Strategic Management

Lecture 8

Fundamentals of Critical Thinking

Learning Objectives

Introduce the students to the following:

- How to argue a case
- How to make oneself clear
- How to assess arguments made by others

Topics

- What do you do when you argue a case?
  - Claims and conclusions
  - Reasons and inference
  - Titles as questions
  - Support for a conclusion
- How will you make yourself clear?
  - Vagueness and definition
  - Assumptions
  - Ordering and indicating
- What case have others made?
  - Counter-claims
  - Selection and evaluation of sources

What do you do when you argue a case?

Claims and Conclusions

Consider the following examples

- A student of geography who has to write about:
  - Iceland and the European mainland
- Someone studying American literature, who has chosen this topic:
  - Political commitment in the novels of John Steinbeck
- An analyst writing in the field of business studies, on this subject:
  - The takeover of Cadbury by Kraft Foods
- A student of psychology who is presented with this:
  - The importance of attachment in language acquisition

What do you do when you argue a case? …

Claims and Conclusions

- None of the titles in the previous examples is a question, so none of them asks you to argue a case
- Each phrase sets up an association between two objects, P and Q: for example, Iceland (in particular) and Europe (in general)
- This is how we advance knowledge—by investigating the association between two objects
- In the physical sciences, the hope is that the association between P and Q might be so strong as to amount to a law; in the social sciences and humanities, the association is more open to question
- These objects might be places (Iceland); people (John Steinbeck); institutions (Cadbury); ideas (political commitment); social behavior (language acquisition)—they can be anything at all

What do you do when you argue a case? …

Claims and Conclusions

- It is implied in each of the previous titles that the two objects referred to are associated in some significant way. We can easily make the phrases into sentences, and the sentences into claims
  - Iceland is a Nordic country nearly 1,000km distant from the European mainland
  - Steinbeck is a writer who made his political position quite clear
  - Cadbury was an iconic British brand when it was bought by US giant Kraft Foods
  - Attachment to a primary carer is important for a child's acquisition of language

What do you do when you argue a case? …

Claims and Conclusions

- What was implicit in the phrases is now explicit in the claims. Claims on their own do not carry a lot of weight—though, perhaps, the more well known the claimants are, the more weight their claims carry
- You may have heard of these claimants:
  - Communism fits Germany as a saddle fits a cow. Joseph Stalin, Soviet leader, 1944
  - The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it. Oscar Wilde, Irish writer, 1891
  - There is only one really serious problem in philosophy, and that is suicide. To assess whether life is worth living or not is to answer the fundamental question of philosophy. Albert Camus, French existentialist writer, 1942
  - The noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees is the high road that leads to England. Dr. Samuel Johnson, English writer, 1763
  - No man is good enough to govern another man without that other's consent. Abraham Lincoln, 16th US President, 1854
  - Whoever lights the torch of war in Europe can wish for nothing but chaos. Adolf Hitler, German Nazi Party leader, 1935

What do you do when you argue a case? …

Claims and Conclusions

- Lincoln's claim is weighty because of who he was and because we all believe in some sort of democracy now
- Wilde's claim is weighty, as well as witty, because, though his observation would seem to be flippant, he has put his finger on precisely what it is that historians do
- Hitler's claim is weighty because, within ten years, he had lit the torch, and had indeed brought chaos down upon everybody's heads
- Each of these claims is, in effect, the conclusion—or main claim— of an implicit argument
- Dr Johnson might have said: 'Scotland is a wet, wild, grim sort of place, whereas England is a thriving, balmy, lush arcadia'. His line about the high road to England would then have been his conclusion—the punchline with which he hoped we might agree

