

32 Topic 11: Identifying Contentions

Recall that a contention is a claim which is being argued for (or against), i.e., a claim which has at least one reason or objection bearing directly upon it.

When somebody presents an argument in a text, your task as listener or reader is to figure out what that argument is. The first and most important aspect of this is figuring out what the contention is.

Identifying a contention is interpreting an argumentative text to identify which of the author's claims is functioning as a contention, i.e., being argued for (or against).

Picking out contentions is a skill that improves with practice.

Identifying Main Contentions

The main contention of a multi-layer argument is a contention which is not itself part of any reason or objection; it is at the top (or trunk) of the argument tree.

In an argumentative text, the main contention is generally the main point the author wants to convince you to believe; it is what all their reasoning leads to. The main contention is the answer to the following kinds of question:

- Why is the author bothering to tell me all this stuff?
- What is the main point the author is trying to convince me of?
- What is the most important thing the author is arguing for or against?

Note that a single argumentative text may contain a number of quite distinct complex arguments. When that happens, there are a number of main contentions, and lots of subsidiary contentions.

Guidelines for Identifying Main Contentions

We can often find main contentions intuitively – without really knowing how we did it. But sometimes it is not so easy. It is easy to be sidetracked by interesting, novel, or outrageous claims; yet these may not be the main thing the author is arguing for.

Here are some guidelines to help you identify main contentions:

- 1. Look at the title.** Look at the title first! It is amazing how often people seem to skip the title completely.

Authors often help us by saying right up front what their contention is going to be. Be careful, however: Sometimes the title is not supplied by the author. In newspapers, for example, titles are often supplied by the editors, who may have misrepresented the author's main point.

- 2. Look for contention indicators.** Indicators are words that signpost reasoning in a text. Contention indicators are words like 'therefore...'. Sometimes authors will use elaborate phrases to signal their main contention: e.g. 'So the upshot of all this is...'

3. **Location, location, location.** Main contentions are often (but not always!) found at the beginning or at the end of the relevant piece of text. The main contention is often found stated explicitly in an introductory section or in a concluding section of the text. Within a section or paragraph, contentions are more likely to be found at the beginning or the end.
4. **The really? test.** A contention is often some controversial, important, or novel claim – usually more so than the premises at least. Generally, an argument is used to persuade us to accept or reject a claim that is controversial or at least contested. After all, that is why the proponent is bothering to argue for or against it. The way to get us to accept a contention is to offer a series of logical moves from premises that are generally accepted as true to an important contention we might otherwise not have believed. That is why you should expect a main contention to be more controversial or novel than the premises.
5. **Context.** Context gives many and varied clues to what the main contention is. Look at the context in which the text was produced, and ask yourself questions like:
 - Who (and what) is the author?
 - What are the author's goals?
 - Where did I find the text? What should I expect to find in this context?
6. **What implies what?** In the end, there is no substitute for actually understanding the text, and seeing which claims provide evidence for (or might be regarded as providing evidence for) which other claims. Take each claim in turn, and ask yourself whether the text provides any reasons for believing that claim. If the answer is 'yes', then the claim is a contention (the contention to some argument in the text), though it is not necessarily the main contention. To determine whether a claim is the main contention, ask whether it is used in the text to support some further claim, i.e. whether some further claim depends on the claim in question being true. If the answer is 'no', you have probably identified the main contention.

Hidden Contentions

Sometimes the main contention of a text is not explicitly stated anywhere in the text. This can happen particularly if there is an ongoing debate on an issue, or if the argument is offered in a context where everyone is likely to understand what it is about. Alternatively, an author may offer a number of reasons and say: 'Now you can draw your own conclusion.'