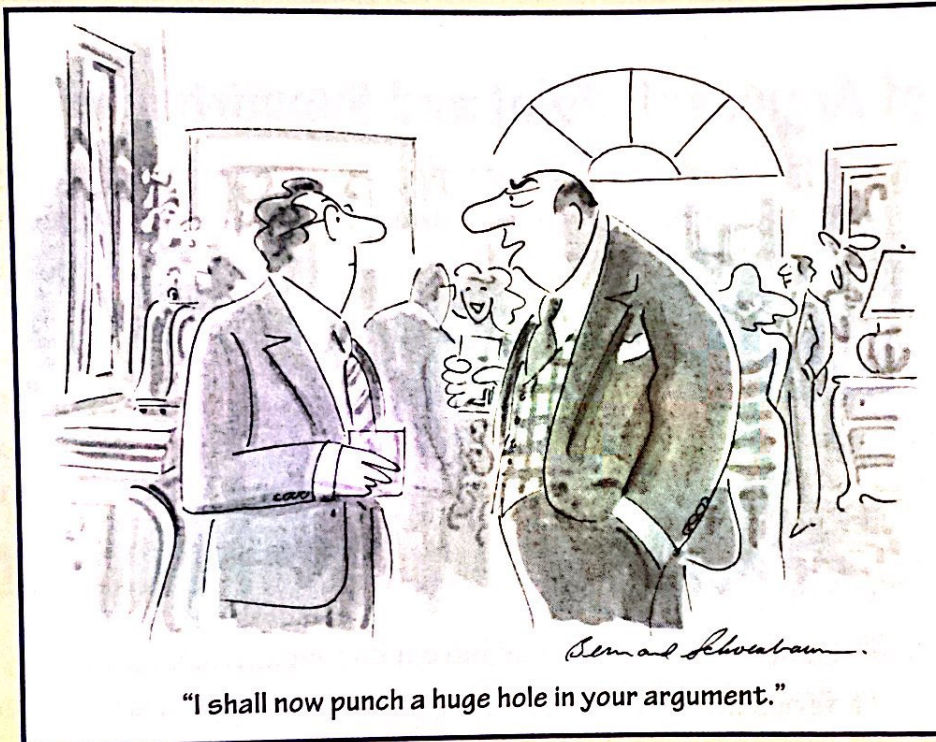


9 Argument



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Many of us enjoy a good argument. A good argument is not an emotional experience in which people's feelings get out of control, leaving them ready to start throwing things. Instead, it is a rational discussion in which each person advances and supports a point of view about some matter. We might argue with a friend, for example, about where to eat or what movie to go to. We might argue about whether a boss or a parent or an instructor is acting in a fair or an unfair manner. We might argue about whether certain performers or sports stars deserve to get paid as much as they do. In a good argument (such as the one that appears to be going on in the above cartoon), the other person listens carefully as we state our case, waiting to see if we really have solid evidence to support our point of view.

Argumentation is, then, a part of our everyday dealings with other people. It is also an important part of much of what we read. Authors often try to convince us of their opinions and interpretations. Very often there are three important things we must do as critical readers:

- 1 Recognize the **point** the author is making.
- 2 Decide if the author's support is **relevant**.
- 3 Decide if the author's support is **adequate**.

This chapter will give you practice in doing the above, first in everyday arguments and then in textbook material.

The Basics of Argument: Point and Support

A good **argument** is one in which you make a point and then provide persuasive and logical evidence to back it up. Here is a point:

Point: The Beef and Burger Shop is a poor fast-food restaurant.

This statement hardly discourages us from visiting the Beef and Burger Shop. "Why do you say that?" we might legitimately say. "Give your reasons." Support is needed so we can decide for ourselves whether a valid point has been made. Suppose the point is followed by these three reasons:

1. The burgers are full of gristle.
2. The roast beef sandwiches have a chemical taste.
3. The fries are lukewarm and soggy.

Clearly, the details provide solid support for the point. They give us a basis for understanding and agreeing with the point. In light of these details, our mouths are not watering for lunch at the Beef and Burger Shop.

