

Analyzing an Argument

Here's an example of an argument that you should understand how to analyze, by finding the claim (what the author is arguing), the support (the evidence to back up their argument), the assumptions (what logic is supporting the argument and the evidence), and possible fallacies (holes in the logic, problems with the argument):

Argument

Backusville High School instituted a policy last year requiring all of its students to arrive at school half an hour early to finish all their homework before attending classes. Since the inception of this policy, 15 percent more students have enrolled at Backusville. The Board of Education reminds us that the more students we have enrolled at Allentown High School, the more federal funding we receive, so it's clear to improve the quality of education for all Allentown students we need to institute an early-attendance policy similar to the one that Backusville has instituted.

Analysis

Claim (Conclusion): We need to institute an early-attendance party.

Support (Premises): We need federal funding and we want to improve the quality of education.

Warrant (Assumptions): This new policy will give us more funding (because it will mean more students will enroll). We are enough like Backusville H.S. that this policy will work for us too.

Fallacies: O.K. folks, here's where we begin tearing this argument apart because it has so many problems... First of all, we can see a potential FALSE CAUSE. Just because Backusville H.S. saw a 15% increase in enrollment after they began the early-attendance policy DOES NOT mean that the new policy CAUSED the increase. This is a post hoc ergo propter hoc (or after this therefore because of this) fallacy. What else could have caused the enrollment increase besides the policy? Perhaps a new housing development nearby the school, so new families moved to the neighborhood, thus, they sent their kids to the nearby high school. Perhaps another H.S. shut down. Perhaps the junior high school saw an influx of students those years, so more incoming freshman came in. Perhaps an outreach program sought to bring back students who'd previously dropped out. Do you see how many other possibilities there are? We have to be so careful to avoid giving only ONE CAUSE to a problem that could have many possible causes. The other major fallacy here could be a problematic ANALOGY. Do we know if we're enough like Backusville to get the same results? Again, unless we know what other factors were involved in their increase, it is unlikely that we'll have duplicate results in our case. Another major problem is the wording of the claim. The major support is that we'll improve education. But are we sure that increased funding will help improve the quality of education at our school? What will we be using the new funding for? If it is to build a new gymnasium or to give to the football team, it seems highly unlikely that this

will have anything at all to do with improved education. What would we need to do to improve education? Teacher training sessions? Hire more teachers to reduce classroom size? Hire tutors? This would need to be made clear, otherwise we have a potential non sequiter fallacy here.

Explanation

Do you see how we analyze arguments and pick apart the logic, finding fallacies and potential holes?

These things would need to be made clear in order to have a reasonable, sound, logical argument. Otherwise, it's no good.

It's important to understand how to analyze arguments in real life so we're not sold deceptions and misunderstandings – we need to be able to distinguish between truth and manipulation.

Your job this week will be to go out into the world (watch certain NEWS channels on television for an hour, for example, and you'll find plenty!!) and find examples of fallacies to explain to us in the discussion board.

For your quiz, you'll take apart an argument exactly like we did with the one here about Backusville H.S.

Have fun!

Here's another for practice:

Try it on your own first and then check your answers on the next page...

Argument

A recent study found that children from an inner-city neighborhood in Rochester who spent at least five hours a day in daycare scored better on standardized tests than did children from that neighborhood who spent less time in daycare. They concluded that all children in the United States should spend at least five hours a day in daycare.

Tell the Claim (Conclusion):

Support (Premises):

Warrant (Assumptions):

Possible fallacies:

(Don't peek until you try it yourself!)

Answer:

A recent study found that children from an inner-city neighborhood in Rochester who spent at least five hours a day in daycare scored better on standardized tests than did children from that neighborhood who spent less time in daycare. They concluded that all children in the United States should spend at least five hours a day in daycare.

Claim (Conclusion): All U.S. kids should spend at least five hours in daycare.

Support (Premises): A recent study found that inner-city kids who spent at least five hours in daycare scored better on standardized tests than those who did not.

Warrant (Assumptions): We want kids to score better on standardized tests. All daycares are the same. All cities are the same. It was the time spent in daycare that caused the test scores to increase.

Fallacies: *False analogy* — since not all students are the same, and those in inner cities might have families who cannot afford to be with them because the parents are working long hours, but suburban families might be more well off and have at least one parent who can stay home and/or be home part-time to help the children learn. Also *hasty generalization* since one “recent study” is hardly enough evidence to assume that this will work in all cases. The *sample size* is just too small to draw any large conclusions. The warrants are all a bit shaky as well, since we have to ask ourselves if we want our children to score better on standardized tests, or if we’d rather they excelled in creativity and imagination.