

# Judging Strengths and Weaknesses of Arguments

Being able to assess arguments effectively is a useful skill in both our public and our private lives. We often need to be able to determine whether someone's argument has merit or not.

Use the following general questions to help you decide whether a writer's arguments are strong or weak.

## 1. Is the writer's word choice clear?

Think about what the writer is saying, each word. Are you confident you understand exactly what the writer is referring to. If not, you should be wary of believing the writer's argument.

For example, if Writer X says we need to "get tough on crime," what exactly does she mean? What policies is she advocating? If Writer Y says, "The government encourages sprawl either actively or by benign neglect. Immigration policy fuels much of our population growth . . .," what does he mean exactly by the terms, "the government" [city, state, or federal government?], "encourages . . . actively," "encourages . . . by benign neglect," "immigration policy" [what particular policy is he referring to?], "fuels," "population growth" [population growth, in general, or in the cities?]. This latter argument, obviously a poor one, was actually a part of a published letter to the editor of the *Austin American-Statesman*.

## 2. Does the writer argue reasonably rather than emotionally?

Does the writer avoid being emotional? If so, the argument is strengthened. Does the writer, instead, include words which indicate he or she feels strongly about the issue, thus, giving you grounds for doubting the objectivity of this writer?

## 3. Does what the writer argues or claims to be true seem reasonable to you, using your own common sense?

Example: If a writer contends that teenagers who are suicidal will forget their problems if they do community service—helping, for example, the mentally retarded—does this claim seem reasonable to you? Do you think a teenager so gravely upset as to attempt suicide will be able to help anyone else? Using common sense, we may well conclude that a person who has recently attempted suicide is probably so overwhelmed by his or her own problems that he or she has no interest in or ability to help others.

## 4. Does the writer support each opinion or claim with the following evidence?

A. The opinion of an unbiased expert which seems to support the claims which the writer is making

Be sure to think about whether the expert may be biased about the issue or not. For example, if a newspaper reporter wanted to find out if St. Edward's is a good school, perhaps she should not ask SEU's president, Dr. George Martin. Obviously, Dr. Martin believes SEU is a good school since he is governing it. An opinion or claim

backed up by a biased expert or source is not well supported, and the writer's argument is a weak one.

B. Relevant facts which support the writer's claims

If the writer claims that being President of the U.S. is dangerous, for example, and supports her claim by noting the number of presidents who have been assassinated or the target of unsuccessful assassins, then she has supported the claim with relevant facts. (Alternatively, she could back the claim by focusing exclusively on the number of recent presidents who have been the targets of assassins.)

C. Relevant current statistics, which are documented, that support the writer's claims

Beware of a writer's spouting off "good" statistics to prove his point without telling you where the statistics come from, and be sure to assess the source. Check to see that the statistics are up-to-date. If the year is 1999, and the writer uses statistics to support his claim that cover the years 1991-1995, then the evidence is poor, and his argument is weak. Finally, do the statistics support only part of his claim? For example, if he is making a claim about the whole U.S., but uses only statistics from Texas, his argument is weak.

D. Unbiased studies which have been done in the area which support the writer's claims

Again, pay attention to whether any studies cited were conducted by people/institutions which are biased or not. If, for example, English teachers do a study to determine if composition classes are well taught, the results of such a study may well be biased. Also, notice whether a survey used in a study has biased questions which would "color" the results. You couldn't trust such studies to be fair and unbiased. Finally, note whether a study covers a representative sample for the conclusions reached.

The four kinds of evidence, above, may help to strengthen a writer's claims. If a writer makes claims without providing evidence to support them OR if he or she makes claims but supports them with weak evidence, then the argument is a weak one. (8/3/2000)