



Sample of the A Level Philosophy Course from Section 1

Course plan

This plan shows the structure of the course and gives an outline of the contents.

Sections 1–5 cover the requirements of the AS and Part 1 of the A level; Sections 6–10 cover Part 2 of the A level. You need to do Sections 1–10 to prepare for the A level.

Getting Started

- Introduction
- Making the most of the course
- Planning your study
- Learning Profile
- Introductory Assignment

Section 1 Introduction to epistemology

- Introduction
- Topic 1 Philosophical terminology
- Topic 2 What is knowledge?
- Topic 3 Responses to Gettier
- Assignment 1

Section 2 Perception as a source of knowledge

- Introduction
- Topic 1 Direct realism
- Topic 2 Indirect realism
- Topic 3 Berkeley's idealism
- Assignment 2

Section 3 Reason as a source of knowledge

Introduction

Topic 1 Rationalism, empiricism and innatism

Topic 2 Innatism

Topic 3 Empiricism: the *tabula rasa* argument

Topic 4 The intuition and deduction thesis

Topic 4 Empiricist responses

Topic 6 Scepticism: the limits of knowledge

Assignment 3

Section 4 Normative ethical theories

Introduction

Topic 1 Introduction to ethics

Topic 2 Utilitarianism

Topic 3 Kantian deontological ethics

Topic 4 Aristotelian virtue ethics

Assignment 4

Section 5 Meta-ethics and applied ethics

Introduction

Topic 1 Moral realism

Topic 2 Moral anti-realism

Topic 3 Applied ethics

Assignment 5

Section 6 Metaphysics of God 1: Arguments for the existence of God

Topic 1 The concept of God

Topic 2 The design argument

Topic 3 Swinburne's design argument

Topic 4 The cosmological argument

Assignment 6

Section 7 Metaphysics of God 2

Topic 1 The ontological argument

Topic 2 The problem of evil

Topic 3 Religious language

Assignment 7

Section 8 Metaphysics of mind 1

Introduction

Topic 1 Introduction to the metaphysics of mind

Topic 2 Substance of dualism

Topic 3 Philosophical behaviourism

Topic 4 Mind-brain type identity theory

Topic 5 Eliminative materialism

Assignment 8

Section 9 Metaphysics of mind 2: physicalist theories

Introduction

Topic 1 Functionalism

Topic 2 Property dualism

Assignment 9

Topic 1

Philosophical terminology

Introduction

The section introduction should have given you some understanding of what we mean by 'philosophy'. However, knowing what philosophy is about involves *doing* philosophy: this means thinking philosophically and arguing philosophically. Philosophers use a particular methodology to be successful at thinking and writing good philosophy.

This first topic introduces you to the methods of thinking and writing that philosophers use. You will come across key terms – such as conclusion, premises, validity and soundness – throughout the topics in this course and in any extra material you read. Understanding these key terms, and using them well, will be essential to your essay writing and exam preparation.

You will probably need around 3 hours to complete this topic.



Objectives

When you have completed this topic you should be able to:

- explain what an argument is and how it differs from an explanation or an opinion
- use correctly key terms such as conclusion, antecedent, consequent, premise, statement and claim
- explain the difference between sound and valid arguments and recognise whether particular arguments are sound and/or valid

- explain the difference between inductive and deductive arguments and recognise whether an argument is inductive or deductive
- explain some logical fallacies
- outline Occam's razor or the principle of parsimony.

Conditionals and necessary and sufficient conditions

Philosophers always start with statements, or claims, such as 'God exists', or 'moral truths do not exist', or 'freedom is freedom from constraint'. What we need to investigate first, before we look at how philosophers prove a point, is the kinds of statement philosophers use.

First, some statements are **conditionals**: A conditional is an 'if-then' statement – for example 'If someone is a mother cat, then they are a feline'. A conditional contains two parts, called clauses: the **antecedent** (the 'if' part) and the **consequent** (the 'then' part).

