



CHAPTER 1

Identifying Arguments and Non-Arguments

1.1 Introduction

Critical thinking involves the assessment and evaluation of arguments—not just the kind of arguments you encounter in philosophy but the kind you come across every day. You need good reasoning skills in order to successfully reflect upon and respond to political commentary, newspaper reports, and mass media advertising. Confidence with these skills will help you discuss potentially lively issues in class, in the workplace, and even at the dinner table.

If you are able to identify and understand the arguments of others, and if you can analyze and evaluate these arguments to distinguish the good ones from the bad ones, and if you can construct your own arguments and defend them, then you'll have a powerful tool to assist you in doing whatever you do in your life. Accordingly, the appropriate readership for this little book of critical thinking is vast—ranging from first-year students at college and university to anyone who needs to learn how to carefully assess the views of others while defending his or her own beliefs.

This book is divided into two parts. The first six chapters may be grouped under a heading called the “art of critical thinking,” as they look at how best to use language to construct successful arguments for everyday reasoning. The second part, which consists of Chapters 7 and 8, may be called the “science of critical thinking,” since these chapters provide steadfast and exacting rules (much like mathematics) that reveal how precisely the bits and pieces of logic and language fit together.

While much of what is here may be new to you—especially the terminology—it is perhaps more appropriate to refer to this book as a *re-introduction* to critical thinking. This is because you are already thinking critically, and you've been doing it for quite some time whether you realize it or not. You need to critically reflect upon and think about what to believe in order to survive each and every day. This book will show you how to further develop and refine this capacity that you possess.

Tempted to cross the street but there's a car coming? You're engaged in critical thinking. Considering leaving for school later than you did yesterday? You will be engaged in critical thinking. Trying to figure out what to eat for dinner tonight? That's critical thinking. Wondering what to wear today given the gloomy weather forecast? Ditto. Even deciding to buy this book involved some degree of critical thinking. What is common in all of these examples is that you are making a decision and drawing a conclusion about what to do or what to think based upon various bits of evidence or prior knowledge or judgements. In other words, you formed an argument and acted from it.

Consider that at some point in your life someone taught you to look both ways to make sure that there were no cars coming before you crossed the road. Now that you're an adult, you might be more of a risk-taker (or a faster runner) and decide that you can beat the oncoming vehicle. Whether you stay or go, you're still making a decision based upon your past experience and knowledge. You think and judge quickly: you go from surveying what is going on around you to recognizing that there's a car approaching. You draw upon a generalization from years of previous road crossings and combine it with an assessment regarding how much risk you are currently willing to take along with whatever you know about the way things work in the world (e.g., what a massive piece of moving metal can do to the human body).

Suppose you go home tonight, open up your refrigerator, and see a sample of one of your favourite foods. You're hungry so you choose to eat it because you know that it will satisfy your hunger. You're thinking critically. Now imagine that you see that the food seems to have an unnatural neon sheen that wasn't there last month and an odour unlike anything you've smelled before. Now you choose not to eat it. Again, you're thinking critically.

Finally, consider why you chose to read this text. You may have a number of grounds for doing so—some that might be considered good and others that might be considered bad. Perhaps it is required for your class; perhaps it sounded useful; perhaps you wanted to impress your colleagues by showing them the types of books you like to read at the beach for fun. Whatever the reasons, you acted upon them, and here you are reading these very words. You chose on the basis of one or more reasons to get this book. You rationally moved from a claim (whatever it might be—and it doesn't matter how silly it might seem right now) to a conclusion based upon that claim. In other words, you developed an argument

and were thinking critically. Someone might be able to challenge the satisfactoriness of the reasons you put forward (e.g., if you try to read this book at the beach, you might fall asleep and get a nasty sunburn), but at least you have your reasons! When you do things or believe things without having *any* reasons (as opposed to having weak reasons), you are not thinking critically. You are just reacting without thought, judging without care.

Critical thinking is an important skill. Let's make that statement stronger: *Critical thinking is a necessary and essential skill.* At a minimum, it is a skill that forms the foundation of what you need for all your other interests. As a skill, it is something that needs to be practised and worked on in order to improve. Think about learning math. Can you learn how to do algebra just by reading a book? No, you have to try it for yourself. Can you learn to drive a car by just reading the student manual? If you think you can, please tell others when you are on the road so that they can get off it! Can you learn a foreign language without practice? Nein! Indeed, even the top athletes in the world must continually practise what they are best at.

Speaking of practice, there are many exercises here for you to try, both on your own and with a colleague. You will find answers to many of the questions in the Solutions to Chapter Exercises section. To start off, here is a fun test of your ability to present your thoughts to another person in a clear and logical fashion: try to think about all the steps that are involved in tying your shoes or putting on your jacket. Write them down and have a colleague follow your directions exactly. You'll soon find that even with something that you do every day, it takes a bit of work to get it right when explaining it properly to someone else.

For example, did you point out which shoe goes on which foot? Even if you know how to get it right, it is a challenge to get others to grasp what you mean as opposed to what you actually said or wrote (e.g., if you just wrote "Put on the jacket," your colleague might put it on backwards or put legs through the arms). Even if you know exactly what you mean, others will not understand you unless you lay out your meaning clearly and explicitly. This is especially the case in argumentation.

Some people don't think critically enough. They just accept without questioning, without exploring alternatives, without examining other options. However, just as Socrates told us that the unexamined life is not worth living, the unexamined argument is not worth accepting.

The purpose of this book is to show you how best to develop your critical thinking abilities so that you can succeed in presenting your point of view, improving it when and where necessary, and responding appropriately to people who disagree with you. In the end, you may find that the beliefs you now hold can rightly persuade others, or you may find that your own views need to be modified. Sometimes all that is required is a minor adjustment, but other times you may be convinced by others that what you once thought was right really isn't right after all.

1.2 Arguments, Not Fights

Cross the street; eat the food; take this course; vote for that person; support a worthy cause; defend an unpopular view. Critical thinking requires that you understand, analyze, and evaluate arguments (your own and those of others) in accordance with certain rules of rational thought. *To think critically doesn't mean just to be negative and criticize but to assess and evaluate reasons and then draw the appropriate conclusion.*

Argument: A set of statements in which some statements (premises) are used to support another statement (the conclusion).

Premise: A reason that is used in an argument to support a conclusion.

