

HANDLING ARGUMENTS

What is an argument?

If someone says they have had an argument with someone, we usually think of a row or an angry disagreement. For the sake of peace many people try to avoid arguments of this sort. People who like arguments are either bad tempered or they are bullies. An argument is a battle with words that you win if you get your own way, or lose if you surrender to the other person.

There is, however, another meaning of argument. People who are studying at university should be concerned about arguments, not in the sense of angry exchanges, but in the sense of supporting a conclusion. Some truths are self-evident or can be discovered easily - it is not difficult to find out whether or not it is raining outside. Other truths are much more difficult to establish. We need to build up a case to find the truth. An argument, in this sense is a reasonable case in favour of a particular conclusion.

Sometimes someone will make a statement without giving any supporting evidence or argument. This is an assertion.

Nuclear power stations are better for the environment than coal powered stations.

This assertion may be true or false, but no reasons are given to help us decide whether it is true or false. If we are to believe it, we need some reasons.

Nuclear power stations do not produce greenhouse gases, therefore they are better for the environment than coal powered stations.

The statement is now supported by an argument. The argument has two parts a conclusion and a supporting reason. For any argument we can ask: Is the reason given itself true? (In this case: is it true that power stations do not produce greenhouse gases) How do we know that it is true? (Is it obvious? How can we find out?) Does the reason support the conclusion? (In this case: is there a connection between producing greenhouses gases and being bad for the environment?) Is it relevant? Finally, are there other relevant considerations which would support the opposite conclusion?

In our example, the argument does tend to support the conclusion and it is based on something that is true. To this extent, it is a good reason to believe the statement. However, what also needs to be asked is whether there are other arguments to consider which might support the opposite view.

The aim of argument should not be simply to persuade someone else – to “win” the argument - but should be to find the truth by finding which arguments are really the strongest. A valid argument is one where the conclusion does follow from the starting point (the premise).