

Effective Argumentation: Premises and Conclusions

One of the most common comments professors write on students' papers is: "So what?" We've all seen those two words scrawled on our papers at least a few times. Why is this a common problem in argumentative writing? What is the error in logic that lets one or more assertions become disconnected from the argument? To answer these questions, we must look at the basic building blocks of any logical argument: *premises* and *conclusions*.

1. **Premises:** *Premises* are assertions that, when joined together, will lead the reader to the conclusion. The most important part of any premise is that your audience will accept it as true. If your audience rejects even one of your premises, they will likely also reject your conclusion, and your entire argument will fall apart. When constructing premises, it is essential to consider your audience. When you know your audience, you also know which assertions they will accept and which they will question.
 - (a) For example, consider the following assertion: "Because greenhouse gases are causing the atmosphere to warm at a rapid rate..." Is this a solid premise? It depends on your audience. If your readers are members of an environmental group, they will accept this premise without qualms. If your readers are oil company executives, they may reject this premise and your conclusions.
 - (b) To construct solid premises, you need to consider the rationales and beliefs of your opponents. What are the "givens" you accept that they do not? What beliefs lead them to reject those "givens"? Where can two sides of an argument find common ground? That is where you will find effective premises to reach your conclusion.

2. **Conclusions:** A *conclusion* can be any assertion that your readers will not readily accept. A conclusion must have at least one premise supporting it. The thesis of an argumentative paper will always contain a conclusion, with the main points or body paragraphs acting as premises that lead the reader to accept it.
 - (a) Let's revisit the previous example, but change the wording slightly: "Therefore, greenhouse gases are causing the atmosphere to warm at a rapid rate." How did changing the first word in the sentence change the function of the sentence? The meaning of the sentence stays the same, but how we're using it *in our argument* has changed. It is now in the form of a conclusion.
 - (b) You may have heard one of your thesis statements or main arguments described as "too obvious." This usually means that your readers already accept your conclusion without any need for argument. You must also consider your audience when you are constructing your conclusions.

3. **Joining words:** Readers need transitional words and phrases to distinguish among different ideas and to make sense of logical relationships. *Joining words* indicate which assertions are offered as premises and which as conclusions. If these signals are missing in your writing, readers will often make their own connections, which may be quite different than those you intended.

To introduce premises, use connectors such as *because* and *since*.

Example: The sea level is rising *because* greenhouse gases are causing the atmosphere to warm at a rapid rate.

To introduce conclusions, use *so*, *therefore*, *thus*, and *consequently*.

Example: *Therefore*, the increase in temperature is causing the sea level to rise.

To link premises, use *and*, *but*, and *or*.

Example: The rising sea level *and* the increase in temperature are connected.

Practice

Use what you've learned about joining words to identify the premises and conclusion(s) in the following argument.

Most Americans eat at fast-food establishments more than once a week, and many researchers agree that such eating habits are the leading (if not primary) cause of obesity in the U.S.. Obesity-related diseases such as diabetes and hypertension burden our healthcare system by billions of dollars each year. Whether through healthcare-insurance premiums or state and federal taxes, you suffer the consequences even if you eat only healthful, home-cooked meals. Therefore, we should impose a small tax on every high-calorie meal served at fast-food chains in this country. This would not only offset obesity-related healthcare costs, but force consumers to seek out more healthful options when looking for lunch.

Key

Premise 1- Most Americans eat at fast-food establishments more than once a week.

Premise 2- Many researchers agree that such eating habits cause obesity.

Premise 3- Obesity-related diseases burden our healthcare system.

Premise 4- Every American suffers the consequences of obesity.

Conclusion- Impose a tax on fast foods.