

ANG 6587 Biological Anthropology Seminar (M-course)

PRÉCIS PAPER M2: What Is the Argument?

PURPOSE:

This week's précis paper will focus on learning how to identify and evaluate the argument of an academic paper in a discipline-specific manner for an audience of your peers. You will also peer review at least one other student's précis. After your paper has been peer reviewed, you have three days to revise your précis and resubmit based on the comments received.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Identify and restate key points from the assigned reading using discipline-specific writing style
- Recognize the premise(s) of an argument and evaluate how well the argument is formed and supported
- Discuss how a poorly formed argument can be restructured and/or reorganized into a effective argument
- Defend criteria used to assess your own work and the work of others (i.e., peer review)

What Is the argument?

In critical reading of any academic research, a core strategy for evaluating a claim is to determine whether it is the end result (i.e., the conclusion) of an argument. If the claim is not set in an argument or the argument does not support the claim, then we as readers should not accept the claim. If the claim is set in an argument and the argument provides convincing reasons for accepting the claim, then we have grounds for accepting it.

In the critical reading of academic literature in biological anthropology, the study of arguments involves three basic questions:

- How do we know there is an argument in what we are reading?
- Why is it necessary to evaluate arguments?
- How do we evaluate arguments?

Is there an argument?

An **argument** consists of one or more statements that are used to provide support for a conclusion. The visible statements that provide the support for a conclusion are called the **premises** of the argument. The premises are presented in order to persuade us that their conclusion is true or probably true. For this reason, they are commonly known as the "Why should I believe it?" part of the argument. Here's an example:

[P] Since the long bones of the human body fuse with the epiphyses in a fairly common chronological pattern, [C] the timing of bone fusion can be used as an indicator of relative skeletal age.

"Since" is a premise [P], and the last part of the sentence is a conclusion [C]. Since the conclusion is supported by at least one premise (i.e., a reason why we should believe it), the sentence contains an argument.

Although not exhaustive, you might find the following hints useful in identifying the presence, or absence, of an argument.

- If what you are reading does not contain at least one conclusion and one premise, there is no argument.

- Conclusions and premises may be scattered throughout the text, making them difficult to recognize. Find the words that identify their presence: "since", "whereas", "seeing that", "the reasons are", "given that", "as indicated by", "consequently", "thus", "shows that", etc.
- Authors may leave out parts of an argument, assuming that the premise is part of the background knowledge that the reader should already possess or that it is implicit in understanding. (e.g., Molars are teeth. [P] Teeth are the only bones directly exposed to the environment, so [C] molars are exposed to the environment.)
- Statements may serve as both premises and conclusions in works that include more than one argument.

Why is it necessary to evaluate arguments?

Not all arguments you encounter in your readings will be good ones. An important part of critical reading is ferreting out the poor arguments from the good, well-supported ones. This is not always an easy or straightforward task. In some articles, there is no argument; there are only statements of fact or past history. In other works, the argument may be incomplete, or the premises are not stated, but implied. You may even find that the conclusion is not explicitly mentioned. There are many examples of an argument being deliberately disguised and 'slippery' so that it appears there is no conclusion, when there really is. In these cases, the authors are hoping that we will unconsciously accept their conclusions.

Is the argument poorly formulated?

Does the evidence provided support the argument and conclusions? This might not be entirely clear at first, but you should understand whether the author is overstating the argument given the sample size, research design, etc. It is your job to figure out whether arguments are sound and well supported. Things to look for in evaluating the argument:

- A **self-contradictory argument** is an argument in which one or more premises contradict the conclusion or each other.
- If either the premises offered in support of an argument or the conclusion of the argument itself are false, the argument is considered **inconsistent with objective fact**.
- A **non sequitur argument** occurs when the premises given in support of the argument may be simply false, while in others they may be true but unacceptable because the conclusion does not follow from them (i.e., the premises are unconnected to the conclusion).
- If there are **exceptions to a generalization**, then the generalization is false.

Did you evaluate the argument fairly?

In most instances when we read an article as students, we are more intent on learning about something than scoring debate points against the author. The following principles are frequently used in 'codes of conduct' for evaluating rational discussion oriented toward critical readers:

- **Fallibility:** There is the assumption that not all positions on a disputed issue can be true. If there are alternative positions, some must be false.
- **Truth-seeking:** You should be committed to seeking the truth or at least the best available answer to an issue at the time of writing.
- **Charity:** The presentation of arguments should be free of linguistic confusion and not overly intertwined with other positions or issues; it should be stated as clearly as possible.

- **Burden of proof:** The burden of proof rests with the author of the piece you are reading. It is not your fault if you still fail to make sense of the argument after a fair-minded attempt to reformulate it.
- **Resolution:** If an argument is both valid and sound, then, according to the concept of resolution, you as the reader should consider the issue settled – at least for the moment. A good argument reviews alternate positions and shows why they should be dismissed or at least why they are weaker than the one being advanced by the author.
- **Suspension of judgment:** Suspend judgment on the issue (or at least this author's take on the issue) if the claim is not successfully supported.
- **Reconsideration:** Be willing to reconsider a claim if what appeared to be a good argument is found to be flawed (e.g., a critical unstated assumption has later been shown to lack merit). We should always be open to the reconsideration of issues whenever doubts about previously accepted resolutions to an issue have been raised.

Adapted from: Gibbon, G. (2014) *Critically Reading the Theory and Methods of Archaeology*. Lanham, AltaMira Press.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Using the guidelines provided in the '[Understanding Précis Papers](#)' page, you are expected to **write a two-page précis** based on one of the readings assigned for this week and the focal point of critique presented above. This work will be peer reviewed, so please be sure that you are on time with your submission to be included in the process.

NOTE: Please include the citation for the paper you have selected at the top of your first page (single-spaced).

FORMAT & SUBMISSION:

The précis paper is due no later than **03:00pm** on **JAN 19, 2015**. Submit your work using the link on this page. Check over your work one last time before submitting. You do not need to add your name to the comments area, as the document is already identified as yours through your submission.

Please remember, your work must be submitted as either a **.doc or .docx file** using standard formatting requirements (e.g., one-inch margins, 12-point font, double-spaced text, etc.). Google Docs **does not** meet this requirement – the format is not compatible with the Turn-It-In plagiarism check system, nor is it compatible with the Canvas peer review and grading system.

PEER REVIEW PROCESS:

Once you have submitted the assignment, your work will be randomly routed to another student in the class to start the peer review process. Using the guidelines provided in the '[Peer Review Process](#)' page, you are expected to complete a peer review of the work submitted by one of your colleagues. This process is completely open and transparent.

Upon the closing date for the paper submission, you will receive a notice reminding you to follow through with the peer review that you have been assigned. The **peer reviews** for MODULE 2 papers are due by **11:59pm** on **JAN 23, 2015**.

REVISE AND RESUBMIT PROCESS:

Once you have received comments back from your peer review, you have three days to revise your précis and resubmit by **11:59pm** on **JAN 26, 2015** for further comments and grading.

For questions concerning make-up or late submissions, please review your syllabus ***prior*** to contacting your professor. If you have any questions or concerns about the assignment, please use Canvas Inbox for a more timely response.