CRITICAL THINKING (CT) MODEL
PART 2 CHECKING ORGANIZATION

One question you may still be asking is how CT works with PW. To repeat what I said in my introduction, CT is not to be used to actually generate papers in the structural sense. It does not serve as a guide to writing paragraphs and coming up with good examples. Rather, you should look at CT provides you with a set of concepts and rules for checking the logic of an argumentative paper.

THE CT TOOL BOX

You can use CT to determine whether or not the thesis addresses the question. This is usually pretty obvious or self-evident. But in the general media, e.g., newspapers and news magazines, writers (or their editors) often prefer not to be too explicit as far as logical structure is concerned because they feel too much structure may make their work appear to be overly formal or academic.

So finding a clear thesis statement may sometimes be a problem. And once you have identified the thesis, then you must identify the problem or question that it addresses. Good writers always present an explicit thesis statement somewhere in the essay, even though it may have to be tweaked a little for clarity.

In evaluating the organization of a paper, the most important area is the relationship between the thesis statement and the supporting arguments. According to PW, this relationship must be such that proving the supporting arguments proves the thesis.

If the supporting arguments do not match the thesis, then the organization of the paper fails and the paper is a total wash, at least from a logical point of view.

OK, so here you might ask what kinds of problems would prevent a specific argument from supporting its thesis. This is a very complex logical issue. In fact, our GE 3A courses take an entire semester dealing with this one question.

However, let me give you a simplified list of rules you might use. (These are not ordered even though they are numbered.) Put them in your conceptual “toolbox” and take them out when you want to check the relationship between the thesis and its supporting arguments.
THESIS STATEMENT

SUPPORTING ARGUMENT

SUPPORTING ARGUMENT

RELEVANCE. The writer must present logically relevant arguments. These are arguments that relate to or match the thesis in such a manner that if the audience accepts the supporting arguments then the audience will accept the thesis. This is the most critical aspect of the organization of an argument. So even if an argument is a statement that can be clearly proven to be true, if it does not directly refer to and support the thesis, then the argument will fail to persuade the reader of the truth of the thesis.

Let’s take as an example the organization of the Sacramento Bee editorial opposing the Floyd Bill. In that essay, the defeat of the Floyd Bill was referred to in all three arguments.

THESIS: I BELIEVE THE FLOYD BILL DESERVES TO BE DEFEATED.

ARGUMENT 1: THE FLOYD BILL SHOULD BE DEFEATED BECAUSE IT EXPOSES BAR AND TAVERN WORKERS TO THE DEADLY HAZARDS OF SECOND-HAND SMOKE.

ARGUMENT 2: THE FLOYD BILL SHOULD BE DEFEATED BECAUSE SINCE IT WILL NOT LEAD TO ECONOMIC PROBLEMS AS ITS SUPPORTERS CLAIM.

ARGUMENT 3: THE FLOYD BILL SHOULD BE DEFEATED BECAUSE MANY STATE ORGANIZATIONS, FROM BOTH THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS, OPPOSE IT.

In this case, each of the supporting arguments (1-3) deals with a specific issue (some of which will be answered below) and answers it. I want you to look at this organizational plan as one in which proving the arguments leads the reader (one who reads Bee editorials) to accept the truth of the thesis.

It is obvious that Mr. Floyd and his supporters would not accept this argument. But because it is valid and reasonable, to deny the thesis, Floyd and his supporters would have to prove that one or more of its supporting arguments is false. As it stands, however, it cannot be simply be ignored or thrown out as irrelevant by those in favor of the bill.

Let me make one final observation. In the Bee editorial, each supporting argument directly refers to the thesis. This underlies the fact that the full logical statement of
a supporting argument must include terms and expressions that it shares with the thesis statement.

CONSISTENCY. Any argument that is relevant is also consistent. A consistent argument is one in which the writer does not make contradictory statements. In other words, the writer does not same that something is true in one place and not true in another.

Not all consistent arguments are relevant. But all relevant arguments are consistent. Hence, relevance is a stronger idea. On the other, any argument that contains inconsistent statements can not work. Hence, one easy way of checking arguments is to look for inconsistencies.

THESIS: I BELIEVE THE FLOYD BILL DESERVES TO BE DEFEATED.

ARGUMENT 1: THE FLOYD BILL SHOULD BE DEFEATED BECAUSE IT EXPOSES BAR AND TAVERN WORKERS TO THE DEADLY HAZARDS OF SECOND-HAND SMOKE.

ARGUMENT 2: THE FLOYD BILL SHOULD BE DEFEATED BECAUSE SINCE IT WILL NOT LEAD TO ECONOMIC PROBLEMS AS ITS SUPPORTERS CLAIM.

ARGUMENT 3: THE FLOYD BILL SHOULD BE DEFEATED ALTHOUGH THERE ARE SO MANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE REAL DANGERS OF SECOND HAND SMOKE THAT IT WOULD NOT BE A MAJOR PROBLEM IF IT WERE PASSED.

