Some of the most important ideas in this chapter are:

1. Arguments can be given for our beliefs, and the fact that we have opinions and 'have a right to our opinions' does not preclude giving such arguments.
2. These arguments can be better or worse and we can reach informed judgments about what makes them better or worse.
3. To offer an argument for a claim, C, is to put forward other claims, P1, P2, etc, as reasons supporting C.
4. The premises are supposed to support the conclusion; the idea is that one reasons *from* the premises *to* the conclusion.

Engaging in the process of critical inquiry

In their book *Reason in the Balance*, Sharon Bailin and Mark Battersby define critical inquiry as *the process of carefully examining an issue in order to come to a reasoned judgment based on a critical evaluation of relevant reasons*. This serves us as a very good definition of what is entailed in critical thinking and highlights what we should be taking away from this course by the end of the semester.

Bailin and Battersby provide a very worthwhile framework for understanding the important elements of engaging in the process of critical inquiry. As they suggest, this is often a complex and multifaceted process. Critical inquiry usually begins with an issue, which is why we will often have recourse to carefully, painstakingly, and precisely identifying the issue that is at the heart of a debate, challenge, or controversy. Critical inquiry almost always begins with an issue. If there is no dispute or controversy, that is, no issue, then there may be no need to engage in critical inquiry. The purpose in examining issues, especially issues we care about, is to arrive at a reasoned judgment. As Bailin and Battersby point out:

> The judgment aimed at in inquiry is not arbitrary; it is not just a matter of unreflective opinion, nor is it based uncritically on what others say. Rather, coming to a reasoned judgment involves critical evaluation. The practice of critical evaluation is also central to inquiry.

Reaching a reasoned judgment will involve comparing individual arguments and pieces of information. But it’s more than that. As a part of this process we need to be able to make a comparative assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the competing views in a debate. “This involves knowing the various positions, the evidence and arguments mustered in their favour, the criticism and objections which have been leveled against them, the responses to the criticisms and objections, and alternative arguments and views.” We will sometimes need to give some consideration and attention to the history behind a debate and relevant aspects of the context of the debate. We’ll also have to consider the sources of information and evaluate their credibility. We have to be able to identify fallacious reasoning, consider counter-examples, assess statistical evidence, and learn how to formulate our own arguments. Furthermore, Bailin and Battersby also emphasize the importance of coming to the critical inquiry process with the right “spirit of inquiry,”
including open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, and the awareness of one’s own biases and irrational tendencies. As Bailin and Battersby summarize their approach to critical inquiry:

…it is not enough to evaluate only the reasons or arguments which support one position or view. Rather, we must look at all or at least many sides of an issue, evaluate the reasons and arguments supporting different positions, and weigh the alternative strengths of each.

They emphasize that critical inquiry has the characteristics of a dialogue, with a number of views or positions in conversation with each other.

**Bailin and Battersby’s Guidelines for Inquiry**

- What is the issue? Before we can even begin to inquire, we need to be very clear about what the issue is that we are trying to inquire about.
- What kinds of claims or judgments are at issue? It is important to be clear about the type of judgments involved in our inquiries because different kinds of judgments may be evaluated according to different criteria.
- What are the relevant reasons and arguments on various sides of the issue? Laying out the various views and positions must include the reasons and evidence which support the positions as well as any objections and responses.
- What is the context of the issue? In conducting an inquiry, it is important to lay out the history of argument and debate around the issue as well as other aspects of context.
- How do we comparatively evaluate the various reasons and arguments to reach a reasoned judgment? Coming to a reasoned judgment involves evaluating various reasons in comparison to one another.

**Bailin and Battersby’s Guidelines for Reaching a Reasoned Judgment**

- Ensure that the relevant arguments, objections, and responses have been identified.
- Evaluate the individual arguments.
- Establish, if possible, which view bears the burden of proof.
- Assess the possibilities in light of the alternatives.
- Consider differences in how the issues and arguments are framed.
- Recognize points that may be valid in various views.
- Synthesize the strengths of different views into the judgment.
- Weigh and balance different considerations, values, and arguments.
- Consider whether your own personal convictions and experiences may be coloring your judgment.

