A Short Guide to Paraphrasing, Schematizing & Evaluating Arguments

General Purpose:
To clarify the argument, highlighting the structure and relationship of the premises & conclusion thus eliminating distractions so that the essential elements can be fairly and critically evaluated.

I. Paraphrasing & Schematizing
Evaluating an argument begins with **Paraphrasing:** Paraphrasing is restating the argument in prose form, using simpler language, true to your own voice, that is consistent with the author’s intent, but is shorter than the original argument.

**Schematizing** an argument is to lay out the premises and conclusion in a standardized form. It is *not* the same as an outline (though it can serve a similar purpose) since in one’s schematization the premises and conclusion may not be in the same order as the argument being evaluated, many points in the essay will be eliminated in the schematization as irrelevant to the argument and one may need to make implicit points explicit. In outlines one follows the order of the text; in schematizations, one presents the logical flow of ideas leading to a conclusion. Further, in outlines, one need only list the topics of each section: In schematizations, *each premise must contain a complete thought: each must assert something to be evaluated for acceptability or relevance.*

**Criteria of a Good Schematization:**
1. all major premises are identified
2. conclusion is identified
3. missing premises and/or conclusion are provided where logically justified & consistent with author’s intent
4. all premises and conclusion contain a complete thought (subject – object – verb)
5. premises are arranged in logical order with sub-arguments identified
6. language in argument is simplified & shortened – eliminating purely rhetorical passages & non-arguments
7. Principle of Charity in evidence.¹

¹ This means making the argument as reasonable and plausible as possible, always giving the author the benefit of the doubt. It is the opposite of the “Straw Man” fallacy.” It is often referred to as the first rule of reasoning and applies to both schematizing and paraphrasing. Invoking the principle of charity means that one gives the strongest, most charitable interpretation of an argument with the proviso that it must remain consistent with the author’s intent. This may include the provision of missing, implicit premises or conclusions. The general idea is to avoid trivializing an argument or mischaracterizing a strong argument as a weak argument. Remembering the principle of charity is a way to insure that one’s own analysis and critique is actually relevant.
Basic Steps to Schematizing:
Read the passage several times making sure you understand it and that it actually contains an argument.

1. Identify the main conclusion.
   Conclusion indicator words include: therefore, so, thus, hence, then, accordingly, consequently, shows that, demonstrates that, it follows that

2. Identify those statements in the passage that are put forward as support of the conclusion (Many arguments contain subarguments which support main premises so it is important to also identify those statements which function as subpremises or subconclusions)
   Premise indicator words include: since, because, for, given that, it follows from

3. Omit any material that serves as purely background information, introductory or editorial remarks, purely rhetorical comments, repetitions or comments not relevant to the central point – note that if you find yourself eliminating a great deal of the essay because it is not relevant to the conclusion, it may be because you’ve missed the author’s intended conclusion.

4. Check that each premise and conclusion is a self-contained complete statement.

5. Check that no premise or conclusion itself expresses a whole argument – if it does so then it needs to be broken down into further elements

6. Number each premise and organize them in a logical order which best demonstrates how they relate to each other and how they lead to the conclusion – this is not necessarily the order found in the passage

7. Check your schematization against the original passage to see whether you have left out anything essential or included anything that you think should not have been included.

8. Finally, reread the passage and check that your schematization is still true to the author’s original intent

Paraphrase of Argument: See essay in text, pp.2-10
Socrates was found guilty of corrupting the youth of Athens. Socrates had the options of escaping or recanting his philosophic principles, thus living longer or he had to accept his punishment of death by hemlock. Socrates thought that it was more important to have a good life than merely a long life. Included in his idea of a good life is the idea of living consistently with his principles. One of the key principles that Socrates lived by was that one’s life was meaningful if one served the good of the polis (society). He argued that his teaching was consistent with this principle in that he performed the important task of being a “social gadfly” and encouraged his pupils to question false or corrupt ideas and practices. He said that instead of condemning him, Athens should be paying him to do this job since it was so important. If he escaped he would be harming the state which nurtured him since that constituted breaking that society’s rules which were necessary to preserve order. If he recanted then he would be a hypocrite. Socrates argued that death was preferable to living without honor. Therefore, Socrates chose to drink the hemlock.