How do the two clauses relate to each other? This is where philosophers refer to necessary and sufficient conditions:

- A **necessary condition** means it is required, you cannot do without it. For example, a necessary condition of being able to vote in the UK is to be at least 18. However, a single necessary condition is not always enough: there may be more than one necessary condition in order for something to be. For example, in order to take my driving test in the UK I must be at least 17, I must have passed my theory test and I must have a provisional driving licence. These are necessary conditions. Without them I cannot take my driving test. These conditions must all be met in order for me to take my driving test, so they are also individually necessary – I have to satisfy all these individual conditions before I can take my driving test.
- A **sufficient condition** means that the condition is enough but is not necessary. So a sufficient condition for being ill is to have flu. However, there are other possible reasons for being ill: having a migraine, a broken leg, etc. If we go back to the driving test example, we know that being over 17, passing the theory test and having a provisional driving licence are all individually necessary conditions. If these are all the conditions needed to be able to take a driving test they are also sufficient. If we list all the individually necessary conditions for something then those

conditions are **jointly sufficient**. In other words, if all these necessary conditions were met, together (jointly) they would be enough (sufficient); nothing else would be needed.

Activity 1

(Allow 5 minutes)

Fill in the gaps in the sentences below with necessary or sufficient.

- 1 Having a ball is for playing football.
- 2 Being a cat is for being an animal.
- 3 Being an animal is for being a cat.
- 4 Rain is for the street being wet.
- 5 Having three A levels is for going to university.

In you answer, you should have written:

- 1 Necessary
- 2 Sufficient (as cats are not the only type of animal)
- 3 Necessary
- 4 Sufficient (the street could be wet because of a burst pipe)
- 5 Sufficient (as you could have two A levels, or other qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate).

Why do conditionals and necessary and sufficient conditions matter to philosophers?

- When philosophers consider a concept, they look at the conditions under which it may be true. For example, if the universe shows design, there must be an intelligent designer.
- Necessary and sufficient conditions help clarify definitions and theories. You will see this in Topic 2 when we look at the definition of knowledge.

In conditionals, no truth is yet asserted: it is just saying, if X is the case, then Y is also the case. However, X must first be established, and the connection between X and Y must be proved. This is the purpose of philosophical arguments.

What is an argument?

An **argument** is not the same thing as a fight or a dispute. The goal of an argument is not to attack your opponent; the purpose of an argument is to offer good reasons in support of your conclusion. Thus an argument includes a position or point of view and an attempt to persuade others to accept that point of view, which can take the form of reasons, examples and evidence.

For example, if I want to argue that morality is relative rather than absolute:

- I could argue that different societies have differing moral practices and that morality in Europe has changed over time. These are *reasons* to back up my claim.
- I could then offer *examples* of differing moral practice. For example, in some cultures, sex outside marriage is considered immoral.
- I could also give *evidence* of morality changing over time by citing the fact that homosexuality is now socially acceptable while it was considered immoral only 50 years ago.

Thus, an argument differs from an explanation. The purpose of an explanation is to clarify a term, a fact or even perhaps an argument. For example:

Euthanasia is the act of deliberately ending a person's life to relieve suffering.

For example, a doctor who gives a patient with terminal cancer an overdose of muscle relaxants to end their life would be considered to have carried out euthanasia.

Assisted suicide is the act of deliberately assisting or encouraging another person to kill themselves.

If a relative of a person with a terminal illness were to obtain powerful sedatives, knowing that the person intended to take an overdose of sedatives to kill themselves, they may be considered to be assisting suicide.

(www.nhs.uk/news/2014/02february/pages/what-type-of-people-choose-assisted-suicide.aspx)

This is an explanation of what euthanasia is. There is no attempt to convince the reader of a specific position or point of view with reference to the debate on assisted suicide. The purpose of an argument, however, is to convince someone, using reasons, that your position is correct.

An argument also differs from an opinion. An opinion is a point of view, but no attempt is made to convince others. For example, I could have the opinion that a particular political party is better than another on the basis of my personal preference, and I could share

this opinion with others. But just saying X is better than Y is not an argument.

Study hint

There is a glossary to accompany these course materials. Entries are highlighted in bold the first time they appear in the text. However you may find it useful to start compiling your own glossary. Writing the definition down may help you fix the meaning of a particular term in your mind more effectively than if you just read it.

Activity 2

(Allow 5 minutes)

Look at the following passages. Are they arguments, opinions or explanations?

- 1 Killing is just wrong!
- 2 Euthanasia should become legal in the UK: if we protect the right to life, we should equally protect the right to a dignified death. People should have the right to choose their death in the same way that they choose how they live.
- 3 UK law makes an important distinction between passive and active euthanasia. The Bland ruling of 1993 stated that assisted suicides which involve the withdrawal of life-saving care are not illegal. However, actively taking action to end another person's life is illegal, even if that person has given their consent.