**Identifying Arguments**

**What do we mean by “an argument”?**
When someone tries to put forward rational reasons in support of a claim to persuade others to accept that claim. Govier’s definition: An argument is a set of claims that a person puts forward in an attempt to show that some further claim is rationally acceptable.
The emphasis here is on the intent or purpose behind a passage. Is an author or speaker trying to rationally persuade us of something?

The O Word!
You should never say “that’s just your opinion.” Opinions can be well-founded, sensible, and credible or foolish and arbitrary. What is important is the matter of evidence. What matters is not whether a claim is a fact or opinion but what kind of evidence we have for the claim. Opinions on important controversial issues can and should be defended by rational argument.

Opinions: an opinion is a belief, typically not fully supported by evidence, on a matter open to some dispute. Evidence, though relevant to the subject, does not prove which view is right. We hold a claim as an opinion because we lack the full conviction we have for secure beliefs or knowledge.

Opinions can be formed with or without evidence, for good reasons or poor ones. We should seek well-founded and sensible opinions, not arbitrary ones. The point of arguing and evaluating arguments is to reach opinions based on reasoned reflection and good judgment.

Not all opinions are equal. Some opinions are mere opinions, reactions based on little more than a gut response. Others are based on evidence and reasons and on careful weighing of pros and cons. Using and evaluating arguments to arrive at opinions does not turn opinion into fact, but it can help us have more reasonably based opinions.

It is difficult to clearly demarcate the distinction between facts and opinions.

The parts of an argument (an aid to identifying arguments):

Premises: the evidence or reasons put forward in defense of a claim; the claims which offer evidence or reasons intended to back up the conclusion.

Conclusion: the claim being defended in the argument; the claim or statement that is in dispute and that we are trying to support with reasons.

Our model of an argument’s structure:

Premise 1
Premise 2
Premise N (an argument may have any number of premises)
therefore
Conclusion

Indicator Words

For help in identifying the parts of an argument you should familiarize yourself with premise and conclusion indicators. People who construct arguments will usually
indicate to us what their conclusions and premises are. We call these "logical indicators." Logical indicators help to separate the premises from the conclusion. We discern two types of logical indicators: (1) conclusion-indicators and (2) premise-indicators. These provide us with clues to the structure of an argument. However, they are signals only, not infallible guarantees. Below are lists of some of the most common conclusion- and premise-indicators.

**Conclusion-Indicators**

therefore… indicates that…
*thus… suggests that…
*so… permits us to conclude that…
*hence… we may deduce (or infer) that…
*implies that… brings us the conclusion that…
*consequently… it must be the case that…
proves that… bears out the point that…
entails that… it follows that…
as a result… leads me to believe that…
shows that… accordingly…

*These are probably the most commonly used logical indicators.

**Premise-Indicators**

1since… may be deduced from…
2because… in that…
for… given that…
for the reason that… as shown by…
in view of the fact that… as indicated by…
as indicated by… owing to…
on the supposition that… as is substantiated by…
assuming that… inasmuch as…

1Except when 'since' denotes time, as in "I've been hungry since lunchtime."

2Except when 'because' denotes a cause, as in: "The window shattered because the molecular structure of glass expands in cold weather."

**Identifying arguments: where and how do you find arguments?**

Be careful of the trap of seeing arguments everywhere. Some things to rely on when trying to identify arguments:

- The intent of the speaker or listener: are they trying to establish that some claim is acceptable by offering evidence in support of that claim?
- Indicator words, though this is not always reliable. Not every argument will use indicator words.
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- You should be able to identify premises and a conclusion
- The context of a passage
- Tone, though note that passages may be opinionated and yet contain no arguments—no rational support is given for the opinions.
- Logical flow
- Background information

Keep in mind that when identifying arguments, we are not focusing on or interested in whether the argument is a good argument or not. Some passages may contain arguments but we think the arguments are so weak that we fail to recognize them as arguments. But weak arguments are (almost by definition) arguments. So don’t confuse identifying arguments with determining whether an argument is persuasive.

What kinds of things typically are not arguments?

- descriptions
- simple statements or expressions of feeling
- explanations
- questions
- ridiculing
- story telling

A brief procedure for identifying arguments:
1. Start by asking yourself what the conclusion would be if it were an argument. Considering what is at issue in the context, what is being disputed or supported, may guide you to the conclusion. Is there an issue or matter of dispute present in the passage?
2. If you cannot find a conclusion, you probably don’t have an argument.
3. If you found a conclusion, can you identify premises that offer rational support?
4. If there is good reason to regard to writer or speaker as trying to persuade others that a claim is true, then the speech or passage contains an argument.
5. Keep in mind the difference between arguments and explanations.

