

Arguments consist of **premises** and **conclusions**. In a strong argument, the premises lead to the conclusion. So, for example:

- Anna is a person (Premise 1)
- All people are mortal (Premise 2)
- Therefore, Anna is mortal (Conclusion)

Or, to put it more like a mathematical formula:

- A is B
- All Bs are C
- Therefore, A is C.

There are three main ways to challenge an argument:

1. **One or more of the premises is weak.**
2. **The premises do not lead to the conclusion.**
3. **The premises are strong and do lead to the conclusion, but the conclusion is undesirable.**

Let's see how these would work in practice.

Take the motion: 'This house would make all schools co-educational.'

Someone puts this argument:

'All schools should be forced to be mixed, because when girls and boys attend the same school, they have to spend time with each other, so they learn to get on with the opposite sex, which is a vital life skill.'

Let's analyse that argument.

Premise 1: Mixed schools make boys and girls spend time together.

Premise 2: Spending time with people teaches you to get on with them.

Premise 3: Getting on with people is a vital life skill.

Conclusion: Therefore, all schools should be mixed.

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Now let's see how we could rebut it.

Challenging Premise 1

'Mixed schools don't make boys and girls spend time together. They spend most of their time ignoring each other. At break time the boys play football, the girls talk. Students at single-sex schools spend much more meaningful time with the opposite sex, because when they do so, they do so out of choice.'

Challenging Premise 2

'Putting boys and girls together doesn't make them get on with each other. Boys tend to dominate class discussion, intimidating girls into not giving their opinions. This establishes a very unhealthy dynamic for later life, where men make decisions and women listen; not a good way to "get on with each other". Girls in single-sex schools get the confidence to express their opinions in class much more easily, and are thus better equipped to interact with men on an equal basis in later life.'

Challenging Premise 3

'Girls consistently achieve better exam results in single-sex schools. Making them sacrifice this achievement by forcing them into mixed schools so they can "learn how to get on with boys" is sending out the message that socialisation is more important than success; or, to put it another way, it's more important for a girl to be nice than to be clever. Is that how we should be bringing up our daughters?'

Showing that the premises do not lead to the conclusion

'It may be true that boys and girls spending time together at school can teach them how to get on better in later life, but that doesn't mean all schools should be forced to be mixed. Not all children are the same; some thrive in single-sex environments, and shouldn't be forced into a "one size fits all" model.'

Questioning the desirability of the conclusion

'Shouldn't schools be about academic education, not socialisation?'

Or:

'What business does the government have telling us what sort of education we should choose for our children?'

**How
can we
rebut?**