In your answer, you should have written:

- 1 Opinion
- 2 Argument
- 3 Explanation

Arguments are made up of statements and part of evaluating arguments involves checking whether statements are true or false; that means checking whether the premises are correct.

- A *statement* is an assertion which is either true or false. It says that something is or isn't the case. 'Sentient animals experience pain' is a statement. 'Mammals are sentient animals' is another statement.

- A *conclusion* is the statement which is the purpose of the argument. In this example, the claim that it is wrong to harm mammals is the conclusion of the argument.

In order to evaluate arguments, you will need to analyse the claims made and how they are argued. That means you will need to explain whether the reasoning of the argument is logical or not and whether you accept the premises set. If you don't accept the premises you will need to argue why! In the exam you will also have to write out arguments.

Activity 3

(Allow 15 minutes)

Which of the following are statements? To check whether they are, just put 'It's true/false that...' and see if it makes sense.

- 1 The Sun revolves round the Earth.
- 2 I like chocolate.
- 3 Mmm, chocolate ...
- 4 $2 + 2 = 4$
- 5 It is wrong for scientists to do experiments on animals.
- 6 End the war now!
- 7 Ouch!

Compare your answers with ours:

- 1 The Sun revolves round the Earth. Yes – this is a factual claim about what the world is like.
- 2 I like chocolate. No – although this could be true or false, it is not describing a fact about the world and that's why it is not a statement but rather an expression of opinion.
- 3 Mmm, chocolate.... No
- 4 $2 + 2 = 4$. Yes
- 5 It is wrong for scientists to do experiments on animals. No – this is not describing a fact about the world but is an expression of opinion. It could be the conclusion of an argument.
- 6 End the war now! No
- 7 Ouch! No

Arguments in philosophy

Philosophy investigates and discusses a variety of areas. Examples of philosophical questions are:

- Do human beings have free will or are their actions pre-determined?
- Is morality absolute or relative?
- Can we have certain knowledge of the world?

Philosophers argue about such questions and use arguments to prove the particular claims they make. A convincing philosophical argument is one which is rational and logical and where the person justifies what they are saying.

Thus, in philosophy it is important to:

- justify beliefs and opinions: it is not enough to say 'I believe this and I am entitled to my opinion'
- look for truth: it is not enough to believe that everything is subjective and that everyone is entitled to their own opinions (then cannibalism or incest might be perfectly acceptable!)
- be reasonable and have rational debates.

In general, philosophical arguments consist of two elements:

- The thesis or position argued for is called the **conclusion**. The conclusion is also called an **inference**, the claim that can be logically derived from the reasons given.
- The reasons why the conclusion should be accepted are called premises. These are factual claims which are put forth as true.

Modern philosophers often present their arguments or summarise them in the following format (the number of premises will vary according to the argument):

P1 Premise 1

P2 Premise 2

P3 Premise 3

P4 Premise 4

C Therefore, Conclusion

For example:

P1 Mammals are sentient animals.

P2 Sentient animals experience pain.

P3 It is wrong to inflict pain.

- P4 Inflicting pain is a form of harm.
C Therefore, it is wrong to harm mammals.

Activity 1

(Allow 10 minutes)

Identify the premises and the conclusion in the following argument:

The universe must be designed. The universe follows rules and is ordered. But rules don't create themselves randomly. Rules are established by someone who has designed them.

Now write a short argument on this topic using the format below:

- P1
P2
P3
C

Your argument should look like this:

- P1 The universe follows rules and is ordered.
P2 But rules don't create themselves randomly.
P3 Rules are established by someone who has designed them.
C Therefore, the universe must be designed.

Sometimes, there is more than one conclusion present: one conclusion is inferred from the first part of the argument. This is called an intermediate conclusion (IC), or a sub-conclusion. Further reasons can then be added to draw a more general conclusion (C).

For example:

- P1 Socrates is a person.
P2 All people are mortal.
IC Therefore, Socrates is mortal.
P3 All mortal things have parts
P4 Anything that has parts is made of particles.
C Therefore, Socrates is made of particles.

Long arguments can also include counter-arguments or counter-assertions.

