

Argument by elimination; precision

ARGUMENT BY ELIMINATION

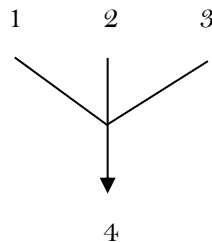
Here you will learn two basic forms of *argument by elimination*.

The first form begins by identifying all possibilities. It then eliminates all possibilities but one and concludes that this remaining possibility must be actual. An argument of this form can have arbitrarily many premises, but for the sake of simplicity here is the template for the argument when there are 4 premises:

Argument by elimination (first form):

1. Either x or y or z .
2. *Not*- x .
3. *Not*- y .

4. z .



Example:

1. My keys are either next to the counter, on the coffee table, or in my coat pocket.
2. My keys are not next to the counter.
3. My keys are not on the coffee table.

4. My keys are in my coat pocket.

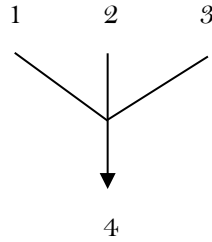
Students often have trouble justifying the first premise of an argument of this form. What you need to do is show that the first premise covers all of the possibilities; in other words, you must show that there are no possibilities that are overlooked in the first premise. In the example above, you might justify premise 1 by saying that I had my keys when I came home just a few minutes ago, and since then I could only have set them down in one of these three locations.

The second form of argument by elimination begins by identifying all possibilities *given* the truth of a certain supposition. The argument then eliminates *all* of these possibilities and concludes that the supposition is false. Again, an argument of this form can have arbitrarily many premises, but here is the template for the argument when there are 4 premises:

Argument by elimination (second form):

1. If x , then either y or z .
2. *Not*- y .

3. Not-z.
 4. Not-x.
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Example:

1. If the stolen jewel is in the thief's apartment, then it is hidden either under the carpet or in the couch cushions.
 2. It is not hidden under the carpet.
 3. It is not hidden in the couch cushions.
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4. The stolen jewel is not in the thief's apartment.

Here the supposition is that the stolen jewel is in the thief's apartment.

There are two errors that students commonly make when using argument by elimination. First, both forms of argument by elimination must include a premise identifying all possibilities (perhaps given the truth of a supposition). This is the first premise in the examples above. However, students often neglect to include this crucial premise. Second, when using argument by elimination, students often fail to be precise – they often fail to ensure that the relevant claims match *word for word*, insofar as ordinary English permits.

PRECISION

An idea may be expressed imprecisely in two main ways: it may be expressed in vague rather than specific terms, or it may be expressed in specific but incorrect terms. It is especially common for students to use imprecise metaphors and prepositions.

Here are some examples of imprecise writing, together with suggestions for revision.

1. Because of this, Nietzsche's reasoning totally falls apart.

Problems:

- The term "this" refers to a previous claim or idea, but the writer does not specify *which* claim or idea.
- The term "totally" indicates that the reasoning fails in some especially extreme way, but the writer is likely exaggerating.
- The phrase "falls apart" expresses a vague metaphor. The writer intends to suggest that there is an error in Nietzsche's reasoning, but the nature of the error is unclear.

Revised sentence:

1*. Because Nietzsche's argument relies on a false assumption, his conclusion is evidentially unsupported.

2. Ibn Tufayl says that God is good. This means that we should do whatever God says.

Problems:

- The writer falsely suggests that the claim that God is good has the same meaning as the claim that we should do whatever God says. Indeed, students often mistakenly use the phrase "this means that" to refer to evidential relations.
- The writer refers to what God *says*, but in the relevant passage Ibn Tufayl does not mention the literal speech of God.

Revised sentence:

2*. Ibn Tufayl reasons that since God is good, we should obey God's will.

3. For Aristotle, the city shapes our meanings as human beings, but his argument about this is false.

Problems:

- "For Aristotle" is a vague expression.
- The sentence contains metaphors – "shapes," "meanings" – that are not only incompatible, but also vague.
- The preposition "about" is vague: it does not indicate the precise relationship between Aristotle's argument and the referent of "this."
- The word "this" has no clear referent.
- An argument cannot be true or false; only a claim can be true or false.

Revision:

3*. According to Aristotle, someone is fully human only if she lives in a city. But Aristotle's argument for this conclusion is unsound.

Let me end by giving you three helpful heuristics. First, **you should typically express claims using *that*-clauses instead of prepositional phrases**. For example, avoid saying:

4. I disagree with Mozi's view about music.

Instead say:

4*. I disagree with Mozi's view that musical performances are wrong.

Second, **when you are discussing the same idea, you should use *exactly the same language, insofar as possible***. For example, avoid saying:

5. Schaffer's notion of grounding conflates a psychological concept with a metaphysical idea. Because of this confusion, Schaffer's argument fails.

The underlined phrases are intended to express the same ideas. So you should instead say:

5*. Schaffer's notion of grounding conflates a psychological notion with a metaphysical one. Because of this conflation, Schaffer's argument fails.

Finally, you should **avoid expressing an entire thought in a noun phrase**. Avoid saying:

6. Epistemic-cum-explanatory differences demonstrate that context overcomes invariancy.

This sentence hides a great deal of important information. Which differences, precisely? What context? The invariancy of what? Here is a way of revising the sentence so as to answer such questions:

6*. In different situations, we should use different epistemic relations to explain the subject's behavior. This suggests that knowledge is a context-sensitive relation, not an invariant one.

You can learn more about how to avoid unhelpful noun phrases in this video, which is both short and very funny: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNlkHtMgcPQ>.