

PHL1030: *Thinking: Analysing Arguments*

Semester One, 2006
Monash University

Arguments

Definition of argument

An **argument** consists of a **conclusion** along with one or more premises; **reasons** for thinking that the conclusion is true.

Arguments

Argument should be distinguished from:

Assertion

I believe that capital punishment can never be justified, no matter how awful the crime. I am completely opposed to it.

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Explanation

On January 28, 1986 a leak in the joints of one of the solid rocket boosters attached to the Space Shuttle *Challenger* caused the main liquid fuel tank to explode 73 seconds after launch, killing all 7 crew members.

Identifying arguments

An important skill is the ability to take a text and extract the argument (or arguments).

To do that, you must be able to distinguish arguments from non-arguments.

Identifying arguments

How can you tell whether a text contains an argument or not?

If you can identify a conclusion – a statement for which a reason has been given – then you have identified an argument.

How can you identify conclusions?

Conclusion indicators

Words or phrases used to signal that an argument for a particular conclusion is being given are called conclusion indicators.

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Some examples:

Therefore

So

It follows that

Hence

Thus

For this reason ...

... must ...

... cannot ...

Conclusion indicators

Each year, thousands of seabirds are injured when they become entangled in equipment owned by fishing companies. Therefore, the fishing companies should assume responsibility for funding veterinary treatment for the injured birds.

This patient must have measles; she has a bright red blotchy rash on her face and neck, along with a high temperature, runny nose and a sore throat.

It can't be poverty that causes crime. Lots of people are poor and never become criminals.

Conclusion indicators

The presence of conclusion indicators is not a *guarantee* that there is an argument.

The same words and phrases also have different uses:

There are so many people at this party, I can't hear what you are saying.

Someone left the ice outside, so it melted.

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The same words and phrases also have different uses:

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Someone left the ice outside, so it melted.

In these examples, *so* and *cannot* are not being used to indicate the conclusion of an argument.

Looking for conclusion indicator words and phrases can still be a useful way of identifying conclusions.

Identifying conclusions

What if there are no conclusion indicators?

Identifying conclusions

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The key question is still whether the passage contains a *conclusion* – a statement supported by reasons.

If some of the statements in the passage provide reasons for thinking that another statement in the passage is true, then the passage contains an argument and you have identified its conclusion.

Identifying conclusions

One way to identify conclusions is by 'working backwards'

Given a statement that you think might be a conclusion, ask yourself: What would make me accept that statement? What evidence would I need to see in order to believe that?

Then look to see if you can find anything like that in the passage.

If you find it, you have identified the conclusion of an argument.

Identifying conclusions

Example

In order to determine car insurance premiums for a driver, insurance companies calculate various risk factors; as the risk factors increase, so does the premium. Certain factors, such as the driver's age and past accident history, play an important role in these calculations. Yet these premiums should also increase with the frequency with which a person drives. After all, a person's chance of being involved in a mishap increases in proportion to the number of times that person drives.

Identifying conclusions

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Quiz

Does the following passage contain an argument or not?

Magazine article: Antitheft devices do not protect cars against thieves. Insurance industry statistics demonstrate that cars with alarms or other antitheft devices are more likely to be stolen or broken into than cars without such devices or alarms.

- A. Yes, this is an argument.
- B. No, this is not an argument.

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A. Yes, this is an argument – CORRECT.

B. No, this is not an argument.

Quiz

Does the following passage contain an argument or not?

Often, accidents in the workplace occur because machine safety devices have been removed to improve productivity, or because workers have been given inadequate training or inadequate safety equipment.

A. Yes, this is an argument.

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Quiz

Does the following passage contain an argument or not?

... the difficult and most philosophically interesting question is how we should feel about death if it's the end. Is it a terrible thing to go out of existence? ... it might seem that death can't have any value, positive or negative, because someone who doesn't exist can't be either benefited or harmed.

A. Yes, the passage does contain an argument.

B. No, the passage does not contain an argument.

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A. Yes, the passage does contain an argument

B. No, the passage does not contain an argument.

Identifying premises

Arguments consist of two parts; a CONCLUSION for which REASONS are given.

If you can identify a reason or premise – a statement which supports another statement – then you have identified an argument.

How can you identify premises?

Premise indicators

Words or phrases used to indicate that a reason is being given in support of a claim are called premise indicators.

Some examples:

Since

Because

For

But

The reason is

There are several reasons ...

First ... Second ... Third

Premise indicators

Because it is a democratic principle that laws should have the consent of those affected by them, liquor laws should be formulated not by politicians but by club and restaurant owners, since such laws directly affect the profitability of their businesses.

People who are old enough to fight for their country are old enough to vote for the people who make decisions about war and peace. This government should therefore acknowledge the right of 17 year olds to vote, since the government clearly regards 17 year olds as old enough to fight.

At least one of the players in the orchestra must have made a mistake, because nothing else would have made the conductor grimace in the way she just did.

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Premise indicators

As with conclusion indicators, premise indicators do not guarantee that a reason for a conclusion is being given. Words and phrases used as premise indicators can also be used in other ways:

The window broke because James threw an empty beer bottle at it.

Since this government came to power, the status of women in our society has improved considerably.

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In these examples, *because* and *since* are not being used to indicate the premises of an argument.

Looking for premise indicators can still be a useful way of identifying the premises of an argument.

Identifying arguments

SUMMARY

If you can identify a statement for which reasons are given, you have identified an argument.

1. Look for conclusion indicators
2. Look for premise indicators
3. Ask: What kind evidence or reasons would lead me to accept that statement? Then see if you can find anything like that in the passage.

Quiz

Calling any state totalitarian is misleading: it implies total state control of all aspects of life. The real world contains no political entity exercising literally total control over even one such aspect. This is because any system of control is inefficient, and, therefore, its degree of control is partial.

Which one of the following most accurately expresses the main conclusion of this argument?

- A. No state can be called totalitarian without inviting a mistaken belief.
- B. To be totalitarian, a state must totally control society.
- C. The degree of control exercised by a state is necessarily partial.
- D. Systems of control are inevitably inefficient.

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