

## 1.9. Meaning, Truth, and Validity

**1. ‘True’ and ‘True in a Situation’.** The concept of truth is shot through our evaluation of arguments, as we isolated the following two factors as ingredients in an ideally convincing argument.

- 1. The premise(s) must be true.**
- 2. The argument must be valid.**

While truth is the essence of the first requirement, the second appeals to truth as well; for we defined a “valid argument” as one whose conclusion is **true** in any possible situation where its premises are.

Now the different ways of speaking about truth – “truth” plain and simple, versus “truth in a certain situation” – might give the impression that we’re talking about two different things. But in fact just one thing’s being discussed throughout: **truth** of a sentence **in a certain situation**.

Mention of situations often drops out when discussing truth in ordinary conversation, where we’re typically interested in one particular situation: the **actual world**, the way things actually are. It would be annoying to always add that we mean the actual state of affairs – asking not whether that news report is true, but whether it’s true in the actual world; not whether he told the truth in his testimony, but whether he told the truth about the actual world; and so on. Even asking whether the story is “actually true” seems like a needlessly wordy equivalent of “true”. So instead we ask simply whether the claim is true (or false) – counting on our audience to take for granted that we mean: true (or false) **in the actual situation**.

(Our statement of the first requirement for being a convincing argument – that the premises all be true – was thus shorthand for: the premises must all be **actually** true, true in the **actual** world.)

Such abbreviated talk of truth, without mention of the intended situation, saves time and doesn't usually lead to misunderstanding. But in discussions of validity and validity counterexamples we're doing something unusual: taking sentences through different possible situations, and asking of each sentence if it's true or false in that situation. For that task the actual world is only one possibility among many. So while the actual world might serve as the sought-after counterexample for our argument (the **actual** situation being a **possible** one, after all), the same could be said of any possible situation.

[An additional source of potential confusion lies in the fact that while a situation is a stretch of space and time, and the cast of characters contained in that region, that's not the sort of thing that can be fit on a page of a book. So when ]

**2. Meaning(s) and Truth.** As we carry a sentence through various possible scenarios, asking in each case whether a certain sentence is true or false in that situation, one feature of the sentence has an obvious influence on our answer – as the following example illustrates.

**Situation A:** Neko deliberately struck Jack with her foot.

1. Neko kicked Jack.
2. Neko kissed Jack.

Clearly Sentence (1) is true in Situation A while Sentence (2) is false there. And equally clearly, that has to do with what each sentence **means**: given the **meaning** of “kicked” and “kissed,” Sentence (1) matches the facts of Situation A while Sentence (2) doesn't.

That point is important to argument evaluation: since meaning is related to truth, and truth is woven into both requirements on convincing, the meaning of the sentence in an argument has an effect on both whether the argument is valid, and whether its premises are (actually) true.

To see how question of validity can turn on meaning, consider a sentence that's ambiguous in meaning – capable of being interpreted in more than one way.

**Dr. Slim lost his suit.**

**Interpretation (1):** the final ruling went against Dr. Slim in a legal case he brought against another party.

**Interpretation (2):** Dr. Slim lost his multi-piece ensemble of formal wear.

And then consider whether the conclusion of following argument follows from its premise.

**1. Dr. Slim sued Pre-Peeled Foodstuffs Inc., but the judge in the case ruled against him.**

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**∴ Dr. Slim lost his suit.**

[given link between meaning and –truth-in-a-certain-situation, the different interpretations make the sentence true in different situations ]

Does the conclusion follow from that premise? Well, if the conclusion is read along the lines of Interpretation (1), then yes, it does seem to follow. But if instead read according to Interpretation (2), the conclusion doesn't at all follow. (It's perfectly possible to have a legal ruling go against you without misplacing a 2- or 3-piece collection of business wear; so on Interpretation (2) it's possible for the premise to be true but the conclusion false.)

Granted, this example's pretty silly: given the subject matter of the premise, Interpretation (1) seems very likely the author's intended sense of the words in the conclusion; whereas Interpretation (2), by comparison, looks in this context more like a play on words than a serious contender for what the author meant.

But the example sets out some important morals about interpretation and truth. (1) When a sentence allows more than one reading (interpretation), the surrounding context usually favors one reading more than the other(s). Still, both possible readings are lurking within the sentence and the words that make it up; and the context serves just to make clear which of those readings the author most likely intended. (2) If reading the conclusion according to the other sense seems like a silly joke, that's no accident. For humor often depends on having listeners assume one sentence interpretation, then springing the other, less likely reading on them.

**3. Lexical Ambiguity.** A sentence may have multiple possible interpretations for one or another reason. In our last example the conclusion had multiple possible readings because one phrase in that conclusion – the word “suit” – had more than one possible reading.

