

Sam Spade's Use of the Syllogism

The prompt to read this information appears on p. 37 of *Acting on Words*.

An imperfect but successful syllogism

As long as you remember that use of the syllogism form does not ensure sound results, the method can still be highly serviceable. Here is an example of a successful deduction in the form of a syllogism from *The Maltese Falcon* (the 1940s film noir starring Humphrey Bogart). Early on in the film, private eye Sam Spade (Bogart's character) concludes, through deduction, that his investigative partner must have been killed by someone his partner knew, because his dead partner's overcoat was still buttoned up and his gun was in his holster.

Major premise (presumption)

An experienced detective assigned to shadow a suspect would not allow a stranger to approach in an alley late at night without quick access to a weapon for possible self-defence.

Minor premise (fact)

The detective's buttoned coat, preventing quick access to his weapon, indicated he did not feel threatened by the person approaching.

Conclusion

The dead detective knew and felt secure around the approaching person who turned out to be his killer.

In the film, Sam Spade's conclusion proves correct: the victim knew the killer. However, notice how his major premise is only an assumption, an informed guess. What if the killer *were* not known to the dead detective, but appeared unthreatening—say, a uniformed police officer, a minister in starched collar, an early-morning milkman, or an elderly person anxiously requiring directions somewhere? These absolute strangers would likely be able to approach the detective without causing enough alarm for him to prepare to defend himself. Thus the major premise would be wrong and the syllogism's conclusion would be faulty: an unknown killer in a reassuring disguise could have approached the experienced detective. As well, the dead detective might have been ambushed by the killer and not have had opportunity to defend himself. Or the killer, a person not known to the detective, might have returned the detective's gun to its holster and re-buttoned his overcoat in an effort to suggest that the killer was, in fact, someone the detective did know.

Our point here is that deductions are often our best-informed conclusions under limited conditions, conditions that include presumptions. Question your own deductions, and be alert to presumptions that veil possible exceptions and alternatives.