

Constructing an Argument

It's time to learn how to construct your own argument. In doing so, it's important you remember how to identify an issue, what a premise is, and what a conclusion is. Then follow the steps outlined here.

1. State the issue:

Make sure your issue is clear and neutral.

Example: Should cigarettes be taxed more than other products? Notice this example of an issue is not yet a position, it doesn't state whether cigarettes should, or should not be taxed. It also isn't biased. It doesn't say, "Should cigarettes be taxed to keep people from dying of cancer caused by tobacco?" Also, notice that the issue is specific. It doesn't ask if there should be taxes on products at all, or even if cigarettes and alcohol should be more heavily taxed.

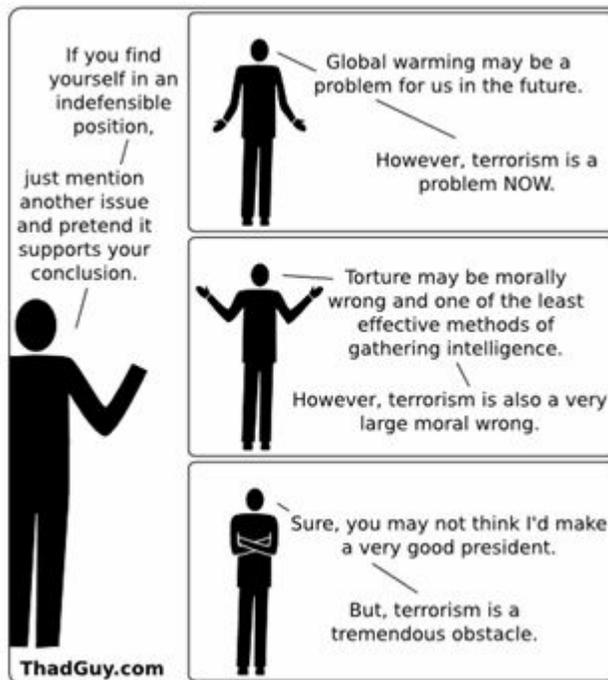
2. Develop a list of premises:

Try to be open-minded. It may be helpful to consider yourself as both for and against the possible positions of the issue, as well as looking for new ways to address the issue. Here, you can also start your research process. Talk to people. Check out some books. Get on the internet and do some research. Reflect on your experiences. Whatever conclusion you come to, considering many premises relating to the issue will be helpful when organizing and defending your conclusion.

As you list different premises, remember to be skeptical, reasonable, consider your sources, and avoid assumptions or unsupported opinions. That is, when you're making a list of premises, you're not just writing down whatever comes to mind, you are practicing critical thinking. Your premises can be dependent or independent. Some of your premises will yield sub-conclusions.

Here is a short list of premises concerning the issue "Should cigarettes be taxed more than other products?" When you make your own list, it should be much longer.

- Cigarettes negatively affect your health.
- If cigarettes cost more, people will be less likely to smoke them.
- The cost of cigarette-related illnesses is a burden on society.
- If a person stops smoking cigarettes, his quality of life will increase.
- A high cigarette tax mostly affects the poor.
- Higher taxes on cigarettes won't necessarily keep people from buying them.
- Higher cigarette taxes would create higher government revenue to pay for the health care needed to address illnesses related to smoking.
- Most states don't use the money made from cigarette taxes to treat the health costs smoking generates.
- States need more money right now.
- Only those who actually get sick from smoking incur any health costs from smoking.
- Any increase in taxation will help.
- Revenue raised from cigarette taxes could be used any place a state needs money.
- If the point is to make money for the state, why not make marijuana legal and tax it?
- Cigarette taxes don't amount to that much money for the state.



- If you can tax cigarettes heavily because they're bad for you, it might not be long until the state also taxes soda or cheeseburgers.
- Only excessive smokers get sick or die from smoking.
- Cigarettes are addictive.
- A cigarette tax is an example of the state limiting personal liberty.
- Cigarette taxes will make cigarettes unaffordable for many.
- Those people who want to smoke but can't afford to, will find illegal ways around the tax.
- Making sure the cigarette tax is enforced will in turn cost the state money.

3. Get rid of weak premises

Weak premises are unclear, irrelevant, not credible, incomplete, or simply untrue. Without going through every premise above, here are a few to eliminate:

- If a person stops smoking cigarettes, his quality of life will increase

This premise is easy to argue against, and therefore is not completely sound. People may have lots of questions about what quality of life actually is, and how someone would measure it.

- If you can tax cigarettes heavily because they're bad for you, it might not be long until the state also taxes soda or cheeseburgers.

This premise relies on a slippery slope argument. Slippery slope arguments aren't very strong because their logical end usually becomes absurd. In this case a slippery slope argument may end in believing the state will eventually tax all things that are potentially a risk to an individual of the state, including running with scissors.

Remember, this is just an example. When you develop your own list you should evaluate and criticize each premise.

4. Organize your premises and form a conclusion

This process takes practice. Some of your premises make sense together, some do not. Take what you consider the strongest premises that are most relevant to the issue and to each other and put them into groups. When you group premises together, a conclusion will become clear as long as you are thinking critically. As a good critical thinker you will find a conclusion that is relevant to the group of premises in question.

There could be more groups than what is presented below, but here are three example groups of possible premises and their natural conclusions.

Argument 1:

If the point of a cigarette tax is to pay for the health costs associated with smoking, and if the cigarette tax is going to be completely fair and direct, then only those who incur health costs as a result of smoking should be taxed higher for smoking.

Argument 2:

Cigarettes are addictive. Even if the goal is to help people quit, making people pay a higher price for their cigarettes isn't going to make a big difference. If someone is addicted to an expensive substance, they don't quit using when it becomes unaffordable; they do drastic, often illegal things, to get money and feed their habit. If the state wants to decrease the number of smokers, they should find a different way to do it than raising cigarette taxes.

Argument 3:

Smoking is addictive and bad for your health. Even if a tax increase in cigarettes only reduces smoking by 5%, that would be worth the health benefits both in cost to the state and to the individual who avoids or quits smoking as a result. Further, even if a tax increase doesn't have sweeping effects on helping people quit smoking, or helping people to never start smoking in the first place, the money generated from a tax increase could be used for beneficial programs the state supports, whether it be health care or education.

5. Choose an argument and finish organizing it:

Critical thinking is very complex. Even if an argument is valid, that is, even if the premises do logically support the conclusion, many things are still up for legitimate criticism. The premises themselves can be argued against, the way the issue is presented could also be argued against, and the type of conclusion could also be argued against. These are just a few objections that might arise when critically evaluating an argument.

For example, take note that each argument above assumes a specific purpose for the increase in cigarette taxes, and then builds relevant premises accordingly. Argument 1 suggests the purpose of the tax is for those who smoke to pay for the health costs smoking generates in the health care system. Argument 2 suggests the purpose of the tax is to help people quit smoking or keep from starting smoking in the first place. Argument 3 suggests the purpose of the tax is to raise money and hopefully help some people quit smoking or keep them from ever starting in the first place.

It is important to be aware of every point of criticism present when constructing an argument. Any of the above 3 arguments may be the argument you choose to support, but you must be sure you can critically defend your argument. At this point, hopefully you've chosen one of the above 3 arguments on your own or come up with a different argument all together. Once you do, it will be helpful to try your argument out on your friends or someone you trust. It will also be helpful to give yourself some time to reflect on your argument. Later, come back and do some revisions.

At some point you have to say, "Okay, this is my argument." But a great critical thinker is never truly done considering and weighing an argument (at least when it's an issue that warrants a well thought out response).