

Critical Thinking Skills Tutorial:

Hidden Assumptions

Writing Center

English 800 Center

**YOU DO NOT NEED TO
PRINT THIS TUTORIAL!**

**All notes and exercises should be
done on separate sheets of paper, which
you will bring to an Instructional Aide
in the Writing Center.**

**As you work through the tutorial, make
sure to see an instructor in the
Writing Center or English 800 Center
if you have any questions or difficulties.**

Hidden Assumptions

Often, we make arguments that are incomplete. We don't state all our premises aloud; one of them is implied by the others.

Incomplete arguments are easy to spot when the speaker is making strange connections. Suppose someone said something like this to you (main points are in red, and supporting reasons are in blue):

- No one should eat cheese today because **it's Friday**.
- Joanne's a lawyer, so **she makes wonderful cookies**.
- **You can't enroll in this class** because you're tall.
- Richard never gets to work on time, so **he must be artistic**.

You can imagine your response to any of these statements: "What are you saying, that people can't eat cheese on Fridays? Lawyers make great cookies? Tall people can't take this class? Artistic people aren't punctual? What on earth are you talking about?"

You would be right. That is indeed what the speakers are saying. But they're not saying it aloud. None of the points you raised above (people can't eat cheese on Fridays, lawyers make great cookies etc.) are said aloud in the original arguments. But they are implied.

When we imply something, we don't say it aloud. But if what we say is true, the implication must be true as well.

Implications are harder to spot when the connections are more obvious. Look at the following argument:

Capital punishment is immoral, because innocent people might end up getting killed by the death penalty.

Even if you don't agree, the reasoning sounds complete. But a step is missing, one that is a necessary part of the argument. To take us from the premise to the conclusion, what extra premise does this argument necessarily imply about things that might kill innocent people?

- The death penalty might kill innocent people.
- Anything that kills innocent people is immoral.
- Therefore, the death penalty is immoral.

The speaker omitted the second premise because, in his view, it was obvious. But it's not. Think of how disagreements like this usually run:

You: The death penalty is horrible--innocent people can get killed!

Friend: Oh yeah? So I guess we shouldn't get inoculations for babies either, because that kills some innocent people too.

You: Oh that's totally different. Inoculation kills babies by mistake.
Friend: Executing an innocent person is a mistake too.
You: Oh shut up and get me a cheeseburger.

Here, two people manage to have an argument without ever quite saying aloud what they don't agree about, nor quite understanding what they are saying. If they spelled out their arguments and didn't hide their assumptions, the conversation might look like this:

You: The death penalty is horrible, because innocent people might get killed. It's true that sometimes the loss of innocent life is acceptable when a greater good is obtained, as with inoculations or traffic for instance, but in the case of the death penalty, the "good" it creates isn't worth the potential loss of innocent life.
Friend: How deep you are. Let me buy you a cheeseburger.

Arguments rarely happen like this, because we rarely examine all our assumptions and complete our arguments. In fact, we often only learn our assumptions by arguing with others who challenge them.

The more we can unearth and examine our hidden assumptions, the stronger our arguments become.

Hidden Assumptions: What we leave unsaid

Not every unspoken remark counts as a hidden assumption. Hidden assumptions are statements that are implied by your argument--statements that you need to get from A to Z. For instance, look at the statement:

Joanne's a lawyer, so **she makes wonderful cookies**.

The speaker doesn't tell us what kind of cookies Joanne makes, nor what is so wonderful about them. But that's not a hidden assumption. We don't need to draw conclusions about the kinds of cookies she makes; in fact, we can't--we have no information about this one way or the other. However, when the speaker claims that Joanne's profession is the reason she makes wonderful cookies, she has implied something. She has implied a connection between being a lawyer, and cookie skills. In fact, she has implied a causal connection: that being a lawyer causes a person to be a good cookie-baker. This cannot be true unless we accept a generalization about lawyers: that all of them are good cookie-bakers.

IN YOUR NOTES: Write down answers to the following questions (keep these to submit with exit quiz):

1. What exactly is a hidden assumption?
2. What do hidden assumptions usually look like?
3. What is the difference between a hidden assumption, and information or details left out of an argument?

What Hidden Assumptions Look Like

Almost always, the unspoken statement is some kind of generalization that is implied, but that we don't really examine.

- Capital punishment could kill innocent people, so it's immoral.
[What is the generalization about activities that could kill innocent people?]
- Frank's an actor, so don't believe a word he says.
[What is the generalization about actors?]
- His brother is a musician, so obviously he has no money.
[What is the generalization about musicians?]
- Catholic bishops recently published a statement that homosexuality was not a sin, because people do not choose to be homosexual.
[What is the generalization about sin?]

Think of the argument this way:

In each case, a speaker identifies something in relation to a group: Capital punishment is part of the innocent-killing group, Frank's in the actor group, his brother's in the musician group; homosexuality, on the other hand, *is not* in the group of "chosen" activities.

