

## **Argument – Basic Definitions**

### **What We Mean by “Argument”**

In a popular sense, an argument is a disagreement that we express with someone. In the field of logic, however, an argument is a specific verbal construction containing a set of claims. The word “argument” is synonymous, in logic, with the word “reasoning.” That is, “to reason” is “to argue,” and that means to arrive at a conclusion derived from a set of evidence or claims.

### **Definitions**

An “argument” is a set of claims that includes 1) a conclusion, 2) a premise, and 3) an inference.

A “claim” is a declarative sentence (not a fragment, an exclamation, a question, or an expletive).

A “conclusion” is a claim that is supported by one or more premises.

A “premise” is a claim offered in support of a conclusion. It functions as a “reason why” for the conclusion.

(Note: Premises and conclusions can be either stated or implied.)

An “inference” is the reader’s applied meaning that senses that one or more claims “leads to” another. Without this inference, the reader will not perceive an argument in a reading.

## **The Two Structural Types of Argument: Simple and Complex**

### ***A Simple Argument***

A “simple argument” is one that contains only one conclusion (a final conclusion) and one or more premises.

### ***A Complex Argument***

A “complex argument” is one that contains a final conclusion and one or more than one intermediate conclusions.

## **The Two Semantic Types of Argument: Deductive and Non-Deductive**

### ***A Deductive Argument***

A “deductive argument” is an argument in which the premises guarantee (the exact wording of) the conclusion.

### ***A Non-Deductive Argument***

A “non-deductive argument” is an argument in which the premises are meant to make the conclusion only “like” or “probable.”

## **The Evaluation of Arguments**

Arguments must be evaluated on the “quality of their premises” (Conway and Munson, *The Elements of Reasoning*).

Premises will be judged as

- 1) true/false,
- 2) acceptable/unacceptable, or
- 3) unquestioned/questionable.

### ***The Evaluation of Deductive Arguments***

A “deductive argument” will be judged as either “sound” or “unsound.” It will be judged as “sound” if, and only if, each of the premises is judged to be “true”; if not “true,” then “acceptable”; if not “acceptable,” at least “unquestioned.”

A “non-deductive argument” will be judged as either “successful” or “unsuccessful.” It will be judged as “successful” if key premises are judged to be “true,” “acceptable,” or at least “unquestioned.” Generally, the degree of success of a non-deductive argument will be enhanced with the addition of more and more true, acceptable, or at least unquestioned premises.

Note: Just because you may judge an argument to be “unsound” or “unsuccessful” has no bearing on either its structural or semantic type.

### **Your Task as a Reader of Arguments**

As a reader of academic texts, your responsibility is to determine, paragraph by paragraph, whether or not the author intends an argument. That is determined by identifying those claims that you sense are intended to be read as conclusions and then by identifying those claims, either stated or unstated, that lead to it.

### ***How to Identify an Argument in a Text***

Quite often, the topic sentence is the conclusion in an argumentative paragraph. That sentence will be placed at or near the beginning of the paragraph or at or near the end. In the first case, be alert to the immediately following sentences; they will often be claims offered as premises or reasons supporting the topic sentence. In the case of the latter—the placement of the topic sentence at the end of the paragraph—the topic sentence will function as a conclusion for which the previous discussion has provided reasons.