2 Adapted from A Practical Study of Argument, by Trudy Govier, Wadsworth
Schematized Version of Same Argument. (Disjunctive Syllogism with three options)
P1) Socrates must either drink the hemlock or escape or recant
P2) For Socrates, “The really important thing is not to live but to live well.”
P3) Living well is living in accordance with one’s principles
P4) Escaping or recanting would conflict with Socrates’ principles
   SP1) One of the most important principles of living is to serve one’s polis (the city-state) with honor and integrity
   SP2) To escape, Socrates would be harming the state which nurtured him – an act with no honor
   SP3) To recant, Socrates would be a hypocrite, renouncing the very principles he supported in life – an act with no integrity
P3) Drinking the hemlock allows Socrates to remain consistent with his principles

C) Socrates must drink the hemlock.

II. Evaluating Arguments: The ARG Method:
Once the individual premises and conclusion have been identified, the next step is to evaluate the strength of the argument. There are three primary considerations to take during this phase:

A: Is each individual premise acceptable? The term “acceptable” functions like the term “true” in ordinary discourse. This means generally, that you have good reason to think that the premise is true and no good reason to doubt it.

R: Each premise must be relevant to the overall argument and support the conclusion. Relevance is not always obvious. Subpremises may include no reference to the conclusion but support the main premise which does directly relate to the conclusion.

G: Once you have tested for acceptability and relevance, now you need to consider whether enough evidence has been provided to support the conclusion. This is called “Grounds.” Are there any missing pieces of information that you can imagine would sway your judgment? Is there a critical fallacy in the argument structure?

III. Some Classic Argument Forms/Structures

Hypothetical Syllogism:  
P1) If A => B – e.g.  
P1) if it rains then my horse won’t eat
P2) If B => C  
P2) if my horse won’t eat then he’ll get sick
C) If A => C  
C) if it rains then my horse will get sick

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3 ibid.
4 the symbol “=>” stands for “then” or “it follows that”
Disjunctive Syllogism: P1) Either A or B-e.g. P1) you’re either somewhere else or you’re here  
P2) not A P2) you’re not somewhere else  
C) B C) you must be here

Argument by Analogy: P1) A has quality X  
P2) B is identical to A in every relevant way  
C) B has quality X

Argument by Counter example: P1) If all A’s are B’s then there cannot be an A which is not a B  
P2) This is an A which is not a B  
C) Not all A’s are B’s

Inference to the Best Explanation: P1) Theories X, Y & Z all offer explanations of this phenomenon  
P2) Theory X has certain flaws  
P3) Theory Y has certain flaws  
P4) Theory Z does not share these flaws nor has any other significant flaws of its own  
P5) Theory Z explains all the relevant data equally well as X and Y  
C) Theory Z is the best explanation

Conductive Arguments (a.k.a. preponderance of the evidence) P1) Evidence 1 supports conclusion X  
P2) Evidence 2 supports conclusion X  
P3) Evidence 3 supports conclusion X  
P4) Evidence 4 supports conclusion X  
P5) It is difficult if not impossible to explain this evidence using any other conclusion  
C) X is very likely correct

Reductio ad absurdum: P1) if X is true then Y must follow  
P2) but Y is ridiculous/absurd  
C) X must not be true

IV. Classic Argument “Blunders” (Fallacies)  
1) False Dilemma – Not all the logical possibilities are considered

2) Mere Assertion/ Simple contradiction- Fails to offer evidence/support
3) *Argumentum ad Hominem*/Against the Person – Fallacy of irrelevance – one must separate the arguer from the argument. Not the same as appeal to authority when one’s expertise *is* relevant to the consideration of evidence.

4) *Argumentum ad Populum*/Appeal to Popularity – Just because “everyone” or, even the majority of people agrees with a certain proposition it does not necessarily make the proposition acceptable.

5) Appeal to force – Fallacy of irrelevance – just because someone is stronger or threatening, it does not follow that they are correct.

6) Begging the Question – Not the same as “Raising the Question” – this form of fallacy fails to address the question at hand and assumes that which is to be proven as true, usually by asserting the conclusion into the premises –it is a form of circular reasoning.

7) Slippery Slope – Appears like a hypothetical syllogism but in this case the antecedents “if x” do not always lead inevitably to the consequents, “then y.” A classic case of this is holding marijuana as a “gateway drug” which leads always to usage of hard drugs such as cocaine.

8) Straw Man – This fallacy occurs at the early stages of paraphrasing or schematizing. In this case one mischaracterizes one’s opponent’s argument in a way that makes it easy to dismiss. This is the opposite of the principle of charity (see the footnote on the 1st page of this guide).