Conclusion: The part of an argument that the premises are meant to demonstrate by means of evidence or justification.

By **argument** we don't mean the yelling and screaming and breaking of expensive dishes variety of quarrels. Nor do we mean the name-calling and hurt feelings variety either. Instead, we mean something more like an examination of ideas and beliefs. When you argue, you are providing reasons as to why one should accept or reject a claim. An argument can be made for your own benefit—when you are deciding what to think or do—or for the persuasion of others.

In constructing arguments, you'll be compiling a series of claims that consist of reasons—which are technically referred to as **premises**—that (ideally) establish a belief, position, or judgement—your **conclusion**. When you are writing an argumentative essay, your ultimate goal is to construct an argument that convinces others to *accept your conclusion based upon the premises you've provided.*

Before you can construct an argument for or against someone else's position, you have to appreciate what that person is talking about. You would not be well thought of if you interrupted someone and said, "Hey Buddy, I have no idea what you're talking about, but I think you're wrong!" Unfortunately, as ridiculous as this sounds, this sort of thing happens regularly. Some people will reject an argument simply because they don't like its conclusion, without ever trying to understand the underlying reasoning. To be a good critical thinker, you must do your best to understand other people's claims and arguments.

Once you understand what is being argued, you need to identify each premise and the conclusion and see how they work together. *Only after you understand the entire argument can you go on to evaluate it and respond to it.* Obviously, you have to know what the other person is trying to claim—and what reasons they are giving in support of that claim—before you can determine whether they are right or not. Accordingly, you need to learn about the structure of arguments, how to standardize them, how to determine if the premises are satisfactory, and how to figure out whether they offer sufficient support for the conclusion. The guidelines presented here will be applicable to all sorts of arguments that you will encounter and construct.

Although arguing with another person usually involves some level of disagreement, this is not necessarily a negative thing; it can give you a chance to learn from each other or to work together to find some common ground. For example, you might appear to disagree about a particular topic only because you are using the same words but meaning something different by them. For instance, if you are

disagreeing with a colleague over whether the rich should pay more taxes, you might in fact just mean different things by the word “rich.” Perhaps a rich person to you is someone who makes \$100,000 per year, whereas your colleague thinks it refers to someone who makes \$500,000.

When arguing with someone, you might agree on the evidence but draw different conclusions from it. You might think the evidence (e.g., the name of the gentleman) points to Mr. Weiss being from Austria, while your colleague thinks the evidence shows that he is from Germany. Once the matter is settled, you might examine who has made the mistake and why. It has been said many times before, but it is true nonetheless, that you can learn from mistakes—be they yours or someone else’s.

If all you did was argue and disagree with people, you wouldn’t have too many friends. However, since argumentation is an important feature of our intellectual lives, in the following pages you will (1) learn how to recognize arguments from other types of speech, (2) examine a variety of different types of arguments, (3) learn about how language is used in creating these arguments, and (4) learn how to evaluate them. By learning all of this, you will also be learning how to create your own arguments.

So let’s get started!

1.3 Critical Thinking and Reasoning

Arguing isn’t just about disagreeing. It isn’t just a matter of saying “You’re wrong!” or “You’re right!” *When evaluating someone’s argument, you have to provide an argument in return.* You have to provide premises and a conclusion. You have to say, “I disagree with you because ...”; otherwise, you are not offering an argument—and not being very helpful either! After careful reflection and examination, you may discover that the other person isn’t wrong, or you may even find that you can help him or her make his or her argument stronger by making suggestions about what to add, remove, or alter. For example, if a child told you that all birds are black, you might point to a blue jay and say, “There’s a bird that isn’t black, so you shouldn’t say ‘all birds,’ you should say ‘some birds.’” In this case, you would be helping the child learn something new about the world rather than merely telling the child that he or she is wrong. That’s how simple and useful critical thinking can be!

Since critical thinking involves thinking (which shouldn’t be a surprise to you), it’s an activity. Let us repeat that: *critical thinking is an activity.* When you read or hear something critically, you cannot be passive; rather, you must be engaged with the words of the author or speaker. You may sometimes find yourself in agreement with a person’s conclusion although your reasons aren’t the same as theirs. Or you may believe that their conclusion is false and that their reasoning is flawed too. In either case, you’ll have to present your own argument to show why you disagree.

Rational Persuasion:

The use of an argument to cause another person to believe a conclusion.

Emotions

Although arguing with other people is about **rational persuasion**, being rational does not mean we must deny that we are human beings with feelings and emotions. But what is important here—in the context of critical thinking—is that you don't let your emotions get in the way of your reasoning. You are not going to convince (that is, persuade) others to feel the same way you do just because you happen to have certain emotions. It doesn't make sense to claim that one person should be happy or sad simply because someone else is. However, when your emotions start to stir, try to determine why you are feeling them. That is, if you are feeling angry or afraid, ask yourself, "Why?" If you are feeling excited or sad, why? By looking inward and examining your own emotions, you may be able to discover their cause and turn them into reasons for your argument.

Perhaps you are angry about a court decision that you heard about on television. What is it that is making you upset? There is the objective reality—the facts of the matter—and then there is your evaluation of those facts. In this case, your view might be that the judge made a bad ruling and the convicted criminal is not being punished enough or at all for a horrendous crime. Fine. But what exactly is motivating your assessment that the ruling was bad? Do you believe in "an eye for an eye" and that, therefore, this person is not being treated justly? Do you believe that a person who commits bodily harm deserves more punishment than a person who steals the life savings of the elderly? Do you believe that the criminal in question remains a threat to society? Why? Questions like these can help you to focus your attention on determining why you first had this feeling of anger.

Intuition

Critical thinking is not about intuition. Intuition is that vague feeling that is captured by saying "I have a gut reaction to this" or "my instinct tells me that..." You may be hard-pressed to articulate why you feel the way you do when you attribute a feeling to an "intuition." And if *you* can't articulate the "why," then no one else can evaluate the feeling, and you cannot use it to rationally convince others. That you have a gut reaction or feeling about something does not guarantee that another person will share that feeling with you. Stating, for example, "I felt that there was just something odd about what was going on there" only reveals your own reaction to the situation and not how another person should think about it. Try and analyze your feelings and see if there is something more concrete and specific that you can express or explain.