- Counter-arguments are additional argument that run against or counter to what the conclusion seeks to establish. The author will normally present the counter-argument in order to dismiss it.
- If no reason was present, then the author would be making a counter-assertion / claim, rather than a counter-argument.

For example:

- P1 Fast food companies argue that their food is not unhealthy.
- P2 This is because they include all that is needed for a healthy diet: protein, vegetables and a reasonable amount of carbohydrates.
- P3 The only reason people get fat is because they eat too much of it.
- P4 However, what such companies fail to recognise is that the sugar and oils added to those healthy ingredients are part of the problem.
- P5 This is combined with the fact that such foods are addictive because of the high sugar and high salt content.
- C Therefore, fast food companies are wrong to claim their food is healthy.
- P1, P2 and P3 act as a counter-argument which is then responded to in P4 and P5.

What makes a convincing argument?

Whether an argument is convincing depends on whether we believe its premises, and whether its conclusion seems to us to follow from those premises. To evaluate whether an argument is effective or not, we need to ask:

- 1 Are the premises true? Can we prove that they are true?
- 2 Does the conclusion follow logically from the premises?

Look at the following argument:

- P1 The world shows evidence of design.
- P2 Only God is powerful enough to design the world.
- C Therefore, God exists.

Here we can question two things:

- 1 Are the premises true? We can question whether the world does show evidence of design, for example (this is what you will study in Section 6 Topic 1).
- 2 But we can also question whether the conclusion follows from its premises. Some philosophers would argue that Premises 1 and 2 are not sufficient to prove that God exists.

Activity 5

(Allow 10 minutes)

Read the following arguments. Evaluate them by identifying whether:

- the premises are true (or can they be questioned?)
- the conclusion follows logically from the premises.

Argument 1:

P1 If stealing harms other people, then it is morally wrong.

P2 Stealing does harm people.

C Therefore, stealing is morally wrong.

Argument 2:

P1 All men are mortal.

P2 Socrates is a man.

C Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Argument 3:

P1 If I am in London, I am in England.

P2 I am in England.

C Therefore, I am in London.

Argument 4:

P1 Getting wet in the rain gives you a cold.

P2 The builders worked for several hours in pouring rain.

C Therefore, they will get colds.

Compare what you have written with our answers.

Argument 1:

P1 If stealing harms other people, then it is morally wrong.

P2 Stealing does harm people.

C Therefore, stealing is morally wrong.

Premises true, conclusion logically follows.

Argument 2:

P1 All men are mortal.

P2 Socrates is a man.

C Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Premises true and the conclusion follows from the premises.

Argument 3:

P1 If I am in London, I am in England.

P2 I am in England.

C Therefore, I am in London.

Premises true but the conclusion doesn't follow. This is an example of a *logical fallacy*. I can be in England but not necessarily in London.

Argument 4:

P1 Getting wet in the rain gives you a cold.

P2 The builders worked for several hours in pouring rain.

C Therefore, they will get colds.

Premises true but the conclusion is not logically necessary: the builders may have been working outside but well covered up, so they didn't necessarily get wet!

Validity and soundness

An argument is **valid** if the conclusion follows logically from its premises.

For example:

Alice is either at home or at school. Since she is not at home, she must be at school.

If the premises are true, the conclusion must be true.

An argument is **sound** if – and only if – it is valid and all the premises are true.

The following argument is sound:

Cows are mammals. Mammals are animals. So cows are animals.

But the following is unsound:

Cows are insects. Insects are mammals. So cows are mammals.

This is because both premises are false.

So an argument can be valid even if it is not sound, as validity is only concerned with the logic of the internal reasoning. It is possible to have a valid argument even if the premises are completely false. Daft as it may sound, the argument above is valid because the conclusion follows logically from the premises. But both premises are wrong, so the argument cannot be sound.

Here's another example of an argument that is valid but unsound (because the first premise is false):

P1 Only Santa Claus can leave gifts at the bottom of the Christmas tree.

P2 There are gifts at the bottom of the tree.

C Therefore, Santa Claus has visited the house.

To summarise:

For an argument to be *valid* it needs one thing only: that the conclusion follows logically from the premises.

For an argument to be *sound* it needs two things:

- 1 It needs to be valid (the conclusion must follow logically from the premises).
- 2 The premises must be true.

Activity 6

(Allow 5 minutes)

Look back to the arguments in Activity 5. Are they valid, sound, neither or both?

