Strengthening & Weakening Arguments

When it comes to strengthening or weakening an argument, the game changes. Here, you're allowed, even encouraged, to introduce new elements or information.
"If true" scenarios let you step outside the confines of the given facts and explore wider possibilities.

Tip: Simplify to Clarify: The best tactic in these questions is to simplify the argument. Break it down to its core elements: conclusion, premises, assumptions

Remember, in these questions, we're not looking for what we can conclude, or what must be true, but rather how a new piece of information **changes** the argument's strength.

Weaken Argument
"Which of the following, if true, weakens the argument?"

Firstly, focus on isolating and identifying the premise and the conclusion.

Then, identify any weaknesses in the argument that you can attack.

Remember, it is enough to just weaken the argument; you don't have to prove it wrong or expose any flaws.

Types of weaknesses to expose:
1. **Incomplete Information:** Not enough information is given, but a conclusion which seems to be drawn from thin air.

2. **Improper Comparison:** Watch for comparisons that don't hold up because the items being compared are fundamentally different. For example, arguing that because strategy A worked in one scenario, it will work in another, neglects the unique contexts of each situation.

3. **Incorrect Causality:** An argument may incorrectly assume that just because one event follows another, the first event caused the second. Pointing out alternative explanations for why an event occurred can undermine this cause-and-effect assumption.

Note on Causality:
An example of incorrect causality or reversal of causality follows:

"Last week Samuel tried out a new restaurant and the same week he got an upset stomach. So Samuel must have had food poisoning due to the new food."

This is not true. There might have been something else that Samuel might have had which caused the upset stomach.

What if Samuel has eaten something rotten that he cooked himself?

What if Samuel's upset stomach was due to a new medication he started?

What if Samuel is feeling more stressed, leading to him experiencing stomach issues?

This is a common trap of critical reasoning questions- we are tricked to assume that the two events take place in a vacuum, that no other event could have influenced what happened. Event 1 strictly influenced Event 2, and that Event 2 couldn't have occurred without Event 1.

How to break down causality?
1. **Find an alternate cause.** This is the strongest way to weaken a causality-based stimulus. For the example above, consider **other** causes of the outcome:

2. **Show that the change might not occur even when the cause occurs or that the effect can occur without the cause.**

3. **Show that the stated relationship is reversed.** This is where you prove that what is perceived to be the effect produces what is thought of as the cause.

CORRECT ANSWER CHOICES (WEAKENING AN ARGUMENT):
- Will point out any obvious reasons for the illogical conclusion. Shows errors in reasoning in the formation of the conclusion.
- Will show that, despite the existing premise being true, with the additional premise (correct answer choice) the existing premise(s) are now, way less supportive of the conclusion
- Attacks or exposes weaknesses in the premise-to-conclusion link.
- Breaks down causality.
- Points out improper comparisons between two scenarios that the author assumed.
- Points out any inappropriate generalisations.

Strengthen Argument
QUESTION STEM: "Which one of these statements, if true, most strengthens the above argument?"

CORRECT ANSWER CHOICES:
- Will bridge & fix a gap that may lead to an illogical conclusion.
- Find a missing link between two scenarios that the author assumed.
- Will introduce a new idea which increases the support from the existing premises to the conclusion
- Helps establish causality.

- Will validate (prove) an (unstated) assumption or rule out a discrepancy in the logic of the conclusion-forming process.

INCORRECT ANSWER CHOICES (FOR BOTH STRENGTHEN & WEAKEN ARGUMENTS):

- **Rephrased or Repeated Information:** Answer choices that merely repeat the argument or its premises without adding new, relevant information neither strengthen nor weaken the argument. Whilst these options often seem appealing, they fail to impact the argument's effectiveness and should be disregarded.

- **Opposite Answers:** Options may do the opposite of what is required, such as weakening an argument when the question asks for it to be strengthened. That is why it is crucial that you read the question carefully.

- **Out of Scope or Irrelevant:** Answers that introduce information unrelated to the argument or its core elements do not contribute to strengthening or weakening the argument. These are distractions that are not relevant to the argument.

- **Opinions & Subjective Tone:** Beware of options which are opinionated or emotional as they do not contribute to logical reasoning are often incorrect.

- **Causality Errors:** Some choices may incorrectly reverse the cause-and-effect relationship or establish a causal link where none exists. These answer choices misinterpret the argument's structure and are incorrect.

Biggest Pitfalls in Strengthening and Weakening Arguments

Pitfall #1: Failing to precisely determine the conclusion/main point of argument

You must **DETERMINE PRECISELY** what the author's intent is.

TRANSLATE the **ARGUMENT** into specifics

- Is it establishing a causal relationship? (A causes B)
- Is it proposing a solution? ("One should/ought do this.""X is the best/only solution for Y")
- Is it arguing against another argument? [disputation, eg. "X is wrong."]

Any option that doesn't address these specifics is incorrect

You must CHOOSE the option that has the most RELEVANCE to the premise-conclusion link.

#Pitfall 2: Falling for "common trap" options
Question writers are sneaky and will add in COMMON TRAP options

When selecting the best option in a strengthen/weaken question, consider the following:

1. **Most convincing:** The option should provide strong and persuasive evidence that directly supports or undermines the argument. It should be compelling enough to sway the reader's opinion in favour of or against the argument's conclusion.

2. **Most watertight:** The option should be free from logical flaws. It should be based on solid evidence or reasoning that leaves no room for doubt or counterarguments. It should be airtight in terms of logic and evidence.

3. **Most relevant:** The option should be directly connected to the argument's premise or conclusion. It should address the main points of the argument and be pertinent to the topic at hand. Irrelevant information, even if it's convincing or watertight, won't strengthen or weaken the argument effectively.

#Pitfall 3: Treating every part of the stimulus as that of equal importance
Narrow your focus to the main conclusion and supporting premises.
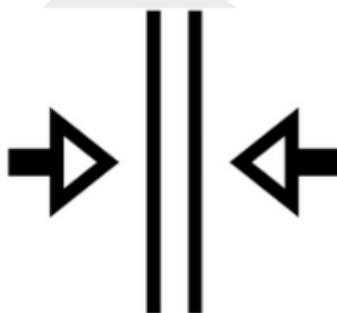
Pay LESS attention to filler words/info.
Below, is an exam of how you can **focus** on just the **important parts of the stimulus.**
This will fast-track your thinking and help you get to the correct answer quicker.

Filler... just here to distract you!

32   It's quite common to hear celebrities and politicians boasting about how little they sleep. They like to create the impression that their success and achievement come from their giving up   Main conclusion
sleep to work exceptionally long hours. But the truth is that success and sleep go hand in hand.
A group of Spanish psychologists have interviewed a wide range of successful people over the last 30 years and have found that most of them credit their achievements to plenty of rest and sleep. Far from being an obstacle to a great life, sleep in fact seems to underpin it!

Premise & evidence supporting MC

Which one of the following statements, if true, most **strengthens** the above argument?

A   Average working hours have increased over the last ten years.

B   People are as honest when interviewed by the press as when they are interviewed by researchers.

C   Many people view public figures like celebrities and politicians as role models.

D   Getting less than seven hours of sleep can reduce people's ability to make good decisions.