

Argument Task

Directions:

Read the statement and the instructions that follow it, and then make any notes that will help you plan your response.

The following appeared as part of an article in a daily newspaper:

“The computerized on-board warning system that will be installed in commercial airliners will virtually solve the problem of midair plane collisions. One plane’s warning system can receive signals from another’s transponder—a radio set that signals a plane’s course—in order to determine the likelihood of a collision and recommend evasive action.”

Discuss how well reasoned you find this argument. In your discussion, be sure to analyze the line of reasoning and the use of evidence in the argument. For example, you may need to consider what questionable assumptions underlie the thinking and what alternative explanations or counterexamples might weaken the conclusion. You can also discuss what sort of evidence would strengthen or refute the argument, what changes in the argument would make it more logically sound, and what, if anything, would help you better evaluate its conclusion.

Response of Score 6

The argument that this warning system will virtually solve the problem of midair plane collisions omits some important concerns that must be addressed to substantiate the argument. The statement that follows the description of what this warning system will do simply describes the system and how it operates. This alone does not constitute a logical argument in favor of the warning system, and it certainly does not provide support or proof of the main argument.

Most conspicuously, the argument does not address the cause of the problem of midair plane collisions, the use of the system by pilots and flight specialists, or who is involved in the midair plane collisions. First, the argument assumes that the cause of the problem is that the planes’ courses, the likelihood of collisions, and actions to avoid collisions are unknown or inaccurate. In a weak attempt to support its claim, the argument describes a system that makes all of these things accurately known. But if the cause of the problem of midair plane collisions is that pilots are not paying attention to their computer systems or flight operations, the warning system will not solve the collision problem. Second, the argument never addresses the interface between individuals and the system and how this will affect the warning system’s objective of obliterating the problem of collisions. If the pilot or flight specialist does not conform to what the warning system suggests, midair collisions will not be avoided. Finally, if planes other than commercial airliners are involved in the collisions, the problem of these collisions cannot be solved by a warning system that will not be installed on non-commercial airliners. The argument also does not address what would happen in the event that the warning system collapses, fails, or does not work properly.

Because the argument leaves out several key issues, it is not sound or persuasive. If it included the items discussed above instead of solely explaining what the system supposedly does, the argument would have been more thorough and convincing.

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Explanation of Score 6

This response is, as the scoring guide requires of a 6, “cogent” and “well-articulated”: all the points made not only bear directly on the argument to be analyzed, but also contribute to a single, integrated development of the writer’s critique. The writer begins by making the controlling point that a mere description of the warning system’s mode of operation cannot serve as a true argument proving the system’s effectiveness, since the description overlooks several major considerations. The writer then identifies these considerations—what causes midair collisions, how pilots will actually use the commercial airline warning system, what kinds of airplanes are typically involved in midair collisions—and, citing appropriate counterexamples (e.g., what if pilots do not pay attention to their instruments?),

Explains fully how each oversight undermines the conclusion that the warning system will virtually eliminate midair plane collisions.

Throughout, the writer complements the logically organized development of this critique with good, clear prose that demonstrates the ability not only to control language and vary sentence structure but also to express ideas forcibly (e.g., “the argument never addresses the interface between individuals and the system”). Of course, as in any response written under time constraints, occasional minor flaws can be found. For example, “the argument assumes that the cause of the problem is that the planes’ courses, the likelihood of collisions, and actions to avoid collisions are unknown or inaccurate” is wordy and imprecise: how can a course, likelihood, or actions be inaccurate?

But flaws such as these, minor and infrequent, do not interfere with the overall clarity and forcefulness of this outstanding response.