

# A Review of Bo Seo's *Good Arguments*

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**Author:** Bo Seo

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Bo Seo's *Good Arguments: How Debate Teaches Us to Listen and Be Heard* focuses on the effectiveness of understanding debate and the power of well-constructed arguments. This book is a work of nonfiction that acts as a guide for self-help, leadership methods, and effective communication. Bo Seo, a two-time world champion in debating, started his Australian school career quite averse to speaking out about what he thought. However, as time went on, he learned that there is a difference between arguments and *good* arguments, and he intends to point out the difference between the two to inform readers of the added benefits that a good argument brings to learning, personally and professionally. He also strives to encourage the audience to use these skills to create favorable circumstances that stimulate helpful disagreements, which can generate critical thinking opportunities.

Through powerful storytelling, Seo takes the reader on the transformative journey of a shy kid whose goal was to be agreeable and blend in but who eventually found a way to embolden his voice through competitive debate and finally became a two-time world champion for that very activity. Seo did not originally intend for his work to be used specifically within a Student Affairs lens. However, I believe that this piece can explain how debate is one of the many ways that Student Affairs Professionals, specifically those involved in orientation, retention, and transition, can teach college students to listen, be heard, disagree, and apply critical thinking skills.

## About the Book

*Good Arguments* is an autobiography that acts as a guide to listening and hearing in the world. Seo intentionally divides the book into two main sections. The first section is intended to teach his audience about the logistical side of debate. He breaks his first section into a presentation of the five components of competitive debate: topic, argument, rebuttal, rhetoric, and quiet. In each section, he explains the skills needed to claim “mastery” of each component. Seo shares a personal story of his learning process to drive home each skill. Seo uses the life experiences he had while growing up to create a relatable relationship with his readers while connecting the stories to the different components of competitive debate. He explains that while attempting to focus on developing these components and skills of debate, he would sometimes get ahead of himself because of a desire to showcase his competitive edge. Through these experiences, Seo revealed to himself and to his teammates that applying certain debate ideas and techniques too quickly was more harmful than beneficial.

Seo’s intent for the second section is to apply debate and the competencies from the first section to life outside the “arena.” Seo focuses on three core areas: bad disagreements, relationships, and technology. Although most of the stories in this section follow Seo’s journey through navigating college, relationships with his family, and figuring out what his future was calling him to do, this section is also about how (good) arguments, when made properly, can improve both the reader’s private life and society as a whole. As Seo moves along in the book, he continues to use relatable experiences to connect with his audience, but he adds a bit more historical flare. As he ages and matures in his stories, so do his references. He recounts the history of Harvard’s background with race and speaks about the founding of many historical monuments on the backs of immigrants.

## How Does This Book Help

Seo provides solid advice that could help Student Affairs Professionals (SAPs) address students within the orientation setting, specifically by modeling for undergraduate students—especially those in the introductory levels of development—how to

navigate environments where their views, morals, and so on, will be challenged. In Chapter 2, which centers on arguments and how they are created, Seo includes a story that mentions the difference between assertions and arguments. This difference may seem obvious to some, but undergraduate students in the beginning stages of development may not know how to separate these two. Helping students understand the difference is important, as it could pull them from simply believing the crowd to thinking critically enough to analyze detail given or the lack of details.

A similar point on rebuttals is made in Chapter 3. Listening intently to what another person is saying is a common courtesy. In doing this, a student can fully flesh out an argument through the points given rather than make assumptions because of preconceived notions. Not only does listening enrich the conversation/debate for the opposite side, but it also pushes the student to think about how they will respond in a way that moves the conversation/debate forward instead of keeping it stagnant. Seo's most important advice comes toward the end of Chapter 8, which discusses how debate affects relationships. SAPs should be teaching their students that it is okay to separate the debate from the person. In many instances, students argue about what they have known their entire lives. Their values come from other people or a lack of resources. Because of this, it is okay to separate the two and argue the topic and not the person, as the person—just like the student—is still developing.