Having identified these things in relation to a group, the speaker concludes that they must have certain qualities. Frank must be a liar, his brother must be poor, and capital punishment must be immoral, because of the groups they belong to; on the other hand, because of the group that it doesn't belong to, homosexuality *can't* be a sin.

But this conclusion can only make sense if we accept that the whole group does have that quality. That's the unspoken premise: a generalization about a group of people or things.

Look again at the imaginary fight over the death penalty:

You: The death penalty is horrible--innocent people can get killed!

Friend: Oh yeah? So I guess we shouldn't get inoculations for babies either, because that kills some innocent people too.

Instinctively, the "friend" has understood what "you" left unsaid: that **anything** that kills innocent people must be immoral. And he has challenged it--quite effectively, since many activities that we accept and approve of cause death to the innocent (driving, inoculations, eating bacon, surfing).

Here are some more incomplete arguments, with hidden assumptions supplied below the text. See if you can spot a logical pattern. What do the missing statements sound like, and how are they implied by the arguments?

Remember too that these are statements that "go without saying." Yet when you see them explicitly stated, do they really go without saying, or do they require some justification? Think about it.

- Dogs are annoying because they need lots of attention.
Anything that needs lots of attention is annoying.
- Juanita has a college degree, so she must make a lot of money.
Everyone with a college degree makes a lot of money.
- Getting an English degree is a waste of an education because you'll never get rich from it.
Any education that doesn't make you rich is a waste of time.
- This building is in bad condition, and therefore the rent should be lowered.
Any building in bad condition loses value.
- Drugs should remain illegal because they injure your health.
Anything that injures your health should be illegal.
- Boxing causes injury, so this is not a sport we should encourage.
No sport that causes injury should be encouraged.
- The defendant should not be sent to prison for stealing because she's a good person at heart.
Good people shouldn't go to prison for their actions.
- Brad lives in California, so he must spend his weekends surfing.
All Californians spend their weekends surfing.
- No one should have to pay for art because art makes people feel good.
No one should have to pay for anything that makes him or her feel good.
- Bob is an athlete, so he has plenty of self-discipline.
Athletes have plenty of self-discipline.

Choose seven of the previous ten examples (number these as responses to questions 4-10). Look at the hidden generalization: does it really "go without saying?"

(a) Explain why you don't necessarily accept this generalization.

(b) If you can think of a specific exception, write it down.

Example: Bob is an athlete, so he has plenty of self-discipline.
Athletes have plenty of self-discipline.

Response: (a) Not necessarily. It depends on what you mean by "self-discipline." A lot of athletes are great about staying in shape, but they aren't disciplined with their money.
(b) My cousin Toni--he's a running back for his high school but parties much too hard.

Exercise 1

Instructions: What is the hidden assumption behind these arguments? Write down one answer, and check the answer key.

1. You should be able to laugh aloud whenever you want to, wherever you are, because it's good for your mind and body.
 - A. Laughter helps you relax.
 - B. You should be able to do anything that is good for your mind and body whenever you want to, wherever you are.
 - C. You are laughing and can't stop.
2. Tom would never hurt anyone's feelings because he's very sensitive himself.
 - A. Sensitive people never hurt anyone's feelings.
 - B. Tom is very easily hurt.
 - C. Tom has been accused of hurting someone's feelings.
3. Cats don't lay eggs because they're mammals.
 - A. Cats have viviparous young.
 - B. Mammals don't lay eggs.
 - C. Cats are mammals.

4. The accused killer had been brought up as a devout Christian, so the community was very surprised when he turned out to be a violent psychopath.
 - A. The accused killer was a violent psychopath.
 - B. People brought up as Christians can't be psychopaths.
 - C. The accused had committed a violent crime.

5. Because he played and sang Irish music so beautifully, Torvald astonished his fans when he revealed that he was actually Norwegian.
 - A. Norwegians are bad musicians.
 - B. Torvald had kept his identity secret.
 - C. Only the Irish can play Irish music.

6. John is an attorney, so all he cares about is money.
 - A. John is like all attorneys.
 - B. Attorneys only care about money.
 - C. If he wasn't an attorney, he wouldn't care about money.

7. Rock music is definitely a part of today's society, so it must be basically a good thing.
 - A. Anything that is part of today's society is basically a good thing.
 - B. Rock music must be part of today's society.
 - C. Rock music must be a good thing.

8. The animal rights activist who beat up the butcher shouldn't go to prison because he is really sincere about what he's doing.
 - A. The animal rights activist was sincere about beating up the butcher.
 - B. Animal rights activism is not a crime.
 - C. People who are sincere about their "crimes" should be excused from punishment.

