Identifying and Assessing Arguments
Vocabulary: Claim

- A claim is any statement that is either true or false. In other words, a claim has a truth-value. (Whether you know it to be true or not is a different matter.).
- “It is raining outside” and “It is not raining outside” are claims.
- “Look at the beautiful sunset” is not a claim.
Vocabulary: Issue

- An issue is raised whenever a claim is in question, disputed, debated, or wondered about.

- Issues are often introduced by the word “whether”, as in “whether a course in critical thinking can help to prepare you for graduate school” or “whether it is raining outside”.

Arguments

- An **argument** is an attempt to support a claim or an assertion by providing a reason or reasons for accepting it. The claim that is supported is called the **conclusion** of the argument, and the claim or claims that provide the support are called the **premises**.
Arguments and Explanations

- Arguments differ from explanations. Arguments attempt to establish the truth of some claim.
- Explanations assume the truth of a claim, and merely try to show how it came about, what caused it, how it works, etc.
Arguments and Explanations

- **Argument**: Rover has fleas. He’s been scratching all day.
- **Explanation**: Rover has fleas. The neighbor’s dog has fleas, and he’s been playing with him all morning.
Identifying the Conclusion

- The first step to identifying and assessing arguments is to identify the conclusion.
- Ask yourself, “What is the author trying to prove?” “What does he or she want me to believe?”
Conclusion Indicators

- It follows that...
- We may conclude that...
- This serves to show that...
- Thus...
- Thus suggests that...
- This proves that...
- Hence...
- Accordingly...
- Consequently...
- So...
- Therefore...
- This shows that...
- This implies that...
Identifying Premises

- The next step in identifying and assessing arguments is to identify the premise or premises offered in support of the conclusion.

- Ask yourself, “What reason or reasons does the author give for accepting the conclusion?”
Premise Indicators

- Since...
- For...
- Because...
- In view of...
- This is implied by...
- Given...
Independent Premises

- Independent premises are premises that do not rely on each other as support for the conclusion.
- If the assumption that a premise is false does not cancel the support another premise provides for the conclusion, the premises are independent.
Independent Premises

- Example: [Premise] Raising the speed limit will wear out the highways faster. [Premise] In addition, doing so will result in more highway deaths. [Conclusion] Therefore, we should not raise the speed limit.

- You can view it as two separate arguments with the same conclusion.
Dependent Premises

- Dependent premises are premises that depend on one another as support for their conclusion.

- If the assumption that a premise is false cancels the support another provides for the conclusion, the premises are dependent.
Dependent Premises

Example: [Premise] Raising the speed limit will waste gas. [Premise] We don’t have any gas to waste. Therefore, [Conclusion] we should not raise the speed limit.
Further Points About Arguments

- The conclusion of one argument can serve as the premise of another.
- Arguments can have unstated premises.
- Arguments can have unstated conclusions.
Identifying the Issue

- Once you’ve identified the conclusion, you can also identify the issue.
- You can state the issue by putting the word “whether” in front of the conclusion.
Identifying the Issue

- It is not always easy to identify the issue.
- Authors may be unorganized.
- There is more than one issue on the table.
Identifying the Issue

- Jon: School vouchers? They may be a good idea. They’ll give parents an opportunity to get their kids out of bad schools. What do you think?

- Ron: I think the people who want them are just a bunch of selfish zealots who want to send their kids to religious schools.
Assessing Arguments

- Once you’ve identified the conclusion and premise or premises, you are ready to assess whether or not the argument is a good argument.
Good Arguments

- A good argument is an argument that provides grounds for accepting its conclusion.
- An argument is a good argument, if, based upon reasonable premises, the conclusion is (1) guaranteed, or (2) likely, to be true.
Assessing Arguments

1. Identify the Conclusion
2. Identify the Premise(s)
3. Does the Conclusion follow from the Premises?
   - Yes
     - Are the Premises reasonable? And/or come from a reliable source?
       - Yes
         - Accept the Argument
       - No
         - Reject the Argument
   - No
     - Reject the Argument