A large part of retention is properly assessing students' needs by truly listening to their needs and addressing the root of the issue instead of what is being said. Seo's work also addresses this concept, beginning with a story he mentions in his first chapter about topics. Seo writes about how one of his friends automatically counted himself out of a conversation because he had been outcasted by other friends who held different beliefs than he did about the meaning of "political correctness." However, a third friend approached the outcast friend and simply asked him to clarify what he thought it meant. With that small act, the third friend opened the door for the outcast person to explain his point of view, bringing the group back together. In higher education, some students automatically cast themselves to the side because they had been told previously that they did not fit in. As SAPs in retention, it is important to ensure that one listens to students carefully. Just as debate is a dialogue and not a monologue, so are conversations with students about their needs. Space must be set aside for understanding and clarity as students express themselves.

Transition professionals primarily help students transition into adulthood. This assistance can include helping students with interview skills, with selecting a field that is right for them, and even with standing up for themselves when making decisions in the adult world. Throughout Seo's text, this can be summed up as authentic communication. Seo explains that a person can be the most articulate at getting their

point across but may not always come out the victor in a debate. Within transition assistance for students, this idea is akin to students having a great interview and not getting the job, explaining to their parents why they want to switch majors or career fields and still being rejected, and even rationalizing within themselves and still making a less desirable decision. Accepting that one may not always win is difficult but is key to healthy navigation through life. Transfer professionals help students accept this fact and identify the types of people they will meet along the way who will try to silence, steamroll, or cast them aside because of self-righteousness. It is important that the professionals remind students regularly that bullies exist in the “real world” as well and that the students’ job is to ensure that they are creating an environment that will support their own personal and professional growth regardless of what others spew at them.

## Key Takeaways and Conclusion

A few key takeaways from *Good Arguments* stuck with me, and I would like to share them with you. The first takeaway is that disagreements are more complex than the world would have us believe. It is up to us to break down an argument’s key parts to see the root cause. Once we know what we are truly arguing about, we can find out why we disagree or agree. Second, we should understand that ending a debate is okay. Ending a debate or argument does not mean that you are conceding or that you have given up; it can mean, for example, that you have identified that you are not as knowledgeable about the topic as you had thought, that you do not have the energy or capacity to continue, or that you realize someone is not going to debate or argue fairly. Stepping away from an argument or debate is sometimes bigger than staying in it. Third, debate and disagreements are among the many ways that learning can happen. When engaging in this very common act, people tend to realize that there are other ways to respond to a disagreement (debate is not the only way), and this realization opens the door to allowing them to better understand and observe their learning approaches in a different light. The final, and what I believe is the most important, takeaway is that disagreement is inherently human. Living in a world where everyone agreed on everything would feel more like a dystopian novel come to life. Without disagreements, there would be no variety, creativity, or room for interpretation.

Around this point, I began to analyze and fully sum up my final thoughts about the book. Although this is an astounding piece of literature that brings about many opportunities to impart growth and wisdom to its readers, the target audience is not likely newly admitted college students. This book requires a certain level of self-awareness, knowledge of the world, and intentionality that is still being developed within the first few years of attending college. *Good Arguments* seems better suited for students who are about to graduate and enter the adult world or for students who

are entering their graduate level of college. This is not to say that Seo's book should be kept within certain circles, but it should be read with the intention and purpose of elevating oneself and those around them.

To conclude, Seo did not intend for this book to be analyzed and viewed specifically through a Student Affairs lens. However, many lessons can be taken and applied to higher education, especially in orientation, transition, and retention. These are the areas where navigating disagreements, shifting points of view, and becoming oneself by finding a voice are all normal and even necessary for growth and development. In understanding this, we return to the idea that debate is one of the many ways that Student Affairs Professionals—specifically those involved in orientation, retention, and transition—can further teach college students to listen, be heard, and apply critical thinking skills.