

An Extended Reconstruction — in Detail

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In this handout, I will present a detailed, step-by-step reconstruction of the following argumentative passage:

Dear Senator Jenkins,
I am writing to urge your support for higher salaries for state correctional facility guards. I am a clerical worker at Kingsford Prison, and I know whereof I speak. Guards work long hours, often giving up week-ends, at a dangerous job. They cannot afford expensive houses, or even nice clothes. Things that other state employees take for granted, like orthodontia for their children and a second car, are not possibilities on their salaries, which, incidentally, have not been raised in five years. Their dedication deserves better.
Very truly yours, ...

This is a rather complex passage, which suggests several independent lines of argumentation. Below, I will carefully follow the steps from chapters 6 and 7 to produce a charitable reconstruction of the argument(s) in this passage. Along the way, I will also do some evaluation and other analysis of this passage.

Step 1: Decide if there is an argument

The author of this letter is trying to convince Senator Jenkins that *the salaries of state correctional facility guards should be increased*. We will have to clarify this basic claim (*e.g.*, are we talking about *all* prison guards in the state, or just *some* of them?). But, it seems clear that *some* clarified version of this statement is the main point of this argumentative passage.

Step 2: Reconstruct the argument

Step 2a: Identify the conclusion

In this case, the author is pretty clear in asserting their conclusion. At the very start of the letter, the author says “I am writing to urge your support for higher salaries for state correctional facility guards.” As it stands, it is not at all clear what *statement* this sentence is intended to express. We need to clarify this considerably. First, and most importantly, notice that this is a *normative* claim. That is, it is a claim about how things *should* be (*not* how they *are*). The author is trying to convince the Senator that *the salaries of state correctional facility guards should be increased*. This is *still* an unclear statement. Is the author talking about *all* state correctional facility guards, or just those guards at *Kingsford Prison*, where the author works? Charitably, I will begin by assuming that the author is *only* talking about the guards at Kingsford Prison, since this seems to be the only group of prison guards that the author knows about which the author has intimate relevant knowledge. Later on, we will consider the possibility of *generalizing* this conclusion to *all* state prison guards. For now, we’ll take the conclusion to be: *All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison should receive a salary increase*.

Step 2b: Identify explicit premises

First, I think it’s important to see which sentences in this passage do *not* express premises. We already know that the first sentence is intended only to express the *conclusion* of the argument. So, it can’t express a premise. The second sentence “I am a clerical worker at Kingsford Prison, and I know whereof I speak” is not a premise either. It does not provide any support for the conclusion. It merely expresses the author’s sincerity and expertise on the issue at hand. This is not relevant to the conclusion of the argument (although it might provide some *reason to believe its premises*). The last sentence “Their dedication deserves better,” seems only to be a *summing-up* of what is suggested earlier in the passage. Since it does not add any new information to the argument, I will not try to include the statement it expresses as an additional explicit premise.

On the other hand, the three sentences in the middle of the passage do seem to (potentially) express explicit premises. So, we may now focus our attention on the mid-section of the passage, which reads as follows:

Guards work long hours, often giving up week-ends, at a dangerous job. They cannot afford expensive houses, or even nice clothes. Things that other state employees take for granted, like orthodontia for their children and a second car, are not possibilities on their salaries, which, incidentally, have not been raised in five years.

Of course, we will need to clarify and simplify these claims considerably, before we place any of them in our final reconstruction. I think there are *three* distinct statements expressed in this part of the passage which *might* end-up being premises in our final reconstruction. These three candidates are (in typographical order):

1. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison work long hours, often on week-ends, at a dangerous job.
2. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are unable to afford expensive houses, nice clothes, orthodontia for their children, or a second car.
3. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison have not received a salary increase in five years.

These three statements all seem to be intended as explicit premises in the argument. So far, we have the following *preliminary* reconstruction, assuming that all three of these statements really are premises in the argument:

1. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison work long hours, often on week-ends, at a dangerous job.
 2. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are unable to afford expensive houses, nice clothes, orthodontia for their children, or a second car.
 3. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison have not received a salary increase in five years.
 4. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison should receive a salary increase.
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Notice how I have used *the same language* consistently throughout my preliminary reconstruction (this is getting a head start on our chapter 7 “fine-tuning” steps!). Notice, also, how I have re-organized and consolidated the mid-section of the passage into three statements, each of which seems to capture an *independent line of reasoning*. This will come in handy, below, when we try to fill-in the *implicit* premises of this argument. Finally, notice how I have chosen to use the quantifier “All” in my reconstruction. After you read the rest of my reconstruction, ask yourself *why* I have done this (*hint*: it involves being *charitable* to the author, who seems to be assuming a kind of “fairness principle” which does not seem to be consistent with this sort of “selective” salary increase policy — see below for more on the author’s implicit “fairness principle”).

