

Criticizing arguments

Reading (before seminar)

An **argument** is an attempt to support a claim (the **conclusion**) with evidence. Here we will rely on our understanding of evidential diagrams to learn how to criticize an argument.

There are only two fully effective ways to criticize an argument:

- You can *attack a starting claim* of the argument. Equivalently, in terms of an evidential diagram, you can attack one of the numbered claims at the *top* of the diagram.
- You can *attack an inference* of the argument. Equivalently, in terms of an evidential diagram, you can attack *any* arrow connecting a claim to another claim.

Notice that directly attacking the conclusion of an argument is not a fully effective method of criticism. For while this method may reveal *that* an argument is mistaken, it cannot show *why* the argument is mistaken. By contrast, when you successfully criticize an evidential claim or inference of an argument, you reveal exactly where the argument goes wrong.

For the same reason, do not directly attack a claim that is evidentially supported some other claim(s). If the claim is false, then something has gone wrong earlier in the argument: either one of the starting claims is false or an inference is faulty.

Here are some tips on criticizing an argument:

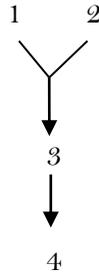
- Support your criticism with evidential claims that almost anyone can verify.
- A criticism is rarely worth making if the argument can easily be modified to avoid the criticism.
- Avoid claiming that the argument fails to “prove” its conclusion. Strong evidential support, not proof, is the proper standard.
- Avoid saying, “Just because x does not mean that y .” This phrase is colloquial and is therefore inappropriate in scholarly writing.
 - To criticize a claim, you may instead say, “The claim that x is false because ...” or “We have little evidence for the claim that x , since ...”
 - To criticize an inference, you may instead say, “The fact that x is poor evidence that y , because ...”; “The fact that x provides little reason to believe that y , because ...”; or “Even if x , y may very well be false, because ...”

Practice (in seminar)

In pairs, develop an objection to the assigned argument. We will discuss your objections and possible replies as a class.

Homework (after seminar)

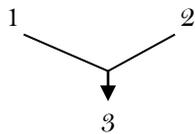
Exercise 1. Identify every claim or inference that you might effectively attack in the following evidential diagram. (Notice that it does not matter which particular claims the numbers represent.)



Exercise 2. Write a *very concise* criticism of the pessimistic argument below. State whether you are attacking an evidential claim or an inference:

“Life is meaningless if we are all just going to die. And of course we will.”

1. If we are all going to die, then life is meaningless.
2. We are all going to die.
3. Life is meaningless.



Exercise 3. Write a *very concise* criticism of the optimistic argument below. State whether you are attacking an evidential claim or an inference.

“If you smoke, then you will probably get cancer. But I don’t smoke. So I will probably not get cancer.”

1. Anyone who smokes will probably get cancer.
2. I don’t smoke.
3. I will probably not get cancer.

