

A cogent argument must pass all three [criteria for good argument.] All its premises must be acceptable. They must be relevant to the conclusion. And taken together they must provide adequate grounds for that conclusion. If any one of these conditions is not satisfied, the argument is not cogent. It does not offer strong support to the conclusion.²

Our view of argument quality is different. Rather than using a categorical logic of “good” or “bad” to assess argument qualities, we prefer a variable logic of “more” or “less” or of “better” and “worse.” Rather than seeing arguments as falling into just two categories of “good” and “bad,” we believe that most exist on a spectrum ranging from especially poor to extremely good. Most arguments fall somewhere between these extremes. Very few are so good that they cannot be improved by logical and extra-logical criticism. Similarly, very few are so poor that their defects cannot be improved.

Many debaters yearn to produce the perfect argument, the argument that has no refutation. Such yearnings reflect debaters’ misunderstandings about the nature of debate. Debate is a process of searching out critical points of disagreement about a substantial debatable controversy. If no disagreement exists, the issue is not debatable and therefore not the kind debaters engage. The perfect argument, if you could produce it, would be trivial as far as debate is concerned, because it would not be about a substantive controversy. Issues surrounding substantive controversies are such that arguments supporting and opposing them are, by their nature, never irrefutable. Therefore, we cannot require that a good argument prove its conclusion beyond any possible doubt. That standard of proof may be relevant to some areas of mathematics, but not to argumentation and debate. For this reason, we try to speak of an argument *supporting* a conclusion rather than *proving* a conclusion.

So the question is, what are some logical criteria to determine whether the support that an argument offers is adequate or inadequate? We maintain that the three criteria for assessing the quality of an argument are acceptability, relevance, and sufficiency. The following diagram illustrates these:

RSA Triangle: The criteria that a good argument must satisfy.

