

THIRD EDITION

# GOOD ARGUMENTS

AN INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL THINKING

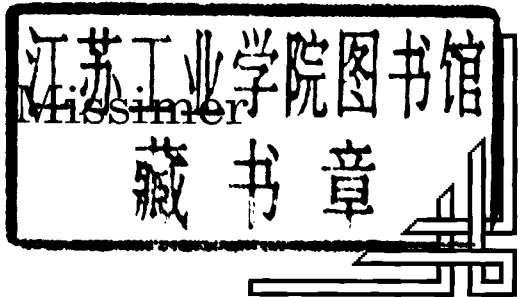
C. A. MISSIMER

Third Edition

# *Good Arguments*

*An Introduction  
to Critical Thinking*

C. A. Missimer



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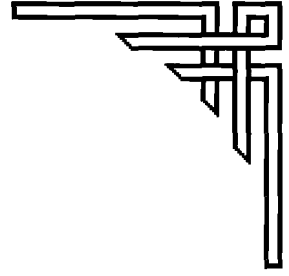
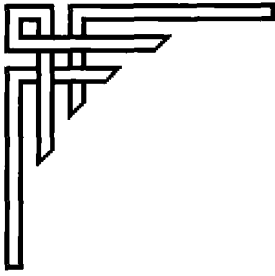
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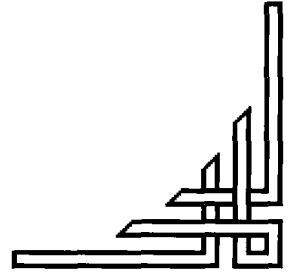
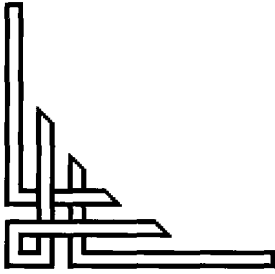
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*Still dedicated to everyone who loves to  
browse through books—  
If that doesn't include you yet,  
then I dedicate this book to you in advance.*



## *Preface*



Students who approach this subject are far more timid than is warranted! The reason may be that to many ears critical thinking has a forbidding sound—"perfect, negative thinking," a new student of mine offered. If nothing else, I hope that this book will disabuse you of that impression. Critical thinking is the comparison of arguments on a subject to see which argument is likeliest, and this book is devoted to showing you how to do just that. There are a few basic concepts to master, along with the language in which these ideas are put, and the result is an endless array of subject-matter on which you can think critically. Indeed, I would argue that over the past centuries critical thinking has been responsible for the growth of knowledge in every field, from football to physics. Yet while critical thinking has produced good arguments that have vastly increased our store of knowledge, any piece of critical thinking is far from perfect. At least I would assume so, on the theory that if we don't search for even better arguments, for more evidence, we will never find them.

The idea of critical thinkers weighing arguments about an issue may sound remote from your life or interests, but I would argue that you think critically many times a day. Unless you reached into the closet out of habit, you made a decision what to wear today. You had reasons for your choice which you found better than those for things you left on the hangers. You made assumptions about the weather. Similarly, your choice of breakfast (or not to bother with one) entailed some quick critical thinking. Your dis-

cussion of which team was likely to win the playoff, or which political candidate would do a better job, would probably be critical thinking.

“Well,” you might infer, “if I already do critical thinking, I don’t need a course in it.” Not so fast! In the areas you know well, you easily think critically. The purpose of this book is to back up a bit and show you exactly what it is that you have been doing so naturally, put names to the various *types* of thoughts you’ve had and how they are structured, so that it will be easy for you to apply the same good thinking in areas you’re not as familiar with.

You may want to think about two assumptions underlying this book. One is that your time is best spent on a dozen basic workhorses of reason, rather than on learning many aspects of reasoning. In the vast majority of cases, even cases of complicated reasoning, these are features of thought which are used. There are many more concepts in informal logic, not to mention the rigors of formal logic. However, you will be best served by learning to manipulate these major mental gears.

The second assumption is that it is vital to practice the common phrases that indicate the structure of critical thinking. These phrases appear in boldface throughout the book.\*

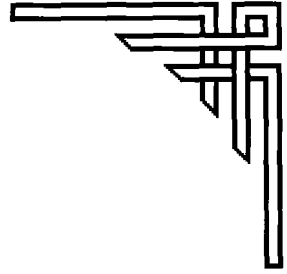
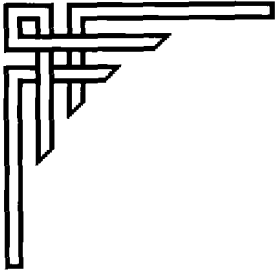
This new edition contains a new chapter on the reasearch paper, as well as expanded chapters on inference and evidence. In this connection, I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Steve Carlson: Our conversations on the nature of evidence were clarifying and most enjoyable. I would also like to thank the following reviewers for their excellent suggestions: Diane M. Thiel, Department of English, Florida International University, Miami, Florida; Stephen T. Mayo, Department of Philosophy, Molloy College, Rockville Centre, New York; Amy Hayek, Department of English, Florida International University, Miami, Florida; and M. Kip Hartvigsen, Department of English, Ricks College, Rexburg, Idaho.

