Argument Advice

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What is an Argument? (after Dr Kenny Pearce)

> By 'argument' in philosophy, we mean an argument in premiss-conclusion form. *Therefore*, (1) gather a **conclusion** and a set of its **premisses** for a philosopher's argument, (2) make the argument's deduction **valid** (i.e. logically connected), and (3) judge whether the argument is **sound** (i.e. all the premisses and conclusion are true) or **unsound** (some premiss is false and so is the conclusion).

Every essay question for this course will ask you to **critically evaluate** an argument contained in one of the historical texts we are reading. An argument is just a collection of reasons (the premisses) for endorsing some particular claim (the conclusion). These reasons are always offered to some particular audience—that is, there is someone the author is trying to convince. When an essay question asks you to critically evaluate—analyze and explain—an argument, this means that you will need to defend your own position on whether the audience should be convinced. In order to do this, you will have to get clear on how the argument is supposed to work. In evaluating an argument, follow these three steps:

Step One: Identify the Conclusion and its Premisses

hom is the author (philosopher) trying to convince? Of what is the author trying to convince them? Often (but not always) the conclusion of the argument will be identified with words such as 'therefore', 'so', or 'hence'. Sometimes the author will say explicitly who the audience is; other times you will need to gather this from the text and its context.

For the conclusion, you will reformulate explicit premisses, which are the premisses that are directly stated in the text. Sometimes (but not always) they may be identified with words like 'since' or 'because'. They may come either before or after the conclusion.

Step Two: Make the Argument Valid

n argument is **valid** if the premisses guarantee the conclusion. In other words, if the premisses are true then the conclusion must be true. The premisses and conclusion of a valid argument might be true and they might be false, but if the premisses are true then so is the conclusion. Conversely, if the conclusion is false then at least one premiss is false.

When you take logic next year, you will learn formal, mathematical methods that will allow you to tell whether very complicated arguments are valid or not. For now, we'll stick to very simple arguments that can be seen to be valid without these advanced techniques.

Here are a few tips to help figure out whether an argument is valid:

- If the conclusion contains a new concept that is not anywhere in the premisses, the argument is not valid.
- If you can make up a story where all the premisses are true and the conclusion is false, and you can tell your story without contradicting yourself, the argument is not valid.

- Arguments that apply a universal principle to a particular case are valid (but only if the principle is absolutely universal). For instance, this is a valid argument:

  P1. Socrates is human. [particular case]

  P2. All humans are mortal. [universal principle]

  C. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

- Arguments of the form 'If A then B; A; therefore B' are valid, so called '*modus ponens* [mode that affirms]'. For instance, this is a valid argument:

  P1. If Socrates is human, then Socrates is mortal.

  P2. Socrates is human.

  C. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

You want to reconstruct the argument from the text in a way that makes it short, simple, and obviously valid, like these examples. In order to do this, you will usually have to **paraphrase** what the philosopher has written. Sometimes, you may also need to add one or more **implicit premisses**. An implicit premiss is something the philosopher **assumes**, but doesn't actually **say**, that is needed to make their argument valid. For instance, if someone said, "Socrates is human, so he's mortal," we would know that that person was assuming that all humans are mortal, even though this was not stated. When adding implicit premisses, you should clearly indicate that you are adding an implicit premiss and explain why you think the philosopher would accept that premiss.

Making the argument valid is the most difficult part, but is also very important. If an argument is valid, that means that anyone who accepts all the premisses must accept the conclusion or, in other words, anyone who wants to avoid the conclusion must reject at least one premiss. This is crucial in determining whether the argument is convincing. Those convinced call the argument **sound**, if all the premisses can be **true**.

Step Three: Is the Argument Sound and Convincing?

The audience should be convinced by the **soundness** of the argument only if the argument is valid and they have good reason to accept all of the premisses (truths). This means that, in evaluating the argument, you should think about which premiss might be most vulnerable to attack, and how the premisses might be attacked. If you think the argument is ultimately convincing, you will need to examine all of the premisses to be **true** and show that the audience must accept all of them. If you think the argument is not convincing, then you need to identify one premiss and show that the audience need not accept it. In other words, for the audience or opponent, the unaccepted premiss is judged to be **false**, and thus the argument is to be **unsound**. **This should be the main thesis of your essay, and should appear in a thesis statement in your first paragraph, and again in a conclusion in your last paragraph.**

In evaluating whether the argument is convincing, it is a good idea to consider one or more specific objections that an opponent might give. All the above essay questions expect a specific opponent and ask you to engage with that opponent's objections. But even if your chosen essay question in future does not do this, it is always a good practice to consider some objections to your thesis.

