



Building a Better Argument

Teacher Handout: **Argument Examples**

1. Premise: Pain is a state of consciousness, a “mental event.”
Conclusion: It can never be directly observed.
Remind students that premises and conclusions can occur in partial sentences.
Premise indicator (*since*) is present in this example.
2. Premise: Segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality.
Conclusion: All segregation statutes are unjust.
Premise indicator (*because*) is present.
3. Premise: Genes and proteins are discovered, not invented.
Premise: Inventions are patentable, discoveries are not.
Conclusion: Thus protein patents are intrinsically flawed.
Conclusion indicator (*thus*) is present.
4. Premise: A meter is longer than a yard.
Premise: This ship is 100 meters long.
Conclusion: This ship is longer than a football field.
Both a premise indicator (*since*) and a conclusion indicator (*therefore*) are present.
5. Premise: Books only teach us to talk about what we do not know.
Conclusion: I hate books.
Remind students that premises can follow their conclusions.
6. Premise: Pornography is a scourge on society at every level.
Premise: Our public library must not be used to channel this filth to the people of the area.
Conclusion: At any cost we must have filters on our Ypsilanti Township library computers.
7. Premise: The more stupid [an MP] is, the more stupid [his constituents] were to elect him.
Conclusion: A member of Parliament cannot be stupider than his constituents.
Conclusion: Democracy has at least one merit.
In this argument, the first conclusion in turn serves as a premise for the second conclusion. Why does democracy have at least one merit? Because an MP cannot be stupider than his constituents. The argument also contains a premise indicator (*for*).

8. Premise: Twenty-eight children in the US were killed by falling TV sets between 1990 and 1997.
Premise: That is four times as many people as were killed by great white shark attacks in the 20th century.
Conclusion: Watching “Jaws” on TV is more dangerous than swimming in the Pacific.
Note the presence of a conclusion indicator (*this means that*).
9. Premise: Theorizing without data leads people to twist facts to suit theories instead of theories to suit facts.
Conclusion: It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data.
Remind students that sometimes a conclusion can come before the premises.
10. Premise: The Defense of Marriage Act took away the power of states to regulate marriage.
Premise: That power should not be taken away from states.
Conclusion: John Kerry was right to vote against the Defense of Marriage Act.
Remind students that it is sometimes necessary to wade through extraneous sentences. Paraphrasing can help to cut through the excess rhetoric. Note, too, the presence of a premise indicator (*because*).
11. Premise: Since 1976, states in the U.S. have executed 612 people, and released 81 innocent people from death row.
Premise: The criminal justice system probably convicts innocent people in non-capital cases at the same rate that it convicts innocent people in capital cases.
Conclusion: There are thousands of innocent people in our prisons.
Remind students that rhetorical questions should be translated as statements and not as questions.
12. Premise: More than 99% of all creatures that have ever lived have died without progeny.
Premise: Not a single one of your ancestors died without progeny.
Conclusion: You are lucky to be alive.
It is also possible to take the first sentence as a single (compound) premise.
13. Premise: Pajamas have little lapels, little cuffs and simulated breast pockets.
Conclusion: Men have styled pajamas to look like suits.
Conclusion: Men love suits.
Premise: If you put a pen in the breast pocket of your pajamas, you will kill yourself when you roll over in the middle of the night.
Premise: (Implied) Breast pockets are used for holding pens.
Conclusion: Pajamas really do not need breast pockets.
There are actually two arguments here. The first argument (about men and their love for suits) has two conclusions, with the first of those conclusions serving, in turn, as a premise for the second conclusion. The second argument (about the uselessness of breast pockets on pajamas) has an explicit premise, an implied premise and a conclusion. Many jokes provide good examples of implied premises.

14. Premise: Rights are either God-given or evolve out of the democratic process.
Premise: Most rights are based on the ability of people to form a social contract.
Premise: Animals are incapable of respecting rights.
Conclusion: Animals cannot form social contracts.
Conclusion: Animals do not have rights.
This argument has two conclusions, the first of which is also a premise for the second.
Note, too, the presence of a conclusion indicator (*therefore*).
15. Premise: If having rights requires being able to make moral claims, then many humans who lack these capacities must be without rights.
Premise: It is absurd to think that some humans lack rights.
Conclusion: This proves that rights do not depend on the presence of moral capacities.
Note the presence of a conclusion indicator (*this proves that*).
16. Premise: In some places, what is just or unjust is thought to be determined solely by whoever has the power to lay down the law of the land.
Conclusion: In those places, the law of the land cannot be judged either just or unjust.
Here the student will have to paraphrase a bit to extract a grammatical premise and conclusion. Note the presence of a conclusion indicator (*it follows that*).
17. Premise: In 1974, Abba and Barry Manilow were two of the top musical acts to emerge.
Premise: In 1974, hit songs included “Kung Fu Fighting,” “Seasons in the Sun,” “Billy Don’t Be a Hero,” “The Night Chicago Died” and “(You’re) Having My Baby.”
Conclusion: It is a scientific fact that 1974 was the worst year in world history for rock music.
It might be worth pointing out that Barry is intending the premise about Abba and Barry Manilow as a premise despite his claim to the contrary. This is a humorous use of sarcasm. Note the presence of two conclusion indicators (*because* appears twice).
18. Premise: If the appellate ruling stands, then D.C. will be forced to enact a weaker gun control statute.
Premise: If D.C. is forced to enact a weaker gun control statute, then there will be more loaded guns in homes.
Premise: If there are more loaded guns in homes, then there will be more shootings by accident and on purpose.
Conclusion: (Implied) The appellate ruling should not stand.
Premise: If the ruling stands, then more D.C. residents will acquire guns.
Premise: If more people have guns, then there will be a larger supply of guns for thieves to steal.
Conclusion: (Implied) The appellate ruling should not stand.
This argument runs a lot of premises together. Students will have to paraphrase to break out all of the individual if/then claims. The argument is also interesting in that it presents two different arguments for the same (unstated) conclusion.

19. Premise: When you evaluate something you get to criticize the work of others.
Premise: When you do something, other people get to criticize you.
Premise: (Implied) It is better to criticize than to be criticized.
Conclusion: Get a job that lets you analyze or evaluate something as opposed to actually doing it.

20. Premise: All men are created equal.
Premise: [All people] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights such as Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.
Premise: The function of Government is to protect those rights.
Premise: Government gets its authority to protect rights through the consent of the people it governs.
Conclusion: When governments stop protecting the rights of the people, citizens have the right to establish a new government in its place.
This argument is difficult because of its archaic language. The basic argument, however, is straightforward once it is paraphrased into more modern English.