2. Richter was not entitled to the habeas relief ordered by the Ninth Circuit. Pp. 10–24.

(a) That court failed to accord the required deference to the decision of a state court adjudicating the same claims later presented in the federal habeas petition. Its opinion shows an improper understanding of §2254(d)’s unreasonableness standard and operation in the context of a Strickland claim. Asking whether the state court’s application of Strickland’s standard was unreasonable is different from asking whether defense counsel’s performance fell below that standard. Under AEDPA, a state court must be granted a deference and latitude that are not in operation in a case involving direct review under Strickland. A state court’s determination that a claim lacks merit precludes federal habeas relief so long as “fair-minded jurists could disagree” on the correctness of that decision. Yarborough v. Alvarado, 541 U. S. 652, 664. And the more general the rule being considered, “the more leeway courts have in reaching outcomes in case-by-case determinations.” The Ninth Circuit explicitly conducted a de novo review and found a Strickland violation; it then declared without further explanation that the state court’s contrary decision was unreasonable. But §2254(d) requires a habeas court to determine what arguments or theories supported, or could have supported, the state-court decision; and then to ask whether it is possible fair-minded jurists could disagree that those arguments or theories are inconsistent with a prior decision of this Court. AEDPA’s unreasonableness standard is not a test of the confidence of a federal habeas court in the conclusion it would reach as a de novo matter. Even a strong case for relief does not make the state court’s contrary conclusion unreasonable. Section 2254(d) is designed to confirm that state courts are the principal forum for asserting constitutional challenges to state convictions. Pp. 10–14.

(b) The Ninth Circuit erred in concluding that Richter demonstrated an unreasonable application of Strickland by the state court. Pp. 14–23.

(1) Richter could have secured relief in state court only by showing both that his counsel provided deficient assistance and that prejudice resulted. To be deficient, counsel’s representation must have fallen “below an objective standard of reasonableness,” Strickland, 466 U. S., at 688; and there is a “strong presumption” that counsel’s representation is within the “wide range” of reasonable professional assistance, id., at 689.