

Critical Thinking

Lecture 1: The Language of Argumentation

MGM115

Prepared by
Dr. Ahmed Alqarni

CRITICAL THINKING COURSE

Introduction: The Language of Argumentation

Before we can analyze, evaluate, or write an argument, we need a shared vocabulary for what an argument even is.

TOPIC ROADMAP

Four building blocks of argument language

This topic gives you the vocabulary the rest of the course depends on: claims, arguments, premises, and conclusions.

1

Why Language Matters

Everyone is trying to convince you — precise language is your defense.

2

Claims

The building block: a declarative sentence that's true or false.

3

Arguments

Premises offered as reasons for a conclusion — and what isn't one.

4

Working Vocabulary

A glossary you'll reuse in every topic that follows.

PART

1

Why Language Matters

Every argument is made of language — so precision about words comes first.

PART 1 · WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS

Someone is always trying to convince you

- You should go to bed early. You should drop out of college. You should buy a particular truck. You should take this course.
- And in the other direction, you're constantly trying to convince yourself: Should I take out a loan? Should I trust this source?
- Studying the language of argumentation is a defense against being conned by bad reasoning — and a tool for reasoning better yourself.

PART 1 · WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS

Reasoning is what language lets us do

- Many animals see better, hear better, or are stronger than us. But they cannot plan, cannot think things through in words, cannot discuss in hopes of understanding better.
- Language is what turns raw perception into an argument — a structure we can actually inspect, question, and improve.
- That's why a course on argumentation has to start with language itself, before it can move to logic, fallacies, or statistics.

PART 1 • WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS

A story worth keeping in mind



A senior anthropology major brought his instructor a fifteen-page term paper. He'd gone back through it asking "So?" after every paragraph — exactly the way this course teaches you to test an argument's language for gaps.

He found he couldn't justify his conclusion, revised it, and cut the paper to eleven pages. The professor's comment: "Beautifully reasoned, clear. A+."

Precise attention to language — what's actually being claimed, what's actually being argued — changes how well you write and read.

PART 1 · WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS

Argumentative language shows up everywhere — even sports radio

- Callers to a sports talk show know the details and make serious projections about strategy, based on evidence and experience.
- They comment on what caused a team to win or lose, and reject bad arguments when they hear them.
- If you can already reason well about a subject you care about, this course is about sharpening that same instinct — and applying it far more broadly, with precise vocabulary.

PART 1 · WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS

Reasoning well vs. merely winning



Reasoning well

- Builds a case from good reasons, in clear language
- Aims at what's actually true
- Treats others as fellow searchers for truth
- Is more effective in the long run



Bad ways to convince

- Misuse emotion or vague language to bypass judgment
- Rely on ambiguity, deception, or distraction
- Aim only at winning, not truth
- Are the tools of a bad trial lawyer, not a critical thinker

PART 1 · WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS

Argumentation is philosophy in miniature

- “Philosophy” literally means the love of wisdom — and philosophy has always been built from careful attention to what words mean.
- We might never reach final truth on every question — but we can be careful, honest users of language, and treat others the same way.
- Everything from here forward — claims, arguments, fallacies, statistics — depends on getting this shared vocabulary right first.

PART

2

Claims

The single building block every argument in this course is made of.

PART 2 · CLAIMS

An attempt to convince always has two sides

1 **Someone tries to convince you.**
An ad, a friend, a politician.

2 **You try to convince someone else.**
A roommate, a boss, a jury.

3 **You try to convince yourself.**
Weighing a decision late at night.

We call an attempt to convince, using language, an “argument.”

PART 2 · CLAIMS

Convinced ≠ argued**EXAMPLE —**

The school bully walks up to Flo and says, “Hand over your candy bar.” Flo refuses. He hits her with a stick. Flo hands it over. Flo has been convinced.

ANALYSIS

But that's no argument. The attempts to convince we study in this course are ones that are, or can be put into, language — a set of sentences we can actually think about and evaluate. A stick is not a premise.



PART 2 · CLAIMS

What kind of sentences can argue?

- If an argument is meant to convince us that something is true, the “something” has to be a sentence — because only sentences are true or false.
- And only a certain kind of sentence: not threats, not commands, not questions, not prayers.
- An attempt to convince, to count as an argument, has to be couched in declarative sentences — plain language that is true or false.

