**Philosophy 5**

**Fall 2019**

**Handout: Building strong arguments**

[Introduction 2](#_Toc20379355)

[Four Criteria 2](#_Toc20379356)

[ACCEPTABLE REASONS (PREMISES) 2](#_Toc20379357)

[Short List to Follow in Applying the First Criterion 4](#_Toc20379358)

[UNACCEPTABLE WORDS 6](#_Toc20379359)

[ISSUE TESTS 10](#_Toc20379360)

[APPLYING THE ISSUE TESTS 10](#_Toc20379361)

# Introduction

The next section of the course consists in establishing methods for evaluating arguments. The purpose of the evaluation is to distinguish defective arguments from arguments that are sound. The goal is to become proficient in separating the good arguments from the bad in order to avoid the pitfalls of bad arguments. This skill will enable persons to formulate strong and correct arguments and to defuse the persuasive power of defective arguments.

There are different approaches to this topic. Some try to cover the subject by listing traditional fallacies by name. I have a link on my web site ~tcrowell. These lists also proliferate on the web, for example, <https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-fallacies.html>

The lists differ in named fallacies and length. The student confronted by these lists soon become confused and burdened by the need to memorize even the key one. So, I propose a different approach which I think convers the same ground, but more effectively.

I have also discovered some confusion when text books deal with this topic. For example, there is some confusion between faults in the argument and faults in the person making the argument. For the moment I will attempt to discuss, with your help, faults in the argument, leaving faults in the person giving the argument for later.

# Four Criteria

I propose four criteria for determining a good argument:[[1]](#footnote-1)

√ A strong argument must have acceptable premises (reasons)

√ A strong argument must pass the issue tests

√ A strong argument must have premises (reasons) relevant to the conclusion.

√ A strong argument must have premises (reasons) that adequately support the conclusion

These criteria, when not satisfied, become tests for arguments that are defective, and form the basis for determining the category of the fallacy--they provide the basis for grouping the various names of fallacies found in some logic texts.

The application of these criteria to actual arguments requires more than sticking on labels. It requires careful reading, interpretation, analysis and understanding of the argument. It requires judgment in assigning these criteria and requires support in justifying that these criteria apply.

# ACCEPTABLE REASONS (PREMISES)

What makes the reasons acceptable? There are several factors, and I will take each in its turn. The first relates our previous discussion of the assurance, namely the source of where we get the information that serves as reasons. The second relates to the meaning of the terms used to express that information. Let’s first look at the question of assurance. Before the Internet, people relied on the print media, the New York Times, The Washington Post, The Sacramento Bee, etc. With the Internet these sources are not on line as well. However, there are a host of other sources that are not as reliable. Some examples follow: Politicalo (almost anything that ends on lo; these sites specialize in taking accurate statements from politicians and then adding false quotes to them that are much worse than what they actually said). Occupy Democrats, Bipartisan Report, Wining Democrats, PoliticusUSA, Blue Nation Review, and IfYouOnlyNews.

Some of the more traditional sources have also come under attack by members of the Republican Administration. They include The New York Times, CNN, and The Washington Post. However, when questioned about exactly what report was objectionable or incorrect, the accusers were not able to be specific, only citing critical pieces from these sources. One test on the veracity of the new source is to look for any corrections for possible errors and verifiable reasons to back up any criticism.

There has been a long history of tension between news media and members of the administration. At the same time the importance of a free press is an essential guarantee in the First Amendment.

The recent criticism of sources has not only extended to media members, but government agencies that are providing non-partisan projections and information. This also extends to President Trump who frequently is at odds with what the Intelligence officials determine, e.g. the threat of North Korea.

The attack on nonpartisan agencies is not new. Richard Nixon attacked the veracity of figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) the nonpartisan research branch of the Department of Labor.

We can now turn to the second factor—the meaning of terms in the argument. Reasons are unacceptable if there is an improper (intentional or not) use of key words in the claim. This criterion is based on the meaning that words have and ways that meaning can be subverted or misused in an argument. A few words first about meaning:

Words in general, but nouns, noun phrases and verbs specifically have both extension and connotation. “Extension” refers to the objects designated or denoted by the term in question. The extension of “race horse” for example, includes War Emblem, Monarcos, Count Fleet, Seattle Slew, Affirmed, Smarty Jones, Birdstone, etc. The connotation indicates the meaning of a term; in the case of “race horse” something like “a horse bred and trained to race, usually a quarter horse or thorough bred.” Sometimes the connotation of a term will designate criteria that must be met for it to be that kind of thing. For example, a criterion for a race horse is that has undergone training for racing.