We see here, then, a small example of what clear thinking in an argument is about: making a point and providing support that truly backs up that point. A **valid argument** may also be described as a conclusion supported by logical reasons, facts, examples, and other evidence.

Let's look at another example:

Point: There are certain creatures in particular that you would never want to bite you.

Of course, we would not want *any* creature to bite us. But in this statement we're told that certain creatures in particular can be nasty biters. We'd like to get supporting details so we can see and judge for ourselves. Here are details:

1. A bite from the venomous king cobra can cause muscle paralysis and lead to respiratory failure in a matter of minutes.
2. A lion's bite is powerful enough to rip off your arm or take large chunks out of your body.
3. A crocodile's jaws will snap closed like a steel trap, and if the crocodile then decides to roll, you can usually say goodbye to your arm, leg, or whatever is in its mouth.

With such solid support, you're likely to agree that the king cobra, lion, and crocodile are especially scary biters and that a logical point has been made.

The Point and Support of an Argument

In everyday life, of course, people don't simply say, "Here is my point" and "Here is my support." Nor do writers state their ideas so directly. Even so, the basic structure of point and support is still at work beneath the surface, and to evaluate an argument, you need to recognize its point and support.

The following activity will help you distinguish between a point and its support.



PRACTICE 1

In each group of statements, one statement is the point, and the other statement or statements are support for the point. Identify each point with a **P** and each statement of support with an **S**.

Hint: If it sounds right to insert the word *because* in front of a sentence, you probably have a statement of support. For example, we could say, "Because the burgers are full of gristle, because the roast beef sandwiches have a chemical taste, and because the fries are lukewarm and soggy, I've come to the conclusion that the Beef and Burger Shop is a poor fast-food restaurant."

1. _____ A. You have constant headaches and blurred vision.
_____ B. You should see a doctor.
2. _____ A. A number of accidents have occurred at that intersection.
_____ B. A traffic light is needed at the intersection.
3. _____ A. A television is always blaring in one corner of the lounge.
_____ B. The student lounge is not a place for quiet study.
_____ C. There are always people there talking loudly to each other.

4. _____ A. High schools need to teach personal finance skills.
_____ B. Many young people do not know how to budget their money.
_____ C. More and more people are getting into serious credit-card debt.
5. _____ A. Cats refuse to learn silly tricks just to amuse people.
_____ B. Cats are more sensible than dogs.
_____ C. Dogs will accept cruel mistreatment, but if a cat is mistreated, it will run away.
6. _____ A. Scientists have proved that acid rain harms trees and bodies of water.
_____ B. Laws should be passed to reduce acid rain.
_____ C. The damage done by acid rain is hard or impossible to undo.
7. _____ A. Fewer companies are offering health plans and retirement benefits.
_____ B. Conditions in the workplace are tougher than they used to be.
_____ C. In many industries, workers have had to take wage cuts.
8. _____ A. The people upstairs make a lot of noise.
_____ B. We'd better look for another apartment.
_____ C. Roaches seem to be taking over this apartment.
_____ D. The landlord does nothing but promise to fix the leaky faucets.
9. _____ A. Almost half of the stores in the shopping center are empty.
_____ B. A deathly hush fills the building.
_____ C. That shopping center is a depressing place.
_____ D. Unhappy-looking store owners stare out at the few passing shoppers.
10. _____ A. The stimulant effects of a daily cup of coffee have been proved to reduce suicide rates.
_____ B. Coffee flushes from the bloodstream the excess fat that clogs arteries.
_____ C. Coffee supplies a large dose of antioxidants, chemicals which prevent the formation of tumors.
_____ D. Even though coffee can make you jittery and interfere with sleep, there are real health benefits to drinking coffee.

Relevant Support

Once you identify the point and support of an argument, you need to decide if each piece of evidence is **relevant**—in other words, if it really applies to the point. The critical reader must ask, “Is this reason relevant support for the argument?” In their enthusiasm for making an argument, people often bring up irrelevant support. For example, in trying to persuade you to lend him some money this week, a friend might say, “You didn’t lend me money last week when I needed it.” But last week is beside the point; the question is whether or not you should lend him money *this* week.

