

With a no2 pencil
delete the destruction
of literature in the
name of children es...

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Anna Quindlen

How effectively does the author present her argument?

Anna Quindlen's 'With a No. 2 Pencil, Delete: The Destruction of Literature in the Name of Children' is an argumentative essay lamenting and arguing against the censorship of books for children, whether it is by banning them from school libraries or by bowdlerizing extracts from a writer for use in state examinations for English. Her argument is powerful and emotive, and, overall convincing, but it could have been made much stronger if she had used other strategies.

One strategy she uses through the essay is tone: the very first sentence is a masterpiece of irony – “ You can imagine how honored I was to learn that my work was going to be mangled for the sake of standardized learning.” (519 - 520). Here “ honored” (a word with very positive connotations) and “ standardized learning” (normally seen in a positive light) are both juxtaposed with the ugly word “ mangled,” so that they are seen in an ironic light and the reader realizes that she was not honored at all. This opening sentence is also powerful because it contains in shortened form the essential nature of her whole argument: the rest of the essay goes into more detail about what Quindlen sees as the pernicious effects of censorship of texts for educational testing purposes.

One strategy is to use examples of the censorship that has been used. Her first example is the New York State Regents exam authorities who have censored passages for use in the Regents exams. She quotes examples of famous writers to show the power that the testing services have: “ Isaac Bashevis Singer, Annie Dillard, even Chekhov” have had their writing edited

“ so nonsensically that the work had essentially lost all meaning.” (520). This could be said to be hyperbolic and she uses this technique later when she writes that “ The New York State Education Department’s overheated guidelines are written so broadly that only the words “ the” and “ but” seem safe.” (520). This is clearly not strictly true, but is sheer exaggeration and might be seen to weaken her argument because it is so clearly exaggerated. Note in that sentence too the use of the emotive word “ overheated” – throughout the essay Quindlen deliberately uses very emotive words to persuade the reader that her argument is a forceful and good one. At this stage of the essay the evidence from the New York State Department’s editing of such famous writers is a very convincing and cogent piece of evidence; however, its force is weakened greatly, because later in the essay Quindlen admits that, in fact, for all her irony and exaggeration “ the education in New York have now backed down from their cut-and-paste-without-permission position, faced with a mob of distinguished writers.” (521). Thus, it turns out that one of the main targets of Quindlen’s irony and exaggeration has not actually gone ahead with its proposed editing: this weakness her argument, because the main part of her opening paragraph did not actually happen because of the pressure exerted by “ distinguished writers.”

The example she uses from her own experience is stronger and more telling, but, in the end, slightly alarmist and again does not contribute very positively to her overall argument. She writes, “ The folk at the Educational Testing Service, one of America’s most powerful monopolies,” (520) wanted to use an extract from one of her books as part of the Georgia End-of Course

tests and wanted to remove two words from the extract - “ slave’ and ‘ pornography.’ Quite apart from the question of whether this editing is justified, the point is that it did not actually happen, since Quindlen refused permission for her extract to be used with those words removed, but she does not reveal this until the end of the essay. The sentence quoted above is a good example of the way Quindlen uses emotive language to convey her argument: she uses “ folk” to suggest the inherent friendliness of the people who run the Educational Testing Service, but that word “ folk” becomes ironic when she describes the organization as “ one of America’s most powerful monopolies” – which makes the organization sound sinister and dangerous. Furthermore, to use her own phrase from elsewhere in the essay, the removal of those two words does not make the sentences “ almost unintelligible” at all, thus making the reader doubt the truth of her earlier assertion.

Quindlen’s use of sarcasm and irony reaches a peak in the middle of the essay. Having revealed the rationale behind removing “ slave” and “ pornography” (the desire to protect children from taking the test from “ controversial topics”), she writes a very powerful paragraph about the horrors and atrocities that children are exposed to in the media through the news. The paragraph drips with irony and deserves to be quoted at length: This [her interaction with the Educational Testing Service over the the editing of her extract] was in a week when students heard of another suicide bomber in Israel, the gunpoint abduction of a teen-ager in Utah and the arrest of an R & B star for appearing on videotape having sex with an underage girls. And they’re going to be distracted by the words “ slaves” and

“ pornography”? (520).

Quindlen’s sense of incredulity and her keen sense of irony come out in that final sentence: this is definitely an argument that appeals to our emotions. Her use of emotive words is part of her argument: she calls this editing “ a betrayal of kids by educators,” (520) and she uses the derogatory term “ pabulum” to describe the end-product of this editing process.

Towards the end of her essay, Quindlen turns her attention to books banned from American school libraries. Her technique is simple but powerful: she quotes from the guidelines of the New York State Education Department’s and then counters by mentioning great works of literature which would be proscribed according to the guidelines. The guidelines state, “ Does the material require a student to take a position that challenges parental authority?” (521) If it does then, *Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Romeo and Juliet* would all be considered unsuitable texts. Another guideline states, “ Does the material assume values not shared by all test takers?” (521) Quindlen is appalled by this notion, since she argues that it is one of great literature's functions to open our minds, to introduce us to new perspectives and to see the world through someone else’s eyes. For Quindlen, the whole point of literature is that it should challenge your values and make you see the world differently.

It is hard to disagree with Quindlen’s argument, but her appeal is largely emotional and she could have used different strategies to make her argument even more convincing. It does not help her that her two main examples – the New York Regents exam and the Georgia-End-of- Course tests are examples of censorship which did not happen. What happens in

other states? Can she generalize so much from just two states? This weakens her argument considerably. She uses quotation from her adversaries, but some quotations from other writers who agree with her intellectual position might have strengthened her argument. Sometimes in arguments it is useful to concede some ground to your opponent - Quindlen does not do this. It is well-known that some texts from the past are edited to remove archaic words that all students might be unfamiliar with or to simplify esoteric vocabulary that appears in the original. She does not consider the arguments for doing that, and her own argument might have been stronger and more convincing had she admitted that very occasionally, for the sake of clarity and readability, some older texts do have to be edited to make them suitable for educational testing: would she want a situation where Chekhov is never used for testing because he describes a society and objects which are simply baffling to a young, modern audience? Nor does Quindlen take into account the fact that these are tests, not lessons in schools where the teacher can provide information about little known vocabulary of old-fashioned social conventions.

As for her attack on books being banned from school libraries, it could be said that her argument lacks the necessary factual evidence to make her argument fully convincing. Exactly which books are banned and in exactly which states? From the way Quindlen writes a reader might be forgiven for thinking that *Catcher in the Rye* is banned from all school libraries all over America, but that is not the case. Therefore, from a logical point of view, there are times when Quindlen's exaggeration actually weakens her argument from an intellectual point of view.

In short, this emotional and passionate argument is very good at appealing to our emotions and in enlisting our sympathy against the censorship of texts. It is short, pithy, sarcastic, and ironic. However, Quindlen might have retained her passionate feelings for this issue, but added more facts and figures to make a truly convincing argument, and, by using quotations from writers who agree with her position, she might have established a greater sense of authority.

Work Cited

Quindlen, Anna. 'With a No. 2 Pencil, Delete: The Destruction of Literature in the Name of Children.' (2007). Pages 519 – 521 in Escholz, Paul, Rosa, Alfred & Clark, Virginia. *Language Awareness: Reading for College Writers*, 10th ed.. 2009. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. Print.