



5.4 Identifying and Evaluating an Argument

An argument has formal validity if its premises (which are true) logically support its conclusion. When thinking critically, we are interested in assessing the validity of arguments expressed in natural language.

Even if an argument is expressed in natural language, we can still assess its formal validity - as long as its wording is clear and unambiguous

Argumentative writing differs from descriptive and expository writing in important ways. In argumentative writing, certain words signal that an argument is being used. These words are known as premise indicators and conclusion indicators.

In academic contexts, it is useful to evaluate the validity of deductive, inductive, conductive and abductive arguments.

How to recognize an argument

The question naturally arises:

“How will we recognize an argument when we encounter it?”

Many similar words can be used to indicate both a formal and informal argument. Once we have detected that an argument is taking place, we can explore its formal and informal aspects.

Note: Usually an argument is defined as having at least two premises and a conclusion.

However, the following examples contain only premise and a conclusion, so that the function of each can be clearly demonstrated.

Longer arguments will be considered in subsequent parts of this section.

Words which signal the presence of an argument can be grouped into:

Premise indicators:	words which indicate a minor claim (premise).
	<i>Examples:</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ because➤ since➤ as➤ in view of the fact that➤ for the reason that

Conclusion Indicators:	words which indicate a main or final claim (conclusion).
	<i>Examples:</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ so➤ therefore➤ thus➤ accordingly➤ it follows that



Conclusions and premises can appear at various places in the sentence. Sometimes, a conclusion may be at the beginning.



Caution: Some of the above words are also used in descriptions and explanations.



Activity: Have a go at Activity One on the right-hand side of the screen.

NOTE: Sometimes, there may be NO premise indicator and NO conclusion indicator – and you will have to find the premise and conclusion without this assistance.



Activity: Have a go at Activity Two on the right-hand side of the screen.



Important note:

Although some of the above examples include only one premise and one conclusion, an argument is usually built up from at least two premises and a conclusion.

In academic contexts, it is useful to evaluate the validity of longer deductive, inductive, conductive and abductive arguments which will be discussed in the following sections.