

T1084 Critical Thinking Sample Pages

CHAPTER 1: FINDING REASONS

1.1 DEVELOPING SKILLS IN CRITICAL THINKING

Learning and developing skills in Critical Thinking is very much like learning to drive. Most learner drivers ache for that time when they can be on their own, out on the open road. But learning the techniques of driving can seem to many people unnecessarily repetitive and slow. To others it can seem bewilderingly complex, emphasized by its curious terminology of gas pedals, biting points, and cockpit drills.

In the same way, learning the skills of Critical Thinking might seem initially rather strange. Some new terminology needs to be mastered, and the methods used to get you to progress from one place to another might, at times, seem difficult to absorb. In addition, putting everything together, like with learning to drive, can seem to be quite demanding. But, as you build up your skills one by one, as you practise using each one, and then as you practise putting them together, you will find that, like learning to drive, suddenly you're doing it, suddenly you're thinking in a new way, looking at what people write in newspapers and books, what people say on television and radio, in a new way. You've become a Critical Thinker.

This book is organised in a way which will help you build up your skills one by one. Each skill is introduced with examples to illustrate it, and then followed by exercises for you to have a go at trying out the skill. All of the exercises are followed by a discussion of both why one answer is right and why the others are wrong.

In that Critical Thinking is concerned with an analysis of arguments, we look first at what we mean by an 'argument'.

1.2 WHAT IS AN ARGUMENT?

Most people would find no difficulty coming up with an answer to this question. An obvious one would be: 'an argument is when two or more people are disagreeing about something.'

'You shouldn't have stayed out until eleven.'
'It's stupid that I have to be home by ten.'

In this familiar example, the disagreement centres on how late the young person should be allowed to stay out. Most people would agree that an argument is going on here, an argument in the sense of a disagreement. However, this meaning turns out to be a very limited one. Look at the next example, and contrast it with the first.

'You shouldn't have stayed out until eleven.'

'It's stupid that I have to be home by ten. Everybody else can stay out until eleven.'

In looking at this second argument, you will have noticed the important difference. In it, the young person gives a reason why they should be allowed to stay out until eleven: 'everybody else can'. This reason gets us beyond a simple disagreement: it invites - almost requires - the first speaker to answer the point. This point identifies one of the central features of arguments in the sense that we are going to look at: ***reasons are given by one person in order to persuade another***. A simple disagreement is no more than a disagreement; it goes no further.

Though an argument is intended to be persuasive, this doesn't, of course, mean that it will succeed in persuading. An argument cannot be judged not to be an argument just because we are not convinced of either its reasoning or its conclusion. Weak arguments are arguments nonetheless, just as poor football teams are still football teams.

In our example, the young person has constructed the argument

'since everybody else can stay out until eleven, (and since I should be treated like everybody else), I should not have to be home at ten.'

Notice how we had to slot something into this argument for it to work, a 'missing' part of the reasoning that the young person was actually using, but you can see how the reason supports the conclusion. (Don't worry about such missing parts at this stage: we'll be looking at them in detail in Chapter 3.) Notice also something else. In using reasoning to persuade the parent, the young person has ended up making a point: 'I should not have to be at home at ten.' This is what we call the ***conclusion*** of the argument, not because it's the last thing that's said (even though in this case it is), but because it's what the reasoning has led to. It is, in other words, the whole point of the argument, the thing that the arguer wants to persuade somebody else about.

At this stage, we can summarize what we have established:

an argument consists of reasoning given in support of a conclusion;

the purpose of an argument is to persuade somebody to accept one position rather than another.

Now that we've established that arguments use reasons in support of a conclusion in order to be persuasive, look at another argument.

Sitting in the sun for too long can damage your skin. Therefore people should ensure that they protect themselves from the sun.

Notice how, in this argument, there is no explicit disagreement with anybody. There isn't anyone saying that we ***should*** sit in the sun for long periods. In other words, an argument doesn't have to be a dialogue in which two or more people disagree about something. In

what way, then, are these two sentences about sitting in the sun an argument? The answer is simple: the two sentences together give us both a reason and a conclusion. Which is which?

The word 'therefore' gives us a huge clue in this example. The author argues that, *because* sitting in the sun can damage your skin, *therefore* people should ensure that they protect themselves from the sun. The author is giving a reason why people should protect themselves. The word 'therefore' is a useful clue in working out when an argument exists. Other words can also be used: 'thus', 'so', 'then' are common examples. (You can also find that words like 'must' and 'should' can give clues. We will meet examples later.) Of course, just because an author has used a word like 'therefore' doesn't mean that they have produced an argument. But it is very likely that they probably thought they had.

Using words like 'therefore' is a useful guide to spotting arguments, but you shouldn't rely on this method. An author might provide an argument without using any of these words which we use for clues. You can draw a conclusion without using words like 'therefore' and 'thus'. Look back at our earlier dialogue about staying out late. Here the young person concludes that it is stupid that they should be in by ten, but doesn't highlight the conclusion by using a word like 'therefore'.

This very simple example also shows you something else. The conclusion of an argument isn't always put at the end. It can be anywhere, including at the beginning (as in this example). The author might, then, draw a conclusion which is supported by reasoning which follows it, or might draw a conclusion somewhere in the middle of a passage. You will have to do the work to find out where it is.

There are many other things we need to look at when we're looking at arguments, but unless we can find at least one reason and a conclusion, we're not dealing with an argument at all. Nor are we dealing with an argument unless there is an attempt to persuade another or others of a particular position. An argument has both a structure (reasoning leading to a conclusion) and a purpose (in order to persuade). Before we move on to look at the importance of arguments, it will be useful to consider examples in which the structure of an argument seems to be there but not the purpose. We are thinking here of explanations.

1.2.1 ARGUMENTS AND EXPLANATIONS

Explanations have the form of arguments, but they don't have the purpose of trying to persuade someone of one position rather than another. Here is an example.

A ridge of high pressure will arrive over the country during the next twenty-four hours. This will mean fine and dry weather for all areas.

Though we can find a reason (the arrival of a ridge of high pressure) for the prediction that there will be 'fine and dry weather for all areas', and though the prediction has the appearance of a conclusion (put a 'therefore' in and see how it fits well), this is not an

argument. It is not trying to persuade us that the weather will be fine and dry: it is explaining why it will be. Here is another example.

The radio isn't working. It just went dead, so it must be the fuse in the plug that's blown.

Again the function of this is to explain rather than to persuade. Of course, there might be situations in which an explanation becomes an argument. If, for example, there was a dispute as to the cause of the radio not working, the conclusion 'it must be the fuse in the plug that's blown' takes on a persuasive nature. In addition, though we can distinguish between arguments and explanations, the latter can play an important part *in* arguments. This is when a particular explanation is used in order to enable a reason to support a conclusion. Here is an example.

When the competition was announced in the newspaper, it said that winners had to agree to have their names and photographs published. But the paper gave only the winners' names. Clearly those people who won refused to let themselves be photographed. Therefore the paper must be prepared to listen to people's concerns about privacy.

In this example, the author attempts to explain why the winners' photographs were not published. Using this explanation, a conclusion is drawn. But, as you can see, without this explanation (or something like it), the conclusion could not be drawn. Suppose the explanation for the omission of the photographs was different: for example, the paper always publishes the rule about photographs in case it ever wanted to feature the winners in an article, but normally has no intention of doing so. In this case, the conclusion does not follow.

We'll meet this question of explanations being used as part of an argument on other occasions.