

# Pedagogy and Examples

This section publishes articles that present ideas or examples for the teaching of critical thinking and logic, or examples that either illustrate or call into question some aspect of current theories of the foundations of reasoning.

## Teaching Students How to Spot a Conclusion

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Anyone who has taught critical thinking knows that too many students are unable to spot the conclusion in an argument consisting of more than a few claims. I personally have experienced considerable frustration trying to teach such a seemingly obvious but nevertheless crucial skill—crucial because not being able to spot the conclusion of an argument amounts to going through life without any idea what anyone else is talking about!

The difficulty in finding the conclusion in an argument is, I think, twofold. First, one has to consider the argument as a whole and not just a claim here and a claim there. Second, having chosen a conclusion on the grounds of the relevance of the remaining claims to it, one often turns around and then uses the conclusion as grounds for deleting claims on the basis of their irrelevance—undoubtedly a non-trivial procedure. What follows is a list of instructions I give to my students to help them find the conclusion, a decision-making procedure of sorts, which alleviates some of the difficulty.

- (1) Take your best guess. Then ask yourself if *every* other claim provides some support for that claim. If the answer is yes you have found the conclusion. If there are claims that don't really seem to support it:
- (2) Look for another possible conclusion. Repeat (1). If no claim is supported by every other claim:
- (3) See if you can come up with an *obvious* unstated conclusion that is supported by every other claim. If there isn't an obvious one:
- (4) Take the claim supported by the greatest number of other claims and delete all the claims that really don't seem to be of any help at all.

The reason I stress “obvious” in (3) is that an enthymeme is normally only used when the missing claim is so obvious that one naturally formulates it in one’s own mind—that is its rhetorical power. However, I have found that some students have a habit of formulating quite ingenious but utterly bizarre conclusions of their own to encompass, perhaps, an implication of some of the premises, or say, a throw-away last line.

Obviously this procedure works only if there are no counter-arguments in the argument, but all textbooks that I have seen introduce short arguments that do not contain counter-arguments before they introduce ones that do. Anyway, students seem to be able to spot counter-arguments and ignore them while looking for the conclusion quite well in my critical thinking courses.

The pedagogic advantage of this method is that not only is it a rule-based technique, an algorithm, but it also gets students actually to think about the argument as a unity. The most common mistake students make (apart from simply plumping for the first or last claim) is to choose a good candidate without reading through the whole argument and being sure that they have chosen the best candidate for the conclusion. Because they can ask “. . . and does this claim support my choice for the conclusion, and does this one, and does this one . . . ?” you can give students a way to be sure they have thought about the whole argument. Furthermore, the algorithm can be used iteratively on the premises to get at the sub-arguments. “Take any premise and ask which other claims provide support for it” and so on. Thus, this is the only procedure they have to master to attack and diagram or just read any argument.