In this schema, supporting Argument 3 clearly contradicts the thesis statement as well as supporting Argument 1.

THESIS: I BELIEVE THE FLOYD BILL DESERVES TO BE DEFEATED.

ARGUMENT 1: THE FLOYD BILL SHOULD BE DEFEATED BECAUSE IT EXPOSES BAR AND TAVERN WORKERS TO THE DEADLY HAZARDS OF SECOND-HAND SMOKE.

ARGUMENT 2: I HAD A SISTER WHO DIED FROM SECOND HAND SMOKE.

ARGUMENT 3: THE RESTAURANT WHERE I EAT HAS ADDED TWO NEW DINING ROOMS SINCE THEY HAVE BANNED SMOKING.
In this case, Arguments 2 and 3 are not inconsistent with the thesis in that they do not contradict the thesis. On the other hand, they are not really relevant to the thesis either in that their truth does not directly support the thesis as it is stated.

Sometimes inconsistencies are not explicit but implicit. They do not lie in what is said but in the implications of what is said. For example, look at the following:

Statement: I like R2 because he changes his socks at least once a week.
If one assumes: Most people change their socks every day.
Then the statement implies: R2 is a total slob.

Statement: I like R2 because he always has a good excuse for being late.
If one assumes: Being late too often is not good, regardless of the excuse
Then the statement can imply: R2 is not only late a lot but he is full of it.

However they appear, inconsistencies are deadly and usually invalidate an argument. But remember, just because an argument does not have inconsistencies does not make it otherwise relevant or otherwise acceptable. You might recall that in police films, when interrogating a suspect, the police detectives always become very suspicious when they detect inconsistencies and contradictions in the suspect’s statement. On the other hand, if the suspect provides a consistent alibi, they don’t simply take the statement at face value and release the suspect. Rather, the detectives then go out and try to determine if all the parts do, in fact, fit.

AWARENESS OF PRIMARY OBJECTIONS. A good argument not only tries to give arguments that support the thesis, but also takes into consideration other points of view. A good writer always seriously considers any reasonable objections to his or her thesis, if they exist. For example, the Bee editor was aware of the arguments the supporters of the Floyd bill were using, and in his second argument he directly addressed them. In doing so, the editor is following the general rule that supporting arguments should show an awareness of possible objections to the position taken by the thesis.

Often this “awareness” is implicit. For example, Rick Kushman wrote a critique of the new Disney Cinderella, which was also published in the Sacramento. Kushman, when referring to some of possibly “controversial” ideas of the Disney producer and director, uses direct quotations of their statements. It may be that he was anticipating the accusation that he was misrepresenting or distorting what they wanted to do in the movie. The same goes for his extensive quotation of the lyrics from songs in the film. These references not only provide support for his arguments, they also anticipate then objection that he may be reading his own meanings into the film.

But however it is done, a good writer never argues in a vacuum. The writer knows that any position generates possible objections, and so he or she must show that these objections have been considered in one way or another in the construction of
the argument. Of course, you don’t have to respond to every criticism, but at the very least you should show a genuine openness to other facts and other possibilities.

LOGICALLY DISTINCT ARGUMENTS. This point is connected to the first two. If a set of supporting arguments matches a thesis statement, then each of the supporting arguments is logically distinct or separate from the other. PW states that the thesis should be supported by at least two different. At the very least, this means that each argument should be supported by different kinds of evidence or proof. In other words, the same evidence should not be used to support what are supposed to be two different arguments. Otherwise, you do not have two or three supporting arguments but only one.

For example, suppose that I wanted to develop arguments against James Jones being elected Superior Court Justice and suppose I presented the following three arguments to support my position.

1) I believe Jones should not be elected because he is a convicted felon.

2) I believe Jones should not be elected because he has recently served prison time.

3) I believe Jones should not be elected because he has a criminal past that includes drug dealing and arms smuggling.

The supporting arguments (1-3) are essentially saying the same thing and could be supported by the same evidence. Now consider the following set.

4) I believe Jones should not be elected because he does not have any formal legal training.

5) I believe Jones should not be elected because he has not had enough experience on the bench since he only served as a Municipal Court justice for one month before he was indicted by a Federal Grand jury.

6) While I believe we should be forgiving and allow that people can change, Jones has done nothing to indicate that he will change his behavior in the future.

In this case, (4-6) are clearly separate issues that will require different kinds of evidence to prove.

This is a very common error in argumentation. A writer may imply that he or she has ten separate arguments to support a thesis. However, a closer analysis shows that he or she only has one argument that is stated ten times using different expressions and wording. The giveaway is usually that the same or similar examples are repeated in each case.
BIAS AND PREJUDICE. It goes without saying that an argument should be presented as objectively as possible. This does not mean that all supporting arguments must be presented as “objective facts.” Objectivity refers to the attitude of the writer, not a specific quality of an argument. An objective argument is one in which the reader believes the writer has tried to present the facts and evidence as fairly and as honestly as he or she can. The reader believes that the purpose of the argument is not to force, bully or badger him or her into accepting the thesis. Rather, it is to present the best case possible so that the reader can take the facts and then use our common rules of inference (which we are discussing here) to make up his or her mind. As a writer, you want your reader to believe you are trying to be as honest and as fair as possible.

