

Arguments Pt. 1: Extracting Arguments from Written Text

We now know a fair bit about what arguments are. Next is learning how to extract them from writing.

1. Extracting Arguments from Written Text

There is a difference between arguments and how arguments can be presented in writing. In both cases arguments are intended to convince you that something is true. But arguments have a necessary logical structure that might be disguised in writing. There can be any number of good reasons why:

Psychological: a writer wants to orient her reader by first stating the conclusion, then giving the premises. (“Ah, I see what I’m looking for here, now I can go looking for it. Thanks, writer!”)

Stylistic: a writer wants to avoid serial repetition. (First, Second, Third, Therefore; First, Second, Third, Therefore;...)

Thematic: a writer wants to foreground conclusions by stating them upfront, working backwards to premises. (“Ah, I see what the important ideas are. Now I’m ready for the smaller details. Thanks, writer!”)

Thus, readers must reconstruct the argument in order to extract its logical form from its written form. This is a *skill* that’s *developed* by exercising your ability to read critically.

2. Some Examples

2.1 Arguments whose logical and written forms are *identical*

For example, see *Merchants of Doubt* p. 2. Passage begins “Physics tells us that...” and ends “It shows that the changes we are seeing in our climate are not natural.”

Since the logical and written forms of the argument this passage states are (basically) identical, you don’t need to do much work to see the logical form – it is given to you. Nonetheless you *do* need to separate its logical form from the rhetorical roughage surrounding it. Here is the argument when that roughage is stripped away (I’ve also simplified the language for clarity):

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| 1. If global warming is natural (i.e. not caused by humans), then both the troposphere and stratosphere would be warming. | $P \rightarrow Q$ |
| 2. It is not the case that both the troposphere and stratosphere are warming. | $\sim Q$ |
| 3. Therefore, global warming is not natural. | $\sim P$ |

Cleaning up this argument allows us to then check it for validity, which is clearly confirmed. You’re now ready to critically assess it.

Activity 1: Reconstruct the argument found in the following passage. Next, compare your reconstruction with your partners. Finally, critically assess the argument you have reconstructed. Is it valid? Sound? Discuss.

“If sound when [rights] are applied to women, why should the arguments not be applied to dogs, cats, and horses? They seemed to hold equally well for these ‘brutes’; yet to hold that brutes had rights [is] manifestly absurd; therefore the reasoning by which this conclusion had been reached must be unsound...” (Singer 149).

2.2 Arguments whose logical and written forms *differ*

For example, see the argument being made against Santer (i.e. not by the authors' of the book) in *Merchants of Doubt* p. 3. Passage begins "Santer had impeccable..." and ends "... accusing Santer of making the alleged changes to "deceive policy makers and the public."

Extracting the logical form from this passage takes a fair bit more work. There are a number of hurdles in your way: (i) the conclusion and some supporting information are unstated; (ii) the authors are interested in arguing against this argument so their presentation is slanted (We'll talk more about this next week); and (iii) the same premise is then restated in a slightly different ways several times.

Here's *one* way to reconstruct the argument:

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| 1. Santer doctored the information in the IPCC report. | P |
| 2. If a scientific report is doctored, then the information in that report is not trustworthy. | $P \rightarrow Q$ |
| 3. Therefore, the information the in IPCC report is not trustworthy. | Q |

Ask yourself whether you can see other ways you can reconstruct the argument. Here's another example of an argument whose logical and written forms differ:

"If the capacity to suffer is the reason for ascribing a right to freedom from acute pain, or a right to well being, then it certainly looks as though these rights must be extended to animals as well. This is the conclusion Singer arrives at. The demand for human equality rests on the equal capacity of all human beings to suffer and to enjoy well being. But if this is the basis of the demand for equality, then this demand must include all beings which have an equal capacity to suffer and enjoy well being" (Steinbock 249).

Activity 2: See if you can extract the logical form of the argument in this piece of writing. Compare your answers with your partners. (WARNING: This is purposely ambiguous!)

Activity 3: Together with your partner identify another argument from the chapter you read for today's class. Simplify it as much as possible. Decide if it is sound or unsound, valid or invalid, and discuss whether or not you find it persuasive.