

# PHILOSOPHY



## *The Quest for Truth*

Tenth Edition

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### *Identifying Arguments*

Consider these simple arguments:

1. Because banning assault rifles violates a constitutional right, the U.S. government should not ban assault rifles.
2. The *Wall Street Journal* says that people should invest heavily in stocks. Therefore, investing in stocks is a smart move.
3. When Judy drives her car, she's always late. Since she's driving her car now, she will be late.
4. Listen, any movie with clowns in it cannot be a good movie. Last night's movie had at least a dozen clowns in it. Consequently it was awful.
5. The war on terrorism must include a massive military strike on nation X because without this intervention, terrorists cannot be defeated. They will always be able to find safe haven and support in the X regime. Even if terrorists are scattered around the world, support from nation X will increase their chances of surviving and launching new attacks.
6. No one should buy a beer brewed in Canada. Old Guzzler beer is brewed in Canada, so no one should buy it.

Here are the same arguments laid out so the parts are easily identified:

1. [Premise] Because banning assault rifles violates a constitutional right, [Conclusion] the U.S. government should not ban assault rifles.

2. [Premise] The *Wall Street Journal* says that people should invest heavily in stocks.  
[Conclusion] Therefore, investing in stocks is a smart move.
3. [Premise] When Judy drives her car, she's always late.  
[Premise] Since she's driving her car now,  
[Conclusion] she will be late.
4. [Premise] Any movie with clowns in it cannot be a good movie.  
[Premise] Last night's movie had at least a dozen clowns in it.  
[Conclusion] Consequently it was awful.
5. [Premise] Without a military intervention in nation X, terrorists cannot be defeated.  
[Premise] They will always be able to find safe haven and support in the X regime.  
[Premise] Even if terrorists are scattered around the world, support from nation X will increase their chances of surviving and launching new attacks.  
[Conclusion] The war on terrorism must include a massive military strike on nation X.
6. [Premise] No one should buy a beer brewed in Canada.  
[Premise] Old Guzzler beer is brewed in Canada.  
[Conclusion] So no one should buy it.

What all of these arguments have in common is that reasons (the premises) are offered to support or prove a claim (the conclusion). This logical link between premises and conclusion is what distinguishes arguments from all other kinds of discourse.

Now consider this passage:

The cost of the new XJ fighter plane is \$650 million. The cost of three AR21 fighter-bombers is \$1.2 billion. The administration intends to fund such projects.

Is there an argument here? No. This passage consists of several claims, but no reasons are presented to support any particular claim (conclusion), including the last sentence. This passage can be turned into an argument, though, with some minor editing:

The GAO says that any weapon that costs more than \$50 million apiece will actually impair our military readiness. The cost of the new XJ fighter plane is \$650 million. The cost of three AR21 fighter-bombers is \$1.2 billion. We should never impair our readiness. Therefore, the administration should cancel both these projects.

Now we have an argument because reasons are given for accepting a conclusion. Here's another passage:

Allisha went to the bank to get a more recent bank statement of her checking account. The teller told her that the balance was \$1725. Allisha was stunned that it was so low. She called her brother to see if he had been playing one of his twisted pranks. He hadn't. Finally, she concluded that she had been a victim of bank fraud.

Where is the conclusion? Where are the reasons? There are none. This is a little narrative hung on some descriptive claims. But it's not an argument. It could be turned into an argument if, say, some of the claims were restated as reasons for the conclusion that bank fraud had been committed.

Being able to distinguish between passages that do and do not contain arguments is a very basic skill—and an extremely important one. Many people think that if they have clearly stated their beliefs on a subject, they have presented an argument. But a mere declaration of beliefs is not an argument. Often such assertions of opinion are just a jumble of unsupported claims. Search high and low and you will not find an argument anywhere. A writer or speaker of these claims gives the readers or listeners no grounds for believing the claims. In writing courses, the absence of supporting premises is sometimes called “a lack of development.”

Here are three more examples of verbiage sans argument:

Attributing alcohol abuse by children too young to buy a drink to lack of parental discipline, intense pressure to succeed, and affluence incorrectly draws attention to proximate causes while ignoring the ultimate cause: a culture that tolerates overt and covert marketing of alcohol, tobacco and sex to these easily manipulated, voracious consumers.—Letter to the editor, *New York Times*

[A recent column in this newspaper] deals with the living quarters of Bishop William Murphy of the Diocese of Rockville Centre. I am so disgusted with the higher-ups in the church that at times I am embarrassed to say I am Catholic. To know that my parents' hard-earned money went to lawyers and payoffs made me sick. Now I see it has also paid for a high-end kitchen. I am enraged. I will never make a donation again.—Letter to the editor, *Newsday*

I don't understand what is happening to this country. The citizens of this country are trying to destroy the beliefs of our forefathers with their liberal views. This country was founded on Christian beliefs. This has been and I believe still is the greatest country in the world. But the issue that we cannot have prayer in public places and on public property because there has to be separation of church and state is a farce.—Letter to the editor, *Douglas County Sentinel*

The passage on alcohol abuse in children is not an argument but an unsupported assertion about the causes of the problems. The passage from the disappointed Catholic is an expression of outrage (which may or may not be justified), but no conclusion is put forth, and no reasons supporting a conclusion are offered. Note the contentious tone in the third passage. This passage smells like an argument. But, alas, there is no argument. Each sentence is a claim presented without support.