

What Is an Argument?

Jim Pryor
New York University

An **argument** is not the same thing as a quarrel. The goal of an argument is not to attack your opponent, or to impress your audience. The goal of an argument is to offer good **reasons** in support of your **conclusion**, reasons that all parties to your dispute can accept.

Nor is an argument just the denial of what the other person says. Even if what your opponent says is wrong and you know it to be wrong, to resolve your dispute you have to produce arguments. And you haven't yet produced an argument against your opponent until you offer some reasons that *show* him or her to be wrong.

When you're arguing, you will usually take certain theses for granted (these are the **premises** of your argument) and attempt to show that if one accepts those premises, then one ought also to accept the argument's conclusion.

Here's a sample argument. The **premises** are in red.

No one can receive an NYU degree unless he or she has paid tuition to NYU.
Shoeless Joe Jackson received an NYU degree.
So, Shoeless Joe Jackson paid tuition to NYU.

In this argument, it is clear what the premises are, and what the conclusion is. Sometimes it will take skill to identify the conclusion and the premises of an argument. You will often have to extract premises and conclusions from more complex and lengthy passages of prose. When you do this, it is helpful to look out for certain key words that serve as indicators or flags for premises or conclusions.

Some common premise-flags are the words **because**, **since**, **given that**, and **for**. These words usually come right before a premise. Here are some examples:

Your car needs a major overhaul, **for** the carburetor is shot.

Given that euthanasia is a common medical practice, the state legislatures ought to legalize it and set up some kind of regulations to prevent abuse.

Because euthanasia is murder, it is always morally wrong.

We must engage in affirmative action, **because** America is still a racist society.

Since abortion is a hotly contested issue in this country, nobody should force his opinion about it on anyone else.

Some common conclusion-flags are the words **thus**, **therefore**, **hence**, **it follows that**, **so**, and **consequently**. These words usually come right before a conclusion. Here are some examples:

You need either a new transmission, or a new carburetor, or an entirely new car; **so** you had better start saving your pennies.

Affirmative action violates the rights of white males to a fair shake; **hence** it is unjust.

It is always wrong to kill a human being, and a fetus is undoubtedly a human being. **It follows that** abortion is always wrong.

A woman's right to control what happens to her body always takes precedence over the rights of a fetus. **Consequently**, abortion is always morally permissible.

Euthanasia involves choosing to die rather than to struggle on. **Thus**, euthanasia is a form of giving up, and it is **therefore** cowardly and despicable.

Authors do not always state all the premises of their arguments. Sometimes they just take certain premises for granted. It will take skill to identify these hidden or unspoken premises.

Whether an argument convinces us depends wholly on whether we believe its premises, and whether its conclusion seems to us to follow from those premises. So when we're evaluating an argument, there are two questions to ask:

Are its premises true and worthy of our belief?

and:

Does its conclusion really follow from the premises?

These are completely independent issues. Whether or not an argument's premises are true is one question; and whether or not its conclusion follows from its premises is another, wholly separate question. If we *don't accept the premises* of an argument, we don't have to accept its conclusion, no matter how clearly the conclusion follows from the premises. Also, if the argument's conclusion *doesn't follow* from its premises, then we don't have to accept its conclusion in that case, either, even if the premises are obviously true.

So bad arguments come in two kinds. Some are bad because their premises are false; others are bad because their conclusions do not follow from their premises. (Some arguments are bad in both ways.) If we recognize that an argument is bad, then it loses its power to convince us. That doesn't mean that a bad argument gives us reason to **reject** its conclusion. The bad argument's conclusion *might* after all be true; it's just that the bad argument gives us **no reason to believe** that the conclusion is true.

Let's consider our sample argument again:

No one can receive an NYU degree unless he or she has paid tuition to NYU.

Shoeless Joe Jackson received an NYU degree.

So, Shoeless Joe Jackson paid tuition to NYU.

In this argument, the conclusion *does* in fact follow from the premises, but at least one of the premises is false. It's not true that one has to pay tuition in order to receive an NYU degree. (NYU gives out a number of honorary degrees every year to people who were never NYU students, and never paid tuition.) Probably the other premise is false, too: as far as I know, Shoeless Joe Jackson did not ever receive an NYU degree.

So this argument does not, by itself, establish that Shoeless Joe Jackson paid tuition to NYU.