# Chapter 2: Recognizing Arguments[[1]](#footnote-1)

We just saw that arguments are made of statements. However, there are lots of other things you can do with statements. Part of learning what an argument is involves learning what an argument is not, so in this section and the next we are going to look at some other things you can do with statements besides making arguments.

The list below of kinds of non-arguments is not meant to be exhaustive. There are all sorts of things you can do with statements that are not discussed here, nor are the items on this list meant to be exclusive. One passage may function as both, for instance, a narrative and a statement of belief. Right now we are looking at real world reasoning, so you should expect a lot of ambiguity and imperfection.

## I. Simple Statements of Belief

An argument is an attempt to support a conclusion, with reasons. Often, though, when people try to persuade others to believe something, they skip the reasons, and give a simple statement of belief instead. This is a kind of nonargumentative passage where the speaker simply asserts what they believe without giving reasons. Sometimes simple statements of belief are prefaced with the words “I believe,” and sometimes they are not. A simple statement of belief can be a profoundly inspiring way to change people’s hearts and minds. Consider this passage from Dr. Martin Luther King’s Nobel acceptance speech.

I believe that even amid today’s mortar bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men. I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This actually is a part of a longer passage that consists almost entirely of statements that begin with some variation of “I believe.” It is incredibly powerful oration, because the audience, feeling the power of King’s beliefs, comes to share in those beliefs. The language King uses to describe how he believes is important, too. He says his belief in freedom and equality requires audacity, making the audience feel his courage and want to share in this courage by believing the same things.

These statements are moving, but they do not form an argument. None of these statements provide evidence for any of the other statements. In fact, they all say roughly the same thing, that good will triumph over evil. So the study of this kind of speech belongs to the discipline of rhetoric, not of logic.

## II. Expository Passages

Perhaps the most basic use of a statement is to convey information. Often if we have a lot of information to convey, we will sometimes organize our statements around a theme or a topic. Information organized in this fashion can often appear like an argument, because all of the statements in the passage relate back to some central statement. However, unless the other statements are given as reasons to believe the central statement, the passage you are looking at is not an argument. Consider this passage:

*From a college psychology textbook*. Eysenck advocated three major behavior techniques that have been used successfully to treat a variety of phobias. These techniques are modeling, flooding, and systematic desensitization. In modeling phobic people watch nonphobics cope successfully with dreaded objects or situations. In flooding, clients are exposed to dreaded objects or situations for prolonged periods of time in order to extinguish their fear. In contrast to flooding, systematic desensitization involves gradual, client-controlled exposure to the anxiety eliciting object or situation.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We call this kind of passage an expository passage. In an expository passage, statements are organized around a central theme or topic statement. The topic statement might look like a conclusion, but the other statements are not meant to be evidence for the topic statement. Instead, they elaborate on the topic statement by providing more details or giving examples. In the passage above, the topic statement is “Eysenck advocated three major behavioral techniques...” The statements describing these techniques elaborate on the topic statement, but they are not evidence for it. Although the audience may not have known this fact about Eysenck before reading the passage, they will typically accept the truth of this statement instantly, based on the textbook’s authority. Subsequent statements in the passage merely provide detail.

Deciding whether a passage is an argument or an expository passage is complicated by the fact that sometimes people argue by example:

Steve: Kenyans are better distance runners than everyone else.

Monica: Oh come on, that sounds like an exaggeration of a stereotype that isn’t even true.

Steve: What about Dennis Kimetto, the Kenyan who set the world record for running the marathon? And you know who the previous record holder was? Emmanuel Mutai, also Kenyan.

Here Steve has made a general statement about all Kenyans. Monica clearly doubts this claim, so Steve backs it up with some examples that seem to match his generalization. This isn’t a very strong way to argue: moving from two examples to statement about all Kenyans is probably going to be a kind of bad argument known as hasty generalization. The point here, however, is that Steve is offering these examples as an argument.

