

# 1.4 - GENERALIZATIONS

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## Learning Objectives

- ❖ Observe similarities between an assertion and a generalization.
- ❖ Recall the attributes of an assertion that also apply to a generalization.
- ❖ Demonstrate an understanding of a generalization as a broad universal statement
- ❖ Use both bottom-up and top-down approaches to locate generalizations in text.
- ❖ Identify the specifics in a segment of text out of which a generalization is formed.
- ❖ Acknowledge that, at times, it may be difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between an assertion and a generalization.

Up to this point, we have examined two of the three categories of statements: one category that we have labelled facts and complex factual information, and a second category, assertions. Now the third - generalizations.

One thing that may strike you when you start examining generalizations is that they share one important feature with assertions: both are forthright, unambiguous and intended to convince the reader to accept them. Beyond that however, generalizations have their own unique characteristics that you should pay attention to.

One definition of a generalization is that it is about taking one or a few facts and making a broader more universal statement. Another definition, following the same path, refers to it as a general statement or concept obtained by inference from specific cases. And a third views it as “*a statement that is broad enough to cover or describe characteristics that are common to a variety of particular objects, events or experiences*”.

### A hypothetical example

Drawing on these definitions, one may say that a generalization takes information from specific situations and applies that information to all possible situations that share the features of the specific. For example, one can state as a generalization, that nowadays teenagers spend less time in face-to-face interaction with their peers than previously. One can arrive at that conclusion from a specific observation made at a party, namely that all the teenagers in the party spent more time on their smartphones than interacting with one another.

Of course, some generalizations, like this one, are very loose and may even be misleading. One should certainly avoid making such sweeping statements when one has not spent the time gathering the data from a sufficiently representative sample of the population of teenagers. Observations made at a single party do not provide sufficient support for the generalization.

Nonetheless, it serves to demonstrate how authors arrive at a generalization. One systematically observes the specific characteristics or behaviours that are shared across a range of people, objects, events, situations and, on the basis of those observations, makes a broad statement to apply to all that may be classified as belonging to that grouping, in this case, teenagers.

## Bottom-up and top-down paths for arriving at a generalization

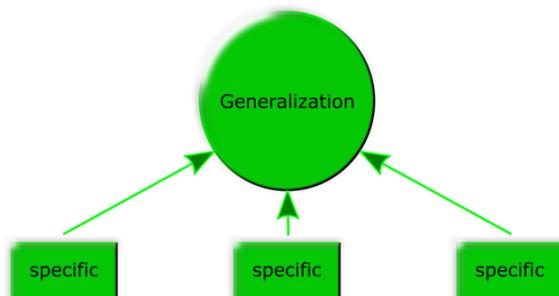


Figure 1.10a - Inductive Reasoning

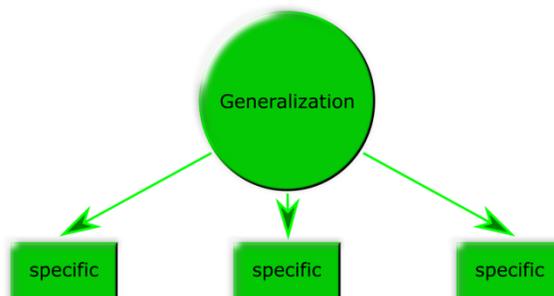


Figure 1.10b - Deductive Reasoning

What our hypothetical example about teenagers also demonstrates is the bottom-up approach to the formation of a generalization, going from the specific to the broad and universal. We first noticed several individual teenagers using smartphones at the party. We also noticed that while doing so, there was not much conversation between or among them. Those are the specific details observed. We then moved up, as it were, from the specific observations to the broad general statement, which states that teenagers are spending less time interacting with their peers.

This approach of arriving at a broad general statement based on information derived from observation of specific details is referred to as inductive reasoning, reasoning from the bottom up.

