

Assumptions and their role in arguments

More Reason (inference) Indicators

Premise Indicators:

After all...
Given that...
Inasmuch as...
Since...
In view of the fact that...

...and many others which signal that an upcoming statement is to serve as a premise in support of another statement in the immediate vicinity.

Conclusion indicators:

Therefore...
In short...
We can conclude that...
So...
Thus...

Remember that if there is no conclusion indicator word find a statement to function as the conclusion.

Assumptions

The word 'suppose' in an argument is used to indicate that an assumption is being made. However there are no special words in arguments to indicate the presence of this kind of assumption.

Two important ways in which assumptions function in an argument:

First, in giving support to the basic reasons

Second, as a missing step within the argument - perhaps an additional reason which must be added to the stated reasons in order for the conclusion to be established or perhaps as an intermediate conclusion which is supported by the reasons, and in turn supports the main conclusion.

Assumption underlying basic reasons:

Occupational accidents will never be eliminated because all human activity entails risk. But the total number of accidents could be greatly reduced, and the surest way of achieving such a reduction is to penalize, with fines or even imprisonment, those employers on whose premises they occur. Such a policy might result in cases of individual injustice, but it would be effective in securing safer workplaces.

The **argument assumes** 'penalties' would reduce accidents. The **unstated assumption** is 'that the penalties would influence the behavior of employers.

Further assumption - the argument assumes that it is possible for employers to take measures, which will prevent the occurrence of some accidents.

Both assumptions need to be taken together in order to support the claim. However the conclusion is too strong -since nothing has yet been said to support the idea that introducing penalties is the surest way of achieving a reduction in accidents.

There is also **another assumption** - that no other method would be as effective in reducing the number of accidents.

Assumptions as unstated reasons or conclusions:

Example:

Some people say that the depiction of violence on television has no effect on -viewers' behavior. However, if what was shown on television did not affect behavior, television advertising would never influence viewers to buy certain products.

Sentence 1 unstated assumption:
'But we know that it does'

Sentence 2 unstated assumption:
'So it cannot be true that television violence does not affect behavior.'

The argument assumes that the depiction of violence and advertising are alike in important ways - it assumes that if one effects the viewers so indeed does the other one. The only thing they have in common is that they are both shown on TV.

- They can be said to have - Dramatic impact
- Difference - violence is not trying to sell and visa versa
- Difference in people's natural response to violence and advertisements can differ greatly

So the argument is questionable

Identifying someone else's assumption

Work with a partner and choose a statement you agree and give your partner just one reason why you believe this. Your partner must then try to identify any unstated assumptions upon which your view depends.

1. Smoking in public places should be banned
2. Boxing is a barbaric activity
3. People should be allowed to hunt foxes
4. Schools should be required to provide sex education
5. It was a good idea to set up the National Lottery
6. You should give money to charities and not to people on the streets
7. Cannabis should be legalised
8. The judges were wrong to go against the parents wishes in the recent conjoined twins case
9. Parents should have to pay fines if their children do not attend school
10. The voting age should be brought down to 16

You can continue this exercise choosing your own topics. Choose a subject, which you think your partner will disagree!

You must write an argument to support one of the above statements and then analyse it by listing your 'reasons' 'conclusions' 'intermediate conclusions' and any 'unstated assumptions'. Then created a diagram showing the structure of your argument.