U.S. failure to do so, argues Speth, constitutes a significant reason why Agenda 21 of the Rio Earth Summit has never fulfilled its promise. (p. 109)

**A Possible Counter-Argument:**

I was intrigued by a counter-argument that Speth himself discusses: that of Danish statistician Bjorn Lomborg, in his book *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. According to Speth, Lomborg's argument favors current U.S. policy with regard to global environmental problems, in that Lomborg denies that such problems exist—or, in any case, that they are serious enough to warrant concerted action. According to Speth,

Lomborg's position on the appropriate response to environmental worries is that we should do nothing, for regulatory cures are generally worse than environmental disease. (p. 114).

Speth rejects Lomborg's argument by accusing him of misinterpreting, oversimplifying, misunderstanding, and distorting the findings of careful and reputable scientists. Speth provides some persuasive evidence for his response to Lomborg—but I was curious to see what a scholar with a different point of view might say, so I went online and found a favorable review of *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (Shapiro 2001). The reviewer's essential point is that the so-called “precautionary principle”—the idea that we should not wait for full and complete proof of threats or problems before we act—is wrong, and that people tend to flock to environmental “alarmists” and “doomsayers” such as Rachel Carson and Paul Ehrlich not because they're right, but because humans are “fascinated by bad news” and “tend to perceive things as...worse than they actually are.” I wish I had more space to explore this here, but basically I have to say that like Speth, I'd *like* to be able to believe Lomborg, but find the environmental scientists who disagree—and their supporting data—far more convincing.

**What Can Be Learned from All This:**

I found it useful to pay close attention to contrasting arguments; I think it enriched my understanding of the issues. I think any individual or organization involved in global environmental problem-solving should explore and respond to a variety of perspectives, just as we have been required to do in this assignment.

**References:**

Shapiro, K. 2001. The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World. (Better and Better). Commentary 112.4: 60-62.

Speth, J. G. 2004. Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, USA.