Arguments and Explanations

The difference between arguments and explanations.
Arguments and explanations are difficult to distinguish because:

(1) many of the same indicator words appear in both arguments and explanations,
(2) the structure of an explanation is often similar to the structure of an argument, and
(3) oftentimes instead of offering evidence in support of their beliefs people offer explanations why they have their beliefs (such explanations do not justify their beliefs).
The structure of an explanation:

Factor 1
Factor 2  these are often the causal factors
Factor 3  therefore
Event X came to be

Arguments and explanations have different purposes. The various factors generally represent how it was that some particular event X came to be. The purpose in citing these factors is not to establish the truth of event X but merely to give an account of how it came to be. So in an explanation we are not trying to prove that something is true, but rather explain how it came to be true.

In an argument someone is putting forward reasons trying to justify a claim as true. An explanation offers an account that species the causes of an event that is assumed to have occurred. So in an explanation there is no question of truth or falsity. If a person regards the truth of a claim as unproblematic and he or she is interested in explaining why it is the case then the person is explaining.

Q because P

(1) Is the author interested in establishing the truth of Q and is P offered as evidence for it? Then we have an argument.

(2) Is the truth of Q unproblematic and at least as well established as the truth of P and are we interested in explaining why Q is the case? Then we have an explanation.

Some complications:

(1) Some passages can be classified as either, depending on what you assume about them. Here you need to make some assumptions about what is likely to need justification and what is not.

(2) Occasionally, the very same set of statements can serve both as an argument and as an explanation. This happens because the same premises that constitute evidence will also, by coincidence, serve to explain why the conclusion is true.

Different Types of Explanation
You might find it useful to keep in mind that there are different types of explanation, including:

Physical Explanations: Uses information, including general background conditions, relevant to the natural sciences to state the cause of an event.

- Tries to pinpoint the direct or immediate cause.
May include reference to a chain of causes.
May speak to general occurrences as well as individual or specific events.
Mistakes we make regarding physical explanations:
1. We sometimes have to explain the immediate cause with a further causal story, having to judge the point at which a demand to extend the causal story is unreasonable.
2. We sometimes expect the natural sciences to provide a reason or motive behind an event; they do not include references to such things.
3. We sometimes deliver a physical explanation at an inappropriate level of technicality.

Behavioral Explanations: Find causes for human behavior by using information and vocabulary from the social sciences.
- Resembles the structure of physical explanations in providing relevant background and identifying a direct or immediate cause.
- Can address general phenomena as well as specific ones.
- Rely on knowledge that is less exact, and admits of more exceptions, than the knowledge in physical explanations.
- Not always a single correct explanation of a particular human action.
- Distinguish between a reason for doing something (argument) and a particular person’s reason for doing something (explanation).

Functional Explanations: Explain what an object or event does, what role it plays in a given context.
- Because an object may have more than one function, or a function different from its originally intended one, it helps to provide the context in which the object performs a given function.
- Can vary from simple to complex, depending on audience and circumstance.
- Typically refer to human motives and reasons.

To give a good account of a phenomenon, we must sometimes use more than one kind of explanation.

Identifying the Issue

An issue is any matter of controversy or uncertainty; an issue is a point in dispute, in doubt, in question, or simply up for discussion or consideration. Issues are raised when claims are in question. Issues exist in virtually any area of thought and when engaged in the process of critical inquiry, we have to be careful that we have identified and focused on the appropriate and relevant issue. It is very easy for people engaged in critical inquiry to be confused or mistaken about the issue they are debating, or to have different ideas regarding what precisely the issue is. In Reason in the Balance, Bailin and Battersby identify the following characteristic of an issue:

- Focus: An issue should not be too broad.
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- Issue versus Topic: Issues in critical thinking should not be confused with or identified with topics of conversation or with psychological problems or hang-ups. A topic is a general subject (i.e., the minimum wage, capital punishment, euthanasia). But such general formulations do not indicate what we want to find out about the topic.
- Precision: It is important that that statement of the issue not be overly vague. It should be stated clearly and precisely.
- Controversy: An inquiry cannot be directed towards some information or state of affairs that is generally known or accepted.
- Neutrality: Issues should be stated neutrally to avoid bias.
- Conclusions = Issues. Issues can be identified with the conclusions of arguments. Since every argument addresses an issue, one way to pin down at least some of the issues in a conversation or passage is to look for the conclusions of any arguments that have been given.
- Many issues can be posed beginning with the word “whether,” indicating that there are two or more sides to a dispute or controversy.