9. Schools can't stop Sikh students from wearing small swords in their turbans, despite the "No Weapons" policy, because it's part of Sikh religion to do so.
 - A. Turbans are religious artifacts for Sikhs.
 - B. Schools can't stop students from doing things that their religion tells them to do.
 - C. Schools should not have a "No Weapons" policy.

10. "Cow-Abunga" yoghurts must be good for you since they're made with 100% natural and organic ingredients!
 - A. Anything natural and organic is good for you.
 - B. "Cow-abunga" yoghurts are made with 100% natural and organic ingredients.
 - C. Yoghurts are good for you.

Answer Key

1. **A: No.** This is said aloud, more or less, when the speaker asserts that laughter is good for the mind and body.
B: Yes. The reason why it is OK to laugh in public, according to this speaker, is specifically because laughter is one of those things that makes you feel good. This necessarily implies that *everything* that makes you feel good should be permitted anywhere, anytime. This might include crying, yelling, being sick, or any number of very private activities!
C: No. This is background information, perhaps, to the statement. But it is not necessarily implied. It doesn't help us connect the kind of thing (something that is good for you) with its quality (being able to do it anywhere, anytime). The hidden assumption, however, *does* make this connection.

2. **A: Yes.** This is one of those unexamined assumptions the, when you look at it, is not all that convincing. The implication is that sensitive people never hurt others, and indeed, that suggests that to be "sensitive" to one's own feelings necessarily means that you care about other peoples'. Unfortunately, this is not the case. People who are very keen to protect their own feelings may not care one bit about yours.
B: No. He may be easily hurt, but that is what "sensitive" means, and we are told directly that he is very sensitive. What we are not told, however, is the connection between his sensitivity and his reluctance to hurt the feelings of others.
C: No. This is background information, perhaps. Tom may or may not have been accused of hurting someone's feelings, and this may or may not be the reason why the speaker makes this statement. But it is not part of the logical structure of the remark.

3. **A: No.** This is suggested by the statement that they do not lay eggs ("viviparous" means to give birth to live young), but it is not embedded in the logic.
B: Yes. The statement clearly implies, without directly stating it, that being a mammal means you do not lay eggs.
C: No. The speaker tells us they are mammals in the second part of the sentence.

4. **A: No.** We are told explicitly that he is a violent psychopath; it is not implied.
B: Yes. Implied here is the notion that because someone has been brought up as a devout Christian, that person is less likely to suffer from the specific personality disorder of psychopathology. In fact, there is nothing to suggest that a Christian upbringing can prevent a person from mental defects such as a psychopathic personality. Indeed, there is nothing to suggest that a Christian upbringing is necessarily gentler, kinder or more likely to promote a non-violent individual than any other kind of upbringing.
C: No. This may be background to the statement, but it's not a hidden generalization or connection. What does the statement imply about a Christian upbringing?

5. **A: No.** There is nothing here to suggest that Norwegians are bad musicians, necessarily.
B: No. This background information is suggested by the statement, but not necessarily implied. Perhaps no one had bothered to ask where he was from! You need to look at the statement implied here.

- C: Yes.** The implication is that only Irish people can really play their own music. This in turn could imply that music can only ever be played well by people brought up in that culture — which is clearly untrue, since we see Hungarians playing German music, Israelis playing Spanish music, New Yorkers playing Nigerian music, etc. etc.
6. **A: No.** This is another way of phrasing the arguments. If you can conclude something about John’s character because he is an attorney, then he *must* be like all attorneys — but in what particular way? That’s the generalization you need.
B: Yes. Unless you assume that all attorneys are money-grubbing, the connection between John, money and the law makes no sense.
C: No. Even if the argument were logical, many other groups care about money, like bank managers or yoga instructors or actors. Another statement is implied here which is essential to link John’s occupation to his money-grubbing.
7. **A: Yes.** You can see where the speaker is going here: he means that the musical tastes of so many people should not be dismissed out of hand. But he does not actually say this. Instead, he makes a sort of disheveled version of this idea; and the result is that he implies that anything that exists today must be good. Does this make sense to you? Lots of things are part of today’s world — poverty, racism, crime, reruns of “Friends” — that we would be lots happier without!
B: No. This just rephrases the opening premise, that rock music is part of today’s society.
C: No. This just rephrases the conclusion: the speaker says that it must be a good thing. But why?
8. **A: No.** That premise is stated aloud; he is sincere about what he is doing (including, presumably, butcher-beating).
B: No. You are almost there. More important, though, is *why* this activism is not a crime — or rather, why this speaker implies that it should not be a crime. Suppose the animal rights activist had *not* been sincere about his cause, but had merely joined to impress his girlfriend. He would not get the same lenient treatment, according to this argument. It is the activist’s *sincerity*, not the specific cause, that gets him exonerated. So what does this tell you about sincerity?
C: Yes. It is precisely the person’s *sincerity* that should excuse him from a jail sentence, according to this speaker. This means that any activity, sincerely undertaken, should not result in prison. What do you think of this generalization now that it is spoken aloud? Would you use it to defend, for instance, Timothy McVeigh, who murdered 168 people in Oklahoma City? He was very sincere. So was the Unabomber. If this is what the speaker means, he needs to do a lot more explaining!
9. **A: No.** This rephrases the premise that wearing certain artifacts is part of Sikh religion.
B: Yes. Good! You have an example of a specific student activity (carrying small swords to school) and you decide that it cannot be prevented, because of the *kind* of activity it is (religious-inspired). The speaker clearly implies that *any* religious practice activity must thus be permitted in school. Like so many generalizations, once you get this out into the open, you can see that it needs a lot more explaining. The Constitution *does not* defend

