Identifying claims and reasons

How strongly do you agree with the following statements? Use 1 for Strongly Disagree and 7 for Strongly Agree.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Arguments generally make people angry.
Most published arguments can be clearly understood.
Most arguments in political speeches and opinion pieces in newspapers are written clearly.
Only some people can understand arguments.
In general it is best to not engage in arguments.
Engaging in arguments is useful in your life.
Engaging in arguments helps people make important decisions.

Misconception: Arguments are emotionally disturbing

You are similar to many undergraduates if you agreed with these statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percent of NIU students Agreed with statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arguments generally make people angry</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In general it is best to not engage in arguments</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see, many people share a common misconception about arguments. They incorrectly believe that Arguments are emotionally disturbing.

• The formal arguments we are going to teach you about are not the type of heated arguments in which people get angry or emotional and try to attack another person. They are not about winning and losing a battle.
• Instead formal arguments are a way for people to make clear what they believe and why. They can also be a means of discovery and exploration.

Misconception: Only some people can understand arguments

Did you also agree with this statement?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percent of NIU students Agreed with statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only some people can understand arguments</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many people incorrectly believe that Only some people can understand arguments.
• One problem with our school system is that not all students are taught how to read arguments, but all students are expected to be able to do it. Because of this, many students start to believe that they are not capable of "doing" arguments. But this is not a problem with the student; it is a problem with the lack of training and practice.

• Everyone can learn to read and evaluate an argument.

One reason students have such difficulty with arguments is that they do not get a lot of practice. In fact, in a survey of your peers, most undergrads do not read, write, or engage in argumentation. For example, the table shows the percent of students saying that the rarely or occasionally engaged in each of the following behaviors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Percent of students stating that they rarely or occasionally engaged in the behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read editorials or opinions</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read arguments for class assignments</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow controversial social/political issues</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argued with others about issues</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write arguments for class assignments</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Without practice and instruction, students can not expect to get better at these skills. But we have shown, that with instruction and practice, we can teach 11th graders to learn to read, write, and evaluate arguments.

**Misconception: Authors write clear arguments**

You are similar to many undergraduates if you agreed with these statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percent Agreeing with</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most published arguments can be clearly understood</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most arguments in political speeches and opinion pieces in newspapers are written clearly</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While believing that **Authors write clear arguments** may be common, that does not make it true.
Many people believe that authors write clear arguments. This is usually not the case.
Authors often want to tell a story. When an argument is written like a story, it is difficult to identify and evaluate the argument.
Similarly, authors want to make the most convincing argument not the most clear argument.
Both of these techniques make it harder for you to focus on the parts that you need to if you want to evaluate the argument. Writers of arguments often behave like magicians in that they try to get you to look at their other hand. You must avoid the temptation to get only the parts that are "story-like" or the parts the author wants you to think about.

This tutorial will help you to understand other's arguments even when they are not written to be easy to analyze.

Common misconceptions about arguments

People commonly believe some things about arguments that are not true. These misconceptions get in the way of learning about argumentation so we will address each misconception before continuing.

First misconception: Arguments are emotionally disturbing.

• True formal arguments are not the type of heated arguments in which people get angry or emotional and try to attack another person. They are not about winning and losing a battle.
• Instead formal arguments are a way for people to make clear what they believe and why. They can also be a means of discovery and exploration.

Second misconception: Arguments are not useful in one’s life.

• Argumentation is not just something one does for a class.
• It is a useful skill among friends and at work. For example, acting as a "devil’s advocate" and pointing out weaknesses in someone’s argument can help make their final argument stronger and more clear.
• Arguments also can help you decide to take the "right" action to achieve whatever goal you have. Explaining and justifying your position to a friend or colleague will make the "right" action more clear.

Misconception: Arguments are not useful in one’s life
The final common misconception is that argumentation is not a useful skill. You share the misconception if you disagreed with these statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percent of students that Disagreed with statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in arguments is useful in your life</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in arguments helps people make important decisions</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see, some people incorrectly believe that Arguments are not useful in their life.

• Argumentation is not just something one does for a class.
• It is a useful skill among friends and at work. For example, acting as a "devil’s advocate" and pointing out weaknesses in someone’s argument can help make their final argument stronger and more clear.
• Arguments also can help you decide to take the "right" action to achieve whatever goal you have. Explaining and justifying your position to a friend or colleague will make the "right" action more clear.

Common misconceptions about arguments (Continued)

Third misconception: Only some people can understand arguments.

• One problem with our school system is that not all students are taught how to read arguments, but all students are expected to be able to do it. Because of this, many students start to believe that they are not capable of "doing" arguments. But this is not a problem with the student; it is a problem with the lack of training and practice.
• Everyone can learn to read and evaluate an argument.

Fourth misconception: Authors write clear arguments.

• Many people believe that authors write clear arguments. This is usually not the case.
• Authors often want to tell a story. When an argument is written like a story, it is difficult to identify and evaluate the argument.
• Similarly, authors want to make the most convincing argument not the most clear argument.
• Both of these techniques make it harder for you to focus on the parts that you need to if you want to evaluate the argument. Writers of arguments often behave
like magicians in that they try to get you to look at their other hand. You must avoid the temptation to get only the parts that are "story-like" or the parts the author wants you to think about.

What is a formal argument?

An argument is an attempt to persuade the reader to change their attitude, belief, or behavior by providing one or more reasons. The main parts of an argument are the main claim and supporting reasons.

• Example argument: "We should probably stop to ask for directions because trying to drive around and figure out where we are will often make us late."

A claim is a disputable statement that an author is trying to persuade you to accept; something not everyone will agree to.

• Example claim: We should stop to ask directions when lost.

