# A Crash Course on Arguments

Philosophers trade in arguments. We give arguments for our claims and respond to other philosophers' arguments with more arguments. It's all about arguments.

## What's an argument?
An argument is group of related claims. One claim is the conclusion and the other claims are premises. The premises support the conclusion: taken together, the premises are reasons to think that the conclusion is true.

## Ok, cool. Tell me more!
Let's start by considering some claims.
   -God exists.
   -Abortion is morally permissible.
   -Smoking is bad for your health.

As they stand now, these are just unsupported claims. Unsupported claims aren't good enough in philosophy. You need to give reasons to think that your claims are true.

Take the claim that smoking is bad for your health. How would you respond if someone asked you why you think it's true? Here's something you might say: "Well, I know that smoking leads to tooth decay, and also that it leads to an increased risk of cancer and heart disease. I take it that any activity that leads to these things is bad for your health so that's why I think that smoking is bad for your health."

Woohoo! *Now* we have an argument - we have reasons (premises) that are given in support of a conclusion.

## Formalizing arguments
You can write arguments in paragraph form. But sometimes it's helpful to formalize them. You formalize an argument by putting it into premise-conclusion form. To do this, organize the premise claims into a list – one claim per premise. Put the conclusion claim at the bottom of the list (stick a "therefore" in front of it to signal that it's the conclusion). Number all the claims.

1. Smoking leads to tooth decay and to an increased risk of cancer and heart disease.
2. An activity that leads to tooth decay and to an increased risk of cancer and heart disease is bad for your health.
3. Therefore, smoking is bad for your health.

When an argument is formalized, it's easier to identify whether the argument's good and, if not, where the argument goes bad.

## What makes an argument good?
There are two basic features an argument must have in order to be a good argument. First, the conclusion must follow from the premises. This means that either the premises entail the conclusion, or, at least, we're warranted in deriving the conclusion from the premises.

Second, the premises must be true (or, at least, they must be plausible).

## What makes an argument bad?
An argument is bad if it doesn't have one or both of the two features that it must have to be good. An argument is bad if the conclusion doesn't follow from the premises. Perhaps the connection between premises and conclusion is a bit loose, or perhaps you have to commit a logical fallacy in order to get from premises to conclusion.

An argument is also bad if one or more of its premise is false (or, at least, if they're not plausible).

**Evaluating arguments**
Let's evaluate the following arguments together. Are they good? If not, why not? Where does the argument go bad? Does the conclusion follow from the premises? Are the premises true?

1. Lebron James is a great basketball player.
2. Lebron James plays for the Lakers.
3. Therefore, Lebron James is 6'9".

Evaluation: This is a bad argument. The conclusion does not follow from the premises – the premises and conclusion are not closely related.

1. Lebron James is a great basketball player.
2. Lebron James plays on the Lakers.
3. Therefore, the Lakers is a great basketball team.

Evaluation: This is a bad argument. There's a gap between premises and conclusion. You're not warranted in inferring that a basketball team is good just because you know that there is one good player on its team.

1. If a basketball team has great player, then it is a great team.
2. Lebron James is a great basketball player.
3. Lebron James plays on the Lakers.
4. Therefore, the Lakers is a great basketball team.

Evaluation: This is a bad argument. Although the conclusion does follow from the premises, one of the premises (premise 1) is doubtful.

1. Lebron James is a great basketball player.
2. Lebron James plays on the Lakers.
3. Therefore, the Lakers has a great basketball player on its team.

Evaluation: This is a good argument. The conclusion follows from the premises, and all the premises are true.

**Reconstructing arguments from scratch**
We come across arguments all the time: in op-eds, during political debates, at church and school, and around the dinner table. The ability to reconstruct someone else's argument is very important, and one of the most valuable skills that philosophy teaches.

To reconstruct an argument is to identify someone else's argument (either written or spoken) and put it into premise-conclusion form. This can be done in three steps.

Step 1: Identify the conclusion.
    Look for the claim that the author is arguing for. What claim's the author trying to prove? That's the conclusion.

Step 2: Identify the premises.
    Look for the reasons that the author gives in support of the conclusion. What does the author say in favor of the claim s/he's trying to prove? Those are the premises.

Step 3: Formalize the argument.
    Consolidate and organize the claims into a list. Put the conclusion at the bottom of the list with a "therefore" in front. Number the claims.

Note: Sometimes an author's argument depends on an assumption that she doesn't say explicitly. This is called implicit premises. When you outline her argument, make implicit premises explicit.

**Let's practice together**
Let's start by reconstructing arguments from everyday scenarios.

Recycling Scenario: Amy's order from Amazon has just arrived. After unpacking the boxes, she walks to the kitchen to throw them away. Her roommate Ben says, "Amy, you should put those boxes in the recycling bin instead of the trash can. Throwing them away just creates unnecessary waste."

