

## Checking Your Arguments

There are two ways of checking the significance and logical validity of your arguments. One is a "positive" check, making sure your essay includes certain specific features, and the other is a "negative" check, making sure your essay avoids certain logical fallacies.

### Positive Check - Testing the Argument

1. Is there a thesis? Am I making an argument? Is there a claim that one can argue for and against, or is it only a statement of fact or summary of the essay's topic?

*Not a thesis.* I will explore Thomas Hobbes's theory of liberty and its consequences.

*Thesis.* Thomas Hobbes's theory of liberty makes community impossible without authoritarian politics.

2. Test the strength of the thesis. Is the thesis clear and strong enough to provoke counterarguments? Could an intelligent person also enrolled in your Humanities class argue against your thesis, or is the thesis too obvious?

*Poor Thesis.* Despite its political consequences, Hobbes's theory of liberty remains influential.

This is a weak thesis because it emphasizes the fact that Hobbes's theory is influential, which is undeniable. The debatable point has to do with the theory's "political consequences," which are de-emphasized in the sentence.

3. Does the essay lay to rest the obvious counterarguments? Three problems frequently arise in relation to counterarguments:
  - People avoid addressing obvious counterarguments because they fear it weakens their argument. However, the reader will naturally generate them, so the best strategy is to address them, not hide from them.
  - The counterargument only engages a peripheral or unrealistic objection.
  - Avoid the thesis-reversal as a counterargument.

*Ex.* Some might say Hobbes's theory of liberty does not lead to authoritarian politics. But, as I have shown, it does.

This counterargument will not persuade any skeptical readers. A real counterargument challenges the arguments that support your thesis; it does not merely reverse it. If you have been defending the claim that Hobbes's theory of liberty makes community impossible without authoritarian politics, then a strong counterargument should engage one of the main ideas—liberty, community, or authoritarian politics—and raise a question about that. For example, Hobbes has a chapter on "systems" that look like

non-authoritarian communities. Developing a claim about that chapter would be an effective counterargument, and it would require you to respond to it with new evidence to re-establish your main argument.

4. Are all my lines of argument consistent?
  - The “shotgun” technique is a mistake. You should not include every argument that occurs to you. Would you be persuaded by an argument that claims Homer’s Odysseus is a virtuous hero because of his cunning, *and also* that Odysseus lacks virtue because he tricks the Cyclops? Each of these arguments might be persuasive independently, but together they are contradictory and unpersuasive.

### **Positive Check - Testing for Excess, Redundancy, and Distraction**

1. Does each paragraph of my essay support and extend my thesis? Can a reader understand a new, different element of the argument in each successive paragraph?
2. Are all of my arguments necessary to support the thesis? Are each of the examples I use as evidence necessary?
  - Omit phrases, sentences, quotations, and paragraphs that do not advance your argument. They distract the reader from what is important. Check your quotations carefully. Do they need to be so long? Could you summarize the information contained in some of them without losing any of their value as evidence? Quote only what you need to quote.
3. Is all of my evidence as specific as I can make it?
  - If you are writing about the virtue of Homer’s Odysseus, then it is not very useful to write at length about general theories of virtue. You need specific evidence about Homeric virtue and how Odysseus’s behavior aligns with that specific ideal.
4. Is the meaning of every key term clear and consistent throughout my essay?
  - If you argue that Hobbes supports individualism, then you need to let the reader know what you mean by *individualism*. Hobbes does not use the term *individualism*, so you need to define the way you will use it in the first or second paragraph. Then confirm that you use the term consistently throughout the essay.
5. Is my conclusion consistent with my introduction?
  - Most of us learn a good deal about our subjects while we write about them. Sometimes we change our opinions without realizing it. Read over your introduction and conclusion to confirm that they argue for the same view on the same subject. Also check to see if the conclusion presents a more concise, clear, and forceful version of your thesis than the introduction. If it does, incorporate the language from the conclusion in

the introduction. However, if the conclusion *disagrees* with your introduction, you will have to consider which view you want to argue for, and then make the necessary revisions throughout your essay so that the argument is consistent.

## Negative Check - Thirteen Common Fallacies

It is important to get into the habit of checking your arguments for weak or faulty logic. This is particularly true in writing because the reader scrutinizes every word and claim. A logical fallacy can ruin an argument and discredit even a correct idea. Here are some common logical fallacies that all writers easily fall into if they are not being careful. You might be familiar with some of these fallacies under different names; the important thing is to learn how to recognize the mistaken logic when you see it.

1. ***Ad hominem*** (“to the man”). The use of judgments about people’s characters (or one side of their characters) to draw conclusions that have little to do with their characters.

*Ex1.* If Joel were a more industrious student, then he wouldn’t argue that the grading policies are too strict.

Joel’s study habits are certainly related to the grade he receives in the course, but they do not affect the debate about the strictness of the grading policy.

*Ex2.* Tom lied about his debts at the racetrack; therefore, I think he’s capable of lying about his debts at the casino.

There is no fallacy here because the two types of debt are closely related, and it is reasonable to assume Tom is *capable* of lying about one if he did about the other.

2. ***Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*** (“after it, therefore because of it”) is the use of temporal order to imply causality.

*Ex.* Helen changed her thesis after discussing it with Ben. He must have gotten her to change it.