PART 2 · CLAIMS

Declarative sentences vs. everything else

**Declarative sentences**

- “This course is a delight.”
- “The author of this book writes well.”
- “Intelligent beings once lived on Mars.”
- “Everyone should brush their teeth daily.”

**Not declarative**

- “Shut that door!” (command)
- “How often do I have to tell you...?” (question)
- “Dear God, let me be a millionaire.” (prayer)
- These can't be true or false, so can't be premises or conclusions

PART 2 • CLAIMS

The building block of every argument

Claim

A declarative sentence used in such a way that it is either true or false (but not both).

Note the phrase “used in such a way” — the same sentence can be a claim in one context and not in another.

PART 2 · CLAIMS

Grammatically declarative ≠ meaningful

EXAMPLE —

“Green dreams ride horses.”

ANALYSIS

This is a grammatically correct declarative sentence — subject, verb, object. But it's nonsense: it has no truth-value, because there's no way for it to correspond to how the world actually is. Being declarative is necessary for a claim, but it isn't enough.



PART 2 · CLAIMS

Is it a claim? — context decides

“Your teacher is short.”

Probably not — “short” is so vague that we can't pin down a truth-value.

“Cats are nasty.”

If you found yourself disagreeing, you were implicitly treating it as a claim — you can't disagree with something that has no truth-value.

PART 2 · CLAIMS

Context can turn a wish into a claim

EXAMPLE —

Maria sighs alone at night, “I wish I could get a job.” Later, accused by her parents of not trying, she says the same words: “It's not that I'm not trying. I wish I could get a job.”

ANALYSIS

Said to herself as a sigh, it's not a claim — it's more like a prayer. Said to her parents as a response to an accusation, it's something that could be true or false. Same words, different use — and use is what decides.



PART 2 · CLAIMS

You can't reason with what you don't understand

EXAMPLE —

“Todo cachorro pode latir.” / “Every mollusk can contract myxomatosis.”

ANALYSIS

If you don't read Portuguese, or don't know what “myxomatosis” means, you're not in a position to treat these as claims you can reason with — even though, to someone who understands the words, each is straightforwardly true or false. A dictionary is one of the most important tools a critical thinker owns.



PART

3

Arguments

Claims give us the material. Now we assemble them into something that argues.

PART 3 · ARGUMENTS

Putting claims to work

Argument

An attempt to convince someone (possibly yourself) that a particular claim — the conclusion — is true, using other claims — the premises — as reasons for believing it.

The conclusion is sometimes called the issue being debated.

PART 3 · ARGUMENTS

The anatomy of an argument

PREMISE

"He's in cardiac arrest."

+

PREMISE

(and any other reasons offered)

+

CONCLUSION

"Your patient is dying."

Good arguments give us good reason to believe the conclusion follows from the premises.

PART 3 · ARGUMENTS

Recognizing an argument: the nurse

EXAMPLE 1

A nurse tells a doctor: “Your patient in Room 47 is dying. He's in cardiac arrest.”

ANALYSIS

The nurse is making an argument. She's trying to convince the doctor that “Your patient in Room 47 is dying” is true. Her premise: “He's in cardiac arrest.” It's a short argument — one premise — but it's a genuine one.



PART 3 • ARGUMENTS

Recognizing an argument: the accident

EXAMPLE 2

Dick tells a police officer: “She hit me from the rear. Anytime you get rear-ended, it's not your fault.”

ANALYSIS

Dick is trying to convince the officer that the accident wasn't his fault, using two premises: he was hit from behind, and being rear-ended generally means you're not at fault. Whether it's a good argument is a separate question — but it is one.



PART 3 · ARGUMENTS

Recognizing an argument: the ballgame

EXAMPLE 3

“Out? Out? I was safe by a mile! Are you blind? He didn't even touch me with his glove!”

ANALYSIS

A runner just called out is trying to convince the umpire that he was safe. His one real premise: the fielder never touched him with the glove. The rest — “Are you blind?” — is noise, not part of the argument itself.



PART 3 · ARGUMENTS

Not an argument: commands and threats

EXAMPLE 4

"Give me that wrench."