A word or phrase having more than one dictionary definition is a case of **lexical ambiguity**. So the word (or letters) “suit” is lexically ambiguous; and a sentence containing that word inherits that lexical ambiguity.

[Lexical ambiguity; then structural ambiguity; another joke (“How the elephant got in my pajamas I’ll never know.”). Equivocation; amphiboly (Maybe Seneca quote at beginning of reading) ]

“Although Trixie tried out as a card shuffler, she failed to make the cut.”

**Argument****Situation B**

**1. All of the birds I've seen are small and  
yellow.**

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**TRUE**

**∴ All birds are small and yellow.**

**TRUE**

[Examples: ]

[Impossibility reactions: “Neko lost her suit, though she didn’t engage in any legal proceedings.” True if we mean a suit of clothes; impossible if we mean lawsuit.]

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Problems: three or four arguments, ask (a) whether the premises are (actually) true; (b) whether the actual world is a counterexample for the argument; (c) whether any possible situation is a counterexample for that argument.

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Now if a string of words is **ambiguous** – has more than one possible meaning or interpretation – then it might be true in a certain situation on one interpretation (or “reading”), but false when read another way.

[Ambiguous sentence; true or false in a certain situation?]

Now, since validity and validity counterexamples are matters of truth in this or that situation, matters of meaning influence whether a certain argument is valid or invalid.

[2. Meaning and Truth; whether a sentence is true in a given situation depends on the meaning of the sentence; whether sentences are valid may depend on what interpretation we give it. Then: equivocation (with footnote in 2.3 on “so did Lucretia”) ]

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Understanding logic as the study of **validity** – whether the conclusion of an argument **follows from** its premise(s) – we begin developing a test of validity. In its first form this test will remain informal and intuitive; but it will contain the elements essential to later, more sophisticated tests. Central to all these is a concept hinted at in previous examples of invalid arguments.

Recall that we judged Argument B invalid because it seems possible for the premises of B to be true while the conclusion is false.

### Argument B

$$1+1=2$$

$$2+2=4$$


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∴ The first U.S. president was born in Boston.

Such a case reveals the invalidity of an argument because a *valid* argument should be immune to precisely this possibility. With a valid argument true premises are accompanied by true conclusion *without exception*, so there’s no *possible* way of having true premises without a true conclusion. If there *is* a possible way for Argument B to have true premises but false conclusion, then Argument B doesn’t fit the definition of a “valid argument”.

We call such a possible situation a **validity counterexample** (or “counterexample,” for short).

A **validity counterexample** for an argument is a **possible situation** where the **premises** of the argument are all **true**, but the **conclusion** is **false**.

For Argument B, the actual world – where  $1+1$  does indeed equal 2, and  $2+2$  equals 4, but the first U.S. president was not born in Boston – served as a validity counterexample. But we saw that with some arguments we need to stretch our imaginations to find a validity counterexample. Argument D illustrates this.

### Argument D

$$1+1=2$$

$$2+2=4$$

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∴ The first U.S. president was born in Westmoreland County, Virginia.

In the actual world, the premises and conclusion of D are all true. But that isn't enough to make D valid – since it's still *possible* for the argument to have true premises with a false conclusion. With just a bit of imagination we described such a possibility: a situation where John Adams won the first U.S. election, while the mathematical facts remained the same. That situation would qualify as a validity counterexample for Argument D – establishing that the argument is *invalid*.

Just one validity counterexample is sufficient to prove an argument invalid. Indeed, that point was made clear by one of our alternate definitions of “valid argument” in the last section.

**Valid argument:** an argument where it's impossible to have true premises without having a true conclusion.

If we can show, for a given argument, that it *is* possible for it to have true premises without a true conclusion, we've shown that the argument falls short of being a valid argument.

For that reason the search for validity counterexamples takes center stage when testing an argument for validity. Roughly speaking: when testing an argument for validity we **try to think of a validity counterexample** for that argument. If we succeed in thinking up such a possibility, we know that the argument is invalid – and if invalid, unconvincing.

We won't rest content with this seat-of-the-pants, imagination-based test of validity. But already it provides an opportunity to rehearse the core concepts of **validity** and **validity counterexamples**, before grappling with more advanced tests. For even in those later tests, these two notions remain central.

**2. Validity Counterexample Examples.** The following simple argument supplies a bit of practice in picking out validity counterexamples.

**1. All of the birds I've seen are small and yellow.**

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**∴ All birds are small and yellow.**

We walk through a series of possibilities, asking for each whether it qualifies as a validity counterexample for this argument. First, consider Situation A.

