STANDARDIZING ARGUMENTS

What does it mean to standardize an argument?
To standardize an argument is to set out its premises and conclusion in clear, simple statements with the premises preceding the conclusion, number each of the statements.

Why do we want to standardize an argument?
- in order to understand the exact line of argument.
- it gives us a clear version of where an author or speaker is going.
- it forces us to look carefully at what an arguer has said.
- it helps us to identify arguments that may have two distinct conclusions.
- generally, it forces you to read (or listen) with a view to determining the main point, and it trains you to ask why the author or speaker is saying what he says.
- What are the reasons offered for his viewpoint?
- it identifies the presence of subarguments

What is involved in the process of clarifying the structure of an argument?
Standardizing an argument can be a difficult (if not torturous) process involving moving from colloquial writing to a clearer, more precise standard form.
- Do you have an argument? Make sure that you indeed have an argument: is the speaker offering reasons intended to convince you of one or more claims made in the passage?
- Logical Flow: look at the logical flow of the passage and identify the conclusion.
- Identify Conclusion and Premises: decide which parts of the passage are stated as reasons intended to back up the conclusion and put these into the most natural logical order.
- Eliminate background information: background information, or material inserted just for added interest or for humor, (window dressing) is not part of the argument.
- Editorial commentary should be distinguished from substantive remarks. You do not need to insert such expressions as “in my unprofessional opinion as a mother” and “I say to all professionals.”
- Abbreviate and Simplify: abbreviate and simplify the prose, putting it into clear complete statements that could be used as premises.
- Statements which are repeated should be entered only once in to the argument.
- Shorten, edit, and delete as necessary.
- Eliminate many of the elements of colloquial writing.

Pay close attention to the general strategies for standardizing arguments Govier lays out on page 31.

Subarguments
Arguments very often proceed in stages. The premise of an argument may be defended in a subargument, so there are really two arguments in one. A subargument is a subordinate
argument inside a main one. A premise in a main argument can be the conclusion of a subargument. We’ll reserve the term conclusion for the main conclusion and consider statements which are conclusions to subarguments to be premises in the main argument.

Consider the following example:

Fetuses ought not to aborted. Any one possessing a right to life ought not to be killed and fetuses have a right to life, for all human beings have a right to life and fetuses are human beings.

Standardizing the argument, we get something like this:

1. All human beings have a right to life.
2. Fetuses are human beings. Thus,
3. Fetuses have a right to life.
4. Anyone possessing a right to life ought not to be killed. Therefore,
5. Fetuses ought not to be aborted.

About Conclusions

Some important points about conclusions to keep in mind when standardizing arguments:

- Placement of conclusions: It’s important to recognize that there aren’t any rules about where conclusions are to be placed in arguments. Often we can count on them being at the beginning of a passage or the end of a passage. But there are only general rules of thumb. Oftentimes conclusions are repeated throughout an argument, sometimes with different wording.
- The help in identifying the conclusion of a passage focus on the primary drift or logical flow of a passage.
- Pay attention to the scope of the conclusion. Is the conclusion about one particular individual or situation or about categories or groups of things? Is the arguer making a universal claim (“All…”), a generalization about most or many members of a group, or a claim about some of them (“Many…”).
- Degree of certainty: Is the conclusion stated with a high degree of certainty or is it qualified as being “probably” or “likely” acceptable?
- Implied conclusions: Sometimes conclusions are simply not stated; they are left implicit. When left implicit, a conclusion is often suggested by the stated words as they appear in the context. You must exercise caution when adding an implicit statement to a conclusion. You don’t want to misconstrue an author’s point or attribute to them claims they would not be willing to accept.

When Constructing Your Own Arguments

1. State your conclusion clearly.
2. Use indicator words to help your reader or listener identify your conclusion.
3. It is typically clearer to place your conclusions either at the beginning or the end of an argument. Placing them in the middle can be confusing.
With complex arguments containing subarguments, it is often a good policy to repeat your conclusion at the beginning and the end of the argument.

Clearly indicate the scope and commitment of your conclusion. “The strength of evidence you require to put forward a convincing argument will vary depending on the degree of commitment you wish to indicate, as well as on the topic of the conclusion.”

**Linked versus Convergent Premises**

Premises can be linked and so dependent on one another or independent of each other and so convergent.

- **Convergent or independent premises**: the falsity of one would not cancel the support the other provides for the conclusion. Convergent premises support their conclusion independently, each stating a separate reason or separate piece of evidence that the arguer thinks is relevant.

- **Linked or dependent premises**: the falsity of either premise would automatically cancel the support the other provides for the conclusion. Linked premises support the conclusion in the argument only when they are taken together. No single premise will give any support to the conclusion without the others.

**Linked Premises**:

- All human beings are mortal.
- Socrates is a human being.
- Therefore,
- Socrates is mortal.

**Convergent Premises**:

- Plato was human and was mortal.
- Aristotle was human and was mortal.
- Aristophanes was human and was mortal.
- Socrates is human.
- Therefore,
- Socrates is mortal.

**Missing Premises and Conclusions**

Keep in mind that arguments will often have implied or missing premises and conclusions and that in the process of standardizing an argument we need to make those missing claims explicit. It is often difficult to decide when an argument has an implicit premise. Oftentimes there appears to be a gap or hole in the argument. But we have to be careful that we don’t take an argument with holes and simply plug them up with premises the author wouldn’t accept or wasn’t intent on supplying. We need to balance our own sense of logical direction with due respect for what other arguers actually said and meant. Don’t read your own beliefs into an argument.
Pay attention to Govier’s guidelines for adding missing claims to an argument, especially pages 45 – 46. **Policy: no supplementation without justification.**

Consider a few examples:

A few fraternities have dangerous initiation rites, and those that do have no legitimate role in campus life.