Qualifiers indicate the generality or certainty of a statement.

• Example: "Probably", "Often"

A reason is a statement that supports the claim. It tells you why you should believe the claim to be true.

• Example reason: Trying to drive around and figure out where we are will make us late.

Arguments include other information but these are the main three.

Steps to reading others' arguments

The task of comprehending an argument can be broken into 4 steps.

Step 1. Identify the main claim
Step 2. State the main claim briefly and precisely.
Step 3. Identify all important reasons.
Step 4. State each reason briefly and precisely.

There are two other components to attend to but you will learn these in the comprehension opposition module.
Step 1. Identify the main claim

When reading a long argument, start by skimming the first couple paragraphs (and last paragraph if necessary) to figure out what the author is trying to persuade you to believe or do. There may be more than one claim in a long argument so find the most important claim.

It may help to pay attention to certain words that tell you that the statement is a claim. Claims sometimes begin with words that indicate that it is a claim such as "therefore", "so", and "thus". Claims often include qualifiers such as "maybe", "probably", "perhaps", "usually", "often", "I believe", "I think", "in my opinion". But these qualifiers are used on reasons as well. So be careful relying on them.

There are three common types of claims are: Value, Policy, and Factual claims. Identifying claims is easier if you know a little about each claim type.

Value claims

Value claims attempt to persuade you to approve or disapprove of something.

Examples:

- Soccer is boring.
- Smoking is unhealthy.
- Cell phones are valuable and perhaps even necessary.
- Your new house is beautiful.
- Stealing is wrong.
- Pornography is dehumanizing.

When trying to find value claims look for terms like "valuable/beautiful/interesting", "good/bad/evil", "right/wrong", "superior/best/worse".

Policy claims

Policy claims attempt to persuade you or your government to take some action or change a behavior usually to solve a problem.

Examples:
• Voluntary prayer should be permitted in public schools.
• Smoking should be prohibited in public places.
• Cell phones should not be used while driving.
• The interest rates for credit cards should be lower.
• Kids should not be tried as adults.
• Americans should only have to work 35 hours a week.

When trying to find policy claims look for terms like "should", "ought", and "must".

**Factual claims**

Factual claims attempt to persuade you that something existed, exists, or will exist or about what caused something to exist.

Examples:

• Columbus’s contemporaries thought the earth was flat.
• Smoking causes cancer.
• People can reduce the severity of depression by increasing their sunlight exposure each day.
• Gun control leads to fewer accidental deaths.

When trying to find factual claims, terms don’t help much, but you could look for time related terms such as "in the past," or "in the future" and causal terms such as "leads to", "improves", "destroys", or "is caused by."

**Practice**

For each claim below, identify whether it is a value, policy, or factual claim.

• The US should help countries gain their independence. **policy**
• Democracy is superior to any other form of government. **value**
• Alcoholism is a genetic disorder. **factual**
• Mandatory jail terms should be imposed for drunk driving violations. **policy**
• California will experience colder, stormier weather for the next ten years. **factual**
• Killing animals for sport is wrong. **value**

**Step 2. State the main claim briefly and precisely**
Once you think you have identified the main claim, you should try to put it in your own words.

You want to try to figure out the main verb and keep that. Make sure to keep the claim of the same type. If it was value claim do not change it to a policy claim. For example, consider these three claims. Can they all be summarized by the main claims: We should not have a curfew in Lowell?

1. The Supreme Judicial Court will rule whether Lowell's late-night restriction violates the rights of those under 17.
2. The curfew is bad for teens.
3. Because the curfew deprives juveniles of their rights, it can only be allowed, they say, if prosecutors show it serves a compelling public purpose, such as reducing juvenile crime or protecting young people.
4. The curfew is a violation of teens' rights.

Once you find the most important verb and nouns, try to get rid of unnecessary words.

Claim may begin with words that indicate that it is a claim such as "therefore", "so", and "thus". Claims often include qualifiers so look for qualifiers such as "maybe", "probably", "perhaps", "usually", "often", "I believe", "I think", "in my opinion".

**Step 3. Identify all important reasons**

To identify the reasons read through the text, sentence by sentence, and ask yourself if the author is using the statement to tell you why you should believe the claim. If there is not at least one reason, then it is just an opinion.

Sometimes reasons begin with phrases such as "because", "the reasons are", and "studies show".

Reasons can be facts, evidence, an expert’s opinion, or a statement of a value or attitude.

**Step 4. State each reason briefly and precisely.**

Put each reason into your own words in a very short statement below the claim.
Pay special attention to whether you are looking for a reason for a value, policy or causal claim.

**Reasons for value claims**

When authors are making value claims, they trying to get you to change your attitude or belief. To better locate their reasons for value claims, it may help to ask yourself **why should I believe that?**

**Reasons for policy claims**

When authors are making policy claims, they trying to convince you to change your behavior. To better locate their reasons for policy, it may help to ask yourself **why is it a good thing or a bad thing that we do the recommended action?**

**Reasons for factual claims**

Like value claims, when authors are making factual claims, they trying to get you to believe something is true. But rather than an evaluative statement, they want you to believe something exists or will exist. To better locate their reasons for factual claims, it may help to ask yourself **why do they think what they are claiming is in fact true?**

**Three tricky aspects of reason identification**

1. Some reasons are also claims. In the example, below a claim (people shouldn’t waste time being lost unnecessarily) is being used as a reason. Note because it is not also supported with a reason, the main claim is supported by only an opinion.

   - **Example:** We should stop to ask directions because people shouldn’t waste time being lost unnecessarily.

2. Sometimes arguments have more than one main claim. In our development example, there was a value and a policy claim.

3. Many arguments mention reasons for the counter-claim.

   It is important to notice which claim each reason is used to support.