The failure of intuition to be satisfactory in convincing others is why you should always avoid using the expression "I feel" when what you really mean is "I believe." That is, when you are attempting to rationally persuade someone, never say, "I *feel* this is the right answer." Say, "I *believe* this is the right answer." Your gut feeling may be enough to persuade you of a conclusion, but it is not by

itself enough to persuade others. Saying “I feel” doesn’t carry the same influential weight as “I believe.” Notice also, that sometimes it might even be wiser to not even say, “I believe that this is the right answer” but to instead say, “This *is* the right answer.” But you will read more about this later on in the book.

Common Sense

Critical thinking is also not just a matter of appealing to “common sense.” Common sense may refer to basic logical principles that tell us, for example, that an object can’t be green all over and not green all over at the same time or that a person cannot be in two different places at the same time. But what you think may be just a matter of common sense can be and often is wrong. Common sense tells you that the sun moves around the earth, but you know that’s not true. Common sense tells you that you should try to steer out of a skid in your car, when in fact you should steer into it. Common sense tells you to try to swim out of a riptide, but in fact you should swim with it until it dissipates.

What was common sense 100 years ago might not be so today. For example, back then it was “obvious” that women shouldn’t have the right to vote. This historical reality suggests that some of what people take as common sense now may be seen as superstitious or ignorant in the future. Indeed, many people believe that you will get stomach cramps and drown if you go swimming right after eating. Wrong. Many believe that you will catch a cold if you are physically cold (no, colds are a virus) or that stress is the most common cause of ulcers (no; and although this was a very commonly held view—even by medical science—ulcers were discovered a few years ago to be most often caused by the bacterium *Helicobacter pylori*). These commonsense views are all false, as are the following widespread medical myths:

Finger nails and hair grow after death. This is false; the soft skin around the nails and hair shrinks after death, giving the illusion of nail and hair growth.

Shaved hair grows back faster, coarser, and darker. This is false; the characteristics of newly grown hair change over time, regardless of whether the hair has been shaved.

People only use 10 per cent of their brains. This is false; MRI scans show that no part of our brain is ever inactive.

Reading in dim light causes permanent eye damage. This is false; though reading in dim light might cause some temporary eye strain, after rest the eyes will be back to normal.

Eating turkey makes one especially drowsy. This is false; there is no greater amount of tryptophan (the “sleep chemical”) in turkey than in other meats (the drowsiness that many experience after a hearty Thanksgiving meal is the result of a number of factors, not turkey-eating itself).

What an individual considers common sense may depend upon a number of factors including age, gender, culture, social norms, religion, educational background, personal bias, tradition, perception, scientific claims, and so forth. The claim that is being made here is not that your common sense is always wrong; rather, that what may be common sense to you may not be for the person next to you. If you think something is just “common sense,” then it should be easy to show it by means of a successful argument.

Arguments vs. Unsupported Claims

When you say, “I like the current mayor’s views,” “It’s probably going to rain tomorrow,” or “The Leafs are going to win the Cup this year!” without offering any reasons for what you’ve said, you are providing only an **unsupported claim**. An unsupported claim is a statement that is offered without any supporting argumentation or evidence. Unsupported claims are extremely common, and they can be useful, since in many contexts it’s entirely reasonable to accept a claim without requiring an argument. Suppose you’re at a restaurant and your server tells you that the steak is on special; it would be rather ridiculous to demand further evidence before believing the server’s claim! Unsupported claims can also tell us about what a person likes and believes. If you claim that “Chocolate ice cream is the best,” there’s no need for me to ask for further support; you’ve told me something about yourself that doesn’t require any evidence.

Unsupported claims can be harmless, as in “I thought the movie was great!” but they can also be perilous. Imagine that someone offers the claim that “Capital punishment is wrong” without any support. Also imagine that you happen to agree with this declaration. You might therefore conclude that this person is extremely wise and someone with whom you should become friends. However, although you both have the same belief, the reasons behind the belief may be vastly different. You may believe that capital punishment is wrong because (you believe) it is cruel and unusual punishment (and notice you’ve provided an argument now, so your claim is no longer unsupported). Yet, if pressed to make an argument, your new best friend might say that capital punishment is wrong because it is too good for the criminal! In its place, your friend might believe that criminals should be strung up and tortured for the rest of their natural lives and that when they are about to die from old age, their lives should be prolonged for even more cruelty. Your new friend might believe that since violent criminals aren’t concerned over how much suffering they cause their victims, we shouldn’t execute them painlessly. “Capital punishment is wrong because it is too merciful!” Not quite what you assumed your new best friend thought, is it?

The lesson to be learned about unsupported claims is simple. If someone makes an unsupported claim about an important topic, such as capital punishment, you should ask, “Why do you think that?” In other words, *try to turn an unsupported claim into a conclusion of an argument by asking “Why?”* “Why is

Unsupported Claim:

A statement offered without any supporting evidence or argument.

capital punishment wrong (or right)?” “Why do you think that actor is the best?” “Why is that candidate not suitable to hold public office?” Only after the person has supplied you with his or her justification will you have something to evaluate. The person’s premises might not be the best—in fact, they might be downright absurd—but at least now you have an argument that you can work with. And as such, you can begin to assess whether you should agree or disagree based upon the reasons provided. Any reason, no matter how silly, is more useful than no reason.

1.4 Premises and Conclusions: The Building Blocks of Arguments

Arguments have two parts. One part is the point of view, evaluation, judgement, or belief that the argument is attempting to demonstrate. This is the conclusion. The conclusion requires reasons, evidence, foundations, or supporting claims; these make up the other part of the argument and are known as premises. The premises and the conclusion are complete statements that are either true or false. Not sentences: **statements**. Statements are also referred to as “propositions.” For example:

It’s cloudy outside and it’s cold, but the forecast for tomorrow calls for clear skies.

This is one sentence with more than one statement. It has three statements: (1) It’s cloudy outside. (2) It’s cold. (3) The forecast for tomorrow calls for clear skies. All of these are individually capable of being true or false.

Here’s another sentence that has two distinct statements in it:

Dogs can make good pets and cats can make good pets.

The word “and” is joining the statements “dogs can make good pets” and “cats can make good pets” together.

Let’s build up an argument. Here’s a distinct complete statement:

Dogs can make good pets.

Here’s another:

Cats can make good pets.

