

GLOBAL  
EDITION



# Asking the Right Questions

*A Guide to Critical Thinking*

ELEVENTH EDITION

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

# **ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS**

### Passage 3

Freedom to use the Internet is under threat in many nations. Should it be this way? People can enhance their knowledge significantly by browsing on the Internet and searching for information on subjects ranging from science and technology to mythology. However, governments often try to regulate content on the Internet in a bid to check the dissemination of “objectionable” matter.

Once served a notice by the government to remove content, a service provider will usually take it down due to the fear of prosecution. Along with it, useful information may also be censored.

Such censorship not only hampers the freedom of service providers to provide access to the Internet but also adversely affects curious minds. Targeting the freedom of Internet service providers and blocking websites will weave a scary web of controls. Rather than impose institutionalized censorship on people, the government should allow them to choose what they want to access on the Internet. So, governments should not send take-down notices to Internet service providers.

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## Sample Responses

### Passage 1

ISSUE: *Do women’s magazines create unfair expectations of female beauty?*

CONCLUSION: *Yes, they do.*

REASONS: 1. The beauty that we see on the cover of a magazine is not realistic, but instead, computerized.

(SUPPORTING REASONS)

- a. The photos of women featured on the covers of magazines have been digitally enhanced by manipulating the lighting and measurements of the bodies of the women in the photo to look more attractive.*
- b. It is impossible for women to mimic some of the physical features represented on magazine covers because they are literally manufactured by computers.*

Recall that we are looking for the support system for the conclusion.

We ask ourselves: Why does this person claim that women’s magazines create unfair expectations of female beauty? The descriptive conclusion is justified by two reasons: an assertion that the photos of women are digitally enhanced on magazine covers by changing the woman’s body measurements, and an assertion that it is impossible for women to mimic these digitally enhanced features manufactured by computers. Indicator words for the supporting reason are “studies have shown.”

**Passage 2**

ISSUE: *Should we focus on increasing food production to help eliminate hunger?*

CONCLUSION: *No, increasing food production is not the best solution.*

REASONS: 1. Poverty and hunger are closely related.

(SUPPORTING REASONS)

*a. Wealth is the hands of a few, and the poorest are unable to purchase food.*

*b. Undernourished individuals have low work capacity and are unlikely to find good employment opportunities to improve their situation.*

*1. There is inequitable distribution of food.*

Why are we told that increasing food production will not be a good idea to help eliminate hunger? The answer to this question will be the author's reasons. The first reason is supported by references to research showing us the two-way relationship between poverty and hunger. Furthermore is the indicator word calling our attention to the second reason—of inequitable food distribution. Note that we paraphrased (or put into our own words) the reasons to some extent. You will find that longer and more complex a reason, the more useful paraphrasing will be to your accurately identifying the reasons.

# Recognizing Ambiguous Words and Phrases

Chapters 3 and 4 of this book help you identify the basic structural elements in any argument. At this point, if you can locate a writer's or speaker's conclusion and reasons, you are progressing rapidly toward the ultimate goal of forming your own rational decisions. Your next step is to put this structural picture into even clearer focus.

While identifying the conclusion and reasons gives you the basic visible structure, you still need to examine the precise *meaning* of these parts before you can react fairly to the ideas being presented. Now you need to pay special attention to the details of the language.

Identifying the precise meaning of key words or phrases is an essential step in deciding whether to agree with someone's opinion. If you fail to check for the meaning of crucial terms and phrases, you may react to an opinion the author never intended.

Let's see why knowing the meaning of a communicator's terms is so important.

Tourism is getting out of control. Tourism can be good for the economy, but it can also harm the locale and its residents. We need to do more to regulate tourism. If we keep allowing these people to do whatever they please, surely we as residents will suffer.

Notice that it is very hard to know what to think about this argument until we know more about the kinds of regulations that the writer has in mind. A quota for tourists? A set of rules about the behavior expected of tourists? We

just do not know what to think until we know more about these regulations the writer is suggesting.

This example illustrates an important point: You cannot react to an argument unless you understand the meanings (explicit or implied) of crucial terms and phrases. How these are interpreted will often affect the acceptability of the reasoning. Consequently, before you can determine the extent to which you wish to accept one conclusion or another, you must first attempt to discover the precise meaning of the conclusion and the reasons. While their meaning typically *appears* obvious, it often is not.

The discovery and clarification of meaning require conscious, step-by-step procedures. This chapter suggests one set of such procedures. It focuses on the following question:

 **Critical Question:** *What words or phrases are ambiguous?*

## THE CONFUSING FLEXIBILITY OF WORDS

Our language is highly complex. If each word had only one potential meaning about which we all agreed, effective communication would be more likely. However, most words have more than one meaning.

