

A Crash Course on Arguments

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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. Ringo is a good drummer.
2. Ringo played drums for The Beatles.
3. Therefore, Ringo is from Liverpool.

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

1. Ringo is a good drummer.
2. Ringo played drums for The Beatles.
- 3.b Therefore, The Beatles is a good band.

Evaluation: This is a bad argument. There's a gap between premises and conclusion. You're not warranted in inferring that a band was good just because you know that band had a good drummer.

0. If a band has a good drummer, then that band is good.
1. Ringo is a good drummer.
2. Ringo played drums for The Beatles.
- 3.b Therefore, The Beatles is a good band.

Evaluation: This is a bad argument. Although the conclusion does follow from the premises, one of the premises (premise 0) is doubtful.

1. Ring is a good drummer.
2. Ringo played drums for The Beatles.
- 3.c Therefore, The Beatles had a good drummer.

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.¹

Classroom Scenario: It's the first day of philosophy class, and Amy comes into the classroom and sits on the floor instead of in one of the empty desks. Amy's friend Ben says, "Amy, you shouldn't sit there. You can't see the board from the floor."

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 shouldn't sit on the floor.

Step 2: Identify the premises. What reasons does Ben give in support of this claim?

Amy can't see the board from the floor.

Step 3: Formalize the argument.

1. Amy shouldn't sit where she can't see the board.
2. Amy can't see the board when sitting on the floor.
3. Therefore, Amy shouldn't sit on the floor.

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 dog, 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.

¹ These scenarios are adapted from Mason Marshall, "Grading Criteria for Outlines."

Your turn!

In groups of two or three, reconstruct the argument from the following excerpt of an editorial on flag desecration laws.² Remember to follow the three steps above: identify the conclusion, identify the premises, formalize the argument.

People who burn flags intend to send a message by doing so. This is what makes flag burning a form of expression. Some flag burners take offense at various American foreign policy measures. Some individuals may burn flags as a way of saying America is not true to its own values. Others simply despise American ideals and set the flag aflame. In any case, people who burn flags do so deliberately in order to send a public message of protest.

The First Amendment protects freedom of speech, which in turn protects the liberty to say wrong-headed, bigoted, stupid, vicious things. Such protection is crucial; otherwise freedom of speech would reduce to the empty freedom to say only the right, the true, and the good. That would present a disturbing practical difficulty: some bureaucrat would have to decide what is permissible speech, because in today's pluralistic society, there is little consensus on many aspects of the right, the true, and the good. Freedom of speech, however, is the freedom to say what one wishes without having to solicit the permission of anyone first.

Freedom of speech guarantees a healthy, open marketplace of ideas. More fundamentally, it includes the freedom to say things that others might not like. Those who are offended should respond with reasoned arguments of their own and not by passing a law. If individuals were only free to say things that others liked, public and private discussions would be banal, stilted, and oppressed. A law against flag burning forbids a form of expression simply because others do not like the message. Government exists, however, to protect individual rights. It should not protect citizens from being offended. We can stipulate that many acts of flag burning are offensive. Simply being offensive, however, does not violate individual rights.

² This is an excerpt from an editorial written by Andrew Cohen called [“Flags, Flame, and Property”](#) published online at [fee.org](#).