

HOW TO CRITICIZE THE FIVE TYPES OF ARGUMENT

There are roughly THREE ways to challenge an argument. First, we can *grant* everything in the argument yet ask whether the conclusion has any real significance. We might call this the tactic of asking “**So What?**” This puts a burden on the author to explain why her/his conclusion is worth arguing about at all.

Primarily, however, arguments are challenged by asking whether the premises are warranted or by asking whether the premises adequately support the conclusion. Let’s call these, respectively, the question of “**Warranted Premises?**” and the question of “**Adequate Support?**”

One important fact about arguments is:

Rule 1: Arguments of ANY type can be challenged by asking “Warranted Premises?”

You can press the issue of “Warranted Premises?” in several ways:

1. Are the premises *consistent*?
2. Do the premises have *dubious implications*? For instance, if the premises include a generalization, does it have *counterexamples*?
3. Are there any *fallacies of unwarranted premises*? (We shall study these in the next part of the course.)
4. Are the premises otherwise *clear* and *uncontroversial*? If a premise is unclear, can it be made clearer? If a premise is controversial, is there a separate argument in its support? (If so, that argument is open to assessment as well.)

Beyond this, however, the rules of critique are different for different argument-types.

1. Critiquing a Deduction

In a **deductive argument**, the question of “Adequate Support?” is always YES. After all, if the argument really is *deductive*, then there is no way that the conclusion could be false if the premises are true. The premises support the conclusion *perfectly*. Accordingly,

Rule 2: Besides asking “So What?”, the ONLY way to challenge a deduction is to ask “Warranted Premises?”

HOWEVER: Sometimes a person *acts as if* their argument is deductive when really it is not. These are “Pseudo-deductions,” a class of argument fallacies, which we shall study in the next part of the course.

So if a person *acts as if* their argument is deductive, you can still meaningfully ask “Adequate Support?” since the argument may not *really* be deductive. Regardless, if the argument actually is deductive, then asking “Warranted Premises?” would be the only way to challenge it.

2. Critiquing an Induction

Per Rule 1, you can always critique an induction by asking about the truth of the premises. But with induction, the question of “Adequate Support?” can be guided by the following rule:

Rule 3: With induction, “Adequate Support?” means asking whether the pattern indicated in the premises is likely to continue.

Relevant questions to ask in applying Rule 3: Is the sample described in the premises *biased* or *skewed*? Even if the sample is not biased, is the pattern just the result of chance? Or is there is some *explanation* for the pattern which indicates that it will likely continue? Appropriate answers to these questions are aided by good science—and we will study what makes for “good science” later in the course.

3. Critiquing an Abduction

Again, the truth of the premises is always a fair question when challenging an abductive argument. Yet with abduction, the question of “Adequate Support?” is guided by:

Rule 4: With abduction, “Adequate Support?” means asking whether alternative explanations of the premises remain likely.

This requires some ingenuity on your part to *imagine other possible explanations*, plus an ability to discern whether alternate explanations have a substantive chance of being true. Judging this will also be assisted by good scientific theories; again, we will study what constitutes a good scientific theory later.

4. Critiquing a Practical Argument

With practical reasoning, the main issue regarding “Adequate Support?” is whether the argument shows that the recommendation (in the conclusion) is likely to be a good recommendation, all things considered. More exactly:

Rule 5: With a practical argument, “Adequate Support?” means asking whether the argument sufficiently evidences that its recommendation is a valuable one, compared to any competing recommendations.

Does the argument downplay or ignore any disadvantages of its recommendation? Is there an alternate recommendation which would be better to follow? Etc.

Often, a speaker acts as if their practical argument is deductive; as such, the argument is a “pseudo-deduction.” It is key to recognize that such arguments, while often very reasonable, are never conclusive. This is aided by asking whether a fallacy is being committed—especially the *Nirvana Fallacy* (see the handout on “Pseudo-Deductions”).

5. Critiquing an “Other” Argument

Arguments in the “other” category are various. So there is no simple rule for asking “Adequate Support?” with these arguments, although per Rule 1, “Warranted Premises?” is always a good question.

-With a *mixed* argument, you can distinguish between the different kinds of arguments being deployed and evaluate each argument separately.¹

-With an *enthymeme*, you should press the speaker for clarification on what exactly they are thinking. This should ultimately yield a more detailed argument which is either a mixed argument, an argument by analogy, or an argument that falls into one of the previous four categories.

-In an *argument by analogy*, the premises claim that X and Y are analogous, and that X has a certain feature F. The conclusion is that Y (probably) has F as well. With such an argument, “Warranted Premises?” means asking whether X and Y are really analogous, or perhaps asking whether X even has feature F. Whereas, “Adequate Support?” can be pressed by asking:

- a) Are the *similarities relevant* between X and Y? In other words, do the similarities between X and Y really make the conclusion *more likely than not*?
- b) Are there *relevant differences* between X and Y? In other words, do the differences between X and Y indicate that the conclusion is less likely than the speaker thinks?
- c) If X and Y are groups: Are members of the two groups similar and different *in the same ways*? Or in fact, is there a significant diversity among the members?
- d) If X and Y are groups: Do we have *enough examples* of each group to make comparisons? Or are we making hasty generalizations about the groups based on only a few cases?

¹ If a mixed argument is broken down into two arguments for the same conclusion, the two arguments might still *jointly* provide better support for the conclusion than either argument individually. After all, the two arguments might offer different bits of supporting evidence. If so, the arguments should not be considered separately, at least not entirely. But take heed: Two arguments are not always better than one. If a conclusion is supported by bad argument, adding a second bad argument doesn't help!