Step 2c: Is the preliminary reconstruction well-formed?

No, our preliminary reconstruction, above, is *not* well-formed. We are going to need to add some *implicit* premises here.

Step 2d: Add implicit premises (as necessary) to make the reconstruction well-formed

In this step of the reconstruction process, we are supposed to add implicit premises (as necessary) to make the argument well-formed — while keeping in mind the *principles of charity* (PC), (PCI), and (PG), and the *principle of faithfulness* (PF).

There are many ways to make this argument well-formed. Here is one way, which I think is both charitable, and faithful, given what is reasonable to assume about the author’s intentions and background knowledge.

1. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison work long hours, often on week-ends, at a dangerous job.
 2. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are unable to afford expensive houses, nice clothes, orthodontia for their children, or a second car.
 3. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison have not received a salary increase in five years.
 4. All state government workers who have not received a salary increase in the last five years are state government workers whose salary increases have *not* kept-up with increasing costs of living and inflation.
 5. All state government workers should receive salary increases which (*at least*) keep up with increasing costs of living and inflation.
 6. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison should receive a salary increase.
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This argument is *valid* (although, as we’ll see in our “fine-tuning” steps, below, there is an *intermediate conclusion* that should be drawn between premises (4) and (5) of the above reconstruction to make its validity clear). And, I think the implicit premises (4) and (5) that we added are quite reasonable, and consistent with what the author is likely to have had in mind. As we all know, costs of living tend to increase each year (inflation often does too). I think we can be pretty sure that the costs of living and/or inflation have increased *somewhat* (everywhere!) in the past five years. This makes premise (4) quite reasonable, I think. Moreover, premise (5) seems like a reasonable “fairness principle,” which says that all government workers should (at least) get pay increases which keep them up with any cost of living/inflationary increases. Finally, I see no reason why attributing (4) and (5) to our author would be unfaithful. It is pretty widely held that costs of living increase regularly, and that government workers (indeed, *all* workers!) should be entitled to cost-of-living increases in their salaries. So, we seem to have found a charitable and faithful way to make our preliminary reconstruction well-formed.

Step 2e: Do our additions lead to any conflicts between charity and faithfulness?

As I explained above, I don’t think there is any problematic conflict between charity and faithfulness in the implicit premises (4) and (5) that we added in part 2d, above. So, I will now move on to the “fine-tuning” steps from chapter 7.

Step 3: Fine-Tuning our reconstruction

Step 3a: Clarify wording (as necessary), and Translate into Standard Form (if possible)

I have tried to be very careful with the wording of the argument. But, as it stands, we have two potential wording/form problems: (i) the statements in our present reconstruction are not all in *strict standard form* for universally quantified statements, and (ii) it may be somewhat unclear as to precisely *when* the guards should receive their salary increases. Fixing these two problems (and performing a few other minor linguistic tweaks) yields the following new reconstruction:

1. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who work long hours, often on week-ends, at a dangerous job.
2. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who are unable to afford expensive houses, nice clothes, orthodontia for their children, or a second car.
3. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who have not received a salary increase in five years.
4. All state government workers who have not received a salary increase in the last five years are state government workers whose salary increases are *not* currently keeping-up with increasing costs of living and inflation.
5. All state government workers whose salary increases are *not* currently keeping-up with increasing costs of living and inflation are state government workers who should immediately receive a salary increase.
6. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who should immediately receive a salary increase.

Notice how all the statements are in strict standard form, and it is now quite clear that the conclusion calls for *immediate* salary increases for all state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison. Notice, also, how the language is now (nearly) *perfectly consistent*, throughout the argument.

Step 3b: Add *justifications* for each statement in the argument

At this point, we need to do three things (i) label each statement as either “(E)” for explicit, or “(I)” for implicit, (ii) say which statements (if any) each statement in the argument *follows from*, logically, and (iii) Add any *intermediate conclusions* (if there are any) that have not yet been drawn which would make the validity of our reconstruction more clear. When we do these three things, we end-up with the following (almost completely “fine-tuned”) new reconstruction:

1. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who work long hours, often on week-ends, at a dangerous job. (E)
2. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who are unable to afford expensive houses, nice clothes, orthodontia for their children, or a second car. (E)
3. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who have not received a salary increase in five years. (E)
4. All state government workers who have not received a salary increase in the last five years are state government workers whose salary increases are *not* currently keeping-up with increasing costs of living and inflation. (I)
5. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers whose salary increases are *not* currently keeping-up with increasing costs of living and inflation. (I), (3), (4)
6. All state government workers whose salary increases are *not* currently keeping-up with increasing costs of living and inflation are state government workers who should immediately receive a salary increase. (I)
7. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who should immediately receive a salary increase. (E), (5), (6)

