

How to evaluate an argument

A good idea when evaluating an argument is to break things down into two stages. Stage one involves the question of whether an argument is *valid* (this is a technical term). An argument is valid if the conclusion *follows* from the premises, whether or not the premises are true. (Another way of saying this is that a valid argument is such that *if* the premises were true, then the conclusion would have to be true as well.) Example:

- (1) All women are mortal
- (2) Jane is a woman
- (3) Therefore, Jane is mortal

But notice one or more of the premises can be false and the argument can still be valid:

- (1) All women are immortal
- (2) Jane is a woman
- (3) Therefore, Jane is immortal

This argument has a valid form because the conclusion does follow from the premises, but it's not a successful argument because one premise is false.

Example of an *invalid* argument:

- (1) All women are mortal
- (2) Snow is white
- (3) Therefore, Jane is mortal

Here the premises are all true, in fact the conclusion is true, but the conclusion doesn't *follow* from the premises.

So the first stage involves thinking about the form of the argument—whether the conclusion follows from the premises. Stage two consists of thinking about whether the premises of the argument are true.

An argument which is valid *and* has all true premises is a *sound* argument (another technical term). The first argument given above is sound. Sound arguments are completely trustworthy. An *unsound* argument either has at least one false premise or else is invalid, i.e. its conclusion doesn't follow from its premises.

You don't have to use these terms when discussing an argument, but you may find it helpful to bear the distinction which they mark in mind when you read and write. (It's also helpful for crushing your opponents in debate, though that's not a very nice thing to do.)