What do you do when you argue a case? …

Claims and Conclusions

- A claim might be a definition, such as this: An expert is one who is familiar with some of the worst errors that can be made in his field, and who succeeds in avoiding them. Werner Heisenberg, German physicist, 1969
- It might be a recommendation: In politics, if you want anything said, ask a man. If you want anything done, ask a woman. Margaret Thatcher, UK Conservative politician, 1975
- Or it might—perhaps like most claims—be a simple expression of opinion: The man who is a pessimist before 48 knows too much; if he is an optimist after it, he knows too little. mark twain, US writer, 1902
- A single claim is generally not persuasive on its own. Indeed, even a barrage of claims may not be persuasive: Franklin D. Roosevelt is no crusader. He is no tribune of the people. He is no enemy of entrenched privilege. He is a pleasant man who, without any important qualifications for the office, would very much like to be President. Walter Lippmann, American journalist, 1932

What do you do when you argue a case? …

Reasons and inference

- Consider this quote:
  When a dog bites a man, that is not news, because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, that is news. John B. Bogart, US journalist, 1918
- Bogart explains that only what is unusual is news.
  And he is, also, reasoning:
  P, and so Q (or P → Q)
  A man biting a dog is unusual (P), so it's news (Q)
- When the association between two claims, P and Q, is an inference of one from the other (P, and so Q) it is fair to say that we have an argument
- Explanation by itself may not equate to argument; but it may well be that explanation will play a part in argument

What do you do when you argue a case? …

Reasons and inference

- Read this excerpt from Barack Obama's January 2010 State of the Union Address.
  From the first railroads to the interstate highway system, our nation has always been built to compete. There's no reason Europe or China should have the fastest trains, or the new factories that manufacture clean products. China is not waiting to revamp its economy. Germany is not waiting. India is not waiting. These nations aren't playing for second place. They're putting more emphasis on math and science. They're building their infrastructure. They're making serious investments in clean energy because they want those jobs. Well, I do not accept second place for the United States of America.
- Was he arguing or explaining?

What do you do when you argue a case? …

Reasons and inference

- He was certainly trying to persuade his listeners to think or to do something—and this is the conventional definition of an argument. He drew the conclusion—he inferred, and he wanted his listeners to infer—from his claims about the United States' past, and other countries' present policies, that the United States should invest in its infrastructure
- A claim-as-conclusion might come before a claim-as-reason, or it might follow it
- See this warning, which is just about the shortest argument that can be imagined:

What do you do when you argue a case? …

Titles as questions

- Our original four titles could easily enough be reworded as questions:
  - To what extent can Iceland be called a European country?
  - In what sense did John Steinbeck write from a decided political position?
  - Why did the takeover of Cadbury by Kraft Foods prove to be controversial?
  - How important for language acquisition is attachment to a primary carer?
- When you ask a question (what is the precise relationship between P and Q?), you have a fixed target at which to aim; if you set yourself to write all you know, or all you can find out, about P and Q, your target is a pair of birds flying away from you in different directions
- By breaking down a question into sub-questions, you can begin to set the parts of your overall argument into a meaningful order, and give direction to your thinking

What do you do when you argue a case? …

Support for a conclusion

When you argue a case, you do the following:

- frame or reframe your title as a **question** that you may need to refine;
- make **claims** the most significant of which is your **conclusion**;
- present these claims as **reasons** from which you **infer** the conclusion;
- take care not to infer more than the reasons **imply**;
- and thus ensure that your reasons **support** the conclusion that you draw.

How will you make yourself clear?

Vagueness and definition

- Consider this safari park sign

- Despite being unclear, the intended warning can be guessed – yet, the word "Danger", at the beginning, might have cleared up any confusion

How will you make yourself clear? …

Vagueness and definition

One of the first things to be done, once you have settled on your title, is to determine the scope of your argument. Let us take this title, for example: “Should we welcome the development of space tourism?”

- At the outset you would need to define:
  - the focus of the enquiry: whether you will concern yourself with the brief history, the economics, the ethics, or the technological and environmental effects of space tourism, or all of these;
  - the time span of the enquiry: whether you will start by looking at the very beginnings of space travel, or only of privately funded space travel; and how far into the future you will gaze;
  - the geography of the enquiry: whether you will investigate developments only in the United States, or in Europe, or elsewhere, or everywhere

How will you make yourself clear? …

Vagueness and definition

To save a title, and therefore perhaps an argument, from terminal vagueness you need to define your target: first, identify it; then, very likely, reduce it in size. (A small target is easier to hit than a big one if you stand up close to it.)

