2.8: Finding the Limits on the Argument

Media Alternative

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If we are getting ready to summarize and respond to an argument, we need to notice exactly how the writer has qualified or limited what they are saying.

Often writers will strengthen their case against the counterargument by taking a step back and limiting what they are claiming. They might make an exception for a particular case which they can’t support. Or they might clarify that their claim only applies to a particular group or situation.
Just as we might limit a tomato harvest to ripe tomatoes, we might want to limit an argument to certain cases and not others.

Faced with a powerful counterargument, a writer might also admit a certain degree of uncertainty about their claim as a whole. They might consider the argument worth putting forward for consideration even if they are not sure it is right.

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**Common Phrases Used to Limit Arguments**

**Kinds of limitations on arguments**

**Phrases**

- Perhaps, ________.
- It is worth considering the idea that ________.
- ________ may_______.
- ________ might_______.
- ________ could possibly_______.
- Probably, ________.
- Very likely, ________.
- Almost certainly, ________.

- Few ________.
- In a few cases, ________.
- Some_______.
- Many_______.

**Expressing less than perfect certainty**

**Limiting what the argument is claiming or restricting the scope of the argument**
Kinds of limitations on arguments

Phrases

- Most ________.
- The vast majority of ________.
- Almost all ________.
- ________ unless ________.
- If it is not the case that ________, then ________.
- ________, except in the case that ________.
- We can exclude cases where ________.

When we read arguments, we can watch for these limitations and add them to our argument map. In the case of the border argument, limitations are found throughout. We have highlighted them and commented on them below.

Sample Notes on an Argument's Limits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argument</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title: Wouldn’t We All Cross the Border?</td>
<td>Not limited at all—“all”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the disagreement over immigration policy I have been hearing about in the news lately reminds me that while I believe in the rule of law, I feel profoundly uncomfortable with the idea of keeping people out who are desperate to come in. Is illegal immigration actually wrong? Is it unethical to cross a border without permission?

Limits the group of immigrants we are talking about to those who are desperate. This is an argument about refugees of one kind or another, not about people who just feel they would be happier or more successful in the U.S.

So maybe the author would still consider it fine to criminalize those who cross illegally because they prefer to live in the U.S. if they are not currently in dire straits.
I don’t have a clear vision yet of what the right border policy would be, and I admit that completely open borders would put our security at risk. But surely there are ways to regulate the border without criminalizing people who are driven by need and good intentions.

If I were raising children in an impoverished third-world community plagued by violence, and if I had a chance to get my family to the U.S., I would take it. I would try to cross a border illegally so my children would get enough to eat and would have a more stable childhood and a chance at a better education and a better career. What parent would sit on their hands and tell themself, “I want to give my child a better life, but oh well. If I don’t have the papers, I guess it would be wrong”?

If most of us, under desperate circumstances, would cross the border without permission and feel no moral qualms about doing so, then we must recognize this crossing as an ethical, reasonable act. If it is ethical and reasonable, then how can either a wall or a detention center be on the side of justice? We must find a policy that treats migrants as we would want to be treated—with empathy, respect, and offers of help.

The main limitation, then, can be entered into the argument map in blue and in brackets thus:

Clarifies that some “regulation” of borders is okay. Their argument does not condemn all efforts to establish rules and consequences at the border.

Again, this clarifies that this only applies to migrants with a compelling reason to cross.

Outlines a specific circumstance that would justify crossing illegally, implying that other circumstances might not justify it.

Repeats the limitation to migrants who are desperate.

Note: The final sentences don’t mention any limitation on which migrants we are talking about.
"Argument Map with Limits" by Anna Mills is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0. See the accessible text description of the argument map with limits.

Now that we have analyzed the parts of the argument and their relations to each other, we are ready for the next step demanded by most college writing assignments. Chapter 3 will discuss how to write a clear and precise summary of an argument.

Practice Exercise 1

1. Choose an argument you are reading for class or one of our suggested readings. You may want to focus on a short excerpt of one or more paragraphs.
2. Read your text closely and identify any limits it puts on any of its claims.
3. Describe each limit in your own words and add it to your argument map. You can handwrite your map or copy this Google Drawings template.