Both of these statements can be true; that is, “Dogs can make good pets” can be true and so can “Cats can make good pets.” Of course, both of these can be false as well. Further information may be required to determine if either one is true. You will read about this in Chapter 6. Let’s add a bit more detail:

Dogs can make good pets and cats can make good pets. John and Jane would like to have a good pet. Therefore, John and Jane should consider getting a dog or a cat.

Statement: The expression of a single idea or concept; can be either true or false. Also known as a “proposition” or a “claim.”

This is not the world's most exciting argument, but it will do. The argument has three premises that logically flow to the conclusion. (1) Dogs can make good pets and (2) cats can make good pets. (3) John and Jane would like to have a good pet. Therefore, John and Jane should consider getting a dog or a cat.

One thing you might notice is the word “therefore.” This word is commonly used to indicate the conclusion of an argument. In formal logic, this word has its own symbol: ∴

Indicator Words

Conclusion Indicator:

A word or phrase that signals that a conclusion is being offered.

There are many **conclusion indicator** words and many **premise indicator** words. Use these the way you would use route markers on a map; they provide direction and will guide you through arguments. Indicator words help your colleagues follow the flow of your argument and so are extremely useful. Look for them in other people's arguments and include them in your own.

Premise Indicator:

A word or phrase that signals that there is a premise being offered.

Since the economy has yet to improve *because* no one is spending money, *I conclude* that it would not be wise to take out a large student loan.

This long sentence forms an argument because it has premises and a conclusion. The premise indicators “since” and “because” and the conclusion indicator “I conclude” make the argument's reasoning obvious. Be careful though because a few indicator terms have other meanings as well. For example, “I've been here since 8 a.m.” uses “since” as a measurement of time passing.

You already use, or are familiar with, many indicator words, even if you didn't know what they were technically called. Here's a list of a few common ones. (Note: the terms “premise” and “conclusion” and “P” and “C” would be replaced with the appropriate statements.)

<Premise Indicator> Premise

<Since> P

<Because> P

<For the reason that> P

<Given that> P

<Conclusion Indicator> Conclusion

<So> C

<Thus> C

<Hence> C

<It follows that> C

<Consequently> C

<Therefore> C

Premise <Conclusion Indicator> Conclusion

P <shows that> C

P <leads us to believe that> C

P <suggests that> C

Conclusion <Premise Indicator> Premise

C <was proven by> P

C <was established by> P

C <follows from> P

You also use other phrases such as “I think that” or “in my view” to indicate premises and conclusions. If there are no indicator words in the passage that you are examining, it is often useful to insert them yourself to see if an argument “pops out.” This is a handy trick when you know that you are dealing with an argument but are not sure of its exact logical structure (i.e., you are not sure if a particular statement is a premise or a conclusion). Here is an example where the conclusion is obvious even though there are no indicator words present:

Television networks are changing over to high definition digital transmissions. You should get a digital receiver or a new television soon.

If you were not certain that the second sentence is the conclusion, you might put in an indicator word such as “because” or “therefore” or “since” and see what makes common, grammatical, and logical sense. Which of the following sounds better to you?

1. Since television networks are changing over to high definition digital transmissions, you should get a digital receiver or a new television soon.

or

2. Television networks are changing over to high definition digital transmissions, since you should get a digital receiver or a new television soon.

Surely the first version represents the correct logical progression. Indeed, it just sounds better too.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, you already possess critical thinking abilities. Another ability you already have is the ability to recognize how words provide information about the sequence of a group of statements. Consider:

Afterwards, I ordered a cheesecake. I had a delicious gourmet hamburger at that new pub the other night.

This sounds a bit awkward, doesn't it? If you just stopped after the first sentence, your colleagues would likely be confused. They might ask, “After what?” However, because you know this feature of proper sentence construction, you might automatically reverse the sentences so that people can follow your train of thought:

I had a delicious gourmet hamburger at that new pub the other night. Afterwards, I ordered a cheesecake.

This next example shows you how simple words help establish the flow of events:

He woke up. He then had a shower. Finally, he got dressed before heading off to work for the remainder of the day.

Here, you know the first thing happened, then the next thing, and then the next, because the words create a timeline. The word “then” indicates that something happened before, namely, that the person woke up before stepping into the shower (and it makes sense that it would happen in this order!). In the last sentence, the words “finally” and “before” make the ordering of events explicit. Moreover, because this ordering of events is not unusual, we accept it as stated. That is, if the sentence was “He headed off to work for the remainder of the day before he got dressed,” you would pause and most likely read the sentence again to see if you read it incorrectly or the author had made a mistake.

Here’s a longer example for you to play with. The following sentences are scrambled. Rearrange them so that the passage makes sense.

1. He then added three provinces to the country.
2. As the driving force behind Confederation, John A. Macdonald was appointed the new country’s first prime minister, subsequently winning the election.
3. Such fundamental contributions deserve our recognition.
4. Certainly, if we Canadians can have a statutory holiday for Queen Victoria, we can have a special day for the Father of Confederation.
5. These were as follows: Manitoba became a part of Canada in 1870, followed by British Columbia in 1871 and Prince Edward Island in 1873.
6. Later, after the formation of the Dominion of Canada on July 1, 1867, he was knighted.

The correct order is 2, 6, 1, 5, 3, and 4:

2. As the driving force behind Confederation, John A. Macdonald was appointed the new country’s first prime minister, subsequently winning the election.
6. Later, after the formation of the Dominion of Canada on July 1, 1867, he was knighted.
1. He then added three provinces to the country.
5. These were as follows: Manitoba became a part of Canada in 1870, followed by British Columbia in 1871 and Prince Edward Island in 1873.
3. Such fundamental contributions deserve our recognition.
4. Certainly, if we Canadians can have a statutory holiday for Queen Victoria, we can have a special day for the Father of Confederation.

While you might not be directly aware of how you figured it out just by looking at it, ordering these sentences required you to see the connections between various terms (such as the sequence of several dates) and how some words reference others or have particular meanings that only make sense when they are in a certain order. This is another example of you being a critical thinker. Proper order is important in argumentation so that people understand your reasoning process.

Making Arguments User Friendly

As you may have noticed, *the conclusion and premises can be located anywhere within a written or spoken argument*. The first statement might be a conclusion and the last statement might be a premise. The conclusion might have a premise before it and one after it. This can happen, for example, when you tack on another reason at the end, as in the following argument:

Physiotherapy is very useful in speeding up the healing process. This is why physiotherapy should be covered by health care rather than people having to pay for it out of their own pockets. Oh, and in addition, it is actually cheaper both in the short term and long term to have more people go to physiotherapists than for them to wait until they need expensive surgery.