In effect, Ben is giving Amy an argument. How might we reconstruct Ben's argument?

Step 1: Identify the conclusion. What claim is Ben arguing for?
Amy should recycle her Amazon boxes instead of throwing them away.

Step 2: Identify the premises. What reasons does Ben give in support of this claim?
Throwing them away creates unnecessary away.

Step 3: Formalize the argument.

1. Amy shouldn't create unnecessary waste.
2. Amy creates unnecessary waste by throwing away her Amazon boxes instead of recycling them.
3. Therefore, Amy should recycle her Amazon boxes instead of throwing them away.

Note that premise 1 was originally an implicit premise in Ben's original argument.

Garrulous Greg Scenario: Greg, an artist, is teaching a painting class at the local community center. He spends the majority of the first few sessions gushing about his new puppy, Gizmo. Finally, one of Greg's students pipes up. She says, "Greg, Gizmo is totally adorable, and I've enjoyed hearing about your adventures together. But I can't learn how to paint a landscape if all you do is talk about Gizmo. And, since this is a painting class, maybe you should stop using up class time to talk about Gizmo."

In effect, Greg's student is giving him an argument. How might we reconstruct that argument?

Step 1: Identify the conclusion. What claim is Greg's student arguing for?
Greg should stop talking about Gizmo during class time.

Step 2: Identify the premises. What reasons does Ben give in support of this claim?
The objective of the course is for students to learn how to paint. The students can't reach that objective if Greg uses up class time talking about Gizmo.

Step 3: Formalize the argument.

1. If, in teaching a class, an instructor is engaged in a practice that prevents students from reaching the objectives of that course, then – all else being equal – the instructor should stop that practice.
2. Greg prevents his students from reaching the objects of the painting class by gushing about Gizmo during class time.
3. Therefore, Greg should stop talking about Gizmo during class time.

**Your turn!**
In groups of two or three, reconstruct the main argument from the following exert of Peter Singer's, "Do Drones Undermine Democracy?" Remember to follow the three steps above: identify the conclusion, identify the premises, formalize the argument.

In democracies like ours, there have always been deep bonds between the public and its wars. Citizens have historically participated in decisions to take military action, through their elected representatives, helping to ensure broad support for wars and a willingness to share the costs, both human and economic, of enduring them.

In America, our Constitution explicitly divided the president's role as commander in chief in war from Congress's role in declaring war. Yet these links and this division of labor are now under siege as a result of a technology that our founding fathers never could have imagined.

Just 10 years ago, the idea of using armed robots in war was the stuff of Hollywood fantasy. Today, the United States military has more than 7,000 unmanned aerial systems, popularly called drones. There are 12,000 more on the ground. Last year, they carried out hundreds of strikes — both covert and overt — in six countries, transforming the way our democracy deliberates and engages in what we used to think of as war.

We don't have a draft anymore; less than 0.5 percent of Americans over 18 serve in the active-duty military. We do not declare war anymore; the last time Congress actually did so was in 1942 — against Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania. We don't buy war bonds or pay war taxes anymore. During World War II, 85 million Americans purchased war bonds that brought the government $185 billion; in the last decade, we bought none and instead gave the richest 5 percent of Americans a tax break.

And now we possess a technology that removes the last political barriers to war. The strongest appeal of unmanned systems is that we don't have to send someone's son or daughter into harm's way. But when politicians can avoid the political consequences of the condolence letter — and the impact that military casualties have on voters and on the news media — they no longer treat the previously weighty matters of war and peace the same way…

I do not condemn [drone strikes made during the Obama presidency]; I support most of them. What troubles me, though, is how a new technology is short-circuiting the decision-making process for what used to be the most important choice a democracy could make. Something that would have previously been viewed as a war is simply not being treated like a war…Congress has not disappeared from all decisions about war, just the ones that matter…

Without any actual political debate, we have set an enormous precedent, blurring the civilian and military roles in war and circumventing the Constitution's mandate for authorizing it. Freeing the executive branch to act as it chooses may be appealing to some now, but many future scenarios will be less clear-cut. And each political party will very likely have a different view, depending on who is in the White House…

A deep deliberation on war was something the framers of the Constitution sought to build into our system. Yet on Tuesday, when President Obama talks about his wartime accomplishments during the State of the Union address, Congress will have to admit that its role has been reduced to the same part it plays during the president's big speech. These days, when it comes to authorizing war, Congress generally sits there silently, except for the occasional clapping. And we do the same at home…

America's founding fathers may not have been able to imagine robotic drones, but they did provide an answer. The Constitution did not leave war, no matter how it is waged, to the executive branch alone.

In a democracy, it is an issue for all of us.