An excellent way to develop your skill in recognizing relevant support is to work on simple point-support outlines of arguments. By isolating the reasons of an argument, such outlines help you think about whether each reason is truly relevant. Paying close attention to the relevance of support will help your writing as well as your reading.



Check Your Understanding

Consider the following outline. The point is followed by six “facts,” only three of which are relevant support for the point. See if you can check (✓) the **three** relevant statements of support.

Point: My dog Otis is not very bright.

- ___ 1. He’s five years old and doesn’t respond to his name yet.
- ___ 2. He cries when I leave for work every day.
- ___ 3. He always gets excited when visitors arrive.
- ___ 4. He often attacks the backyard hedge as if it’s a hostile animal.
- ___ 5. He gets along very well with my neighbor’s cat.
- ___ 6. I often have to put food in front of him because he can’t find it by himself.



PRACTICE 2

Each point is followed by three statements that provide relevant support and three that do not. In the spaces, write the letters of the **three** relevant statements of support.

Hint: To help you decide if a sentence is relevant or not, ask yourself, "Does this provide logical support for the point being argued?"

1. **Point:** Wildlife can be found even in the middle of the city.

- A. Raccoons sometimes raid the garbage containers near urban apartments.
- B. Many animals have been pushed out of their homes by building development.
- C. Squirrels, chipmunks, and rabbits make their home in city parks.
- D. Heavy traffic makes it dangerous for animals in the city.
- E. Many city dwellers own a cat or a dog.
- F. Hawks build their nests on the window ledges of skyscrapers.

Items that logically support the point: _____

2. **Point:** Singapore is a society with strict controls on people's behavior.

- A. There are four official languages spoken in Singapore.
- B. Singapore declared its independence from Malaysia in 1965.
- C. Chewing gum on the street is prohibited by law.
- D. Most Singaporeans are of Chinese, Malay, or Indian descent.
- E. Persons convicted of vandalism are whipped with a long rattan cane.
- F. There is a \$95 fine for failing to flush a public toilet.

Items that logically support the point: _____

3. **Point:** Alcohol and tobacco are among the most dangerous drugs that Americans use today.
- A. Cancer from cigarette smoking kills numerous Americans every year.
 - B. During Prohibition (1920–1933), liquor bootleggers fought one another as drug dealers do today.
 - C. About half of all fatal traffic accidents are due to drunk driving.
 - D. Nothing is more annoying than trying to enjoy a restaurant meal when the people at nearby tables are smoking and drinking heavily.
 - E. We often don't think of alcohol and tobacco as "drugs" because they are legal.
 - F. Alcohol abuse causes many people to become more aggressive and violent.

Items that logically support the point: _____

4. **Point:** Psychologically healthy people have some general characteristics in common.
- A. Depression, stress, or fatigue can interfere with a person's normal functioning.
 - B. A person who is psychologically healthy is productive, doing tasks without making a big deal of them.
 - C. The culture we live in has a great deal to do with what we consider "normal" behavior.
 - D. People who are well-balanced psychologically get along well with most other people.
 - E. Psychologically healthy persons can focus their attention on people or things outside of themselves.
 - F. Consistently inappropriate behavior can be a symptom of mental illness.

Items that logically support the point: _____

Relevant Support in Paragraphs

The point, or main idea, of the argument in the paragraph on the next page is stated in the first sentence. One of the other sentences is **not** relevant support for that point.



Check Your Understanding

Read the paragraph below and see if you can find the statement that does **not** support the point of the argument.

¹Every high-school student should be required to take a class in parenting skills. ²The absence of such classes shows how little our schools do for young people. ³Numerous young people today are bearing children without having the least idea of how to be a good parent. ⁴Many of them have grown up in families where poor parenting was the norm, and so they have no good parenting models. ⁵Well-planned parenting classes could give future parents at least an idea of what responsible parenting is all about. ⁶The classes might then reduce future problems, including child abuse.