**Situation A:** I've seen 20 small yellow birds; and there are hundreds of small birds, of various colors, that I haven't seen.

In Situation A the premise of our argument would be true. But the conclusion of the argument – that “All birds are small and yellow” – is certainly false in A. Since Situation A makes all the premises of the argument true (all *one* of them) while making the conclusion false, Situation A qualifies as a **validity counterexample** for the argument.

Argument	Situation A
<b>1. All of the birds I've seen are small and yellow.</b>	<b>TRUE</b>
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<b>∴ All birds are small and yellow.</b>	<b>FALSE</b>

Thanks to Situation A, we know this argument is **invalid**: true premises do *not* guarantee a true conclusion here, so the conclusion does *not* follow from the premise. (Equivalently: the premises don't **entail** the conclusion.)



For a bit more practice, we continue with Possible Situation B.

**Situation B:** I've seen 20 birds; and all the birds, whether I've seen them or not, are small and yellow.

In B the premise of the argument is **true**: if all the birds are small and yellow, then certainly all the ones I've seen are. And of course the conclusion is **true** here as well.

Argument	Situation B
1. All of the birds I've seen are small and yellow.	TRUE
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∴ All birds are small and yellow.	TRUE

Situation B is **not** a validity counterexample for this argument. This situation tells us **nothing** about the validity of the argument.

How about Possible Situation C?

**Situation C:** All the birds are big and white; and I've seen 20 of them.

In such a situation the premise of the argument would be **false**: here it is not true that all the birds I've seen are small and yellow. The conclusion would be **false** in C as well.

Argument	Situation C
1. All of the birds I've seen are small and yellow.	FALSE
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∴ All birds are small and yellow.	FALSE

Situation C does **not** qualify as a validity counterexample for this argument. C tells us **nothing** about this argument's validity.

We said that Situations B and C tell us nothing about the validity of the argument. Here's why.

Situation A already established that this argument is invalid. But Situation B shows us something important about an invalid argument: **an invalid argument can** (by lucky coincidence) **have true premises and true conclusion.**

Argument	Situation B
1. All of the birds I've seen are small and yellow.	TRUE
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∴ All birds are small and yellow.	TRUE

Of course a **valid** argument can also have true premises and conclusion – as this example shows.

**Valid Argument:**

1. George Washington was the first US president.
  2. George Washington was born in Virginia
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∴ The first US president was born in Virginia.

In the actual world, for instance, the premises and conclusion of this valid argument are true.

**Having true premises and true conclusion is something both valid and invalid arguments can do.** So a situation like that – where the argument's premises and conclusion are all true – is no help in settling whether the argument is valid or invalid.

In Situation C the above invalid argument had false premises and a false conclusion.

Argument	Situation C
1. All of the birds I've seen are small and yellow.	FALSE
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∴ All birds are small and yellow.	FALSE

But that can happen to a valid argument as well.

**Valid Argument:**

1. Benjamin Franklin was the first US president.
  2. Benjamin Franklin was born in Florida
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- ∴ The first US president was born in Florida.

This argument is **valid**, because if the premises **were** both true, the conclusion would have to be true as well. Of course, in the actual world both the premises and conclusion are **false**. So: a valid argument can have false premises and false conclusion (in a given situation).

Here again, **having false premises and false conclusion** (in a given situation) **is something both valid and invalid arguments can do**. So finding such a situation – where an argument's premises and conclusion are both false – tells us nothing about whether that argument is valid.

As single situations go, the **only** case that tells us anything about an argument's validity is a situation where the argument has true premises and a false conclusion – a **validity counterexample**. For that's the one sort of situation a valid argument will **never** find itself in.

So if, by scouring the world before us or any other possibilities the imagination can dream up, we find such a situation for a given argument, we know for certain that the argument is invalid. That's why the search for validity counterexamples plays such a central role in tests of validity.

Note finally that, just as we think of validity as a more technical version of plain old ‘following from,’ validity counterexamples are likewise something we refer to naturally in conversation (if not by that name). So when we want to object that the conclusion of an argument doesn’t follow from its premises, we say: “even if all that’s true, it doesn’t follow that....” In saying this we’re depicting a situation where all the premises are true yet the conclusion isn’t. And that’s just a validity counterexample for the argument in question. Validity counterexamples are what we naturally reach for to show that the conclusion **doesn’t follow** from the premises.

### Summary: Validity Counterexamples

- A **validity counterexample** for an argument is a **possible situation where the argument has true premises but a false conclusion.**
- Finding a validity counterexample for an argument establishes that the argument is **invalid.** (As single situations go, no other kind of possible situation tells us *anything* about whether an argument is valid or invalid.)