10.8: Threshold of Decision Making

**Threshold** refers to the degree of validity on the **Continuum of Certainty**, that the advocate must demonstrate before an audience will commit to a decision. Whether you are attempting to gain audience acceptance for a point of view or making a personal decision, you need to reach the threshold of acceptance of your audience. If you are attempting to make a decision on your own, you are the audience and are waiting until the argument is valid enough to reach your threshold.

**The Continuum of Certainty** is a measurement of how sure you are on a decision from totally uncertain to ninety-nine percent convinced. As we have seen, a good critical thinker is never 100% convinced of anything, that way they stay open-minded.

**THE CONTINUUM OF ARGUMENTATIVE CERTAINTY**

0%----------------25%-----------------50%-----------------75%---------------99%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Assertion</th>
<th>Inference</th>
<th>“Fact”</th>
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The Threshold is that point on the continuum where a person is sure enough of what is being argued to actually believe it or accept it. This is what we refer to as reaching the audience’s threshold or breakthrough point. They may not be totally convinced, but they are convinced enough to agree with the speaker’s point. Most audiences have a threshold with respect to granting adherence to a particular point of view being advanced.

The following chart shows different scientific levels on the Continuum of Certainty.

Different standards of proof are required by different courts in order to establish guilt/liability. Criminal courts demand the highest standard of proof of any court. This is because a finding of guilt can result in the accused losing his or her liberty.
In order for an accused to be found guilty, the evidence must establish beyond a reasonable doubt that he or she is guilty. There must be no reasonable explanation for what happened other than that the accused did it. If there is any other reasonable explanation, the accused will not be found guilty. This is not a simple concept either to explain or to understand, and it is likely that often juries make findings of guilt or innocence, without fully comprehending this important principle of criminal law.

Civil courts set the threshold as “preponderance of evidence.” In law, the term means “the greater weight.” A “preponderance of the evidence” means that the thing alleged is more likely than not to be the case. Unlike the “beyond a reasonable doubt” measure of certainty, the “preponderance of the evidence” measure means that if a jury sees a thing as 51 percent likely to be correct and 49 percent likely to be incorrect, they should decide that it is correct. This is how a civil court case is decided, like The People's Court or any of the other court shows on television.

10.8.1: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007

The critical thinker keeps the following in mind when arguing outside the courtroom:

No two people necessarily have the same threshold on the same topics. Some people will accept an argument if it can be proven that it would possibly be the best alternative, that it is potentially capable of happening. Some others must be shown that it is plausible, that it is believable and reasonable. Still others must be persuaded that it is probably the best alternative, that is likely to become a reality. Some will hold out for near certainty that it is sure to happen.

Audience adherence to a point of view is not possible until an advocate reaches the threshold of his or her target audience. Critical thinkers need to determine the threshold level of their audience for making a decision. They need to know what level of proof they will be required to meet before an audience will agree with them. The closer to certainty the threshold of the audience is, the better the argument the advocate will need in order to be able to reach it.

On some topics, people may have thresholds that cannot be reached at all. Dogmatic people and apathetic people are two such audiences. Dogmatic people because they are closed-minded. In argumentation, no amount of evidence, documentation, scholarship, or facts can produce a conclusion that is 100% certain. Generally, arguing with dogmatic people is unproductive and frustrating, because they already are certain about their point of view, and thus have no interest in being open-minded to new information, much less to an opposing viewpoint. A friend of mine was arguing global warming with another man. In frustration, he finally asked him, “Is there any amount of proof that I could show you that would convince you that global warming exists?” His reply was, “No.” This person was so dogmatic they had no
threshold that could be reached. Apathetic people generally have no defined threshold as a result of their “I don’t care” attitude.

Threshold will also vary depending on the topic. Let’s say that you have just received a proposal of marriage. What threshold do you hold for granting adherence to the proposal? Given different threshold levels you would need arguments of different strength before you would say, “Yes.”

- **Possibility** You would say yes just because you were asked. Here, if you just think it might work, you go for it.
- **Plausibility** You will need some demonstrated proof before saying yes like an engagement ring.
- **Probability** You would have to include assurances that the marriage would work before saying yes. A demonstration of love and guarantees of future security would be required.
- **Near Certainty** You will need to be certain you are making the right decision. A long engagement and contractual obligations will be needed in order for you to make up your mind.

**Threshold is affected by both psychological and physiological conditions.** For example, if you have just made a decision to purchase an expensive car, your threshold in regard to buying additional “lower priced” options will be lowered. What’s another $300 for a graphic equalizer, when you have just spent $40,000 on the car?

**Threshold can be lowered.** Critical thinkers recognize that ambiance, creating favorable conditions like right setting, right time, right place, right occasion, for argumentation to take place, is as important to the argument as it is to other forms of interpersonal communication. If you want a better chance for a yes when asking your boss for a raise, make sure you ask him or her when they are in a good mood, maybe just after you have done a great job at an assigned task. Creating the right kind of argumentative environment can actually soften or lower the threshold of an audience.

As Reike and Sillars write in their book, ARGUMENTATION AND THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS,

> “The decision-making process occurs every day and is ongoing. Arguments are applied to the entire spectrum of communication situations – from casual interpersonal or small group interactions to more formal situations of conference, debate, or negotiation. The decision-making process may require that you understand the special demands which some kinds of argumentation place on you because of their special rules.”

(Rieke, 1993)

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**Reference**