It is often difficult to properly identify the issue at the center of a dispute. Why is it difficult to identify the proper issue? {Keep these points in mind when critically evaluating your own writing.}

- Our writing is often haphazard, unorganized, unfocused.
- We often take on several issues simultaneously.
- We can ourselves be confused about what issue we are discussing.
- We often are sidetracked by tangents, asides, and irrelevancies.
- We sometimes purposely try to draw attention away from the main issue {a fallacy known as red herring}.
- We may need to distinguish between main and subsidiary issues {often parallel to the distinction between main and sub-arguments}.

What are the dangers of incorrectly identifying the issue? We might be accused of committing the straw man fallacy, or of being sidetracked, or not evaluating the correct topic or argument. For a full account of the straw man fallacy, CLICK HERE.

Let’s consider the following example: “In Defense of Viciousness and Violence”

It is easy to criticize "splatter flicks,” the bloody and vicious horror movies so popular among teenagers. After all, they portray our worst nightmares in living color and focus attention on vicious, twisted criminals and psychopaths. All the same, I think it is important to pay attention to the good effects of slasher flicks.

Our society is a scary place. There is terrible violence in public schools, vicious drug-related crime, adult abuse of children, random death on city streets. So, teenagers have to deal with real fears. It helps to watch real fears acted out in the safety of a movie theater, where the audience can—if they choose—simply walk away. Because splatter flicks scare us in a setting where we have ultimate control, they help us learn to cope with our deepest fears, dreads, and anxieties.
Violent behaviors are not popular because of violent movies; violent movies are popular because they reflect the violence that already exists. No one claims that people are loving because they watch *Bambi*. So why do critics claim that people turn into murderers because they watch *Scream* or *I Know What You Did Last Summer*?

How would you characterize the main issue raised by this article?

(a) Whether our society is a scary place.
(b) Whether “splatter flicks” portray our worst nightmares.
(c) Whether we should pay attention to the good effects of slasher flicks.
(d) Whether violent movies are popular because they reflect the violence that already exists in society.

Note that each of these claims, while saying roughly related things, is making a distinct point. Which issue we attribute to this passage will make a big difference in terms of what we think is the overall point of the passage. To help identify the appropriate issue, you might focus on identifying the core argument of the passage. What do you think is the main conclusion of this passage? What premises (or evidence) does the author cite in support of that conclusion? The main conclusion of the passage is your issue.
Additional Exercises

Identifying Arguments

Determine which of the following passages contain arguments.

1. Will a beverage begin to cool more quickly in the freezer or in the regular part of the refrigerator? Well, of course it’ll cool faster in the freezer! There are lots of people who don’t understand anything at all about physics and who think things may begin to cool faster in the fridge. But they’re sadly mistaken.

2. Some of these guys that do Elvis Presley imitations actually pay more for their outfits than Elvis paid for his! Anybody who would spend thousands just so he can spend a few minutes not fooling anybody into thinking he’s Elvis is nuts.

3. Marijuana should be legalized because it is much less dangerous than alcohol or nicotine.

4. The reason he looks so awful is that he was up all night studying.

5. He must have been up the entire night, since his eyes are red and swollen and his clothes are all wrinkled.

6. It is a very good idea to buy term life insurance rather than whole life insurance, because when you buy the latter you are in effect investing in a savings account that doesn’t give you a very good return on your money.

7. You really ought to relax a bit more with a good novel or something else you like doing.

8. I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. I believe that we must assist free people to work out their own destinies in their own way. I believe that our help should be primarily through economic and financial aid, which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes.
   President Truman, Address to Congress, 1947

9. It’s wise to let states deny AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) benefits to unmarried kids under eighteen who live away from their parents. This would discourage thousands of these kids from having children of their own in order to get state-subsidized apartments.

10. Even though fifty million American adults still smoke, the rate of cigarette smoking has declined over the past twenty years. Experts believe that the decline in smoking is responsible at least in part for the decline in cardiovascular mortality.