Compare your answers with these:

Argument 1: valid (conclusion follows logically from the premises) and sound (valid and premises are true)

Argument 2: valid and sound

Argument 3: not valid (conclusion doesn't follow) and unsound (premises true but not valid)

Argument 4: not valid and unsound

Inductive and deductive arguments

A **deductive argument** offers logically conclusive support for its conclusion: if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true.

All soldiers are brave. Martha is a soldier. Therefore Martha is brave.

An **inductive argument** provides probable support for its conclusion: if the premises are true, the conclusion is probably true.

All cats that I have observed purr. Therefore, every cat must purr.

So while deductive reasoning starts with a general rule which it applies to specific examples, inductive reasoning uses specific examples to draw a general rule.

This distinction is important as arguments in philosophy are either inductive or deductive, and understanding which type of argument it is will help you evaluate it more effectively.

Activity 7

(Allow 5 minutes)

Identify whether the following arguments are inductive or deductive.

- 1 Every human being has rights. Nadir is a human being. Therefore Nadir has rights.
- 2 Today, I left for work at seven o'clock and I arrived on time. Therefore, every day that I leave the house at seven o'clock, I will arrive at work on time.
- 3 Killing someone is always wrong. Capital punishment involves killing a person. Therefore, capital punishment is always wrong.
- 4 No man ever got pregnant. Therefore, no man will ever get pregnant.

Were you able to spot which arguments were deductive and which inductive? You should have written:

- 1 Deductive
- 2 Inductive
- 3 Deductive
- 4 Inductive

Other types of arguments, such as *reductio ad absurdum* (which means proving something by contradiction), arguments from analogy, and abductive arguments, will be covered as part of your study of particular topics.

Logical fallacies

Another way to evaluate arguments is to consider whether the premises or the conclusion, or both, contain fallacies – which means errors in logic. **Fallacies** are defects in an argument that cause an argument to be invalid, unsound or weak. As you will need to evaluate philosophical arguments in the next topic, it will be very useful for you to be able to spot such errors! The following are the most common fallacies and you may see that some philosophers can at times commit such errors.

Circular argument

A **circular argument** is an argument where the conclusion occurs as one of the premises, or a chain of arguments in which the final conclusion is a premise of one of the earlier arguments in the chain.

Consider the following argument:

God exists because the Bible says that he does. We all know that the Bible is accurate because it was written by inspired men, men inspired by God to write down his words.

In order to take this as evidence for the existence of God, you already have to believe in God. So the argument really doesn't prove anything – it just repeats one of the premises as the conclusion. The problem is that the premise needs independent support, which is hard to find in this case.

False dilemma

Another fallacy is called a **false dilemma**, where the author presents a false dilemma which limits the possibilities considered. This may restrict the choice to one option as one is often presented as more favourable than the other. For example, 'Either you favour the death penalty or you condone letting murderers go free to kill again' is a false dilemma because a third option – imprisonment – is completely ignored.

Slippery slope

A third type of fallacy is the **slippery slope**. In this case, the author presents an argument in which the conclusion is far removed from the initial claim, usually via a series of assumption-laden steps. An example of this might be a claim that allowing the government to ban marches could lead to other restrictions and eventually a totalitarian political system. The weakness lies in the difficulty of justifying the move between the steps.

Ad hominem/ad hoc

An **ad hominem fallacy** consists of attacking the arguer rather than the argument. For example:

The MP's argument in favour of this energy program is obviously worthless. We all know the MP has received large campaign contributions from lobbyists supporting this program.

An **ad hoc argument** is not quite a fallacy but a method of arguing that we all fall prey to! When a claim has been made, and a legitimate objection raised, there may be no rational option but to revise the original claim. What is not acceptable is adding some special proviso, just to suit the argument, and then trying to say that the original conclusion still stands.

Take the argument that fishing is harmless fun for all concerned, based on the premise that fish experience no pain. Suppose that convincing evidence is provided that fish do feel pain: it would be *ad hoc* reasoning to switch to the claim that fish don't feel pain like humans do – and still argue that fishing is harmless fun.

Activity 8

(Allow 10 minutes)

Which fallacy are the following arguments committing?

- 1 The choice of what should be taught in universities should be left to professors. If students are allowed to influence this choice, they will see themselves as running the school. This will lead to a breakdown of order and discipline, and pretty soon there will be no learning at all in the university.
- 2 Either we allow abortion or we force children to be raised by parents who don't want them.