The key to telling the difference between expository passages and arguments by example is whether there is a conclusion that the audience needs to be convinced of. In the passage from the psychology textbook, “Eysenck advocated three major behavioral techniques” doesn’t really work as a conclusion for an argument. The audience, students in an introductory psychology course, aren’t likely to challenge this assertion, the way Monica challenges Steve’s overgeneralizing claim.

## III. Narratives

Statements can also be organized into descriptions of events and actions, as in this snippet from Book V of Harry Potter.

But she [Hermione] broke off; the morning post was arriving and, as usual, the Daily Prophet was soaring toward her in the beak of a screech owl, which landed perilously close to the sugar bowl and held out a leg. Hermione pushed a Knut into its leather pouch, took the newspaper, and scanned the front page critically as the owl took off again.[[4]](#footnote-4)

We will use the term “narrative” loosely to refer to any passage that gives a sequence of events or actions. A narrative can be fictional or nonfictional. It can be told in regular temporal sequence or it can jump around, forcing the audience to try to reconstruct a temporal sequence. A narrative can describe a short sequence of actions, like Hermione taking a newspaper from an owl, or a grand sweep of events, like this passage about the rise and fall of an empire in the ancient near east:

The Guti were finally expelled from Mesopotamia by the Sumerians of Erech (c. 2100), but it was left to the kings of Ur’s famous third dynasty to re-establish the Sargonoid frontiers and write the final chapter of the Sumerian History. The dynasty lasted through the twenty first century at the close of which the armies of Ur were overthrown by the Elamites and Amorites.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This passage does not feature individual people performing specific actions, but it is still united by character and action. Instead of Hermione at breakfast, we have the Sumerians in Mesopotamia. Instead of retrieving a message from an owl, the Guti are conquered by the Elamites and Amorites. The important thing is that the statements in a narrative are not related as premises and conclusion. Instead, they are all events which are united—common characters acting in specific times and places.

## III. Explanations

Explanations are not arguments, but they share important characteristics with arguments, so we should devote a separate section to them. Both explanations and arguments are parts of reasoning, because both feature statements that act as reasons for other statements. The difference is that explanations are not used to convince an audience of a conclusion.

Let’s start with a workplace example. Suppose you see your co-worker, Henry, removing a computer from his office. You think to yourself “Gosh, is he stealing from work?” But when you ask him about it later, Henry says, “I took the computer because I believed that it was scheduled for repair.” Henry’s statement looks like an argument. It has the indicator word “because” in it, which would mean that the statement “I believed it was scheduled for repairs” would be a premise. If it was, we could put the argument in canonical form, like this:

I believed the computer was scheduled for repair.

I took the computer from the office.

However, this would make a strange argument. If it were an argument, it would be trying to convince us of the conclusion that Henry took the computer from the office. But you don’t need to be convinced of this. You already know it—that’s why you were talking to him in the first place.

Henry is giving reasons here, but they aren’t reasons that try to prove something. They are reasons that explain something. When you explain something with reasons, you increase your understanding of the world by placing something you already know in a new context. You already knew that Henry took the computer, but now you know why Henry took the computer, and can see that his action was completely innocent (if his story checks out).

Both arguments and explanations involve giving reasons, but the reasons function differently in each case. An explanation is defined as a kind of reasoning where reasons are used to provide a greater understanding of something that is already known.

Because both arguments and explanations are parts of reasoning, we will use parallel language to describe them. In the case of an argument, we called the reasons “premises.” In the case of an explanation, we will call them explainers. Instead of a “conclusion,” we say that the explanation has an explainee. We can use the generic term “reasons” to refer to either premises or explainers and the generic term “target proposition” to refer to either conclusions or explainees. This figure shows this relationship:

On the left, premises point toward a conclusion, with the word "prove" written next to the arrow. On the right, explainers point toward an explainee, with the word "clarify" next to the arrow. Both "premises" and "explainers" are labelled "reason." Both "conclusion" and "explainee" are labelled "target".

We can put explanations in canonical form, just like arguments, but to distinguish the two, we will simply number the statements, and we will separate the explainers and explainee with an E, like this:

1. Henry believed the computer was scheduled for repair

**E**

2. Henry took the computer from the office.

Cases where the target proposition is something that is completely common sense are clearcut cases of explanation. Consider the following passage.

