

3.a.

Argument Concepts

What is the author's argument?

- C What is the thesis question?
- C What are the premises underlying it?
- C What is the thesis?
- C What is the "road map"; that is, given this thesis, what are the individual points the author will have to prove to make the thesis be true?
- C What assumptions has the author made which remain unaddressed?

What arguments does the author make that may be challenged?

- C Premises underlying thesis question
- C Individual points of the argument in the "road map," or body of the work.

If you wanted to challenge this author, how would you go about it?

- C Choose one point — either a premise underlying the thesis question, or a part of the author's "road map."
- C What kind of primary source evidence would you be looking for to "test" this point? What kinds of primary source evidence would tend to support the author? What kinds would undermine the author's argument?
- C The last step would be to go to the primary source evidence itself, and see what you find.

Two important concepts:

1. The "valid" argument: an argument structured such that, given that the premises are correct, the conclusion *must* be correct. In the following argument, the premises are not correct, but the argument is still valid, for its logic is correct:
 - p1: Martha Ballard was a midwife
 - p2: All midwives had professional educations
 - c: Therefore Martha Ballard had a professional education
2. The "sound" argument: a valid argument with true premises. The preceding argument is valid but not sound, for not all of its premises are true (p2 is false).
 - C This argument is invalid, and hence unsound (despite that its premises are correct):
 - p1: Martha Ballard was a midwife
 - p2: Martha Ballard caught over fifty babies
 - c: All midwives caught over fifty babies

- C This argument is sound, for its argument is valid and its premises true:
p1: Martha Ballard was a midwife
p2: All midwives catch babies
c: Martha Ballard caught babies

A very important thing to remember: Very often, we confuse good or possible arguments with the arguments a scholar actually made. In evaluating a scholarly argument, you are making claims about what an author has stated. You do not have the freedom to put arguments in authors' mouths; *you must be able to back up every claim you make (about an author's argument) through reference to the text.* There is a distinction between what an author *might* have argued and what the author *did* argue. If it's not in the text, the author did not argue it — even if it would have made a good argument. It is vital to imagine possible arguments, but remember — that enterprise is not the same as determining what the author actually argued.