- 3 Free trade is good for the country, because it brings all the advantages of an unimpeded flow of goods between countries, and this is good for the country.
 - 4 You claim that atheists can be moral – yet I happen to know that you abandoned your wife and children!
-

You should have written:

- 1 Slippery slope
- 2 False dilemma
- 3 Circular argument
- 4 *Ad hominem* fallacy

Occam's razor

Occam's razor is a principle first developed by the Franciscan friar and medieval philosopher, William of Ockham (1285–1347). (You will sometimes see his name spelt Occam.) The principle, which is also called the principle of parsimony, states that, when multiple explanations are available for a phenomenon, the simplest version is preferred and that we should avoid making more assumptions than needed. Of two equivalent theories or explanations, all other things being equal, the simpler one is to be preferred.

Consider the following example:

Very bright lights are seen in the sky in a particular location during the night.

Two possible explanations arise:

- The lights come from planes flying to and from a nearby airport.
- Aliens are regularly visiting the spot.

To prove the second would require making more assumptions and developing a complex explanation. The first explanation is the simplest and therefore the likeliest.

This principle of parsimony is something philosophers at times refer to to prove an argument – or to disprove others.

Complete your work on this topic by reading the section titled 'Philosophical argument' in Chapter 1 of your textbook.



Self check

(Allow 15 minutes)

Briefly explain what an argument is and what makes a convincing argument. Make sure that you refer to the key terms.

You will find feedback to self checks at the end of the section.

Summary

Philosophy involves arguing about the meaning of key ideas such as free will, morality, knowledge, or the existence of God.

Arguments in this context involve stating a point of view backed up by reasoning and evidence. Philosophers use a method to create good philosophical reasoning which involves justifying a conclusion with a set of premises. A convincing argument is one where the premises are true and logically support the conclusion.

Philosophers need to make sure that their arguments are valid and sound. An argument is valid if the conclusion follows logically from the premises. An argument is sound if the premises are true and the argument is valid. Arguments come in two types: they are either inductive, whereby a general rule is derived from specific instances, or deductive, whereby a general rule is applied to specific cases.

Key terms

ad hominem fallacy: a fallacy where the arguer attacks their opponent rather than their opponent's argument

ad hoc argument: a form of debating which involves explaining away facts that seem to refute one's belief or theory

antecedent: the 'if' part of a conditional or 'if-then' statement

argument: process of reasoning from a set of statements or premises to a conclusion: an argument is *valid* if the conclusion follows logically from its premises; an argument is *sound* if – and only if – it is valid and the premises are true

circular argument: an argument where the conclusion assumes the premises and the premises the conclusion

conclusion: the thesis or position argued for

conditional: an if-then statement; for example, if someone is a bachelor, then they are an unmarried man

consequent: the 'then' part of a conditional or 'if-then' statement

deductive argument: an argument that infers a conclusion from premises using valid forms of argument; if an argument is deductively valid, then the conclusion must follow necessarily from the premises; deduction involves arguing from the general to the particular so if all x is y , then this x must be y

fallacy: an error in reasoning

false dilemma: a fallacy which involves presenting two opposing views, options or outcomes, one of which is so unacceptable that the other is the only real solution; it ignores any other possibility

inductive argument: an argument that reasons from particular instances to general conclusions, e.g. all observed x is y , therefore all x is y

inference: a conclusion that can be drawn from one or more reasons

jointly sufficient: when two or more conditions are enough together to guarantee that something is the case

necessary condition: a condition that must be met for something to be – for example, having three sides is a necessary condition of being a triangle

Occam's razor: or principle of parsimony; the view that the simplest explanation is likely to be the most truthful

premise: a statement which is the basis of another statement, an inference

proposition: any statement that has a truth value, i.e. that can either be true or false

slippery slope: a fallacy in which a person asserts that some event must inevitably follow from another without any argument for the inevitability of the event in question

sound: in the context of arguments, an argument is sound if the premises are valid and the conclusion is logically derived from the premises

sufficient condition: a condition that is sufficient for something to be; for example, breaking your arm is a sufficient reason (but not a necessary condition) for going to the doctor

validity: in arguments, a claim is valid if it is true



What next?

We hope this sample has helped you to decide whether this course is right for you.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us using the details below.

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