*From Livescience, a science education website, under the headline “Why is grass green?”* Like many plants, most species of grass produce a bright pigment called chlorophyll. Chlorophyll absorbs blue light (high energy, short wavelengths) and red light (low energy, longer wavelengths) well, but mostly reflects green light, which accounts for your lawn’s color.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The passage contains reasoning. The nature of chlorophyll “accounts for” the color of grass. But in this case the audience does not need to be convinced that grass is green. Everyone knows that. The audience went to the Livescience website because they wanted an explanation for why grass was green.

Often the same piece of reasoning can work as either an argument or an explanation, depending on the situation where it is used. Consider this short dialogue

*Monica visits Steve’s cubical*.

Monica: All your plants are dead.

Steve: It’s because I never water them.

In the passage above, Steve uses the word “because,” which we’ve seen in the past is a premise indicator word. But if it were a premise, the conclusion would be “All Steve’s plants are dead.” But Steve can’t possibly be trying to convince Monica that all his plants are dead. It is something that Monica herself says, and that they both can see. The “because” here indicates a reason, but here Steve is giving an explanation, not an argument. He takes something that Steve and Monica already know—that the plants are dead—and puts it in a new light by explaining how it came to be. In this case, the plants died because they didn’t get water, rather than dying because they didn’t get enough light or were poisoned by a malicious co-worker. The reasoning is best represented like this:

1. Steve never waters his plants.

**E**

2. All the plants are dead.

The same piece of reasoning can change from an explanation into an argument simply by putting it into a new situation:

*Monica and Steve are away from the office*.

Monica: Did you have someone water your plants while you were away?

Steve: No.

Monica: I bet they are all dead.

Here Steve and Monica do not know that Steve’s plants are dead. Monica is inferring this idea based on the premise which she learns from Steve, that his plants are not being watered. This time “Steve’s plants are not being watered” is a premise and “The plants are dead” is a conclusion. We represent the argument like this:

Steve never waters his plants.

All the plants are dead.

In the example of Steve’s plants, the same piece of reasoning can function either as an argument or an explanation, depending on the context where it is given. This is because the reasoning in the example of the plants is causal: the causes of the plants dying are given as reasons for the death, and we can appeal to causes either to explain something that we know happened or to predict something that we think might have happened.

Not all kinds of reasoning are flexible like that, however. Reasoning from authority can be used in some kinds of argument, but often makes a lousy explanation. Consider another conversation between Steve and Monica:

Monica: I saw on a documentary last night that the universe is expanding and probably will keep expanding for ever.

Steve: Really?

Monica: Yeah, Steven Hawking said so.

There aren’t any indicator words here, but it looks like Monica is giving an argument. She states that the universe is expanding, and Steve gives a skeptical “really?” Monica then replies by saying that she got this information from the famous physicist Steven Hawking. It looks like Steve is supposed to believe that the universe will expand indefinitely because Hawking, an authority in the relevant field, said so. This makes for an ok argument:

Steven Hawking said that the universe is expanding and will continue to do so indefinitely.

The universe is expanding and will continue to do so indefinitely.

Arguments from authority aren’t very reliable, but for very many things they are all we have to go on. We can’t all be experts on everything. But now try to imagine this argument as an explanation. What would it mean to say that the expansion of the universe can be explained by the fact that Steven Hawking said that it should expand? It would be as if Hawking were a god, and the universe obeyed his commands! Arguments from authority are acceptable, but not ideal. Explanations from authority, on the other hand, are completely illegitimate.

In general, arguments that appeal to how the world works are more satisfying than ones which appeal to the authority or expertise of others. Compare the following pair of arguments:

(a) Jack says traffic will be bad this afternoon. So, traffic will be bad this afternoon.

