

Critical Thinking Skills Tutorial

Hidden Assumptions

This Tutorial includes two files:

- **Lesson (36a_Hidden_Assumptions_Lesson)**

In order to learn the material presented in this tutorial more effectively, we have created a “notes” section in the exercises file. Take notes for this tutorial by answering the questions listed in the exercises file.

- **Exercises (36b_Hidden_Assumptions_Exercises** – located in the same area as the lesson)

- It has highlighted areas for you to take notes and answer the exercises using an application such as Adobe Acrobat Reader.
- Download and save this file as your own; you will share it with an instructor after you complete the lesson and exercises.

Please contact the Writing Center with any questions or difficulties:

csmtwc@smccd.edu or 650-574-6436.

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.

Please open your Hidden Assumptions exercises file and complete notes 1 through 3.

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.

Please open your Hidden Assumptions exercises file and complete notes 4 through 10.

Please open your Hidden Assumptions exercises file and complete exercise 1.

Final Activity

Instructions:

1. Now that you have completed the lesson, notes and exercises for this tutorial, please share your tutorial notes and exercise answers with the Writing Center, either by emailing them to csmtwc@smccd.edu or by stopping by room 18- 104.
2. The Instructional Aide will review your notes and exercises and give you the Exit Quiz. If you pass the quiz, the Instructional Aide will give you credit for this tutorial. If you do not pass the quiz, you will need to make an appointment to meet with a Writing Center Instructor. To make this appointment, sign up using the same method you use to make essay conference appointments. Be sure to include a comment or note that you are meeting about a tutorial.
3. During this appointment, the instructor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your notes, answers to the exercises, and quiz. The instructor will then give you credit for completing this tutorial.