Reconstructing Arguments 5.1
Distinguishing arguments from non-arguments

• This passage (which appeared, at first, to be purely rhetorical) actually contains a surprising amount of argumentation.

• The main conclusion advanced in the passage is:

  • (C) The editorial (which claimed that (C1) the Supreme Court decision on flag burning was correct, and which claimed that (C2) Bush was wrong to come out against the decision) is incorrect.

• There are two (independent) lines of argument for (C) here.

  • One line goes against (C1) and the other against (C2), i.e., the first argues that not-(C1) and the second argues that not-(C2).

• Let’s have a look at each of these lines of argument.

Reconstructing Arguments 5.2
Distinguishing arguments from non-arguments

• The main conclusion of the first line of argument is:
  • not-(C1) The court’s decision that flag burning is protected speech (under the 1st amendment) was incorrect.

• The stated premise for this conclusion is:
  • (1) Flag burning is obscene (indeed, flag burning is as obscene as walking down Main Street naked at noon-time).

• This means we’ll need to add two implicit premises:
  • (2) If flag burning is obscene, then it is not protected speech under the first amendment.
  • (3) If (1) and (2) are both true, then not-(C1).

• Thus, we have reconstructed a (valid!) argument for not-(C1), from one stated premise (1), and two implicit premises (2)/(3).
Reconstructing Arguments 5.3

Distinguishing arguments from non-arguments

• The main conclusion of the second line of argument is:
  • not-(C2) Bush was right to come out against the decision.

• The stated premises for this conclusion are:
  • (4) In coming out against the supreme court’s decision, Bush was following the “will of the people”.
  • (5) All office holders are always right to follow the “will of the people”.
  • (7) A poll of the paper’s readers was overwhelmingly against the supreme court’s decision.

• This means we’ll need to add an implicit premise:
  • (8) If (7) is true, then the “will of the people” was against the supreme court decision.

• We have here a (valid!) argument for not-(C2).

Reconstructing Arguments 5.4

Distinguishing arguments from non-arguments

• It is helpful to look at a diagram of the structure of the arguments expressed in this passage.

(C)
(1)+(2)+(3) (4)+(5)
(7)+(8)
not-(C1) not-(C2)

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Identifying Conclusions of Arguments

• If you think you’ve got an argument expressed in a passage, you’ll first need to identify its conclusion. Some guidelines:
  • Ask yourself: what’s the main point of the passage?
  • Conclusions need not be controversial claims — they can be about any sort of topic.
  • Longer passages may contain multiple arguments. It can be useful to outline the structure of a passage, if you think there are multiple conclusions being argued for in the passage.
  • Look for conclusion indicators (“therefore”, “hence”, “thus”).
  • Try to insert a conclusion indicator, and see if the passage still reads smoothly (as an argument for that claim).
  • Sometimes conclusions are not explicitly stated, or they are stated in an unclear or imprecise (or even misleading!) way.

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Identifying Premises of Arguments

• Ask yourself: what are the author’s reasons for believing the conclusion (or what reasons are they offering)?
  • If there are multiple arguments in the passage, be careful to group premises with their associated conclusions.
  • Look for premise indicators. [Or, try to insert premise indicators, and see if the passage still reads smoothly.]
  • Some premises are implicit, and must be articulated by us.
  • Premises can be stated in obscure or unclear ways. Our reconstructions should make such premises clear and precise.
  • Sometimes statements in a passage are unnecessary premises.
  • Some stated premises may be irrelevant to the conclusion (we may omit these if it makes the argument stronger).
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General vs Specific Premises

- Premises can be either general or specific.
- Specific premises are claims about individual objects.
  - e.g., Socrates is a man.
- General premises involve “quantifying” over groups of objects. There are various types of “quantifiers”:
  - Some, many, most, all, none, almost all, every, any.
- Often, specific and general premises are combined in arguments. We’ve seen examples from predicate logic.
- We will reconstruct general premises in standard form:
  - All As are Bs.
  - Most As are Bs.
  - Some As are Bs.

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General vs Specific Premises

- Here are some examples (to convert into standard form):
  - If something is a bird, then it can fly.
    - Form: All As are Bs.
  - The only people who got an “A” did it by bribing the prof.
    - Form: All As are Bs.
  - A person is a student only if that person is registered.
    - Form: All As are Bs.
  - Lying is always risky.
    - Form: All As are Bs.
  - In most cases, honesty is the best policy.
    - Form: Most As are Bs.

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Adding Implicit Premises

- We have three basic premises to help guide us in the addition of implicit premises (when it is clear that this is needed).
- **Faithfulness:**
  - (PF) Add implicit premises that are consistent with the intention of the author of the argument.
- **Charity:**
  - (PCI) Add implicit premises that are reasonable to accept rather than implicit premises that are obviously false.
- **Generalization:**
  - (PG) When adding a generalization as an implicit premise, add a true wide generalization rather than a true narrow one, and add a true narrow generalization rather than a false wide one.

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Adding Implicit Generalizations (Example)

Bar X. Am is a recent law-school graduate who has just been interviewed for a position in a law firm. The interviewer says, “Bar will be a successful lawyer. She’s smart and articulate, and she likes to argue.”

- As a first pass, we might try the following reconstruction:
  1. Bar is smart.
  2. Bar is articulate.
  3. Bar likes to argue.

- But, this reconstruction is missing a generalization.
- What generalization should we add here?
The principle of charity urges us to find the strongest argument in the vicinity. Consider the following non-deductive alternative:

1. Bar is smart.
2. Bar is articulate.
3. Bar likes to argue.
4. Bar is a lawyer.
5. Most lawyers who are smart, articulate, and like to argue will be successful lawyers.

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6. Bar will be a successful lawyer.

• This may be a stronger argument than the deductive rendition. This “most” generalization is more plausible, to be sure…
Adding Implicit Generalizations (Example #2)

• Two common mistakes here:
  • (a) leaving out a requisite general premise
  • (b) leaving the quantifier off a general premise

• Example:
  • Michael must be tall. After all, he’s a professional basketball player.

• Mistake (a) would lead to this incomplete reconstruction:

  1. Michael is a professional basketball player.
  2. Michael is tall.

• Mistake (b) would lead to this incomplete reconstruction:

  1. Michael is a professional basketball player.
  2. Professional basketball players are tall.
  3. Michael is tall.

• This is still incomplete, since (2) is missing a quantifier.

• Which quantifier should we add here?
  • All? Most? or some other quantifier?
  • Remember, we want the strongest, plausibly true claim…

Two Example Argumentative Passages:

• God does not exist. For there is a tremendous amount of pain and suffering in the world. And if God existed, then there would not be this much suffering in the world. For God is supposed to be all-powerful. In addition, he is supposed to be all-knowing, and he is supposed to be all-good. And if he has these qualities, he wouldn’t allow so much gratuitous suffering.

• Bush should not have won the election, since Gore should have won. For Gore won the national popular vote by some 300,000 votes. And he also would have won the popular vote in Florida if the Supreme Court had allowed the re-counts to continue, and surely this is something they ought to have done.