(b) Oh no! Highway repairs begin downtown today. And a bridge lift is scheduled for the middle of rush hour. Traffic is going to be terrible

Even though the second passage is an argument, the reasons used to justify the conclusion could be used in an explanation. Someone who accepts this argument will also have an explanation ready to offer if someone should later ask, “Traffic was terrible today! I wonder why?” This is not true of the first passage: bad traffic is not *explained* by saying “Jack said it would be bad.” The argument that refers to the drawbridge going up is appealing to a more powerful sort of reason, one that works in both explanations and arguments. This simply makes for a more satisfying argument, one that makes for a deeper understanding of the world, than one that merely appeals to authority.

Although arguments based on explanatory premises are preferred, we must often rely on other people for our beliefs, because of constraints on our time and access to evidence. But the other people we rely on should hopefully hold the belief on the basis of an empirical understanding. If those people are just relying on authority, then we should hope that at some point the chain of testimony ends with someone who is relying on something more than mere authority. Later on in this book, we’ll look more closely at sources and how much you should trust them.

We just have seen that the same set of statements can be used as an argument or an explanation, depending on the context. This can cause confusion between speakers as to what is going on. Consider the following case:

*Bill and Henry have just finished playing basketball*.

Bill: Man, I was terrible today.

Henry: I thought you played fine.

Bill: Nah. It’s because I have a lot on my mind from work.

Bill and Henry disagree about what is happening—arguing or explaining. Henry doubts Bill’s initial statement, which should provoke Bill to argue. But instead, he appears to plough ahead with his explanation. What Henry can do in this case, however, is take the reason that Bill offers as an explanation (that Bill is preoccupied by issues at work) and use it as a premise in an argument for the conclusion “Bill played terribly.” Perhaps Henry will argue (to himself) something like this: “It’s true that Bill has a lot on his mind from work. And whenever a person is preoccupied, his basketball performance is likely to be degraded. So, perhaps he did play poorly today (even though I didn’t notice).”

In other situations, people can switch back and forth between arguing and explaining. Imagine that Jones says, “The reservoir is at a low level because of several releases to protect the down-stream ecology.” Jones might intend this as an explanation, but since Smith does not share the belief that the reservoir’s water level is low, he will first have to be given reasons for believing that it is low. The conversation might go as follows:

Jones: The reservoir is at a low level because of several releases to protect the down-stream ecology.

Smith: Wait. The reservoir is low?

Jones: Yeah. I just walked by there this morning. You haven’t been up there in a while?

Smith: I guess not.

Jones: Yeah, it’s because they’ve been releasing a lot of water to protect the ecology lately.

When challenged, Smith offers evidence from his memory: he saw the reservoir that morning. Once Smith accepts that the water level is low, Jones can restate his explanation.

Some forms of explanation overlap with other kinds of nonargumentative passages. We are dealing right now with thinking in the real world, and as we mentioned above, the real world is full of messiness and ambiguity. One effect of this is that all the categories we are discussing will wind up overlapping. Narratives and expository passages, for instance, can also function as explanations. Consider this passage:

*From the sports section.* Duke beat Butler 61-59 for the national championship Monday night. Gordon Hayward’s half-court, 3-point heave for the win barely missed to leave tiny Butler one cruel basket short of the Hollywood ending.[[7]](#footnote-7)

On the one hand, this is clearly a narrative—retelling a sequence of events united by time, place, and character. But it also can work as an explanation about how Duke won, if the audience immediately accepts the result. “The last shot was a miss and then Duke won” can be understood as “The last shot was a miss and so Duke won.”

1. This chapter is based on *For All X, The Lorain County Remix*, remixed by J. Robert Loftis. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. King, Martin Luther. “Acceptance speech at Nobel Peace Prize ceremony.” *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Edited by Clayborne Carson. Grand Central Publishing, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Adapted from Ryckman, Richard. *Theories of personality*. Cengage Learning, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Scholastic Press, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McEvedy, Colin, and John Woodcock. *The Penguin Atlas of Ancient History*. Penguin Books, 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mauk, Ben. “Why is grass green?” Livescience.com, February 20, 2013. https://www.livescience.com/32496-why-is-grass-green.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Based on Associated Press. “Butler ends 2009-10 season as National Runner-Up.” April 6, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)