11. Your staff is having trouble learning to use your new computer system because the commands they have to type in are numerous, complicated, and not related to the machine’s operations in any obvious way.

12. Mike Wallace: “My folks, who were Russian immigrants, loved the chance to vote. That’s probably why I decided that I was going to vote whenever I got the chance. I’m not sure if I’m going to vote for Dukakis or Bush, but I am going to vote. And I don’t understand people who don’t.”

13. NBC’s coverage of the Olympics was not very exciting. The anchorman was cool and detached, and, except for basketball, they never zeroed in on a single event long enough for anyone to care. Plus, there was just too much coverage. Anytime you
turned on NBC, there was the Olympics. It was like air—always there. And what’s so exciting about air?

14. *Newsweek*: “Television evangelist Pat Robertson made a plausible presidential candidate. The son of a former senator from Virginia, he graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Washington and Lee, has a law degree from Yale, is a Marine veteran, a former Golden Gloves boxer and a shrewd entrepreneur. His cable-TV network is second only to Ted Turner’s, reaching more than 30 million homes.”

15. You better not pet that dog. She looks friendly, but she’s been known to bite.

**Distinguishing Between Arguments and Explanations**

Determine which of the following passages contain arguments, which contain explanations, and which contain neither.

1. I did well in medical school in part because I was a philosophy major as an undergraduate.
2. There must have been fire because there was smoke.
3. “...women are not creating culture because they are preoccupied with love.” -- Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*
4. “A witty experiment by Philip Goldberg proves what everyone knows, having internalized the disesteem in which they are held, women despise both themselves and each other. This simple test consisted of asking women undergraduates to respond to the scholarship in an essay signed alternatively by one John McKay and one Joan McKay. In making their assessments, the students generally agreed that John was a remarkable thinker, Joan an unimpressive mind. Yet the articles were identical; the reaction was dependent on the sex of the supposed author.” --Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*
5. Kim is really a terrifically talented photographer. Incidentally, did you know that he's just got a brand new 35-millimeter camera?
6. Even if the weather is clear tonight, you won't be able to see Halley's comet. The reason is that we're too close to the lights of the city to see anything that faint in the sky.
7. Nevadans have traditionally opposed zoning ordinances because of their fierce individualism.
8. “On the morning of his great 'peace' speech, Hitler had promulgated in the greatest secrecy the Reich Defense Law, which completely reorganized the armed forced and introduced a spartan war economy. While talking peace to lull the outside world, he was going to make ready for war as rapidly as possible.” --William L. Shirer, *The Nightmare Years*
9. “But despite its enormous popularity, the Falcon did not bring in as much money as we had hoped. As an economical small car, its profit margin was limited. Nor did it offer many options, which would have greatly increased our revenues.” --Lee Iacocca, *An Autobiography*
10. Steve never calls Elisa. But she forgives him; she knows how busy he is.
11. “Nothing in the universe occurs haphazardly; there is a cause-and-effect pattern to all phenomena, including weather. It follows, therefore, that...weather is predictable.” --*The Old Farmer's Almanac*
Identifying the Issue

For each passage, identify the primary issue discussed in the passage.

1. The Republicans’ proposal to cut taxes on capital gains (profits from selling real estate, stocks, and bonds) is not a sop for the wealthy. It is a way to stimulate investment and ultimately to create jobs. That’s why it is in everyone’s interest to support the proposal.
2. With genetically different animals, there’s always the possibility that the results of experiments are due to variations among animals rather than to whatever is being tested. Genetically identical research animals would be a boon to research because scientists could be more confident of their research results.
3. It’s wise to let states deny AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) benefits to unmarried kids under eighteen who live away from their parents. This would discourage thousands of these kids from having children of their own in order to get state-subsidized apartments.
4. That American schools have finally been integrated is a myth. The vast majority of African American students attend schools whose student bodies are almost entirely African American. And most whites attend schools where only a tiny minority are African American, Latino, or Asian.
5. The Justice Department recently reported that the Immigration and Naturalization Service allowed more than 180,000 immigrants to become American citizens just before the last presidential election without completing background checks. The INS did this in hopes that most of the new immigrants would vote for Democrats. This political chicanery is an outrage, and Congress should demand accountability from the responsible officials.