

Explaining an argument

Reading (before seminar)

Here you will learn how to fully explain an argument. As you know, an argument consists of one or more starting claims which evidentially support a conclusion. To fully explain an argument, you must therefore explain each of the following (not necessarily in order), *unless* the explanation would be painfully obvious:

1. What the starting claims mean.
2. What the conclusion means.
3. Why the starting claims are plausible.
4. How the starting claims evidentially support the conclusion.

If the argument is particularly complex, you may wish to end your explanation with a brief summary.

Consider this apparently simple argument from Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*:

1. I think.
2. I exist.



In the writing sample below, I explain this argument in detail. (I omit textual quotations and references, which you should certainly include.) Identify exactly where in the writing sample I carry out each of the four steps:

I will now explain Descartes' argument that because he thinks, he must exist.

Descartes uses the term "thinking" to refer broadly to any mental activity, including perceiving, imagining, doubting, and so on. Given this definition, Descartes regards the starting premise that he thinks as obvious. For not only can he verify its truth introspectively, but the thought that one is thinking (i.e., engaging in mental activity) is also self-verifying; after all, to have that thought is already to be engaging in mental activity. The claim that Descartes thinks, then, is immune to any doubt as long as Descartes entertains it.

This claim supports the conclusion that Descartes exists because any thought requires a thinker, a self, who has that thought. Indeed, Descartes' transition from the claim that he thinks to the conclusion that he exists remains rationally intact even in the face of radical skeptical doubts. For example, suppose that at the very moment that Descartes performs this reasoning, he is being deceived by an omnipotent and malicious

demon. Still, the reasoning would remain correct. For if the demon is deceiving Descartes, then the demon is deceiving a thinker, *who must exist* in order to be deceived.

Yet Descartes is careful to limit the scope of his conclusion. This self whose existence is certain is not a human being, an animal, or even a material body; it is rather nothing but a thinking thing, a thing that engages in mental activity. In sum, from the premise that he thinks, Descartes can conclude with certainty that he – a thinker – exists.

Notice also my generous use of signposting expressions (expressions like *however, therefore, thus, because, despite, but, and, since*, etc.). To make this point vivid, below I reproduce the same writing sample with all signposting expressions underlined.

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Be warned that many students confuse *repetition* with explanation. However, merely repeating what an author has said in slightly different language is just a waste of space. Consider:

I will now explain Descartes' argument that because he thinks, he must exist. Descartes' starting claim is that he thinks, i.e., that he is a thinking thing, being, or entity of some sort. He uses this claim to support the conclusion that he is also an existing thing, being, or entity of some sort.

The "explanation" above effectively has *no substance whatsoever* and should be cut. To avoid giving such pseudo-explanations, make sure that every explanation you offer either is itself non-obvious or is necessary to support a further non-obvious claim. Cut any explanation that does not meet these criteria.

Practice (in seminar)

Together, let's identify where the author carries out steps 1-4 in the sample explanation of Descartes' argument.

Homework (after seminar)

From your first paper draft, select an explanatory paragraph of 150 words or less. Revise it in light of what you have learned here. Print your revised paragraph (just one copy, since we will not review this exercise in class), and **put your name on the back** so that I may practice anonymous grading.