In evaluating argument, it is important to be able to identify either the extension or the connotation of key terms in the argument, sometimes both. If there are problems on either of these scores, we will say the argument as failed the criterion of acceptable reasons.

In a recent Tweet Trump states:

“Homicides last year increased by 17 percent in America’s 50 largest cities. That’s the largest increase in 25 years. In our nation’s capital, killings have risen by 50 percent. They are up nearly 60 percent in nearby Baltimore.”

The terms in the above fail the extension test; that is they include reference to only a few cities. Overall the crime rates have been declining for decades. To be fair the rate in D.C was up 54.3 percent and 58.5 percent in Baltimore. But in the first part of 2016 32 cities saw a decrease in homicides while 31 saw an increase.

As an in-class exercise, we can site more examples from current news reports.

Think of the term, “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD’s) as it was used by the administration preceding the invasion of Iraq. WMD’s was a term used in the argument to justify the invasion, as was references to meetings between Hussein and leaders of Al Qaeda. What do we know now about the extension of those terms in that context?

On the other hand, President Trump has claimed that the North Korean missals are not capable of threatening the U.S. which is questioned by the CIA.

We sometimes accept a claim because it is appealing. But acceptable in this sense will not be proper as a criterion for a strong argument. Any answer that showed we accepted a statement because it simply was appealing will not be a proper test for the strength of an argument. We want to eliminate anything as acceptable simply because it makes us feel good.

Also, the proposed criterion is "acceptable," not "accepted". There may be many claims that are, in fact accepted, but should not be, i.e., are not acceptable.

When the new tax law was being consider, the proponents stated it would benefit the middle class. In practice it will do anything but. The lower income brackets will get about a 10% benefit by reduction where the upper 1% will bet a 30% benefit in reeducation. This will include the elimination of the Estate tax, the elimination of the Alternative Tax, and a reduction of the upper level bracket by 20%.

# Short List to Follow in Applying the First Criterion

1. A claim is acceptable if the words used in the claim have an explanation, illustration, or use that the hearer of the argument can identify and the maker of the argument can give.

2. A claim is acceptable if the claim is testable, knowable, verifiable, analyzable, comprehensible, etc. Any argument that contains premises, not acceptable in this sense, fails to meet the test of a good argument.

3. As a general rule, if #1 and 2 are met, an acceptable claim will not contradict claims that are consistent with generally held belief, claims we can verify from immediate personal experience, direct observation, and claims that are consistent with generally held views by reasonable knowledgeable people.

4. Claims are acceptable only when the language used to state the claim fall within the broad categories of unprejudiced, unbiased disinterested, (not uninterested) neutral language. All the arguments that fail because of a language problem will fail to meet this first test, and hence will serve to group these fallacies under one heading.

5. Claims used, as reasons are acceptable only if the words in the claims are used in a way that their meaning is unambiguous, not overly vague, and exceedingly general or used in ways the hearer is not sure how the maker of the argument is using the words. [[2]](#footnote-2)

6. Claims are not acceptable if the key words, when repaired by illustration, explanation, and definition renders the thesis unsupported.

7. The presenter of the argument has to be in a position to know the claims he or she offers as premises

8. The claims offered as premises cannot be in need of support when evaluated in relation to the conclusion. The claims offered as premises should be less questionable than the theses they support. If we are less sure about then premises in comparison with the conclusion, then there is a question about the acceptability of the premises

In number 7, we encounter claims that the presenter of the argument offers as known. In examining these claims, if we can raise objections as to how the presenter could have known these claims, we can judge the argument to have unacceptable premises. These would include claims that the presenter of the argument could not have known because he or she was not present at the proper time and place, claims about what another person was thinking and their state of mind. When reasonable evidence of what that state of mind was is missing, we are in a position to judge the argument as containing unacceptable premises.

A special case of this is when the presenter of the argument appeals to "reliable (but unnamed) sources." Unless there is presented evidence for the reliability of the source, arguments that depend on this maneuver can be criticized as containing unacceptable premises.

Item 7 comes down to the conditions for accepting testimony. Briefly they are as follows:

1. The presenter of the argument is in a position to know what he or she claims to know (This because he is in the right place at the right time and in the right way)

2. The claim falls into a broad area of recognized disciplines where there are recognized ways of distinguishing true from false.

