Critical Reasoning: the role of a statement

A role question does not ask whether a statement is true; it asks what job. . .

Lesson grev.cr.A5

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The idea

A role question does not ask whether a statement is true; it asks what job the statement does inside the argument. First locate the author's own main conclusion — the single claim everything else is arranged to support — by asking which sentence the others answer 'why?' for.

What is the author's main conclusion, and how does the marked statement stand in relation to it — is it that conclusion, support for it, a step toward it, or a view the author opposes?

Find the main conclusion first by testing which claim the others explain. Then ask of the marked statement: does the argument support it, does it support the conclusion, or does the author reject it?

Watch every step

Commuters who switch to the new express train save roughly forty minutes a day. Time saved on the commute is time returned to family and rest, both of which improve workers' health and productivity. The city should therefore expand express service to more neighborhoods.

In the argument above, the statement that 'Commuters who switch to the new express train save roughly forty minutes a day' plays which of the following roles?

A. It is an objection to the recommendation that the author ultimately concedes. ✗ *sides-reversed*

B. It is a restatement, in numerical form, of the argument's final recommendation. ✗ *content-not-function*

✓ **C.** It is evidence offered in support of the argument's recommendation.

D. It is the main conclusion the argument reaches. ✗ *premise-conclusion-confusion*

E. It is an intermediate conclusion inferred from an earlier premise. ✗ *main-vs-intermediate*

Why C — "It is evidence offered in support of the argument's. . . ." Choose the option that names that function, not the option that merely repeats the statement's content.

Now a harder one

When the agency trialed a four-day week, its staff reported less burnout and took fewer sick days, while clients noticed no drop in service. The shorter week also made the agency's job postings far more competitive with those of its rivals. On this evidence, the agency should make the four-day schedule permanent.

In the argument above, the statement that 'the agency should make the four-day schedule permanent' plays which of the following roles?

A. It is an intermediate conclusion that in turn supports a further conclusion. ✗ *main-vs-intermediate*

B. It is the main conclusion that the rest of the argument is offered to support.

C. It is a proposal the author raises only in order to reject it. ✗ *sides-reversed*

D. It is a summary of the trial's results offered as background. ✗ *content-not-function*

E. It is a premise offered in support of another claim. ✗ *premise-conclusion-confusion*

Why B — "It is the main conclusion that the rest of the argument is. . . ." Choose the option that names that function, not the option that merely repeats the statement's content.

The method, in one line

Critical Reasoning: the role of a statement

Find the main conclusion first by testing which claim the others explain. Then ask of the marked statement: does the argument support it, does it support the conclusion, or does the author reject it?

Have I kept the direction of support right? Have I put the author on the correct side? Is this the main conclusion or only a step toward it?

Watch out: two traps to dodge

premise-conclusion-confusion
Reverses the direction of support — labels the main conclusion a premise, or labels a supporting premise the conclusion.

main-vs-intermediate
Confuses an intermediate (subsidiary) conclusion with the main conclusion, or vice versa.

Name the trap before you pick — most wrong answers are one of these two.

Try it, then watch the walk-through

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