The number of the irrelevant sentence: _____

Explanation

The point of this argument is stated in the first sentence: "Every high-school student should be required to take a class in parenting skills." Any statement that doesn't help prove this point is irrelevant. Sentences 3–6 support that argument: Sentences 5–6 tell the benefits of parenting classes. Sentences 3–4 explain why students need those benefits. Sentence 2, however, is about something else altogether—it complains about how little is being done for young people by schools. Whether that is true or not doesn't change the point and support of the argument. Even if the schools did a great deal for young people, parenting classes could still be useful. Thus sentence 2 is irrelevant to the argument.



PRACTICE 3

The point of the argument in each paragraph that follows is stated in the first sentence. One sentence in the paragraph does not support that point. Read each paragraph, and decide which sentence is **not** relevant evidence. Then write its letter in the space provided.

Hint: To decide if a sentence is relevant, ask yourself, "Does this really provide logical support for the point being argued?"

- _____ 1. ¹Nobody in this neighborhood will miss the Martins when they move. ²They keep their poor dog chained to a tree 24 hours a day, and it howls for most of that time. ³When the neighborhood kids play ball anywhere near their house, Mr. Martin yells at them, "Don't you dare hit that ball into my yard!"

⁴Of course he has had a lot of illness, so you can understand his being short-tempered. ⁵In addition, the Martins refuse to come to neighborhood block parties, and then they complain about the noise. ⁶And they mow their lawn at 6 a.m. on Saturday morning, when other people are trying to get a little extra sleep.

Which of the following statements does **not** support the author's argument that no one will miss the Martins when they move?

- | | |
|---------------|---------------|
| A. Sentence 3 | C. Sentence 5 |
| B. Sentence 4 | D. Sentence 6 |

- _____ 2. ¹National health insurance is entirely possible, as many industrialized countries have proven. ²The National Health Service in Great Britain provides free health care to all citizens. ³The Health Service is almost completely tax-supported. ⁴That doesn't help the immigrants living in Britain, however. ⁵In Sweden, medical care is provided by publicly funded hospitals and clinics. ⁶A national health insurance system reimburses the providers. ⁷Canadians rely on private physicians and hospitals for day-to-day care, but health care is guaranteed as a right for all citizens. ⁸Income taxes are used to finance Canada's public medical insurance.

Which of the following statements does **not** support the author's argument that providing national health insurance is entirely possible?

- | | |
|---------------|---------------|
| A. Sentence 3 | C. Sentence 5 |
| B. Sentence 4 | D. Sentence 6 |

- _____ 3. ¹Short-term goals encourage self-discipline better than distant aims. ²For instance, dieters lose more weight by attempting to shed two pounds a week than by worrying about a total of twenty pounds or more. ³Low-fat diets are another help for dieters. ⁴Also, students who try to increase study time by a half hour each day do better than those who think only about compiling straight A averages. ⁵And alcoholics and drug addicts achieve more lasting recovery when they deal with their problems one day at a time.

Which sentence is **not** relevant support for the argument that short-term goals are better for will power than long-term goals?

- | | |
|---------------|---------------|
| A. Sentence 2 | C. Sentence 4 |
| B. Sentence 3 | D. Sentence 5 |

- _____ 4. ¹The wish for acceptance by the dominant culture sometimes causes people to turn their backs on their own cultural tradition. ²In Australia, Aborigines who have become part of the dominant society may refuse to acknowledge their darker-skinned grandparents on the street. ³In India, the well-off Indians who dominate the culture copy the traditions and prejudices of the

British, leaving many Hindus unhappy about their behavior. ⁴India won its independence from Britain after Mahatma Gandhi led a campaign of peaceful resistance. ⁵And in the United States, many descendants of immigrants have changed their ethnic-sounding family names to names like those of white Protestants. ⁶Also, children of U.S. immigrants are sometimes ashamed to let their school friends see that their parents speak another language.

Which sentence is **not** relevant support for the argument that people at times turn their backs on their own cultural tradition?