Consider the multiple meanings of such words as *freedom*, *obscenity*, and *fairness*. These multiple meanings can create serious problems in determining the worth of an argument. For example, when someone argues that a magazine should not be published because it is *obscene*, you cannot evaluate the argument until you know what the writer means by *obscene*. In this brief argument, it is easy to find the conclusion and the supporting reason, but the quality of the reasoning is difficult to judge because of the ambiguous use of *obscene*. A warning: *We often misunderstand what we read or hear because we presume that the meaning of words is obvious.*

Whenever you are reading or listening, force yourself to *search for ambiguity*; otherwise, you may simply miss the point. A term or phrase is ambiguous when its meaning is so uncertain in the context of the argument we are examining that we need further clarification before we can judge the adequacy of the reasoning.

When any of us is ambiguous, we have not necessarily done something either unfair or improper. In fact, many documents, like constitutions, are intentionally left ambiguous so that the document can evolve as different meanings of key terms, like “liberty” and “bear arms,” become practical necessities. Indeed, because we rely on words to get our points across when we communicate, there is no way to avoid ambiguity. But what can and should be avoided is ambiguity in an argument. When someone is trying to persuade us to believe or do something, that person has a responsibility to clarify any potential ambiguity before we consider the worth of the reasoning.

## LOCATING KEY TERMS AND PHRASES

The first step in determining which terms or phrases are ambiguous is to use the stated issue as a clue for possible key terms. Key terms or phrases will be those terms that may have more than one plausible meaning within the context of the issue; that is, terms that you know must be clarified before you can decide to agree or disagree with the communicator. To illustrate the potential benefit of checking the meaning of terminology in the stated issue, let's examine several issues:

1. Does a high income produce happiness?
2. Do reality shows create a misleading picture of how we live?
3. Is the incidence of rape in college residence halls increasing?



**Attention:** *Ambiguity refers to the existence of multiple possible meanings for a word or phrase.*

Each of these stated issues contains phrases that writers or speakers will have to make clear before you will be able to evaluate their response to the issue. Each of the following phrases is potentially ambiguous: “high income,” “happiness,” “misleading picture,” and “incidence of rape.” Thus, when you read an essay responding to these issues, you have to pay close attention to how the author has defined these terms.


The next step in determining which terms or phrases are ambiguous is to identify what words or phrases seem crucial in determining how well the author's reasons support her conclusion; that is, to identify the *key* terms in the reasoning structure. Once you locate these terms, you can determine whether their meaning is ambiguous.

When searching for key terms and phrases, you should keep in mind why you are looking. Someone wants you to accept a conclusion. Therefore, you are looking for only those terms or phrases that will affect whether you accept the conclusion. *So, look for them in the reasons and conclusion.* Terms and phrases that are not included in the basic reasoning structure can thus be “dumped from your pan.”


Another useful guide for searching for key terms and phrases is to keep in mind the following rule: The more abstract a word or phrase, the more likely it is to be susceptible to multiple interpretations.

To avoid being unclear in our use of the term *abstract*, we define it here in the following way: A term becomes more and more abstract as it refers less and less to particular, specific instances. Thus, the words *equality*, *responsibility*, *pornography*, and *aggression* are much more abstract than are the phrases “having equal access to necessities of life,” “directly causing an event,” “pictures of male and female genitals,” and “doing deliberate physical harm to







Review the issue for possible key terms



Look for crucial words or phrases within the reasons and conclusion



Keep an eye out for abstract words and phrases



Use reverse role-playing to determine how someone might define certain words and phrases differently

### Summary of Clues for Locating Key Terms

another person.” These phrases provide a much more concrete picture and are therefore less ambiguous.

You can also locate potential important ambiguous phrases by *reverse role-playing*. Ask yourself, if you were to *adopt a position contrary to the author’s*, would you choose to define certain terms or phrases differently? If so, you have identified a possible ambiguity. For example, someone who sees dog shows as desirable is likely to define “cruelty to animals” quite differently from someone who sees them as undesirable.

## CHECKING FOR AMBIGUITY

You now know where to look for ambiguous terms or phrases. The next step is to focus on each term or phrase and ask yourself, “Do I understand its meaning?” To answer this very important question, you will need to overcome several major obstacles.

One obstacle is assuming that you and the author mean the same thing. Thus, you need to begin your search by avoiding mind reading. You need to get into the habit of asking, “What do you mean by that?” instead of, “I know just what you mean.” A second obstacle is assuming that terms have a single, obvious definition. Many terms do not. Thus, always ask, “Could any of the words or phrases have a different meaning?”

You can be certain you have identified an especially important unclear term by performing the following test. If you can express two or more alternative meanings for a term, each of which makes sense in the context of the argument, and if the extent to which a reason would support a conclusion is affected by which meaning is assumed, then you have located a significant ambiguity. Thus, a good test for determining whether you have identified an important ambiguity is to *substitute* the alternative meanings into the