

SKILLS OF ARGUMENT

Analysis	Criticism	Construction
1. Identifying linguistic clues	Pointing out structural and linguistic flaws	Using connectives accurately
2. Explaining role of logical connectives		
3. Distinguishing premises from conclusion	Identifying implicit premises; establishing relevance	Providing distinct and relevant premises for conclusion
4. Distinguishing main from subsequent conclusion	Identifying implicit conclusions; assessing line of argument	Using subsequent conclusions en route to main conclusion
5. Distinguishing necessary from sufficient reasons	Identifying exceptions	Demonstrating ground as necessary or sufficient
6. Distinguishing supposition from assertion	Identifying assumptions	Working with premises one doesn't believe
7.	Assessing whether premises justify conclusion; whether premises are plausible	

USING ARGUMENT

Knowing how an argument works (or doesn't) is more than knowing the conclusion and the premises used; it is understanding how the premises are supposed to connect together to support the conclusion. With your own arguments, you equally need to understand how they work, and should present them with a clear structure.

Presentation of ideas is distinct from critical discussion of those ideas. This involves interpretation, analysis, and evaluation of the arguments and ideas presented. You need to understand whether an argument succeeds or fails and why, and be able to present and compare arguments and counterarguments to argue towards the most plausible position. This type of knowledge involves use of secondary literature, which contains lots of analysis and evaluation, more than one source (to compare ideas), and – don't overlook it! – *thought*.

Two aspects of critical discussion:

- 1) relating a particular argument to a broader context, e.g. a philosopher's overall theory, other philosopher's ideas on the same issue, etc.; in general, to understand the relation between the parts and the whole;
- 2) reflecting on what a particular argument actually demonstrates, and whether there are counterarguments that are better. This is what secondary sources try to do.

When using secondary literature, don't just *report* the arguments you find. You need to work through the arguments so that you understand for yourself the pros and cons of each viewpoint. As a minimum, be able to argue both for and against a particular view. Even if you can't come to a firm conclusion about which viewpoint is right, try to come to a firm conclusion about why the different points each seem right in their own way, and why it is difficult to choose. Philosophy is not about knowing the 'right answers', it is about understanding why an answer *might* be right and why it is difficult to know.

On argument

Three points of reference

Martinich, A. *Philosophical Writing*

Warburton, N. *Philosophy: The Essential Study Guide*

Blackwell Study Guides: 99p pamphlets

EXEGESIS

1. The usual starting point for constructing an argument is explaining other people's ideas. The idea is to be accurate and *sympathetic*. An argument works best when the ideas are presented as strongly as possible – otherwise the opponent can simply rephrase the idea, and your counterargument falls apart.

2. In general, aim to be concise, i.e. the kernel of the idea, presented clearly and relevantly. Stick to what you need to present in order to properly discuss the question. This can involve surrounding detail, since you need to show an awareness of the situation of the topic in the subject. Sometimes you will need more detail – again, be selective and relevant.

ON ARGUMENT

1. What is an argument? Premises and a conclusion, in which the premises 'support' the conclusion. Premises are reasons for the conclusion, e.g. reasons to believe that the conclusion is true. If the premises are true, the conclusion is more likely to be true.
2. What's the difference between an argument and an assertion? An assertion does not come with reasons. Arguments always involve reasoning.
3. What types of argument are there? Deductive and inductive. There are different types of inductive argument, e.g. enumerative and inference to the best explanation.
4. What are the key features of a good argument? The premises are relevant, clear, and plausible; the inference from premises to the conclusion is clear, i.e. one can see how the premises support the conclusion. Note: an argument can be good without being true!
5. What is it to evaluate an argument? It is to give an argument about the argument, e.g. an argument that the argument evaluated is good or bad. So it is giving reasons for thinking that other reasons (the premises) are good reasons to believe the conclusion. In evaluation, be cautious. Acknowledge alternative position, qualify and appreciate limits of what you have shown, avoid sweeping claims.