

Steelmanning

A Powerful Tool for Constructive Dialogue

Steelmanning is the practice of presenting the strongest possible version of someone else's argument. This contrasts with the more common "strawmanning" tactic, where one misrepresents or oversimplifies an opposing argument to make it easier to refute. Steelmanning aims to understand and then articulate back the strongest form of an argument – typically something that is being questioned or argued against – which demonstrates intellectual honesty and fosters constructive dialogue. While strawmanning creates a weak, easily defeated version of an argument, "steelmanning" does the opposite, reformulating the argument to its strongest form. Although the origin of the term is unclear (please comment if you know about the origin of the term), the basic concept was popularized via the rationalist movement¹ and by philosopher Daniel Dennett in his book *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*.²

How to Practice and Apply Steelmanning

Practicing steelmanning involves several key steps:

1. Listen Actively:

Pay close attention to the original argument by containing your preconceived notions and biases as much as possible. Understand their core points and underlying logic. Repeat your understanding to ensure accuracy and model your desire for it.

Sujin: We shouldn't spend so much on space stuff when we have problems like poverty and healthcare.

Eric: So you're saying our resources should focus on urgent Earth issues before we invest heavily in space exploration. Do I have that right?

2. Reconstruct the Argument:

Identify any strong points and present them concisely, clearly, and fairly. Ensure that you capture the true intent and rationale of the original argument, avoiding any misrepresentation.

Sujin: Yes, exactly. Addressing poverty and healthcare directly improves people's lives immediately.

Eric: Understood. It sounds like you're highlighting the importance of immediate human needs.

¹ e.g., [Knocking Down a Steel Man: How to Argue Better](#)

² see here: [How to Criticize with Kindness: Philosopher Daniel Dennett on the Four Steps to Arguing Intelligently – The Marginalian](#)

3. Enhance the Argument:

Offer any missing elements that could make the argument stronger or more convincing. Collaboratively consider the best possible evidence and reasoning that could support the argument.

Sujin: Yes, and by focusing on these issues, we can create a more stable and productive society, which might better support future endeavors like space exploration.

Eric: I see. So, you're suggesting that solving urgent problems could lay the groundwork for long-term projects by building a healthier, more resilient society?

4. Present the Steelman:

Articulate the steelmanned argument to your discussion partner. This shows you're set on working with them to figure things out—no tricks or traps—and sets the stage for a more productive and insightful discussion.

Sujin: Exactly, and by investing in people's well-being now, we create a stronger foundation for future advancements, including space exploration.

Eric: That makes sense. By prioritizing immediate needs, we can ensure a more sustainable and supportive environment for future projects. Does that capture your perspective accurately?

5. Engage with Respect and Openness:

Approach the conversation with a curious mindset along with a genuine willingness to understand and learn in pursuit of truth and accuracy. Acknowledge any merits of their strengthened argument before offering to collaboratively explore and reflect on the reasoning process for supporting reasons against critique or counterpoints.

Sujin: Yes, that's right. I appreciate you taking the time to understand my point of view. That's my position and I feel like I even have a better perspective into things now.

Eric: Thanks for sharing your thoughts. I've learned a lot from this discussion too and will keep these points in mind going forward. Care to hear my current stance on resource allocation?



Finally, be sure to check in with your interlocutor during or after presenting the steelmanned argument to see if you made any mistakes or if there are any aspects that you misunderstood. (Challenge: identify where this was done in the example dialogue that was provided throughout this section.)

Why Should We Practice Steelmanning?

Engaging in steelmanning can positively transform how we interact with differing viewpoints, fostering an environment where intellectual humility and open-mindedness thrive. Steelmanning encourages us to step away from our biases and preconceptions and compels us to understand the rationale behind opposing views, which can often reveal common ground or new ways of thinking about a problem. In a world where misinformation and polarized thinking are rampant, the ability to steelman an argument can serve as a powerful antidote, promoting a more nuanced and thoughtful discourse.

Attempting to present the strongest version of an opposing argument helps us identify and understand the underlying principles and evidence that support various viewpoints. Steelmanning helps us recognize that other perspectives often contain valuable insights; insights that we might've otherwise overlooked. By practicing steelmanning, we become better at recognizing the strengths and weaknesses in different arguments, enhancing our critical thinking capabilities, and creating space for ideas to be explored honestly, deeply, and constructively, leading to richer, more meaningful discussions.

