

Argument Structure
I) Introduction: Basic Concepts

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Hello, and welcome to the introduction to this online study of argument structure! I'm Dona Warren in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point.

This introduction will familiarize you with some basic concepts. At the end of this introduction, you will be able to state the definition of the term “argument,” state the definition of the expression “ultimate conclusion,” and explain the importance of correctly understanding an argument’s internal structure.

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Let’s start with some terminology. For our purposes, an argument isn’t a dispute or a fight. Instead, it’s a unit of reasoning that attempts to prove that a certain idea is true by citing other ideas as evidence.

I call the idea that the argument tries to prove the “*ultimate conclusion*” of the argument, but it can also be called the “conclusion” or the “thesis.”

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For example, let’s consider the passage “Leslie should get a dog. After all, Leslie needs company and a dog is good company. Besides, Leslie would take a dog for a walk every day so a dog would help Leslie to get more exercise.”

The ultimate conclusion of this argument is “Leslie should get a dog.”

The other ideas in the argument constitute the evidence advanced for the ultimate conclusion.

The central point to bear in mind is that the ideas that an argument advances as evidence for its ultimate conclusion are *related to each other*, or work together, in a way that gives each argument a precise internal structure.

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It’s important to understand the internal structure of an argument because

- understanding the internal structure of an argument is essential to correctly interpreting the argument,
- correctly interpreting the argument is essential to correctly evaluating the argument,

- correctly evaluating the argument is essential to knowing whether or not we should be persuaded by the argument, and
- knowing whether or not we should be persuaded by the argument is essential to deciding whether or not we should believe the ultimate conclusion.

In short, understanding the internal structure of an argument is essential to deciding what beliefs we should have, and sometimes that's very important.

Think, for example, about the belief that life has meaning, or the belief that capital punishment is justified, or the belief that science is the only reliable way to know about the world. Each of those beliefs has important implications for how we run our lives, and because each of those beliefs can be the ultimate conclusion of an argument, it's good to know how to understand the reasoning that supports them.

The argument that we've just seen – the argument for the conclusion that Leslie needs a dog - might not strike you as particularly momentous because you probably don't have anything invested in its ultimate conclusion. That's intentional. By focusing on arguments with relatively neutral content as we proceed through these lessons, we'll be less distracted by the material *in* the arguments and better able to think about the structure *of* the arguments. Once you learn how to analyze the structure of arguments that address fairly uncontroversial topics, you'll be able to apply that skill set to arguments that tackle more contentious or existentially relevant issues.

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But there's some bad news and some good news.

The bad news is that identifying the internal structure of an argument can be difficult. You might or you might not find it easy to discern the structure of the argument that we've just seen, the argument about Leslie getting a dog. Sooner or later, however, you'll certainly be confronted by a tricky, complex argument, that you won't be able to interpret very easily.

The good news is that there are certain expressions (like "therefore," "because," "and," "but," and "besides") that can help us to identify the internal structure of an argument.

The goal of lessons 1 through 4 is to learn how to take advantage of these expressions to represent the internal structure of an argument. This will allow us to really understand how the ideas in an argument work together to support the argument's ultimate conclusion.

We won't be worrying at all about how to *evaluate* arguments here because we can't evaluate an argument until we understand it correctly, and once we do understand an argument the evaluation is sometimes rather obvious.

This concludes the introduction to argument structure. You may now proceed to the "Gauge Your Understanding" exercises and then continue with Lesson 1.