3. The presenter of the claim has training, background experience and education in that field.

4. The claims made by the presenter are not in complete disagreement with the generally held view in that discipline.

# UNACCEPTABLE WORDS

Text books on the subject have a long list of word mistakes. For our purposes I will limit the discussion to two related types—Equivocation, Ambiguity. Both are usually cited under the general heading Vague Expressions.

Here are some definitions of each:

An [equivocation](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/e5.htm#eqvn) trades upon the use of an ambiguous word or phrase in one of its meanings in one of the propositions of an argument but also in another of its meanings in a second proposition.

An [ambiguous](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/a4.htm#amb) word, phrase, or sentence is one that has two or more distinct meanings.

The word problem is sometimes followed by silly examples.

An organ is a kind of musical instrument

The human heart is an organ

Therefore: ????

Equivocation.

A recent discussion of the work “hike” indicates how the meaning of a word has influence in an argument. The original meaning of “hike” was connected to a current meaning of take a long and sometimes difficult walk. It now has retained some of the suggestion of that meaning, namely something that is not the normal or natural case of the normal case, a hike is not the normal case of taking a walk. It has gravitated to the field of economics, as in a wage hike, a hike in the minimum wage, a hike in inflation. Persons who are more likely to take issue with some of these increases, will be tempted to use the word “hike” rather than “increase” On the other hand, those who might favor the increase, e.g. in wages, should probably also use the word “increase” if they want to avoid the suggestion that the increase is not normal or natural.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Vagueness

George Will quotes from a book by John Dilulio Jr. “Bring Back the Bureaucrats.” The topic is “Big “Government”. This is a good example of a vague expression on two scores, first the word “Big”. What is the right number of government employees? On the second point, what kind of government, city, county, state, federal, judiciary, executive, legislative staff? Run these two examples together, and the result is hopeless vagueness.

Dilulio shows that the non-federal government size has dramatically increased. This includes federal contractors, municipal governments, state agencies, and local employees. This is the increase quoted favorably by George Will. On the other hand, Dilulio’s argues that at the federal level the size has barely increased. From Will’s argument and the quote for Dilulio’s book:

In 1960, when John Kennedy was elected president, America’s population was 180 million and it had approximately 1.8 million federal bureaucrats (not counting uniformed military personnel and postal workers). Fifty- seven years later, with seven new Cabinet agencies, and myriad new sub-Cabinet agencies (e.g., the Environmental Protection Agency), and a slew of matters on the federal policy agenda that were virtually absent in 1960 (health care insurance, primary and secondary school quality, crime, drug abuse, campaign finance, gun control, occupational safety, etc.), and with a population of 324 million, there are only about 2 million federal bureaucrats.

So, since 1960, federal spending, adjusted for inflation, has quintupled and federal undertakings have multiplied like dandelions, but the federal civilian workforce has expanded only negligibly, to approximately what it was when Dwight Eisenhower was elected in 1952. Does this mean that “big government” is not really big? And that by doing much more with not many more employees, it has accomplished prodigies of per-worker productivity. John J. Dilulio Jr., of the University of Pennsylvania and the Brookings Institution, says: Hardly. As I argue in this book’s concluding chapter, many measures are needed to reform our government improving its performance, then we must start by pruning the stem’s proxies while increasing the federal workforce. To undercut the proxy- bred political pressures behind government’s growth and to bolster government performance (or at least to avert near-term administrative debacles in indisputably understaffed federal agencies), we must indeed “bring back the bureaucrats.”

This is the part of Dilulio’s argument that Will leaves out.

The use of words can go wrong several ways, but when the individual uses these mistakes in an argument, (intentionally, or ignorantly), then the mistake is in the adequacy of the premises by virtue of mistakes in the concepts

Here is another example from an economist Richard Vedder, “Why Did 17 Million Students Go to College?” October 20, 2010, 9:53 am

Two sets of information were presented to me in the last 24 hours that have dramatically reinforced my feeling that diminishing returns have set in to investments in higher education, with increasing evidence suggesting that we are in one respect “over investing” in the field. First, following up on information provided by former student Douglas Himes at the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), my sidekick Chris Matgouranis showed me the table reproduced below   
  
Over 317,000 waiters and waitresses have college degrees (over 8,000 of them have doctoral or professional degrees), along with over 80,000 bartenders, and over 18,000 parking lot attendants. All told, some 17,000,000 Americans with college degrees are doing jobs that the BLS says require less than the skill levels associated with a bachelor’s degree.