ANALYSIS

This is trying to convince someone to do something — but it isn't trying to convince anyone that a claim is true. Commands and threats aren't built from premises and conclusions, so however forceful they are, they aren't arguments.



PART 3 • ARGUMENTS

Not an argument: instructions

EXAMPLE 5

“Follow the directions provided by your doctor. This medicine may be taken with or without food. Store at room temperature.”

ANALYSIS

Instructions, explanations, and descriptions can use perfectly good declarative sentences — but they aren't intended to convince you that some claim is true. They're telling you what to do, not arguing for a conclusion.



PART 3 · ARGUMENTS

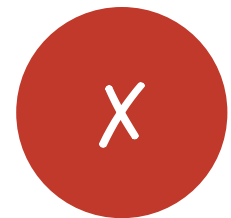
Not an argument: an explanation

EXAMPLE 7

“The sky is blue. That's because sunlight is refracted through the air so that other wavelengths are diminished.”

ANALYSIS

This isn't trying to convince you the sky is blue — that's already obvious to you. It's explaining why a fact you already accept is true. Explanations and arguments can look alike on the page; the difference is in what job the sentence is doing.



PART 3 · ARGUMENTS

Not an argument: no language at all

EXAMPLE 8

A chimpanzee pokes a stick into a termite hole, pulls it out with a termite stuck to it, eats the termite, and repeats the process.

ANALYSIS

Whatever the chimpanzee is doing, she isn't using claims to convince herself that some claim is true. There's no language here at all. That's exactly why this course begins with language — without it, there's no argument to analyze.



PART 3 · ARGUMENTS

Quick check: is it an argument?

- Is it made of declarative sentences — could each one be true or false?
- Is someone (possibly you) trying to convince someone (possibly yourself) that one of those sentences is true?
- Are the other sentences offered as reasons for that one — not just noise, not just commands or questions?
- If you can answer “yes” to all three, you likely have a conclusion and premises — an argument.

PART 3 · ARGUMENTS

Four things that get mistaken for arguments

Commands / threats

“Give me the wrench.” — trying to make you act, not convincing you something is true.

Questions

“Don't you love your mother?” — questions have no truth-value, so can't be premises or conclusions.

Instructions

“Store at room temperature.” — telling you what to do, not arguing for a conclusion.

Explanations

“The sky is blue because...” — accounting for something already accepted, not proving it.



PART

4

Working Vocabulary

A glossary you will reuse in every topic that follows this one.

PART 4 · WORKING VOCABULARY

Core terms, part 1

Claim

A declarative sentence used so that it's true or false, not both.

Truth-value

Whether a claim is true or false.

Argument

An attempt to convince someone a conclusion is true, using premises as reasons.

Premise

A claim offered as a reason for the conclusion.

Conclusion

The claim the argument is trying to establish; also called the issue.

PART 4 · WORKING VOCABULARY

Core terms, part 2

Declarative sentence

A sentence that could, in principle, be true or false — as opposed to a command, question, or prayer.

Indicator word

A word like “so” or “since” that flags a claim's role (premise or conclusion) without being part of the claim.

Critical thinking

The deliberate, careful evaluation of claims and arguments, rather than accepting or rejecting them by impulse.

Issue

Another name for the conclusion — the claim actually being debated.

PART 4 · WORKING VOCABULARY

Why this vocabulary has to come first

- Every later topic — validity, fallacies, statistics, causation — is stated in terms of claims, premises, and conclusions.
- If you can't reliably separate a claim from a command, or a premise from noise, you can't apply any of the more advanced tools that follow.
- Precision about language isn't pedantry here — it's the load-bearing foundation the rest of the course sits on.

TOPIC SUMMARY

Where we landed

- This course studies attempts to convince that use language: arguments.
- A claim is a declarative sentence used in such a way that it's true or false (not both).
- An argument tries to convince someone that a conclusion is true, using premises as reasons.
- Commands, questions, instructions, and explanations look similar but aren't arguments.
- This shared vocabulary — claim, argument, premise, conclusion — is what every remaining topic in the course builds on.

TOPIC 1

Key words to know cold

Truth-value

Claim

True

False

Argument

Premise

Conclusion

Issue

Critical thinking

Declarative sentence

Indicator word

**Language of
argumentation**



Thank You