Not everything that is present in an argumentative passage or essay is necessarily a core part of the argument. If all you had in your paragraphs was premise, premise, conclusion, it would be very monotonous. By adding background comments, personal asides, introductory remarks, or even a joke or two, you can make the paragraph more interesting. Of course, how appropriate this is depends upon who your intended audience is and whether you are putting together an informal talk or formal essay. Extra information has been added to the argument below, to fill it out:

I really enjoy travelling. I've been many places so I can offer a few bits of advice. I had to learn some of these the hard way! If you are planning on visiting Europe this summer, it is a good idea to learn a few basic foreign words and expressions because there are so many opportunities to travel, and if you are lost, you increase your chances of getting help by being able to communicate with the people there. By the way, I found the people in Eastern Europe to be the most helpful.

The extra bits of detail just make it more readable. Nevertheless, it should be clear that the person is trying to convince you that you should learn a few foreign words if you are travelling to Europe.

If you're unsure whether or not a person is making an argument, ask yourself whether he or she is trying to convince you of anything. The way to determine this is to look for the main point. Ask yourself, "Okay, what is going on here? *What is the main point or idea here?*" Every argument has to have one. Once you find the main idea, you've very likely found the conclusion of the argument!

1.5 Identifying Statements and Arguments

Things such as questions (“How are you today?”), jokes (“A man walks into a bar. He should have ducked.”), commands (“Close the door.”), and emotive expressions (“Ouch!”) all have an important role to play in human communication, but they are not means to rationally persuade others. The goal of an arguer is to convince you of something. He or she wants to prove something to you. One way to make you accept his or her view is to threaten you with physical violence if you don’t. While this might be an effective method (that is, you don’t want to disagree with someone who is telling you he or she will pop you in the jaw if you don’t see eye to eye with him or her), it’s not good arguing. Indeed, a threat of violence is but one example of bad arguing that you will see later on in Chapter 6, concerning fallacies—but right now it is important to make sure that you can become an expert at playing “spot the argument!” No prizes will be awarded; however, with practice, you will become a little quicker in picking out arguments from non-arguments.

Read the following lighthearted passages and try to determine if any of them are arguments. (More serious ones will be presented later.) If you don’t think it is an argument, then try to determine what it is.

1. Because my dog doesn’t talk to me, and given that my vegetables don’t talk to me, it follows that my dog is a vegetable.
2. It has been very dry and hot for the past few months, and there is a strong breeze coming from over the forest hills. There is also a smoky smell in the air. Therefore, Gouda cheese is good for you.
3. The leaders of the Western world sat down together for a big bowl of ice cream.
4. If everyone in the southern hemisphere jumped up and down right now, then the earth would move to the right.
5. Would you kindly remove your boot from my backside?
6. The universe does not revolve around you, it revolves around me!
7. The universe is big.
8. Put your clothes back on please.
9. Mmmmm!
10. Bunny rabbits and beer go well together, since both are full of hops.
11. It is true that it is either a Blix or a Phregerel. It is also true that it cannot be a Blix. So it must be a Phregerel.
12. “Arghei blh!” is the first sentence of the author’s latest novel—225 pages of randomly selected letters from the keyboard. The book costs \$18.95.
13. It is a very stupid idea for a book. If I were to review it, I would say it is a bunch of !@#%\$.
14. It took a while, but the coroner was able to determine that the cause of the man’s death was that he stopped breathing for a very, very long time—most likely due to the fact that his head was missing.
15. Why don’t people use fake money to pay for plastic surgery?

You are not going to be told just yet what the answers are. However, here is a hint. There are four arguments above. Go back and check.

Did you find four?

Good.

Wait.

Did you pick the right four?

You will find out momentarily, but first you need to learn a bit more about the differences between arguments and non-arguments. It is only when you have identified that you are dealing with an argument that you can then proceed to analyze its various components and evaluate whether you should accept it or reject it. If it is not an argument, although the sentence or passage may still be quite interesting and useful, it is not an example of rational persuasion.

Non-Statements

As mentioned earlier, not all sentences are statements. Some sentences contain multiple statements, while other sentences contain no statements at all. Remember that a statement makes a claim that is either true or false. In this section, we'll examine some common types of sentences that may look like statements but in fact are not. Since statements are the building blocks of arguments, we need to be able to identify statements in order to identify arguments.

QUESTIONS AND RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

Questions are not meant to be true or false claims intended to convince one of anything. To say a question is true or false is to say something odd indeed. "Will you take the garbage out today?" is just a question, not a "true" question. If you replied that you will take the garbage out and do in fact take it out, then that statement (that is, "I will take the garbage out") is what is true.

Sometimes people phrase statements as if they were questions. These are known as **rhetorical questions**. *A rhetorical question is used when the person believes that the answer is already known and it is perceived as being obvious.* So, really, the person isn't waiting for your response at all. Rhetorical questions such as "It really doesn't matter if I come to class today, does it?," "What good is having a law if you cannot enforce it?," "Why should I care about others if they don't care about me?," and "You really don't want me to answer that, do you?" should all be treated as statements that can be true or false. They should be rewritten so that their meaning is clear: "It doesn't matter if I come to class today." "Laws that cannot be enforced are not good laws." "People don't care about me, and I am not going to care about them." "You won't like the answer if I respond to your question."

Rhetorical questions are problematic because they can, and often do, backfire. They often take the form "Everyone knows that *such and such* is true, right?" To claim that everyone knows something is a pretty strong statement to make and

Rhetorical Question:

A question that has an implied answer and therefore functions as a statement.

also an easy one to refute since you only need to find one person who doesn't know that such and such is true (perhaps even you!). Usually, people who try to claim that "everyone knows" do so as a strategic manoeuvre to intimidate the listener into thinking that somehow he or she is in the wrong (and is stupid as well) because so many people know "better."

COMMANDS

Commands are not statements because they are not capable of being true or false. Commands telling someone to take out the garbage or to make sure that his or her shoes are tied are authoritative requests, not statements of fact. Rules and laws are also examples of commands, but one has to be careful. If the command is "Do the dishes," it is neither true nor false. But if the command is "You *should* do the dishes," then this is not a command but something that is debatable—it is a statement you can argue over (namely, whether or not it is true that you should do the dishes).