So if we take the second paragraph as his support for the thesis in the first paragraph, we should ask about the acceptability in the groups identified in the reasons. Are for example are the waiters and the waitresses full time or part time? Are they summer jobs taken by teachers or other full time employees on separation from their full time work? Secondly what is meant by “college degrees” AA degrees or BA , degrees from non-accredited colleges, for profit colleges, degrees from colleges where degrees are granted of on-line courses? Secondly what is included in “professional degree”. It is all too vague.

In another example George Will writes in support of a Colorado law allowing parents to participate in a state funded scholarship program that allows a choice of religious schools. He states that conservatives are pro-choice about most things—owing guns, driving SUV’s using incandescent light bulbs, etc.—other than killing pre born babies. Liberals are pro-choice mostly about the latter.[[4]](#footnote-4) Using “killing pre born babies” rather than “fetus” or “a woman’s right to choose” Will clearly defines the case in favor of his argument. The issue is whether a fetus is a baby—whether the fetus has the features found in babies.

Here is an attempt to redefine “fetus”

1. The divine Author did not recognize the difference between unborn and unborn baby

2. Therefore, “unborn” means “unborn baby” in the Bible.

And this justifies our use of “unborn baby” for “fetus.”

Vagueness again

Recent discussion have centered on the word “fact” and its connection to the adjective “alternative.” In many of its uses the word doubles for “true” as in “it is a fact that…”

The use of “alternative fact” may have its origin is something said several years ago by Senator Jon Kyl. He gave a speech in which he said, “if you want an abortion you go to Planned Parenthood, and that’s well over 90 percent of what Planned Parenthood does?”

He said this in connection with the Republican effort to cut all federal funding off from Planned Parenthood, which is included in a current version of the Republican effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Existing federal legislation does not allow any federal funding for abortions services (The Hyde Amendment) including any that may be performed by Planned Parenthood. (The Republicans charge that the federal funding that Planned Parenthood gets for other services finds its way over to the abortion side).

The abortions that are performed under Planned Parenthood constitute about 3 percent of all their services.

When reminded of this, Kyl replied that his statement was not intended to be factual. This seems to show another use for “fact” or “factual” since I don’t think Kyl wants to say that he did not intend his statement to not be true or that he intended to make a false statement.

I still don’t know what to make of Kyl’s use of “factual” or the expression “alternative fact”

I have discussed the word “fact” in another paper dealing with fact and opinion. For this class, that is available on the Canvas Module Page.

5. Vagueness . Terrorism  
From Wikipedia

There is no universal agreement on the **definition of terrorism**. Various legal systems and government agencies use different definitions. Moreover, governments have been reluctant to formulate an agreed upon and legally binding definition. These difficulties arise from the fact that the term is politically and emotionally charged. To avoid this kind of confusion, the most common definition of terrorism is used, which includes the following:

* It is the use of violence or threat of violence in order to purport a political, religious, or ideological change.
* It can only be committed by [non-state actors](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-state_actor) or [undercover personnel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Undercover_operation) serving on the behalf of their respective governments.
* It reaches more than the immediate target victims and is also directed at targets consisting of a larger spectrum of society.
* It is both [mala prohibita (i.e., crime that is made illegal by legislation) and mala in se (i.e., crime that is inherently immoral or wrong)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criminal_law#Mala_in_se_v._mala_prohibita).

Here is a partial list of terrorist originations declared so by the State Department (denotation).

Here is a partial list:

Abu Sayyaf (Philippines)

Ansar al-Islam (Iraq Kurds)

Communist Part of the Philippines

Basque Fatherland and Liberty

Kurdistan Workers Part

Islamic Jihad

Hezbollah

Kahane Chai (Israel)

Palestine Liberation Front

Al-Qaida

United Defense of Columbia

Some are recognizable others not.

From the above denotation we see the following conceptual criteria

* Must be foreign
* The organization engages in terrorist activity as defined in various other laws
* The activity must threaten the security of the U.S. nationals or the national security (defense, relations, and economic interests) of the U.S.

# ISSUE TESTS

In this section of the hand out, we will discuss the second criterion:

\*A strong argument must be relevant to the issue. It must pass the issue test.