References for Logic Training

How to formulate an argument? Have a look at, for example,

1. Jay Rosenberg (1996) *The Practice of Philosophy: Handbook for Beginners* [If you cannot access the book, do ask me. I will scan and distribute more chapters that you request. The Chinese translation (2018) should be available at library and online for your purchase.]

2. Wilfrid Hodges (2001) *Logic: An Introduction to Elementary Logic* [If you buy a book on logic, make sure that the author's answers to logic exercises are included. Hodges's book is great in this sense. See below the quotation therefrom.]
3. John MacFarlane (2021) *Philosophical Logic: A Contemporary Introduction* [This is more technical and advanced than the above two books, whereas it is useful and new.]
4. forall x (P.D. Magnus, Albany, 2005)
5. Openproof Project (Stanford)
6. Logic Matters (Peter Smith, Cambridge)

Hodges (2001, 36):

> An *argument* [...] is what a person produces when he or she makes a statement and gives reasons for believing the statement. The statement itself is called the conclusion of the argument (though it can perfectly well come at the beginning); the stated reasons for believing the conclusion are called the premisses. A person who presents or accepts an argument is said to *deduce* or *infer* its conclusion from the premisses.

Rosenberg (1996, 19): **Rule One** (the point is *so* important that there is no Rule Two)

> Any opinion for which one can give reasons is admissible in philosophy, *but* once a claim has been supported by an argument, subsequent criticism *must* then engage the argument.

11 Top Tips for Successful Essay-Writing by Dr Brian Carey (Number 7 will surprise you!)

1. Don't be afraid of the first-person pronoun.
2. Express complex ideas in simple language.
3. Define technical terms.
4. Use 'signposts': remind the reader what you've done, and what you're about to do.
5. Avoid history lessons and biographies.
6. Get straight to the point. A shorter essay with only relevant content is better than a longer essay with irrelevant content.
7. Your conclusion should be **almost a mirror of your introduction.**
8. Don't bite off more than you can chew.
9. **Always stick to the question that you are being asked.** This is the number one reason why students lose marks in essays and exams.
10. When you get to the end of your essay, make sure you've done what you said you would in your introduction.
11. **Seven words** that will guarantee you extra marks in every assessment you write from this day forth: **'In this essay, I will argue that...'**

For example, in the introduction:

In this essay, I will argue that Deep Space 9 (DS9) is the best Star Trek series of all time. I will begin in Section 1 by identifying two key measures by which a TV series ought to be judged – (1) quality of writing (2) quality of cast. In section 2, I will argue that DS9 ranks above all other Star Trek series on each of these measures. In Section 3, I will consider and reject the objections that DS9's storylines were predictable and repetitive, and that most of its cast members were scenery-chewing hacks. Section 4 concludes.

Essay Structure: Intro, Body Paragraphs, and Concl.

1. **Introduction**: the first paragraph should be up to 10% of the word count, and articulate two components:
    i. Your thesis statement by answering and paraphrasing the essay question in your words ('In this essay, I will argue that...');
    ii. Announcing your essay structure of each section or step. ('In section 1, Berkeley's argument is reconstructed... In section 2, I will consider an opponent's view...').
2. **Body paragraphs**: section (1) *analyze* a philosopher's **argument in premiss-conclusion form** with quotations and citations, (2) *posit* **an objection to a premiss**, and (3) *deliberate on* **your response** to the objection. In these three sections, show your understanding of the meaning of '**argument**', composed of premisses and the conclusion, and engage with a *critical analysis* of at least one garbled premiss in your response to the raised objection.
3. **Conclusion**: the final paragraph can mirror the introduction by paraphrasing. Signpost it as a conclusion ('In conclusion', 'To recapitulate', etc.).
4. **References**: don't forget bibliography! Citations and references (bibliography) ought to be consistent with one of the referencing styles, such as Chicago Manual of Style.