Parts of an Argument

Exactly what makes up an argument? Generally, an argument consists of a proposition, premise, and conclusion.

Don't miss this!

Sample Argument Maps

A proposition is a statement. A proposition can be true or false. People make propositions every day, all the time. A strong proposition must be declarative and clear, based on fact or experience. Some of the propositions below are strong and some are weak.

- 50% of Honda Civics owned in Alabama are white.
- Your presidential vote matters.
- Affirmative action creates positive diversity in the workplace.
- My sister is a girl.

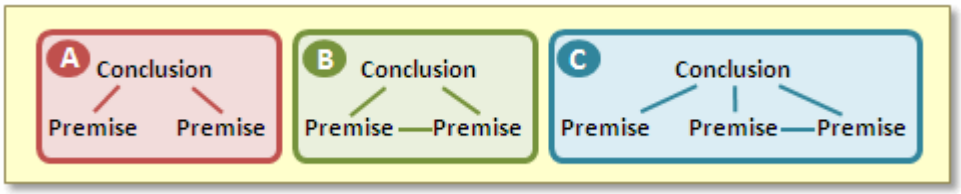
A premise is a type of proposition used to support a conclusion. Usually premises are well understood or generally accepted as true. This is important because premises must be used to support a conclusion. If a premise is not easily agreed on, or generally thought to be true, the premise in question will become its own argument. For example, "my sister is a girl," might be a good premise. "My sister is good at business," is probably a bad premise because it also needs to be supported.

A conclusion is a proposition that is supported by the premises of an argument. Conclusions are generally debatable statements that need solid premises to support them. A proposition like "affirmative action creates positive diversity in the workplace," is not something most people readily agree on, which makes it better at performing as an intended conclusion for an argument, and not as a premise.

How Premises Build Conclusions

Think of premises as building blocks for a conclusion, where the conclusion is the top block. Strong premises are like solid well-placed blocks that make the conclusion less likely to topple. Conversely, weak premises are like paper blocks, poorly placed. Premises like these are unlikely to support the conclusion.

The image on this page shows examples of mapped arguments.



Premises sometimes depend on each other to support a conclusion, and sometimes they're independent. Some conclusions may have only one premise, but really there's no limit to how many premises might be included in an argument, and no rule as to whether or not premises should or shouldn't be dependent on each other.

Example A has two **independent** premises. Independent premises do not need each other to support the conclusion. If either of the premises were false, it wouldn't necessarily mean the conclusion was false.

> Example: P1-Driving too fast can kill you. P2-Driving too fast can result in an expensive speeding ticket. C-You shouldn't drive too fast. If you were driving on a road with no speed limit, you couldn't get a ticket, but you could still get in an accident and die. P1 does not need P2 for C to be properly supported.

Example B has two **dependent** premises.

> Example: P1-Writing a thank you note is more personal than typing one. P2-Paul likes personal notes. C-You should write a personal thank you note to Paul.

As you can see, P1 or P2 would not conclude C if they existed alone. They need each other.

Example C has an independent premise and two dependent premises.

The possibilities of premises are endless. The important part for sound arguments is that the premises are good premises for the argument in question.

Check out this website for sample argument maps. The arguments are diagrammed by determining which propositions are premises, which premises are dependent, and finally, identifying the intended conclusion. There is also an activity for you to try. Try mapping out the arguments on a piece of paper, and then check your answers on the link provided.

Diagramming arguments will help you understand how arguments are built. Once you understand how arguments are built you'll have a better idea of how to critique them, as well as a better idea about how to build your own arguments.