We spoke of the issue in relation to the thesis--the issue was a question the thesis directly answered. Now we are in a position to use this tool to evaluate the entire argument.

The steps are as follows:

1. Determine the main thesis

2. Formulate the issue (the question the thesis answers)

3. Judge the issue on the following grounds:

a. Are there other theses in the argument (secondary, parallel) that address other issues, i.e., not the one addressed by the main thesis?

b. Are the reasons in support of the thesis more relevant to another issue, one not the one answered by the thesis?

c. Has the issue answered by the thesis been previously settled by arguments generally accepted?

d. Are the reasons not directly relevant to the issue, as the issue is generally understood?

4. When there are opposing arguments, evaluate thesis and counter thesis as possibly answering different issues. Then determine which is the more important (which issue is more significant, vital, critical, etc.)?

For an argument to be strong it must be internally sound and pass the issue tests listed above.

# APPLYING THE ISSUE TESTS

Issue Example:

In 2003, the California legislature passed and the Governor signed a law allowing the issuance of driver’s licenses to undocumented residents. So, the dispute centered on the issue: Should undocumented residents be allowed to secure a California driver’s license? This in turn, generated a set of other issues: Would the issuance of licenses decrease the number of uninsured motorists? Would the issuance of licenses increase the number of skilled drivers? Would the issuances of licenses increase the risk of terrorists’ ability to go undetected? Would this be unfair to immigrants who are trying to reside in the U.S. legally?

One needs to decide which of these issues is central, and ensure that the specific arguments are answering across the range of issues. As an exercise I have developed a method to sort out competing issues called the AB Grid.

Try your hand at the following exercise.

Once you decide which of the two the thesis directly answers, you next must decide **HOW** the issue is answered. It can be either “yes" or "no" depending on how the thesis specifically answers that question. So under your choice for the main issue write either “yes” or “no” depending on how the argument answers that issue.

Next, in the other part of the grid enter "+", "-", or "?" depending whether the thesis is a positive (yes), negative (no) or undetermined (?) answer to that issue. Write a brief justification for each answer.

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AB Grid for free two year college

A. Should California adopt a plan for free tuition and the State’s two year college?

B. Should California adopt a fee structure for the two year colleges that is affordable for all?

1. Recent studies show that a significant percentage of students in two year colleges are either in danger of being homeless or are facing serious food challenges. Add to this the cost of tuition, books and other fees, you have a real disaster. So to alleviate the problem, let’s grant free tuition.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A | B |
|  |  |

2. I accept the housing and food problem faced by two year college students. But helping them get support and budgeting information is the way to go including budgeting for their educational costs. A free tuition gives them a false sense of entitlement. So let’s keep tuition within reason.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A | B |
|  |  |

3. A comparison of tuition costs for California two year colleges with others nation wide reveal that the tuition in California is among the lowest. To eliminate it all together would put an additional burden on the system’s budget. It is adequate and workable, so let’s keep it where it is

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A | B |
|  |  |

4. Tuition costs need to be considered in connection with Grants, Scholarships and other financial support. Taking all this into consideration tells us that tuition is within reasonable limits.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A | B |
|  |  |

5. I don’t know what to think about the benefits of free tuition. Let’s see what works out where it is being tried. So in the meantime, current rates seem reasonable for the time being.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A | B |
|  |  |

6. It is time to reevaluate the budget for the entire system. Given its current lack of funding, we can improve the picture by raising California’s very in adequate and low tuition. Further, with an increase in tuition, students will take their enrollment more seriously as an investment and we will see a better completion and success rate.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A | B |
|  |  |

7. Free tuition is a noble and bold proposal. Let’s follow other leaders like City College San Francisco

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A | B |
|  |  |

1. These criteria are modifications of ones proposed by Trudy Govier, *A Practical Study of Argument.* I have use her word “premises” with the understanding that we need to read “reason” for “premise.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . It is useful to remember what are “homonyms”, words that sound the same, spelled the same, but have different meanings (and sometimes related). These are not homographs, words spelled the same, but pronounced differently e.g., "invalid" and "invalid"; nor homophones, words pronounced the same but spelled differently, e.g. "vane,” "vain," and "vein." There are several homonyms that are antonyms. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the Press Democrat February 9 Second headline: “Some students say proposed $270 tuition hike to much with housing.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. George Will, Press Democrat August 29, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)