Moreover, steelmanning encourages us to step away from our biases and preconceptions. It compels us to understand the rationale behind opposing views, which can often reveal common ground or new ways of thinking about a problem. This approach not only enhances our empathy and respect for others but also makes us better equipped to engage in problem-solving.

Steelmanning Improves Mental Immunity

By forcing us to honestly assess our views in light of the strongest portrayal of the opposing views, steelmanning strengthens our defenses against misinformation and manipulative arguments by encouraging us to consider if our views are misguided. This practice helps us to reduce cognitive biases such as confirmation bias, where we tend to favor information that supports our pre-existing beliefs. Steelmanning encourages us to seek out the most credible and well-supported arguments, thereby fostering mental frameworks that are more resilient to biases and simplistic or misleading information.

By challenging ourselves to consider the best possible counterarguments, we become more balanced and fair-minded thinkers. This not only protects us from falling prey to misinformation but also enhances our ability to communicate ideas accurately and fairly. In essence, steelmanning better equips us to navigate an increasingly complex information landscape, fostering a healthier, more discerning approach to both personal and public discourse.

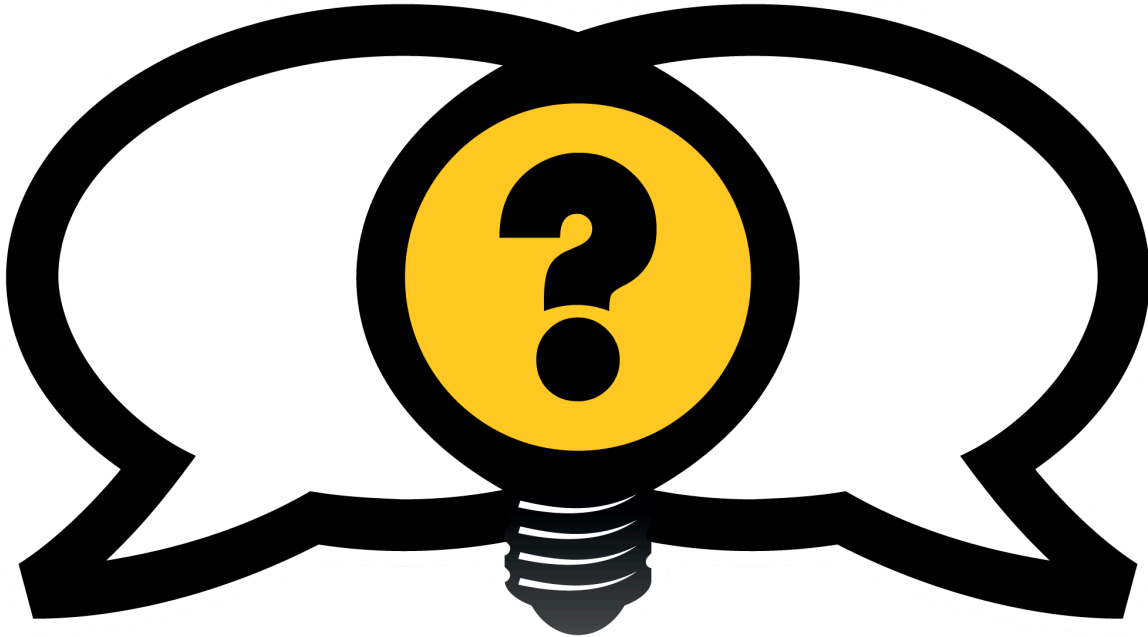
Conclusion

Steel manning is a powerful tool for enhancing critical thinking and building mental immunity. By striving to present the strongest version of opposing arguments, you foster intellectual

humility, improve dialogue, and sharpen your thinking. Embrace steelmanning as a way to elevate your thinking and engage more deeply with the views and arguments of others.

Learn More

[How To Steel Man An Opposing Argument \(feat. Sam Harris and Jordan Peterson\)](#) - YouTube



This article is part of our collaboration with Anthony Magnabosco of [Street Epistemology International](#). You can learn more about [Street Epistemology](#) by taking their fantastic, free, self-directed course: [Navigating Beliefs: A Learning Course for Rational Conversations](#).