

Argument Clinic

Philosophers often argue, not in the sense of yelling and fighting with one another, but in the sense of offering reasons in support of the positions they endorse. As a student of philosophy, you will be required to examine philosophical arguments, and construct arguments of your own.

In many universities, Philosophy Departments offer courses in Introductory Logic, where students learn about the theory of arguments. Most students who are good at math or computer science find such courses extremely easy. At Caltech, we do not offer courses in Introductory Logic, although there is a sequence in Advanced Logic taught by the Math Department (Ma 116). Research has shown that if you try to teach students just a little bit of Logic, it actually makes them worse at understanding and analyzing arguments. (This is not just true of Logic. When you first learn how to shoot a jump shot at basketball, your aim will be worse than if you just throw it. And for much of the history of medicine your prognosis was better if you drank lots of fluids and got plenty of rest than if you went to see a Doctor.) So I will not try to teach you any logic. Instead, the purpose of this document is to provide with information that is helpful for writing about arguments.

Spelling: ‘Argument’ has only one ‘e’; i.e., it is not ‘argument’.

For or Against: Philosophers always argue *for* or *against* some claim. Students are sometimes wont to write that a philosopher ‘argues’ a claim: ‘Descartes argues the distinction of the mind and the body’, ‘Berkeley argues the existence of matter’. Unless you specify whether the philosopher argues *for* or *against* the claim in question, I have no idea what you are saying.

Parts of an Argument: An argument consists of one or more premises, and a conclusion. The premises are propositions that are intended to support the conclusion. There are two accepted spellings of ‘premise’, the other being ‘premiss’; their plurals are ‘premises’ and ‘premisses’ respectively. You may use either spelling, but be consistent.

Validity and Soundness: If the conclusion of an argument does indeed logically follow from its premises, then the argument is said to be ‘valid’. Note that validity is a feature of the logical structure of the argument, and has nothing to do with whether the premises are true or not. The argument ‘all horses fly; Socrates is a horse; therefore, Socrates flies’ is valid. If, in addition to being valid, an argument has true premises, it is said to be ‘sound’. Soundness is thus stronger than validity: an argument can be valid without being sound, but not vice versa. The opposites of ‘valid’ and ‘sound’ are ‘invalid’ and ‘unsound’.

Begging the Question: I may be fighting a losing battle, but I strongly oppose the common misuse of the phrase ‘beg the question’. The phrase is sometimes used to mean ‘raise the question’; for instance: “the recent Mapplethorpe exhibition begs the question ‘what is art?’.” While this usage is becoming more and more common, it is not what the phrase means. To beg the question is to presuppose the very point that is at issue, that is,

to present an argument whose premises would only be accepted by someone who already accepted the conclusion. Such an argument is also said to be 'circular'. For example, someone who argued that you should accept the Bible as literally true because it is the word of God, and that you should believe the Bible is the word of God because it says so in the Bible (e.g. 2 Timothy 3: 16), would be begging the question or arguing in a circle.