Step 3c: Check to see that all premises are *being used* in the argument

Now that we have written-down explicit justifications for each line of our reconstruction, we can see that *premises (1) and (2) have not been used in the argument*. At this point, we have two choices: either we (i) delete premises (1) and (2) from the argument (as *unnecessary*), or (ii) we *add more implicit premises* to make at least one of these premises logically relevant to the conclusion. We should always *try* to make the premises relevant first. Then, if we can't reasonably make them relevant, we should probably delete them, and stick with the argument (3)–(7) which seems to be a fairly good one already. We can make both premises (1) and (2) relevant, by adding two new implicit premises, as follows:

1. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who work long hours, often on week-ends, at a dangerous job. (E)
2. All state government workers who work long hours, often on week-ends, at a dangerous job are state government workers who should immediately receive a salary increase. (I)
3. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who are unable to afford expensive houses, nice clothes, orthodontia for their children, or a second car. (E)
4. All state government workers who are unable to afford expensive houses, nice clothes, orthodontia for their children, or a second car are state government workers who should immediately receive a salary increase. (I)
5. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who have not received a salary increase in five years. (E)
6. All state government workers who have not received a salary increase in the last five years are state government workers whose salary increases are *not* currently keeping-up with increasing costs of living and inflation. (I)
7. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers whose salary increases are *not* currently keeping-up with increasing costs of living and inflation. (I), (5), (6)
8. All state government workers whose salary increases are *not* currently keeping-up with increasing costs of living and inflation are state government workers who should immediately receive a salary increase. (I)
9. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who should immediately receive a salary increase. (E), {(1), (2)}, {(3), (4)}, {(7), (8)}

Notice that the conclusion, (9), now follows from premises (1) and (2). The conclusion also follows from premises (3) and (4), and from premises (7) and (8), as well. What we have here are *three independent arguments* for (9).

What we need to ask ourselves at this point is “Are our recently added implicit premises (2) and (4) *reasonable*?” I think the answer to this question is “No.” Lots of state government workers work “long hours, often on week-ends, at a dangerous job.” Does this mean they should all get immediate pay increases? If so, then when would it be okay to *stop* increasing their salaries for this reason? Presumably, their jobs won’t get any easier just because we’re paying them more. Moreover, many government workers are unable to afford luxuries such as “expensive houses, nice clothes, orthodontia for their children, or a second car.” Should their pay immediately be increased for this reason? If so, then when would we *stop* increasing their pay on these grounds? After all, there will always be luxuries government workers can’t afford. It seems to me that neither of these implicit premises (which are required to get the author what they want), is at all reasonable. These premises seem to constitute an *appeal to pity*, which should not rationally persuade the Senator.

At this point, the *principle of charity* (PC) plays a crucial role in our deliberation about what to do next with our reconstruction. Should we attribute the *poor* arguments from {(1), (2)} and {(3), (4)} to our author, who already seems to have a fairly *strong* argument from {(7), (8)}? I think the principle of charity makes it pretty clear that we should *not* do so. A *charitable* reconstruction would simply ignore the poor arguments in the passage, and focus entirely on strong lines of reasoning (if any are suggested). For this reason, my final reconstruction of the argument in this passage is as follows:

My Final Reconstruction

1. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who have not received a salary increase in five years. (E)
2. All state government workers who have not received a salary increase in the last five years are state government workers whose salary increases are *not* currently keeping-up with increasing costs of living and inflation. (I)
3. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers whose salary increases are *not* currently keeping-up with increasing costs of living and inflation. (I), (1), (2)
4. All state government workers whose salary increases are *not* currently keeping-up with increasing costs of living and inflation are state government workers who should immediately receive a salary increase. (I)
5. All state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison are state government workers who should immediately receive a salary increase. (E), {(3), (4)}

I would say that this is a pretty strong argument (assuming, of course, that the crucial starting premise (1) is true, and that the prison guards have, in fact, *not* received a pay increase for five years). It rests, mainly, on a *principle of fairness*, which says that government workers should receive pay increases at least often enough to keep-up with the inevitable increases in cost of living due to inflation (and other factors). This is *not* to be confused with an irrational appeal to pity. It is safe to assume that some of the “other government workers” (probably, including Senator Jenkins herself!) of which the author speaks have, themselves, received such minimal salary increases sometime during the last five years. It only seems fair that the state correctional facility guards at Kingsford Prison should receive the same consideration.