any and all religious practices. Rastafarian religion, for instance, mandate the smoking of marijuana, but you just tr explaining that to your homeroom teacher.

C: No. Maybe they should and maybe they should not, but that is not the discussion here. You need to connect the sword-wearing to religion.

10. **A: Yes.** And like so many hidden generalizations, this one crumbles when you drag it into the light. Think of all the organic, natural things that are *not* good for you: botulism, the bubonic plague, toadstools, leopards.

B: No. This just restates one of the given premises; it is not implied.

C: No. This rephrases, in more general terms, the conclusion that Cowabunga yoghurts are good for you. But the real question is, *why* are they good for you? The speaker answers by telling you what kind of yoghurt they are. So what does that tell us about the kind of yoghurt?

You are now ready to take the exit quiz.

- You can get a printed version of the quiz at the Writing Center, OR
- You can print out the quiz at the end of this tutorial, and complete it at home.

YOUR NAME: _____ **Date:** _____
G# _____ **Course#** _____ **Instructor** _____

HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS: Exit Quiz -- Directions

- Print this page, and your notes from the tutorial if you have kept them online. (If not, make sure you have your notes with you.) Complete this quiz on paper.
- Take the completed quiz and your notes with answers to all questions to the Writing Center to be checked. NO appointment is needed for this. However, if you do not pass the quiz you must make a conference appointment for feedback and credit.
- **REMEMBER:**
 - However well you do on the quiz, the instructional aide cannot give you credit unless he or she can clearly see that you have responded to all questions.

What is the hidden assumption in each argument? Write it down as a complete statement. (The first is done for you as an example.)

1. Echinacea is good for you because it's organic.

Assumption: *Anything organic is good for you.*

2. Candy, however, is bad for you because it's full of chemicals.

Assumption: _____

3. Carmen was an artist, so she never understood ordinary things like money and responsibility.

Assumption: _____

4. The new movie must be terrific if it's got Sean Penn in it.

Assumption: _____

5. Mark is thin as a rail, so he must be very careful about what he eats.

Assumption: _____

6. My friend Tomika laughs a lot; she must be very funny.

Assumption: _____

7. It was surprising to learn that the man who'd committed this terrible murder was a great animal lover, and had spent several days earlier in the month trying to house a stray that he'd rescued.

Assumption: _____

8. The state should not interfere with a woman's right to control her pregnancy, since this is a private matter.

Assumption: _____

9. The arts should definitely receive federal funding because they enrich the lives of all Americans.

Assumption: _____

10. Marcia refused to eat cake because she wouldn't touch fattening foods.

Assumption: _____

11. No one expected Kyle to get good grades in science because he was a football player.

Assumption: _____

12. Since Bob was a medical doctor, we were very surprised to find out that he smoked 40 cigarettes a day.

Assumption: _____

13. Catholic doctrine takes the position that being gay is not sinful, since sexual orientation is not something that we choose: we're born with it.

Assumption: _____

14. Stephen King can't be considered a really great writer because his books are very popular.

Assumption: _____

15. Because of its scenes of violence, the movie was condemned by critics as "trash" and "junk."

Assumption: _____

TO BE COMPLETED BY THE INSTRUCTIONAL AIDE:

_____ (initials) _____ (date)

1. Tutorial questions are COMPLETE / INCOMPLETE (____/10 questions)

2. Score on exit quiz: ____/15

3. Conference with instructor required for credit? YES / NO

ATTENTION!

STOP!

Now that you are at the end of this tutorial and have taken the Exit Quiz, please bring it, with your tutorial notes and exercise answers, to the Writing Center in 18-104 or the English 800 Center in 18-102 and ask the Instructional Aide to correct your quiz.

If you pass the quiz, the Instructional Aide will give you credit for this tutorial.

If you did not pass the quiz, you will need to make an appointment with a lab instructor. During this appointment, you will review your incorrect answers and ask any questions you may have about this tutorial. You will receive credit for the tutorial after this appointment.

Remember that you may go to the Writing Center or English 800 Center at any time in this process to ask questions and seek help.