- A. Sentence 2
- B. Sentence 3
- C. Sentence 4
- D. Sentence 5

Adequate Support

A valid argument must include not only relevant support but also an **adequate** amount of support—enough to prove the point. For example, it would not be valid to argue “Abortion is wrong” if one’s only support was “My sister had an abortion and has regretted it ever since.” Such an important issue would require more support than the attitude and experience of a single relative. Arguing a point that doesn’t have adequate support is called “jumping to a conclusion.”



Check Your Understanding

In the argument below, three supporting items are given, followed by four possible points. The evidence adequately supports only one of the points; it is insufficient to support the other three. Choose the **one** point you think is adequately supported, and put a check mark (✓) beside it.

Support

- The first time I went to that beach, I got a bad case of sunburn.
- The second time I went to that beach, I couldn’t go in the water because of the pollution.
- The third time I went to that beach, I stepped on a starfish and had to go to the emergency room to have the spikes removed from my foot.

Which **point** is adequately supported by the evidence on the preceding page?

- ☐ A. That beach is unsafe and should be closed.
- ☐ B. I've had a string of bad experiences at that beach.
- ☐ C. Beaches are not safe places.
- ☐ D. We're never going to get this planet cleaned up.

Explanation

The correct answer is B. Answer A is not adequately supported by three isolated instances; we'd need many more reports of dangerous conditions before considering having the beach closed. Answer C is even more poorly supported. We'd need many, many reports of dangerous conditions at beaches worldwide to come to the conclusion stated in C. Answer D is supported in part by the reference to pollution in the second statement of support, but the other two statements (about sunburn and the starfish) are not examples of pollution.



PRACTICE 4

For each group, read the three items of support (the evidence). Then check (✓) the **one** point that is adequately supported by that evidence.

Group 1

Support

- Many credit cards do not carry an annual fee.
- Some cards give you cash back, frequent-flier miles, or other benefits.
- Some credit cards charge a lower rate of interest than others.

Which **point** is adequately supported by all the evidence above?

- ☐ A. When used wisely, credit cards can be helpful.
- ☐ B. Credit cards charge high interest rates on unpaid balances.
- ☐ C. You need to shop around for the right credit card.
- ☐ D. Many people get into trouble by overusing credit cards.

Group 2**Support**

- Some people put off writing or calling a friend because they feel they do not have time to do it right, but a quick note or call is often better than nothing.
- Sometimes it makes sense to do a routine chore quickly rather than perfectly in order to save time for something more important.
- Even a desk and office need not be perfectly neat; sometimes cleaning them up is just an excuse for putting off more important work.

Which **point** is adequately supported by all the evidence above?

- ___ A. Perfection is not always a worthwhile goal.
- ___ B. Striving for perfection always pays off in the end.
- ___ C. You can be better organized if you plan each day more carefully.
- ___ D. Getting things done haphazardly is always better than not getting them done at all.

Group 3**Support**

- Some thieves who are sent to jail steal again as soon as they are released.
- A dog that has been hit for eating food off the table will often continue to gobble what it can find when the owner is not around.
- A teenage girl who is “grounded” because she sneaked out of the house may try to come up with a more creative plan to get out without being caught.

Which **point** is adequately supported by all the evidence above?

- ___ A. Many studies have found advantages and problems with punishment.
- ___ B. Punishment does not always have the intended effects.
- ___ C. Punishment is rarely effective.
- ___ D. Punishment can be effective in some cases.

Group 4**Support**

- Elderly nursing-home patients who have little control over their activities tend to decline faster and die sooner than do those given more control over their activities.
- If two rats receive simultaneous shocks, but only one of them can turn a wheel to stop the shocks, the helpless rat becomes more vulnerable to ulcers and has lower immunity to disease.
- When allowed to adjust office furnishings and control interruptions and distractions, workers experience less stress and illness.

Which **point** is adequately supported by all the evidence above?

- ___ A. It is possible to gain full control over our lives.
- ___ B. Many negative life events are uncontrollable.
- ___ C. Loss of control is a major problem in our society.
- ___ D. A loss of control is stressful and makes one more vulnerable to ill health.