Although the command "Do not park your car here" is neither a true claim nor a false one, you can still debate whether someone has good reason to obey it. For example, is the law arbitrary? Is the law discriminatory? Is there a large fine for disobeying? These all provide (good or bad) reasons for drawing a particular conclusion, and so they will be true or false—but the original command itself is neither true nor false.

EMOTIVE EXPRESSIONS

Ouch! Ugh! Wha?? Argh! Whew! Grrr! Brrr! Bah! Blah! Ow!

When people utter these sorts of expressions, you can understand and appreciate their sentiments. They are vocalizing some feeling or state of being that is positive or negative. But consider this: if someone said, "Ouch!" to you, would you agree or disagree with him or her? Would you say, "I don't think so. I think you are mistaken"? Of course you wouldn't. You don't evaluate these sorts of communications as being correct or incorrect or true or false. Merely expressing one's own emotions is not an attempt to argue. If a person is whimpering in pain, she is not saying anything right or wrong. She is just expressing how she feels.

Now, looking back over the 15 examples above, are any of them just vocalizations of someone's emotional state?

Found it? Right. It's number 9. Yeah!! Woo-hoo!!!!

Okay, that's enough cheerleading emotive expressing for now. 😊

(And perhaps you notice the smiley face at the end of that sentence. It also represents an emotive expression.)

Thankfully, not everything that comes out of your mouth involves trying to make a point or convince someone of something. When you slam your hand in the car door, a passerby is not going to disagree with the words that come out of your mouth. He or she might help you, feel sorry for you, laugh at you, or tell you not

to use such foul language in public, but the noise that escaped your lips was not an argument. Indeed, unlike when you wish to construct an argument, these sorts of expressions are often immediate and are vocalized without any prior thought.

Be careful. You don't want to confuse these emotive examples with similar sounding expressions such as "Super!" "Dazzling!" "Fantastic!" "Awesome!" "Magnificent!" "Boring!" "Horrible!" "Electrifying!" Although these particular terms express a person's attitude towards something (or some event or person or what-have-you), and although it would seem odd to think that "super!" is true or false, in fact in certain contexts saying "super" is a shorthand way of saying "I believe that thing (or event or person or what-have-you) is wonderful." You may actually agree or disagree with the view that the person is conveying with the term, but, again, you will need to make further inquiries.

Non-Arguments

Not every passage that contains statements is an argument. Even if a passage contains nothing but statements, it may not be an attempt to support a conclusion on the basis of premises. In this section, we'll examine descriptions and explanations, which are easily mistaken for arguments if you're not looking carefully.

DESCRIPTIONS

Descriptions of events are not arguments. *Descriptions are declarations concerning how the world was, is, or will be*; they can be either true or false. "Sarah graduated from university in June 2012." "Today was eight degrees warmer than the average temperature and the sun was shining." "The truck is available in four colours: black, red, blue, or white." Merely describing something is not arguing, because it does not involve using premises to support a conclusion. Of course, descriptions can be part of an argument, such as when a person complains:

The movie *Meet my Pets* was 84 minutes long including the credits (description).
Most people would complain about such a short film (unsupported claim).
However, when a comedy film is not funny at all it seems to make time slow down to a crawl (unsupported claim). So, *Meet my Pets* was too long—by about an hour (conclusion).

Here, the description of the movie's length is a statement that is used as a premise in an argument, though the description is not an argument on its own.

EXPLANATIONS

When people offer **explanations** as to why the sun rises (or, to be more correct, why it appears to us that the sun rises), or how a computer program works, or how planes are able to stay aloft, or how someone contracts an illness, they are trying to show why something is the way it is. We experience many things in the world, and, due to our capacity for curiosity and wonder, we want to understand how those things

Description: A statement or set of statements concerning how the world was, is, or will be.

Explanation: An attempt to show why some fact is true by appealing to contributing factors.

Factor: A fact or event that causes or influences another fact or event.

come about. “Why can I see stars that are billions of kilometres away yet have to wear glasses to read street signs?” “Why do dogs sometimes wag their tails when they are sleeping?” “Why do people in horror movies always run back into the darkened house where the killer is?” In answering questions such as these—questions about why things are the way they are—an explanation identifies **factors**, or causes.

Suppose that you and I are on the same stationary train and are having the same experience of non-motion. The fact is that the train is not moving. I don’t have to prove this to you. But what is the cause? What are the factors behind the fact? Perhaps there is an obstruction ahead.

Consider the fact that a person is dead. I don’t have to kick him a few times to prove to you that he is dead. We both see that his head is located three metres away from his body. What we want to determine is what led to his death. Maybe it was an accident, maybe it was murder. What clues do we have to help us establish the fact that this person’s death was intentional? We are not arguing that he is dead; rather, we are trying to explain the cause of his death. We want to figure out what the factors are that led to the fact that we are witnessing.

The logical progression of a causal explanation is always from the observation or the fact to the causal factors that explain it. This is the exact opposite of an argument, where the arguer moves from the reasons to the conclusion. There may be a “conclusion” that there is a stopped train or a dead body, but those are the givens; we want to find out how they came about—and that is why it is an explanation and not an argument. Or consider when the instructor says to the student, “Why are you late?” and the student replies, “Because I couldn’t find a parking spot.” Here the student’s answer is an explanation. She is providing the causal factor. Both the student and the instructor can see by the clock on the wall that she is late.

Of course, *not all explanations are scientific or causal in nature.* Another use of an explanation might be when someone is confused, say, about the meaning of a word. In Chapter 2 you’ll learn about different types of definitions, but simply put, if a person doesn’t understand a word, you would offer an explanation of it. You wouldn’t provide an argument to try to convince him or her of its proper meaning. You might explain the word by simply giving an example of what it refers to. Imagine you are asked, “What is a hound?” and you say, “It’s a type of dog that was historically used in hunting.” But perhaps this is not clear, and so you might offer another example by mentioning a specific breed such as a beagle or whippet. In doing so, you are explaining the concept “hound.” You are not arguing that such and such should be considered a “hound.”

Recognizing Arguments and Other Expressions

Let’s go through the light-hearted questions from earlier in the chapter and see what sorts of expressions they are.

1. Because my dog doesn't talk to me and given that my vegetables don't talk to me, it follows that my dog is a vegetable.

