

Chapter One: Informal Logic

1.1. Arguments

1. Having Arguments, Making Arguments. Roughly speaking, logic is the study of **arguments**.

But the word “argument” is used to talk about quite different things, and not all of these are relevant to logic. Again speaking roughly, we can distinguish arguments we **have** from arguments we **make**.

An example: Neko and Jack **had** an argument. It went like this.

Neko: You’re an idiot. Chocolate ice cream is way better than strawberry.

Jack: You’re the idiot. Strawberry rules. You’re just too dumb to see that, like you were too dumb to notice that the microphone was off during the talent show.

Neko: How dare you bring that up! I never want to speak to you again.

Jack: Fine by me. And I want my skates back.

We could fairly describe this unhappy exchange as ‘Neko and Jack arguing,’ or ‘Neko and Jack having an argument’. This is argument as **dispute**, or **disagreement**.

But we wouldn’t accuse either Neko or Jack of **making** an argument here. Neither is trying to **convince** the other that he’s right, by presenting some **evidence** in **support** of his view.

Jack *could have* tried to make an argument in defense of his view, like this.

Jack: Chocolate ice cream is better than strawberry ice cream. And here’s why: a recent poll of college graduates found that nearly 50 per cent preferred chocolate ice cream, while only 20 per cent preferred strawberry.

Or like this.

Jack: It's clear that chocolate ice cream is better than strawberry ice cream. After all, my spiritual advisor told me so, and I trust his opinion on everything.

He might not succeed in convincing us in either case. But in each case we at least credit him with **making** an argument (however bad).

Indeed, it's the arguments we *make* that are judged **good** or **bad**, because these sorts of arguments are *for* something. When we *make* an argument, we're trying to **convince** someone that a certain claim is true, by providing some **evidence** in **support** of that claim. And when we make an argument that falls short of that goal – an unconvincing argument – we've made a bad argument.

(By contrast, that first 'argument' between Neko and Jack isn't so naturally called good or bad, because a dispute or disagreement isn't really *for* anything.)

Logic studies arguments in this second sense: arguments that someone **makes**, and that can be judged **good** or **bad**.

2. Parts of an Argument. Already we recognize that an argument has two parts: (i) the claim being argued for, and (ii) the evidence offered in support of that claim.

The claim being argued for is called the **conclusion** of the argument. So in the following argument, the conclusion is that Rex owes Ace twenty dollars.

Rex borrowed ten dollars from Ace on Friday. He borrowed another ten dollars from Ace on Saturday. And he hasn't paid any of that money back. So, *Rex owes Ace twenty dollars.*

The other sentences in this argument are intended as the evidence in support of that conclusion. We could call such sentences the *grounds*, or the *evidence*, or the *reasons* for believing the conclusion. Instead we'll use the traditional, if slightly technical term "**premises**". So the first three sentences of this argument are the **premises**; and the last is the **conclusion**.

Rex borrowed ten dollars from Ace on Friday.
 He borrowed another ten dollars from Ace on Saturday.
 And he hasn't paid any of that money back.

} Premises

So, *Rex owes Ace twenty dollars.*

Conclusion

3. Argument: A Definition. Noticing that both the premises and conclusion of an argument are sentences, we can attempt this preliminary definition.

An **argument** is a string of sentences, intended to convince someone of something.

(Admittedly sometimes – particularly in a logic book – we do build arguments just to study them, without intent to convince. But arguments in their natural environment – ordinary discourse – are made for purposes of convincing. In the same way, we sometimes buy a new car only to fill it with dummies and crash it in a lab. But the real purpose of cars remains to carry people and their possessions.)

Now, to **convince** someone of a certain claim is, roughly, to get them to believe that claim, by way of some reasons for that claim. Convincing involves getting the audience to believe the conclusion, *because of* their believing the premises. And believing a premise or conclusion means: believing that that sentence is *true*.

So we see that premise and conclusion must be sentences of a particular sort: those capable of being true. These are the **declarative sentences**. In our last example, all three premises and the conclusion were declarative sentences. By contrast, **interrogative** sentences (questions) like

What time is it?

and **imperative** sentences (commands) such as

Close the door!

are not capable of being true or false. Not being declarative sentences, they are not fit to serve as a premise or conclusion in an argument.

The following argument might seem an exception to that rule, since it appears to have a non-declarative sentence as its second premise.

If you want to pass logic, you should study.
Do you want to pass logic?

Alright, then: clearly, you should study

But closer examination reveals that the second sentence is not a premise at all. It is rather a question posed only in order to point to its obvious answer – namely that *you want to pass logic*.

And when we replace the question with its obvious answer, the argument fits together very logically.

If you want to pass logic, you should study.
[You want to pass logic.]

Alright, then: clearly, you should study

Here again, all the premises (including unspoken ones) and the conclusion are declarative sentences.

In light of this we tweak the earlier definition a bit, to yield our official definition of “argument”.

An argument is a string of declarative sentences intended to convince someone of something.