Anything might have led Helen to change her thesis. Perhaps it was the conversation with Ben, but it just as easily could have been something else. Avoid this fallacy by showing the causal *connection* between the earlier and later events.

3. ***Analogy***. Analogies are useful as illustrations, but they are seldom effective substantial arguments.

*Ex.* Luxury-loving California, like luxury-loving Rome, will be destroyed by invading barbarians.

A shared love of luxury is not a sufficient *similarity* to justify the prediction that California will fall in the *same* way as Rome. The point of the analogy might be somewhat related to the conclusion, but it is not determinative.

4. **Appeal to authority.** The fallacy occurs if you invoke an authority on a matter that is either unrelated to his or her area of authority or irresolvable by any appeal to authority.

*Ex.* Henry David Thoreau's doctrine of civil disobedience is the right form of resistance to use because Martin Luther King adopted it.

Certainly, King has a moral and practical authority on the issue of civil disobedience. Therefore, his endorsement of Thoreau's doctrine *is* a reason to consider it seriously, but King's authority cannot determine that it is "right form of resistance."

It is appropriate to use the appeal to authority when the authority can resolve the issue at hand, as in the following example:

*Ex.* I consulted with the foremost authority on Anglo-Saxon archaeology, and she agreed that the helmet you found is not authentic.

5. **Appeal to perspective.** This fallacy is based on the assumption that one's membership in a particular group or epoch necessarily determines the content or value of one's judgments. This appeal can be used to credit or to discredit the views of a person without taking seriously the substance of their claims.

*Ex1.* As a student, I know what is wrong with college education.

*Ex2.* As a business executive, Sam couldn't possibly understand the plight of Marine Corps recruits.

*Ex3.* Since Jane Austen was a woman, her novels provide an accurate picture of the way women lived in her society.

In each of the examples, the actor's group is not a sufficient reason to credit or to discredit their opinion on the issue. Maybe Sam's brother was a Marine recruit, so she understands their plight very well. It is possible that Jane Austen's picture of women's lives is not completely accurate for any number of reasons: class, race, or literary imagination to name a few possible ones.

6. **A priori arguments** are arguments from assumed first principles. All arguments rely on assumptions. The fallacy occurs if those assumptions are themselves controversial claims that require evidence to support them.

*Ex.* Since every truly democratic government provides for its elderly people, Athens, which had no social security system, was not a democracy.

No reason has been stated for the controversial claim that "truly democratic governments" provide for their elderly people. This claim has been assumed to be true, but it first requires evidence to support it.

7. **Causes resemble effects.** It is enough that causes *produce* effects; those causes do not necessarily also *resemble* their effects.

*Ex1.* World War 1 was a great event. Therefore, it could not have been caused by a small event in Eastern Europe.

*Ex2.* Sam's plan had bad consequences. Therefore, it was a bad plan.

A small event actually was the catalyst for WW1 to start. And just because Sam's plan turned out to have bad consequences does not mean that it was a bad plan. There are many reasons why a good plan might end up with some bad effects. More information is needed before we judge the plan.

8. **Demand for proof or disproof.** The fallacy is that you must accept whatever you cannot disprove. You might have seen this fallacy in poor arguments about the existence or nonexistence of God. You do not need to accept everything that anyone tells you just because you cannot absolutely and immediately disprove it. There is room for skepticism and uncertainty.

9. **False alternatives.** This fallacy occurs if you frame something as being an either/or situation when it is not.

*Ex.* She is either a democratic leader or a mere con-artist.

Maybe she is both. Maybe she is neither.

10. **Invidious or laudatory definition.** This fallacy occurs if a person uses value-resonant words to define something in order to make it look good or bad without using any evidence to support that opinion.

*Ex1.* It was not surprising that he refused to give money for the children's hospital; he was a capitalist, a robber baron living for greed alone.

*Ex2.* As a capitalist, a producer of wealth, her life was dedicated to the good of the community.

11. **Isolated fact.** This fallacy occurs if a link is made between one fact and another unrelated, or partially related, one. Visitors to the Soviet Union used to say that the Soviet economic system was unfairly criticized because any country that built the Moscow subway must be doing things right. What is the relationship between the Soviet economic system and the Moscow subway? Certainly, there is some connection (otherwise it would be an absurd statement), but the single, particular fact cannot prove or disprove the merits of an entire economic system.

12. **Near it, therefore like it.** This fallacy makes a leap and applies a general fact to individuals or groups.  
*Ex.* In the eighteenth century, most people in America were Christians. We can then assume that Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were Christians.

Although there is some probability that Jefferson and Franklin would have been Christians based on the time and place in which they lived, it requires more evidence to make that assumption. As it turns out, while Jefferson and Franklin believed in God, they were not Christians.

13. **Possibility, therefore probability.** Similar to the previous fallacy, this one makes a leap from the possibility of something to treating it as probable or as reality. Probability and reality require more evidence than possibility does.  
*Ex.* Since it is possible to explain Aeneas's actions in terms of self-interest, I will assume self-interest motivates him.

There are several problems with this example. The biggest one is that it takes the *possibility* of reading the character of Aeneas one way as enough of a reason to treat it as the *best* or *correct* reading of him. This leap is unjustified and particularly unfair to the long-suffering Aeneas!