I hope that you will become at ease in recognizing the structure of critical thinking and enjoy a lifetime of fascination, reading others’ good arguments, and creating your own across a wide spectrum of subjects. Have fun!

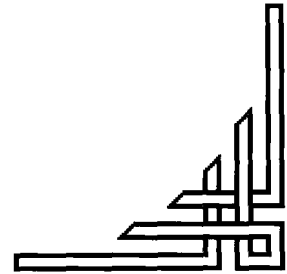
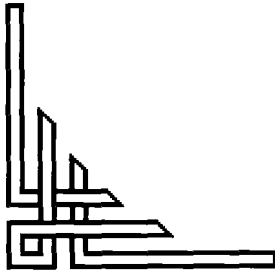
C. A. Missimer  
Seattle, Washington

\*This preface contains a few of the commonly used phrases that this book will show you how to use:

I would argue that  
My reason is  
You might infer that  
[a claim has] little warrant  
On the assumption that



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# 1

## ***Welcome to the Community of Thinkers***



Actually, you're already a member. The fact that you were able to grasp what the preface was about indicates that you already possess critical thinking skills. In fact, you're far more skilled at critical thinking than you know. This book will help you to realize what you already know, and help you to build on it. And just as you've been a skilled thinker most of your life without necessarily being conscious of it, you have been a contributor to the community of thinkers, too. Members of this community address one another largely through the use of arguments, whether in conversations, articles, or books.

### ***THE DOZEN BASICS***

To argue is to try to convince someone else that your point of view is right. Everyone reading this book has made scores of arguments. Good arguments are structured with these twelve features:

1. definition and distinction
2. issue
3. conclusion
4. reasons
5. alternative arguments

6. evidence
7. truth
8. consistency
9. warranted inference
10. assumptions
11. implications
12. prescription

These are concepts which a critical thinker must be able to use in order to appraise arguments. You will be handling all of these features in their appropriate language with ease by the end of the book. They are the basic stuff of critical thinking. All arguments display most, if not all, of these features.

If these features are unfamiliar, you may doubt that you will be able to use a number of foreign concepts within a few weeks, all of them at the same time. You have, however, already learned to perform any number of involved tasks, much as a cyclist downshifts and makes a left turn at a busy intersection while watching out for cars and people. Almost everything that is difficult initially becomes easy with habit.

First, I want to make you aware of how often you use the notions of definition, distinction, and argument. You will find about twenty phrases in boldface in this chapter which show different ways that critical thinkers express these concepts. Try to get used to these phrases, start using them in everyday discussions, and be on the lookout for them. These phrases are the “noises” that critical thinkers make.

## **DEFINITION**

How many times in your life have you said “What do you mean?” Or, perhaps, in informal talk, “Whaddyamean?”

Linda: I thought that was a terrible game. Bah! 68–0.

Sally: Whaddyamean, “terrible”? The score may have been 68–0, but the winning team made so many superb plays!

The same principle of “whaddyamean” applies in critical thinking. When you write, you should say “Whaddyamean” to yourself a lot. You define or explain the meaning of your main terms that might be misunderstood. Those last four words are important—you’d almost never need to define “oak tree” or “elephant.” If you had to define every word you used, you’d end up defining your definitions and never even get around to making your point. By now you may be muttering, “Well, dang it, how

much defining should I do and expect others to do?" As a rule of thumb, a writer should think about defining roughly one or two terms in a five-hundred-word essay. Abstract terms—the words for things you can't see, touch, or taste, such as "terrible," "justice," "natural," even "argument"—are more elastic and usually need defining.

So, *define what could be misunderstood, especially the abstract.* Here are some examples:

**By the term** "community" in the chapter title, **I mean** participation in common.

"Community" **means** participation in common.

He used "community" **in the sense of** participation of people in a common activity.

Note the quotation marks around the term to be defined. Always use them. The quotation marks are important, emphasizing to the reader that the writer is setting up the ground rules to talk about "this important word."

You can get definitions from the dictionary, but one word about them. Because abstract terms such as "community" are harder to pin down, they are liable to have several dictionary definitions. Choose the one(s) you mean carefully.

### ***DISTINCTIONS IN THE STRICT AND LOOSE SENSE***

In *defining* a term you say for sure what's *inside* the limits of your term. When you draw a *distinction* between your term and another, you say what's *outside* the limits of your term. Together, definition and distinction are a pair of pincers that grab hold of a slippery term. For instance, here are a definition and a distinction, both taken from a dictionary:

By "argue" in this book I mean "maintain" or "assert"; I would distinguish this sense of argue from "quarrel" or "bicker."

With a definition you show what you mean (within your term: here, maintain, assert); with a distinction you show what you don't mean (outside your term: here, quarrel, bicker).

The author **makes a distinction between** "community" in the sense of participating in a common activity **and** "community" in the sense of living in the same district or city.

She **drew a distinction between** being easygoing **and** being lazy.

In the baseball example above, Sally drew a distinction between Linda's definition of "terrible" (68–0) and hers (no superb plays). In everyday talk, people often make distinctions by responding, "But that's not the same thing!" Can you think of any instances in which you'd use that phrase to draw a distinction?

