

WRITING STRATEGIES

Argument (Continued)

As was mentioned in the previous unit, the assumptions included in the arguments most often suffer from the following common flaws:

1. Weak analogy
2. Confusion of correlation with cause-effect
3. Overgeneralization of the feature of a small sample to a larger group
4. Immutability of things over time
5. Overlooking the role of intervening variables or other possibilities
6. Lack of facts and figures or the source from which they are obtained

Note: Every time an argument refers to a study or survey, it can be challenged in regard to the sample used in the study. In such cases the requirements that the sample should meet in terms of sample size and sample representativeness are not explicitly motioned. To question the study included in such arguments follow the model below:

The first problem with the argument is that the writer refers to **a study** but does not how many people took part in the study reported. **As you know, in research studies the greater the number of the people in the sample, the more reliable and valid the findings are.** Maybe in this study only ten people participated; hence, the findings of such a study are neither reliable nor valid.

Even if it is assumed that enough people took part in the study, there is still another problem with the sample. **In a research study, the findings can be generalized to the target population if the sample used is representative of the concerned population in terms of age, sex, social class, culture, etc;** however, in this argument there is no evidence to show whether the sample used was representative of the target population. It follows that the findings of this study cannot be applied to the members of the population without reservations.

Sample Argument

The following appeared in a newsletter offering advice to investors.

"Over 80 percent of the respondents to a recent survey indicated a desire to reduce their intake of foods containing fats and cholesterol, and today low-fat products abound in many food stores. Since many of the food products currently marketed by Old Dairy Industries are high in fat and cholesterol, the company's sales are likely to diminish greatly and their profits will no doubt decrease. We therefore advise Old Dairy stockholders to sell their shares and other investors not to purchase stock in this company."

This excerpt from an investment newsletter cites a recent study in which 80% of respondents indicated a desire to reduce their consumption of high-fat and high cholesterol foods, then points out that food stores are well stocked with low-fat food products. Based on this evidence the newsletter predicts a significant decline in sales and profits for Old Dairy (OD), a producer of dairy products high in fat and cholesterol, and advises investors not to own OD stock. I find this advice specious, on several grounds.

First, the excerpt fails to assure me that the survey results accurately reflect the desires of most consumers, or that the results accurately predict consumer behavior. Without evidence that the respondents' desires are representative of those of the overall population where OD products are sold, it is hasty to draw any conclusions about future food-buying habits from the survey. Moreover, common sense informs me that consumers do not necessarily make food-purchase decisions in strict accordance with their expressed desires. Thus, as it stands the statistic that the newsletter cites amounts to scant evidence that OD sales and profits will decline in the future.

Secondly, the fact that low-fat foods are in abundant supply in food stores does not necessarily indicate an increasing demand for low-fat dairy products or a diminishing demand for high-fat dairy products. Absent evidence to the contrary, it is quite possible that consumers are buying other types of low-fat foods but are still demanding high fat in their dairy products. For that matter, it is entirely possible that food stores are well stocked with low-fat foods because actual demand has not met the demand anticipated by the stores.

Thirdly, even assuming an indisputable consumer trend toward purchasing more low-fat dairy products and fewer high-fat dairy products, the newsletter concludes too hastily that OD profits will decline as a result. OD can always raise the price of its dairy products to offset declining sales, and given a sufficient demand OD might still turn a profit, despite the general consumer trend. Besides, profit is a function of not just revenue but also expenses. Perhaps OD expenses will decline by a greater amount than its revenue; if so, then OD profits will increase despite falling revenues.

In sum, without additional information prudent investors should refrain from following the newsletter's advice. To better assess the soundness of this advice it would be helpful to know the following: (1) the demographic profile of the survey's respondents; (2) the extent to which consumer desires regarding food intake accord with their subsequent behavior; (3) the extent of OD loyalty among its regular retail customers who might continue to prefer OD products over low-fat products even at higher prices; and (4) the extent to which OD might be able to reduce expenses to offset any revenue loss resulting from diminishing sales of OD products.

Exercise

Directions: Read the following argument and do the following:

- Identify the conclusion
- Locate the assumptions
- Reveal the weaknesses of the assumptions

Argument

The following appeared as part of an article in a health and beauty magazine.

"A group of volunteers participated in a study of consumer responses to the new Luxess face cream. Every morning for a month, they washed their faces with mild soap and then applied Luxess. At the end of that month, most volunteers reported a marked improvement in the way their skin looked and felt. Thus it appears that Luxess is truly effective in improving the condition of facial skin."

HOMEWORK

Write an essay on the following argument.

From a letter to the editor of a city newspaper.

"One recent research study has indicated that many adolescents need more sleep than they are getting, and another study has shown that many high school students in our city are actually dissatisfied with their own academic performance. As a way of combating these problems, the high schools in our city should begin classes at 8:30 A.M. instead of 7:30 A.M., and end the school day an hour later. This arrangement will give students an extra hour of sleep in the morning, thereby making them more alert and more productive. Consequently, the students will perform better on tests and other assignments, and their academic skills will improve significantly."