
Questioning as we learn: An introduction to critical thinking

Material for Higher Education students in Sierra Leone by INASP, UK



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Unit 4 - Snippet 101

Conditional statements

Claims can be conditional. This means that a statement's conclusion becomes true only if certain requirements are met. Conditional claims can be tricky. You may hastily draw the wrong conclusion if you don't pay close enough attention. The following pages will help you understand how you can interpret conditional statements correctly.

Let's take this example of a conditional statement:

If it rains, then Peter will watch TV.

In which cases has the speaker told the truth or predicted correctly what will happen? And in which cases has there been something wrong with the speaker's claim?

If it's raining indeed and Peter is watching TV, then the speaker has certainly said the truth.

If it's raining and Peter is not watching TV, then the speaker hasn't predicted the future correctly or given a wrong claim.

But what follows in terms of the statement's truth if it's not raining and Peter is watching TV or not? Both scenarios are in accordance with the statement. Actually, the speaker hasn't claimed anything for the situation where it's not raining. So Peter can watch TV or not, and the speaker wouldn't have lied.

This also means that if one believes the speaker, one can predict:

When it's raining, Peter must watch TV. We can predict that without even checking on him.

When Peter is not watching TV, it is not raining. So one doesn't need to look out of the window to check that.

However, you cannot predict anything when you see that it's not raining; Peter could be watching TV or not. And you cannot predict anything when you see that Peter is watching TV. It could be raining or not.