*Conclusion missing: A few fraternities have no legitimate role in campus life.*

Standardizing the argument:

1. A few fraternities have dangerous initiation rites.
2. Fraternities that have dangerous initiation rites have no legitimate role in campus life.

Therefore

3. A few fraternities have no legitimate role in campus life.

Mechanistic materialists do not believe in free will because they think that everything is governed by deterministic laws.

*Missing premise: No one who thinks that everything is governed by deterministic laws believes in free will.*

Standardizing the argument:

1. Mechanistic materialists think that everything is governed by deterministic laws.
2. No one who thinks that everything is governed by deterministic laws believes in free will.

Therefore

3. Mechanistic materialists do not believe in free will.

**Standardizing Arguments: An Example**

Consider the following passage:

DON’T TAKE THE ADVICE OF THE NUCLEAR ESTABLISHMENT ON THE ISSUE OF NUCLEAR SAFETY

The people that make and run nuclear power plants have assured us that there will never be a major catastrophe. But manufacturers of nuclear reactors also make toasters, dryers, washers, and television sets, and other household appliances. These simple appliances are
not completely reliable and there is much less reason to believe that complete nuclear reactors are completely dependable.

Remember: We’re talking about millions of lives and billions of dollars in property damage.

We need to put this passage into a standard form, with a series of numbered premises and a conclusion:

1. Manufacturers of nuclear reactors make toasters, dryers, washers and other simply household appliances.
2. Toasters, dryers, washers and other simple household appliances made by the manufacturers who also make nuclear reactors are not completely reliable.
   So,
3. Complex nuclear reactors are very unlikely to be completely reliable.
4. Unreliable nuclear reactors could cause millions of lives to be lost and billions of dollars to be lost in property damage.
   Therefore,
5. We should not take the advice of the nuclear establishment when it assures us that nuclear energy is safe.

The issue of missing premises:

Companies are less likely to make complex items that are reliable than they are to make simple items that are reliable.

The subargument may be regarded as having (6) as a missing premise. It moves from (1), (2), and (6) to (3). By adding (6) as a missing premise, we make the structure of the original argument clearer, for we can see how the fallibility of toasters is supposed to be related to the fallibility of nuclear reactors.
Additional Exercises

Put the following arguments into standard form. Add implicit premises, conclusion, or both as necessary.

1. Stealing is wrong. Using a friend’s car without asking is taking property without permission. So using a friend’s car without asking is wrong.
2. American universities are eroding their public support. Any social institution which spends beyond the willingness of the public to pay is eroding its public support.
3. Every successful politician has to compromise his or her principles occasionally. Everyone who has to compromise his or her principles occasionally loses integrity.
4. I will be moving up in the world. Bruce has a new job in Minneapolis. So, he’ll be moving and that will create an opening for either Armand or me.
5. Dogs are not ruminants. They don’t chew their cud.
6. The Senator has something to hide. After all, only people hiding something refuse to take a polygraph.
7. The U.S. surgeon general's latest report on cigarettes and cancer is an interesting example of natural selection in the late twentieth century. The intelligent members of our species will quit smoking, and survive. The dummies will continue to puff away.
8. If God can prevent evil, but doesn't, then He's cruel. If God would like to prevent evil, but can't, then He's not all powerful. God is not cruel.
9. "...many wrongly believe that in order to strengthen one's own security one has to threaten the security of others. To protect oneself against burglary, one does not have to burglarize the homes of others."--Dietrich Fischer, *Preventing War in the Nuclear Age*
Additional Exercises: Answers

1.

1. Stealing is wrong.
2. Using a friend’s car without asking is taking property without permission.
3. Taking property without permission is stealing. (missing premise)

Therefore
4. Using a friend’s car without asking is wrong.

2.

1. Any social institution that spends beyond the willingness of the public to pay is eroding its public support.
2. American universities are social institutions that spend beyond the willingness of the public to pay. (missing premise)

Therefore
3. American universities are eroding their public support.

3.

1. Every successful politician has to compromise his or her principles occasionally.
2. Everyone who has to compromise his or her principles occasionally loses integrity.

Therefore
3. Every successful politician loses integrity. (missing conclusion)

4.

1. Bruce has a new job in Minneapolis.
2. If Bruce has a new job in Minneapolis, that will create an opening for either Armand or me.
3. An opening will not be created for Armand. (missing premise)

So
4. An opening will be created for me. (implied conclusion)
5. If an opening is created for me, then I will be moving up in the world. (missing premise)

Therefore
6. I will be moving up in the world.

5.

1. All ruminants are cud-chewing animals. (missing premise)
2. Dogs are not cud-chewing animals.

Therefore
3. Dogs are not ruminant.

6.
1. All people who refuse to take a polygraph test are people with something to hide. (missing premise)
2. The Senator refuses to take a polygraph test.
Therefore
3. The Senator has something to hide.

7.
1. People who decrease their chances of survival are people who will die out through natural selection.
2. People who continue smoking act in ways that decrease their chances of survival. So,
3. People who continue smoking are people who will die out through natural selection.
4. People who increase their chances of survival are people who survive through natural selection.
5. Smokers who quit are people who act in ways that increase their chances of survival. Therefore
6. Smokers who quit are people who act in ways that increase their chances of survival.

8.
1. If God can prevent evil, but doesn't, then He's cruel.
2. God is not cruel. Therefore
3. (God cannot prevent evil.)
4. If God would like to prevent evil, but can't, then He's not All-powerful.
5. (God cannot prevent evil) therefore
6. (God is not All-powerful)

9.
Missing premise: Increased national security is similar to preventing burglary.
Implied conclusion: To increase our own national security, we do not have to threaten the national security of others.