This is an argument. There are two premises (1) My dog doesn't talk to me. (2) My vegetables don't talk to me. There are two premise indicators ("because" and "given that"). The two premises are being used to try and establish the (very silly) conclusion that the person's dog is a vegetable. This example shows the use of indicators.

2. It has been very dry and hot for the past few months, and there is a strong breeze coming from over the forest hills. There is also a smoky smell in the air. Therefore, Gouda cheese is good for you.

This is an argument. The first two sentences are the premises and the conclusion is identified with the use of the indicator word "therefore." One might have expected that the person was developing an argument that perhaps there is a forest fire, given the premises mentioned, but that is not the case; the conclusion has nothing to do with the premises. This example shows that even bad arguments are still arguments.

3. The leaders of the Western world sat down together for a big bowl of ice cream.

This is a just a silly description.

4. If everyone in the southern hemisphere jumped up and down right now, then the earth would move to the right.

No evidence is offered to convince you of its truth, so in this context it is an unsupported claim.

5. Would you be upset if I asked you to kindly remove your boot from my backside?

This is an example of a question.

6. The universe does not revolve around you, it revolves around me!

This sentence contains two statements, neither of which is supported. We might, however, interpret this as an argument if we rephrase it as follows: "The universe revolves around me, so it does not revolve around you." Note also that the use of an exclamation mark does not make the claim any more effective. Saying something loud or more than once doesn't make it any truer.

7. The universe is big.

This is an unsupported claim. Furthermore, the term "big" is pretty vague and open to subjective interpretation. How big is big?

8. Put your clothes back on please.

This is a command. It is telling you to do something. It is neither a true nor a false statement.

9. Mmmmm!!

This is an emotive expression. The person is merely vocalizing his or her pleasure and is not trying to convince you of anything. The person would be trying to convince you if he or she went on to state “Because it is yummy, you should try it too.”

10. Bunny rabbits and beer go well together, since both are full of hops.

This is an argument. The conclusion that “bunny rabbits and beer go well together” is based upon the premise that bunny rabbits and beer have something in common (i.e., one contains “hops” as an ingredient and one “hops” around). The word “since” is a premise indicator.

11. It is true that it is either a Blix or a Phregerel. It is also true that it cannot be a Blix. So it must be a Phregerel.

This is an argument. The conclusion indicator word is “so.” The point of this example is that you do not need to know what the subject matter of an argument is in order to see its logical structure. The structure of this particular argument goes like this: A or B. Not B. So A.

12. “Arghei blh!” is the first sentence of the author’s latest novel—225 pages of randomly selected letters from the keyboard. The book costs \$18.95.

This is a description of a very strange book.

13. It is a very stupid idea for a book. If I were to review it, I would say it is a bunch of #\$\$@vq!!

This is a group of statements. Notice that the person does not give evidence for the claim that the idea for the book is stupid, so that claim is unsupported.

14. It took a while, but the coroner was able to determine that the cause of the man’s death was that he stopped breathing for a very, very long time. This was most likely due to the fact that his head was missing.

This is an explanation. You don’t need to prove that the man is dead. Rather, you need to determine the cause of his death. And you should probably give the coroner an award for stating the obvious.

15. Why don’t people just use fake money to pay for plastic surgery?

This is a rhetorical question. The person is facetiously suggesting that people should use fake money for plastic surgery.

1.6 Chapter Exercises

Exercise 1.1

TRUE/FALSE QUESTIONS

1. This sentence contains an argument. True or False?
2. Premises are supposed to supply support for a conclusion. True or False?
3. When someone gives an argument (in the philosophical sense), he or she maintains that because the argument's premises hold, its conclusion should be granted. True or False?
4. If the premises are satisfactory and if the conclusion is true, then the argument must be good too. True or False?
5. In the argument "The library is a useful place because you can find lots of information there," the statement "You can find lots of information there" is the premise. True or False?

Exercise 1.2

Can you identify which of the following passages are arguments? If you find an argument, what are the premises and the conclusion? Are there any indicator words?

1. After being told that I did not have the authority to order more stock, I was starting to get a little worked up. I paused a moment and then looked my boss straight in the eye. "Sir, I cannot believe that you didn't know I was being left in charge of the entire store while you were on vacation in Hawaii."
2. If you want to make your canned drinks cold fast, put them in a bowl of ice water and add a handful of salt. The salt will lower the freezing temperature of the water and will cause your drinks to cool down rapidly.
3. I have a patio deck that needs replacing. It is about three metres by six. The original wood was not sealed properly by the previous owners. The wood is rotting away, so it needs to be taken off and replaced. The same goes for the wooden railing too.
4. The spark that started World War I was the assassination by Serbian nationalists of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914. Austria issued an ultimatum to the Serbian government to participate in the conviction of the assassins. When this demand was rejected, Austria went to war. Russia had a treaty to help Serbia and joined in the fight. Germany, on the other hand, had an agreement with Austria and declared war on Russia. France joined with Russia, and then Britain allied with France and declared war on Germany.

5. The Canadian city of Winnipeg, which has a population of over 500,000 people, has the honour of being the coldest city on Earth. In the winter (which seems to last for most of the year), it regularly goes to -40 degrees. Growing up, I remember walking to school in the bitter cold. The moisture from my eyes would form tiny icicles on my eyelashes. The coldest days were also the sunniest, however. Only when there was a blizzard would classes be cancelled.
6. The lawyers pick jury members on account of their ability to be fair. I told them that I could not honestly say how I might respond if I was put in a situation where I might have to sacrifice the life of a loved one, and I think that this is good enough to conclude that I would be fair. Accordingly, I expect to be chosen for the jury.
7. There seem to be vast climate changes affecting the planet. There are hotter summers in one place, colder winters in another, and wetter springs in others. These events tell us that to just use the term “global warming” is wrong.
8. In the world of professional sports, there is a lot of money at stake. Athletes will try anything, including cheating, to win. Coming in second is not an option for some athletes who know that winning means fame and fortune.
9. If you are planning on visiting Europe this summer, it is a good idea to learn a few basic foreign words and expressions because there are so many opportunities to travel, and if you are lost, you increase your chances of getting help by being able to communicate.

Exercise 1.3

In your local newspaper, find a short letter to the editor that you believe contains an argument. Make a copy of the original and then cut the sentences out and give them to a colleague after you randomly sort them. Can your colleague put them back in the original order?

