

WHAT ARE THE ISSUE AND THE CONCLUSION?

Before we evaluate someone's reasoning, we must first find it. Doing so sounds simple; it isn't. To get started as a critical thinker, you must practice the identification of the issue and the conclusion.

Cell phones are becoming a large part of today's society bringing with them benefits and drawbacks. They are beneficial for those with tight schedules and in case of emergencies. Cell phones can also come in handy for parents to check up on their children. Even though cell phones do carry benefits, the drawbacks are in their inappropriate use. When a cell phone rings or owners talk on them during a lecture or a concert, a major disruption in the concentration of others is inevitable. Even though there are suggestions in polite society to leave them off, perhaps we need stronger penalties associated with abuse of the growing population of cell phones.

The person who wrote this assessment of cell phones very much wants you to believe something. But what is that something and why are we supposed to believe any such thing? In general, those who create Web pages, editorials, books, magazine articles, or speeches are trying to change your perceptions or beliefs. For you to form a reasonable reaction to their persuasive effort, you must first identify the controversy or issue as well as the thesis or conclusion being pushed onto you. (Someone's conclusion is her intended message to you. Its purpose is to shape your beliefs and/or behavior.) Otherwise, you will be reacting to a distorted version of the attempted communication.

When we read or listen, it is so easy to ignore what was said in the previous paragraph. We often react to the images, dramatic illustrations, or tone of what was said instead of the reasoning that was intended by the person communicating with us. Each time we fail to react to the reasoning, human conversation has experienced a defeat. We are not connecting as the person who wrote or spoke to us intended. So, getting straight about the person's conclusion and issue is an essential first step in effective human interaction. When you have completed this reading, you should be able to answer the first of our critical questions successfully:

Critical Question: *What are the issue and the conclusion?*

Attention: An issue is a question or controversy responsible for the conversation or discussion. It is the stimulus for what is being said.

Kinds of Issues

It will be helpful at this point to identify two kinds of issues you will typically encounter. The following questions illustrate one of these:

Do families who own pets have fewer arguments with one another?

What causes high blood pressure?

Who made the decision to increase our sales taxes?

How much will college cost in the year 2015?

All these questions have one thing in common. They demand answers attempting to describe the way the world is, was, or is going to be. For example, answers to the first two questions might be, "In general, families with pets have fewer arguments with one another," and "Poor dietary habits cause high blood pressure." Such issues are descriptive issues. They are commonly found in textbooks, magazines, the Internet, and television. Such issues reflect our curiosity about patterns or order in the world. Note the boldfaced words that begin each question above; when questions begin with these words, they will probably be descriptive questions.

Attention: *Descriptive issues are those that raise questions about the accuracy of descriptions of the past, present, or future.*

Now let's look at examples of a second kind of question:

Should *capital punishment be abolished?*

What *ought to be done about social security?*

Must *we outlaw SUVs or face increasing rates of asthma?*

All of these questions demand answers suggesting the way the world ought to be. For example, answers to the first two questions might be, "Capital punishment should be abolished," and "We ought to increase social security benefits."

These issues are ethical, or moral, issues; they raise questions about what is right or wrong, desirable or undesirable, good or bad. They demand prescriptive answers. Thus, we will refer to these issues as prescriptive issues. Social controversies are often prescriptive issues.

We have somewhat oversimplified. Sometimes it will be difficult to decide what kind of issue is being discussed. It will be useful to keep these distinctions in mind, however, because the kinds of critical evaluations you eventually make will differ depending on the kind of issue to which you are responding.

Attention: *Prescriptive issues are those that raise questions about what we should do or what is right or wrong, good or bad.*

Searching for the Issue

How does one go about determining the basic question or issue? Sometimes it is very simple: The writer or speaker will tell you what it is. Alternatively, the issue may be identified in the body of the text, usually right at the beginning, or it may even be found in the title. When the issue is explicitly stated, it will be indicated by phrases such as the following:

The question I am raising is: Why must we have speed limits on our highways?

Lowering the legal drinking age: Is it the right thing to do?

Should sex education be taught in the schools?

Unfortunately, the question is not always explicitly stated and instead must be inferred from other clues in the communication. For example, many writers or speakers are reacting to some current event that concerns them, such as a series of violent acts in schools. Asking "What is the author reacting to?" will often suggest the central issue of a communication. Another good clue is knowledge of the author's background, such as organizations to which she belongs. So check for background information about the author as you try to determine the issue.

When you are identifying the issue, try to resist the idea that there is one and only one correct way to state the issue. Once you have found a question that the entire essay or speech is addressing, and you can show the link between that question and the essay or speech, you have found the issue. Just make certain that what you are calling an issue meets the definitional criteria for that idea.

The surest way to detect an issue when it is not explicitly stated, however, is to locate the conclusion. In many cases, the conclusion must be found before you can identify the issue. Thus, in such cases, the first step in critical evaluation is to find the conclusion—a frequently difficult step.

We cannot critically evaluate until we find the conclusion!

Searching for the Author's or Speaker's Conclusion

To identify the conclusion, the critical thinker must ask, "*What is the writer or speaker trying to prove?*" or "*What is the communicator's main point?*" The answer to either of these questions will be the conclusion. Any answer to the question provided by the speaker or writer will be the conclusion.

In searching for a conclusion, you will be looking for a statement or set of statements that the writer or speaker wants you to believe. She wants you to believe the conclusion on the basis of her other statements. In short, the basic structure of persuasive communication or argument is: This because of that. This refers to the conclusion; that refers to the support for the conclusion. This structure represents the process of inference.

Conclusions are inferred; they are derived from reasoning. Conclusions are ideas that require other ideas to support them. Thus, whenever someone claims something is true or ought to be done and provides no statements to support her claim, that claim is not a conclusion because no one has offered any basis for belief. In contrast, unsupported claims are what we refer to as mere opinions.

The last paragraph says a lot. It would be a good idea for you to read it again. Understanding the nature of a conclusion is an essential step toward critical reading and listening. Let's look closely at a conclusion and at the inference process. Here is a brief paragraph; see whether you can identify the conclusion, then the statements that support it.

Factory farming should not be legal. There are other more natural ways to produce needed food supply.

"Factory farming should not be legal." This is the author's answer to the question: should factory farming be legalized? It is her conclusion. The author supports this belief with another: "There are other more natural ways to produce needed food supply."

Do you see why the supporting belief is not a conclusion? It is not the conclusion because it is used to prove something else. Remember. To believe one statement (the conclusion) because you think it is well supported by other beliefs is to make an inference. When people engage in this process, they are reasoning; the conclusion is the outcome of this reasoning.

Sometimes, communicators will not make their conclusions explicit; in such cases you will have to infer the conclusion from what you believe the author is trying to prove by the set of ideas (s)he has presented.

USING THIS CRITICAL QUESTION

Once you have found the conclusion, use it as the focus of your evaluation. It is the destination that the writer or speaker wants you to choose. ***Your ongoing concern is: Should I accept that conclusion on the basis of what is supporting the claim?***