“Standard form” is a term used to refer to a way of representing arguments that we have used many times in this class. As we conceive of them in here, arguments are collections of statements, one of which is the conclusion with others being reasons for that conclusion. Standard form is useful as a way of representing arguments because it helps you focus on those statements in a text that are specifically relevant to the author’s reasoning. The form is straightforward: you list the reasons (or premises) in a numbered stack on top of the conclusion, like so:

1. Reason 1
2. Reason 2
3. Reason 3
...
n. Reason n

C. Conclusion

In this exercise, you are to extract the argument from the text that appears below. Begin with a paragraph in which you reconstruct the argument from the text, and then supply a standard form representation of that argument. Remember that a reconstruction is not a summary—you need to include in the argument steps that are implicit or have been introduced elsewhere, so long as they are steps on which the reasoning depends.

(details about argument reconstruction and standard form development are available on the Critical Thinking Worksite, located here: http://www.msu.edu/~orourk51/ctw-br/.)

That would settle the matter, except for one difficulty: what I have just said seems to imply that I can never be in error. If everything that is in me comes from God, and he didn’t equip me with a capacity for making mistakes, doesn’t it follow that I can never go wrong in my beliefs? Well, I know by experience that I am greatly given to errors; but when I focus on God to the exclusion of everything else, I find in him no cause of error or falsity. In looking for the cause of my errors, I am helped by this thought: as well as having a real and positive idea of God (a being who is supremely perfect), I also have what you might call a negative idea of nothingness (that which is furthest from all perfection). I realize that I am somewhere in between God and nothingness, or between supreme being and non-being. Now, the positive reality that I have been given by the supreme being contains nothing that could lead me astray in my beliefs. I make mistakes, not surprisingly, because my nature involves nothingness or non-being—that is, because I am not myself the supreme being, and lack countless perfections. So error is not something real that depends on God, but is merely ‘something negative, a lack’, a defect. There is, therefore, nothing positively error-producing in the faculty of judgment that God gave me. When I go wrong I do so because the faculty of true judgment that I have from God is in my case not free of all limitations, ‘that is, because it partly involves nothingness’. (Descartes, Med. IV, ¶ 4)