Understanding and Evaluating Arguments

An argument consists of a conclusion – the claim that the person is arguing for – and the premises – the reasons or evidence that they offer in support of the conclusion.

For example:

Every officer on the force has been certified, and nobody can be certified without scoring about 70 percent on the firing range. Therefore, every officer on the force must have scored about 70 percent on the firing range.

**Premise 1:** Every officer on the force has been certified.

**Premise 2:** Nobody can be certified without scoring about 70 percent on the firing range.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, every officer on the force must have scored about 70 percent on the firing range.

Mr. Conners, the gentleman who lives on the corner, comes down this street on his morning walk every day, rain or shine. So something must have happened to him because he has not shown up today.

**Premise 1:** Mr Conners comes down this street on his morning walk every day, rain or shine.

**Premise 2:** He has not shown up today.

**Conclusion:** Something must have happened to him.

**Notice that sometimes the conclusion of one argument can serve as the premise of another.**

Every student who made 90 percent or better on the midterms has already been assigned a grade of A. Since Margaret made 94 percent on her midterms, she already has her A.
All those students who have been assigned A’s are excused from the final exam, Margaret got an A, so she is excused from her final exam.

**Notice also that arguments can have unstated premises:**

You can’t check books out of the library without an ID card. So Bill won’t be able to check any books out.

**Unstated premise?** Bill has no ID card.

**Arguments can have unstated conclusions as well.**

The political party that best reflects mainstream opinion will win the most seats in the next election, and the Republicans certainly best reflect mainstream opinion.

**Unstated Conclusion:** The Republicans will win the most seats in the next election.

List the premises and the conclusion in each of the following arguments.

1. Since cheese is so tasty, we ought to put it on top of our fried eggs. This is especially true given that Gabe likes cheese.

2. All your friends think you look better as a blonde. Green hair is unnatural. People with strangely colored hair attract trouble. Therefore, you should get rid of that ghastly green hair!