Exercise 1.4

Imagine you are in the advertising business. Create a print ad for a new product (e.g., a car, a soft drink, a movie, a vacation spot) using an example of five different types of communication from those discussed above. For instance:

Do you want a new car? (question) Buy this one (command). It is very stylish (unsupported claim). It is available in a two-door and a four-door model (description). You surely don't want to be seen driving something less impressive than this, do you? (rhetorical question).

Exercise 1.5

What is the main point in the following passages?

1. Let me tell you why I will not take that professor's philosophy course this year. First, it's too hard for me. I've seen the textbook and have no idea what it is about, even after reading the introduction. The class is early in the morning, and you know how I have a hard time waking up. So I'll miss some classes for sure. I'll be stressed out about whether I would pass or fail and that will just make matters worse.
 - a. Whether I ought to take the philosophy course.
 - b. Whether I will take the philosophy course.
 - c. Whether I will be obsessed by the philosophy course.
 - d. Whether I find philosophy too difficult.

2. It will take decades to recover from pollution caused by the BP oil leak off the coast of the United States in 2010. Offshore drilling must be stopped. Everything will be affected. Jobs will be lost, tourists will stop visiting, and some wildlife will be wiped out for good. This is all the result of the never-ending consumer desire for more and more oil.
 - a. Whether offshore oil drilling must be stopped.
 - b. Whether the BP oil leak was indirectly caused by consumer demand.
 - c. Whether the US coast line will take decades to recover.
 - d. Whether the US economy will take decades to recover.

3. This year's National Hockey League draft lists a large number of goalies available. Many NHL teams need good goalies this year. If you have a lousy goalie, then you are sure not going to win many games! I bet a lot of goalies will be drafted early on.
 - a. Whether there are teams in the NHL that need goalies.
 - b. Whether there are a large number of goalies available in the player draft this year.
 - c. Whether a lot of goalies will be chosen early.
 - d. Whether a good goalie will help a team win more games.

4. Most people attending or teaching at university are interested in being challenged by new ideas. Some of these ideas are wild and crazy, but others are more significant and can be considered quite radical in terms of being a threat to what is commonly accepted by society. I just wanted to let you know what to expect this year when you go. Some students and professors you will interact with on campus will be radicals.
 - a. Whether people are interested in new things.
 - b. Whether you'll find radical thinkers at university.
 - c. Whether students are interested more in new ideas than professors are.
 - d. Whether common views need to be challenged more in university.

5. Television shows set in ancient Greece or medieval Europe can never be good without all the blood and violence. Without blood and violence, these shows will not capture what the times were really like. Sure the violence we are shown is often shocking, but these were very brutal periods of human history. If the actors just said, "Ouch" or fell down and played dead, viewers would laugh and turn the shows off. Sometimes the violence can be way over the top and offensive to some, but given the nature of these shows, if you don't like the overall setting, you won't like the violence, and vice versa.
 - a. Whether shows with offensive characteristics can appeal to those who don't like violence.
 - b. Whether television shows set in ancient Greece or medieval Europe would be good television series without the inclusion of violence.
 - c. Whether television shows set in ancient Greece or medieval Europe would be believable without the inclusion of violence.
 - d. Whether television shows will succeed if they contain content that will be offensive to some.
6. State three different premise indicator words or phrases.
7. State three different conclusion indicator words or phrases.
8. Form an argument using two different indicator words or phrases.
9. Form an argument without using any indicator words or phrases.
10. What should you notice about the word "argument"?

Exercise 1.6

STATEMENT GENERATOR: MORAL ISSUES STATEMENTS

		a	b		c	d
1	It is	Always	Obligatory	for	Adults	to get on a bus without paying if no one is looking.
2		Usually	Right		Children	to keep a promise even if it hurts someone's feelings.
3		Sometimes	Permissible		Community members	to eat meat.
4		Hardly ever	Wrong		Family members	to allow a 17-year-old to have a friend sleep over in the same room.
5		Never	Prohibited		Friends	to read material that others consider offensive.

Randomly select a number between 1 to 5 for each lettered column in the table above. (You may wish to write down numbers on scraps of paper, place them face down and select one at a time, returning the paper you have selected to the pile for the next column and your next selection. In this way, you can draw the same number more than once.) Each number corresponds to a word or phrase to create a statement dealing with some ethical issue. Without any support, this statement is just an opinion. Reflecting upon it, ask yourself, “Why?” Then provide reasons for the claim so that you have now created an argument. In this first use of the statement generator, do not be concerned about how good your reasons are. The important thing right now is to just create arguments.

For example: You draw the numbers 2,2,1,4. This creates the unsupported claim:

It is usually (from column a) good (b) for adults (c) to allow a 17-year-old to have a friend sleep over in the same room (d).

Now you want to provide possible reasons for this claim. You ask, “Why?”

Seventeen-year-olds are old enough to make their own decisions. If adults don’t allow them some degree of control over their lives, they’re likely to become frustrated and resentful. Therefore, it is usually good for adults to allow a 17-year-old to have a friend sleep over in the same room.

You have created an argument!

Now you can do the same to generate statements that might come up in a workplace.

STATEMENT GENERATOR: BUSINESS STATEMENTS

		a	b		c	d
1	It is	Always	Obligatory	for	CEOs	to receive large bonuses.
2		Usually	Right		Bosses	to make a living wage.
3		Sometimes	Permissible		Employees	to make environmental concerns their top priority.
4		Hardly ever	Wrong		Family members	to hire a friend over a stranger.
5		Never	Prohibited		Friends	to reveal corporate secrets.

1.7 Postscript

Each chapter of this book flows from the previous one. So make sure you understand the concepts from Chapter 1 before moving on to Chapter 2 and understand Chapter 2 before moving on to Chapter 3, and so forth.

With this first chapter, you were presented with a few different types of oral and written communication. While many everyday utterances are interesting and helpful, they are not always contextually relevant here. Thus, by themselves, unsupported claims, emotive expressions (which reveal how a person feels), sincere questions (which are neither true nor false as opposed to true or false statements that are dressed up as rhetorical questions), commands, jokes, and explanations are not part of rational persuasion. But being able to identify when they occur is part of critical thinking. You might wish to criticize a person for making a bad joke or an inappropriate comment, but that is best left for another time. In what follows in the remaining chapters, you will be working with passages that are intended to rationally persuade others by means of well-constructed arguments.