To sum up: In any discussion, show what you mean and what you don't mean by your major ideas, particularly the abstract ones; expect others to do likewise.

### **False Dichotomy: Distinction Run Amok**

Someone who creates a distinction that doesn't in fact exist can be said to have created "a false dichotomy." For instance, if I claim that either you're a serious student or you love to party, I hope I have created a false dichotomy: You can be both academically ambitious and party-loving; you just can't fulfill both sides of your nature at the same time. Other examples are as follows:

He argued that the slogan People, Not Profits **creates a false dichotomy between** making money **and** making people happy.

In her speeches, she **raised a false distinction between** totalitarian **and** authoritarian regimes.

The reader mistakenly thought that if ideas were expressed simply and enjoyably, they were not important. He **thereby created a false dichotomy between** the simple **and** the significant.

The following is an amusing claim of a false distinction:

If you bet on a horse, that's gambling. If you bet you can make three spades, that's entertainment. If you bet cotton will go up three points [in the commodities market] that's business. See the difference?<sup>1</sup>

### **Failure to Make Distinctions**

People can argue about whether a distinction is a valid one or is a false dichotomy. It can also be argued that a person has failed to make a distinction:

While arguing that most people are selfish most of the time, the author **failed to make a distinction between** self-regarding acts, such as sleeping, **and** acts against others, such as stealing.

In claiming that everyone over sixty-five should receive social security payments, the proponents of the bill are **confusing two groups**: those who really need these benefits and those who merely qualify for them but don't need them.

The key is to seek out and reflect on definition and distinction whenever an argument presents them.

## ARGUMENT

In this book, we'll never mean "argument" in the sense of a quarrel; however, we will be using "argument" in two senses, because it often occurs in both ways. To keep them distinct,\* I have called one the loose sense of argument and the other the strict sense of argument. Remember the phrases "in the loose sense" and "in the strict sense"—they'll come in handy when you make distinctions.

### The Loose Sense

The loose sense of "argue" is the way it was defined above, to maintain or assert. Here are some examples showing how to use "argue" in this way:

**He argued that** it is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers.<sup>2</sup>

Lily Tomlin **made the argument that** reality is a crutch for people who can't cope with drugs.<sup>3</sup>

**I would argue** with Goethe **that** the intelligent person finds almost everything ridiculous, the sensible person hardly anything.<sup>4</sup> (This phrase means "I am actually arguing that" or "I would *agree* with Goethe"; if you mean to disagree you'd say, "I would take issue with Goethe" or "I would argue against Goethe's position that. . . .")

**Maybe . . . and Maybe Not** The term "argument" occurs frequently in this loose sense of making a claim about what is true. The word is wonderful in that it helps put the hearer in balance. While indicating that an assertion is clearly being brought forward, "argue" acknowledges that the assertion is just that—a claim that something is true. In fact, almost everything is a claim—or so I'm claiming!

The words "argument," "assertion," and "claim" help you to maintain that critical balance between accepting and rejecting an idea so that you can look it over at leisure. In short, use of the terms "argue" and "claim" helps you to think "Maybe that's true, but maybe not."

\*See how useful distinctions are? "Argument" has been distinguished in three important ways.



**Try This** For the sake of developing your critical skills, and for the fun of it, try thinking of everything you hear and read as an argument, a claim, an idea to which you can respond “maybe; maybe not,” rather than accept it as a given fact. It’s impossible to actually think of every claim in that way, because of our overwhelming tendency to accept what we’re told, but take this as a challenge (a “maybe not”).\* In the course of this book you will soon learn to sort out the likelihood of various types of claims (see chapters 4 and 11).

**Your Next Move** It’s the addition of reasons that gives an argument needed backing. So when someone makes an argument or claim in the loose sense, your next move is to ask for reasons to support or back up the claim. Some ways of making that move:

“What are your reasons for making that argument?”

“Why do you make that assertion?”

Or, when analyzing a piece of writing in which the author made a claim but didn’t give reasons why the reader should agree:

The author argued that reality was just a crutch for people who can’t cope with drugs, **but gave no reasons** to support this claim.

## The Strict Sense

In its strict sense, to argue is to claim that something should be thought or done and to give a reason why it should be thought or done. For example, following this discussion I’m going to make an argument. I’ll claim that reasoning with people is the best way to persuade them and then explain why I think so. A formal argument has at least one claim with at least one reason to support or back up that claim. *It’s the addition of reasons that distinguishes an argument in the strict sense from an argument in the loose sense.* Reasons are needed to give most claims substance.

**A Strict Sort of Argument** You may have noticed that the common “noises of a critical thinker” in this book appear in boldface type. When you come to these phrases, repeat them, aloud if you can get away with it. Hearing information is a memory aid. Underlining is important too. Both come down to repetition, and the more you repeat, the easier it

\*Some exceptions are greetings, such as “hello,” or questions, “Is that a gefilte fish sandwich?” However, we’re all aware of “leading questions” that contain claims, such as the famous “When is the last time you beat your wife?” And what about “Ow!”—is that a claim?