- Ask not why banks failed in 2008; ask why Lehman Brothers failed, and then look at whether other banks failed for the same or similar reasons
- Ask not what can be done to keep the world supplied with fresh water; ask what is being done to ensure supplies in the oil-rich, water-poor states of the Arabian peninsula, and perhaps whether this can be done elsewhere

How will you make yourself clear? …

Assumptions

- Look at this example:
  As the traveler who has once been from home is wiser than he who has never left his own doorstep, so a knowledge of one other culture should sharpen our ability to scrutinize more steadily, to appreciate more lovingly, our own.
  Margaret Mead, American anthropologist, 1928
- Is the Dane who has been to the Alps necessarily 'wiser' than one who stayed at home on the plain? Is this a fair assumption to make—that travel broadens the mind? Whether it is or not, at least we know where Mead is 'coming from', so we can understand why she draws the conclusions she does, even if we do not agree with them
- It is only a matter for worry when an assumption is implicit, for then it is, in effect, a missing reason—and it may be that missing reason that contributes most to the conclusion. Until that reason is made explicit, the argument is incomplete and may fail to persuade

How will you make yourself clear? …

Ordering and Indicating

- Since a claim by itself will seldom be very persuasive, its significance may have to be explained; so, a more developed argument will look like this:
  Claim (P) → Explanation (E) → Inference (Q)
- I have separated the claim and the explanation in the following argument, but, in practice, reasons and explanations may well overlap:
  [P] Private property is acceptable only as a concession to human weakness, not as something desirable in itself. [E] People work more and dispute less when goods are privately owned than when they are held in common. [Q] Private property is, therefore, a necessary evil.
  Adapted from R.H. Tawney, British economic historian, 1926

What case have others made?

Counter-claims

- Every new piece of writing—however short—should be seen as a chance to add to understanding, by however little
- What you say will be different—not new, perhaps, but different— because it will be you who is saying it; and you who is selecting and ordering the reasons to support the claims you make
    - It may differ from the received opinion on the subject; from a common assumption; or from the position taken by an institution or individual, for example:

Common claim	Your claim
Schooling is vital if children are to be socialized and receive a rounded education.	Education is vital, but not schooling; home education has its advantages for some.

What case have others made? …

Counter-claims

Why present Claim A (or a fully developed Argument A) at all? Why not just go straight into the case that you want to make? There are good reasons for considering what others have said first:

- it gives your reader(s) a point of reference, a sort of ‘story so far’;
- a context in which to weigh your Argument B;
- it shows that you acknowledge that there are other points of view than your own;
- in a comparison with Argument A (which you show to be defective in some way), your own (well-supported) Argument B is given extra weight;
- and your Argument B leads straight into your intermediate or main conclusion

What case have others made? …

Counter-claims

Of course, there may be more than two ‘sides’ to the question; and you might want to include a number of perhaps quite diverse claims in a composite A argument. When you write a dissertation, or thesis, for example, you will very likely present Argument A in the form of a review of literature, where you give an account of the views of several authors who have made contributions to the position that you seek to counter

What case have others made? …

Counter-claims

Each time you find a reference in a book, journal, or website that is relevant to your question make a note of the title, the author's and publisher's names, the date and place of publication, and the page number, or URL, so that you can be sure to find it again, and make full reference to it in your own work.

Minutes spent making a note of these details when you first find the reference will save you hours of chasing later.

What case have others made? …

Selection and evaluation of sources

When you write—on any subject—you are going where many have gone before. You owe it to your own argument to look at the argument of at least one of your predecessors in the field.
Where will you look? You will look in books, in journals, and on websites—and in each case you will expect to find the name of the author, or authors, concerned; the name of the publisher; and the date of publication. Without these, you must judge the source to be unreliable, and therefore one that you might prefer not to use.

THANK YOU