Then there is the top-down approach, as reflected in the following extract:

### Extract 1.15

#### **The changing teaching profession and you**

#### **Are there also challenges to teaching?**

Here too, the simple answer is 'yes'. Every joy of teaching has a possible frustration related to it. You may wish to make a positive difference in students' lives but you may also have trouble reaching individuals. A student seems to not learn much, or to be unmotivated, or unfriendly, or whatever.

And so some teaching problems can be subtle: when you call attention to the wonderful immensity of an area of knowledge, you

might accidentally discourage a student by implying that the student can never learn “enough”. The complexity of designing and implementing instruction can sometimes seem overwhelming, instead of satisfying. Unexpected events in your classroom can become chaos rather than an attractive novelty. To paraphrase a popular self-help book, sometimes “bad things happen to good teachers” (Kushner, 1983).

At first glance, there does not seem to be a generalization at the beginning of this extract. However, a closer look will reveal that the question of the subheading, when combined with the firm answer ‘yes’ in the sentence that immediately follows, together yield the response in the form of the generalization, ‘There are (also) challenges to teaching’.

This is a top-down approach, otherwise known as deductive reasoning. The generalization is stated up front and the details subsequently identified serve to confirm its validity. Through deductive reasoning, the author provides a series of situations that reflect the challenges of teaching. For example,

- *You may wish to make a positive difference in students' lives but you may also have trouble reaching individuals.*
- *Unexpected events in your classroom can become chaos rather than an attractive novelty.*

A generalization is described as universal as it applies to the entire group or class of objects, people, events, experiences (or at least most of it). Generalizations are broad universal statements that are formed from or that yield specific features observed in as many cases as possible of the thing to which the generalization applies.

### Is there a distinction between a generalization and an assertion?

Just in case some of you are still unsure of the distinction between an assertion and a generalization, let's look at it from a somewhat different perspective:

*One way to think about this (distinction between the two), would be that a generalization is a claim about the state of something over multiple cases, whereas an assertion may be*

*limited to a single case. Thus 'Canadians are polite' is a generalization that is intended to apply to many if not all cases, while 'your posting in this debate was very thoughtful' is an assertion about a particular case which may be made in part, because it is not true most of the time. ... All generalizations are assertions - i.e. a claim about the world. (Ben Levin, ResearchGate, January, 2017).*

Basically, what Levin is saying is that certain features of an assertion also apply to a generalization in that both are claims: assertions make claims about specific situations while generalizations make claims about broader, more universal contexts.

There are times though when it is not possible to make such a clear distinction and you may find yourself asking, is it a universal statement or is it a claim that applies to a specific situation, much like Claire Handscombe's online commitment problem we discussed earlier? The following extract presents that kind of challenge:

**Extract 1.16**

Travel agencies, otherwise known as the retail sector, are the storefront for the tour operators due to their location in prime urban centres. Their generic functions may include, but are not limited to, making reservations, planning travel itineraries, calculating fares, advising clients on destinations, resorts and other types of travel products (Page and Connell, 2006). Travel agents offer distribution of travel products in suburban areas by providing convenient locations for travellers to book their holidays. Because of the intangible nature of the tourism product they are usually regarded by consumers as the experts because of their perceived experience with the destination and their product knowledge. ...

So, is it a generalization? Or is it an assertion and not a generalization? Or can it be either? If I start with the core idea in the first sentence, namely 'travel agencies ... are the store front for the tour operators', I am likely to lean towards considering it a generalization, viewing it as a broad universal statement. However, when I add the concluding phrase – 'due to their location in prime urban centres' – the meaning is narrowed down to being a claim applicable to

a more specific context. It is evident that the follow-up supporting details only apply with this particular condition.

In making decisions about these two types of statements, it is important to be clear about the fundamental features of each, since, at times, the line between the two may be somewhat blurred.

### Key Takeaways

- ❖ Generalizations are broad statements that apply to all or at least most members of a given population.
- ❖ In that regard, they are considered to be universal statements.
- ❖ Generalizations may be formed using either deductive or inductive reasoning.
- ❖ Generalizations share the core characteristics of assertions.

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