Biased or prejudicial language is language that asks/demands/coerces the reader to believe in or accept the truth of the thesis or other assumptions without a logical consideration of the facts. For example, I can say that I believe something as a personal belief without being biased. I can say that my belief is a subjective impression without being prejudiced. However, if I ask you to accept a personal belief as a fact without presenting you with any facts, then I can be accused of bias.

For example, as good as the Bee article is, the writer makes certain kinds of statements that could be seen as a problem. He uses biased or prejudicial language, not only in presenting his arguments but also in presenting his background information.

[Floyd’s] measure callously exposes one category of workers to the deadly hazards of secondhand smoke.

In this statement, the italicized words might be seen to show bias. However, in editorials and personal opinion pieces such as this, the writer is expected to take a strong position on an issue. In a sense, an editorial is supposed to be “biased.” So as readers, we can give the writer some latitude when we evaluate his argument. This latitude is justified because the Bee editor goes on to present clear and “objective” supporting arguments as well as examples, so he doesn’t ask us to believe the Floyd Bill is “callous” without providing us with reasons and explanation.

Hence, we still want to call this a good argument in spite of these problems. In other cases, though, the use of biased language at any point could be extremely damaging to validity of the writer’s argument, e.g., in personnel evaluations or police reports.

DO-ABILITY. The last point I would like to mention is that the arguments should be do-able given the writer’s expertise and background as well as the time/space available in the essay. For example, I do not believe that anyone, regardless of how knowledgeable he or she may be, can “prove” to a degree of factual certainty that
the California “three-strikes law” has effectively reduced violent crimes in California in the course of nine or ten paragraphs. An expert could certainly give an opinion, a very informed opinion, perhaps, but ten paragraphs is not long enough for the presentation of fully developed and annotated arguments on such a complex subject.

Hence, one of the points that you can always consider is whether or not the writer, including yourself, has presented a thesis that can reasonably be proven/supported given his/her background and the available time/space.

Another way of looking at this is that we should always assess the scope of an argument. For example, it is critical to determine whether an argument is supposed to prove that a proposition is generally, universally or factually true or whether it is simply designed to back up the writer’s “non-expert” personal beliefs and opinions on a complex topic.

This matter of scope is an extremely critical issue. In fact, it is so important that it is reflected in how different types of essays are published and presented to the public. In newsmagazines like Time and Newsweek as well as newspapers like the Bee, there are factual reports and there are argumentative or editorial reports. The first are usually not given a by-line or the name of the person who wrote the article. The second type of essay is always by-lined. The reason for doing this is not only to acknowledge the reporter’s individual efforts in researching and writing the essay but also to indicate that the opinions expressed may not necessarily represent those of the publication or the editorial staff. They are professional opinions and judgments, but they are not presented as “objective facts.”

All of your papers for E20 must be written in the first-person singular “I” because the use of the first person generally narrows your evidence base. In these assignments, you are only offering your opinions on the questions the limited resources available to you. The third-person “objective” point of view, on the other hand, assumes a greater degree of knowledge, authority or background on the writer’s part. More importantly, the third person prevents the writer from using personal experiences and making personal qualifications to arguments.

One last comment on this point. When analyzing a writer’s arguments, you should be aware of shifts in point of view. This occurs when the writer goes from the objective third person to the first person and/or the second person point of view. These shifts are not only matters of style but of logic. They show that the writer does not understand the nature of the arguments he or she is presenting and the types of evidence necessary to support them.

Consider the following paragraph:

I loved to play Pac-Man when I was young.
I thought Pac-Man was more fun than Boy Scouts.
Many adults started out with video games and ended up being anti-social.
You may say they don’t really harm you but they do.
Video games are causing you more harm than you think at the time. In fact, most anti-social behavior these days usually starts with Pac-Man. I read somewhere about the serial killer who played Pac-Man a lot. It is obvious Pac-Man should be banned in every country in the world. It is more dangerous than nuclear waste because turns kids into killers.

Needless to say, there is a logical confusion as to what is being argued here. The scope of the argument is certainly not clear. The writer is either giving personal reflections on Pac-Man and/or “arguing” how Pac-Man is a danger to all the little children’s of the world.

The point is that you really can’t tell what this guy is talking about. A personal reflection on the childhood joys of Pac-Man should be do-able in a few paragraphs. However, an analysis of why there should be an international ban on Pac-Man would probably not be.

END NOTE

I admit that these six CT tools are rather awkwardly stated here. But once you start to use them, I believe that you will find that they will become clearer and clearer. In our next handout, I’ll present a set of tools for checking a paper's development.