



LSAT ACADEMY

Indicator Words as Essential Fundamentals

Fundamentals Beat Raw
Intelligence on the LSAT



Indicator Words as Essential Fundamentals

Fundamentals

In 2011 LeBron James—possibly the greatest of all time—hired hall of famer Hakeem Olajuaon after the NBA season was over in order to re-teach him basic footwork under the basket. LeBron had already been MVP of the league twice by this point. LeBron had been heaped with nothing but praise his entire career. Yet ***eight years into his career***, once the season was over, he worked out with multiple NBA legends, having them ***teach him the fundamentals***, so that he could have absolutely no flaws in his game.

Some athletes cruise through their high school sports program on pure ***talent***. Some of them even cruise through college without ever developing a solid foundation of ***skill*** in their sport. But sooner or later, if those athletes ever make it to the big leagues, they need to focus on skill, or else they'll be washed out of the league within a couple of years. Because when people reach a certain level, everyone needs to master the ***fundamentals*** so that they can become skilled to play there. And the greatest are always, in part, defined by their absolute mastery of the fundamentals.

Talent

I can tell the story of undisciplined basketball players falling apart in the big leagues to smart, capable, high-scoring LSAT students, and these LSAT students have no problem understanding the story: those athletes are silly. The athletes had a chance at something great, and they threw it away just because “training” on “fundamentals” insulted their pride. These athletes had never ***needed*** “fundamentals” before, and to embrace “fundamentals” at this late stage of the game would damage their self-image.

But these same smart LSAT students often totally fail to see the parallel between themselves and the athletes. Some of these LSAT students are already scoring in the mid-160s, some of them are even in the low 170s. They want to get just that last point, they want to nudge their score up just a bit more. It would mean the world to them to achieve the higher score. But are they willing to go back to grade school? Are they willing to memorize lists of words that they feel they already know?

A surprising amount of the time the answer is no. They are ***smart*** people, they are already getting “***smart-people***” scores, and they feel they don’t need any ***childish*** fundamentals. They’re looking for something deep and intellectual. They don’t realize they’re very little different from those talented, undisciplined college athletes.

Yeah, But I Already Know Them, Duh

Memorizing indicator words is part of mastering the fundamentals. But you already know all of them, by heart, and you have for years! Of course you do. I know that already. You know I know that. I know I'm not asking you to learn a bunch of words for the first time.

But very little of what I do as an LSAT teacher is telling students brand new, shiny information. Most of it is helping them pare away the useless tools from the useful tools, and helping them to appreciate their relative value.

Leaving aside their relative value, **all** of the indicator words I want you to memorize you already know, the problem is ***you know them too well***. What we want is for you to be ***unable to not see these words when they pop up***. We want these words to start seeing these words ***pulsating*** on the page, and glowing in bright fiery letters of red.

Because when reading, most people's minds: 1) take in a bunch of words in a clump, 2) extract some meaning from them, and then 3) discard the words having barely noticed them. When was the last time you read the word "for" on the page and really noticed it? Honestly? You probably noticed the word "for" about the last time you noticed the letter "G." Because that's not how we read. We don't read letter-by-letter. And we don't read word for word. We vacuum up vast quantities of words, retain a few ideas, and leave the words behind like husts. We take very little conscious notice of the words. And that needs to change.

Consider once again the supremely talented, but fundamentally unsound, rookie NBA star. Now consider the 2-time MVP LeBron James. Which one of these made it to 8 seasons, let alone 20, as Mr. James had? And which of these was still drilling on the fundamentals in their 8th season? Who do you want to be like? Do you really want those few extra points?

Argument Indicator Words

The core of the LSAT is Logical Reasoning—2 out of 3 sections are LR. And the core of LR is argument. Working not just accurately, but effortlessly, with arguments is essential to getting one's highest score on the LSAT. Acknowledging this as true, how can any LSAT student not make memorizing the indicator words of arguments a priority?

Conditional Reasoning Indicator Words

The Logical Reasoning section tests for all kinds of reasoning, but probably the most common form of reasoning on the LSAT is **conditional reasoning**. To get your best score you need to not only understand these indicator words, you need to be able to flex them effortlessly. You want to be able to see:

Going to law school requires taking the LSAT.

...and be able to instantly flex that into:

If going to law school, then taking the LSAT.
If not taking the LSAT, not going to law school.
Unless taking the LSAT, not going to law school.
Not going to law school until taking the LSAT.
People who go to law school take the LSAT.
Only if taking the LSAT, going to law school.
The only people who go to law school take the LSAT.

This should be quick and easy; effortless. If you know the words **for the most part**, and you can work your way through most conditional reasoning statements **without too much trouble**, then two things are true about you:

1. You understand conditional reasoning better than most LSAT students, and
2. You **don't** understand conditional reasoning as well as you need to for your best score.

The reward for getting this stuff down is pretty high: tens of thousands off the price of law school, admittance to **this** law school instead of **that** law school. Enough about the LSAT is hard, this is just boring and silly. And yet most people won't memorize these words and become effortless at flexing them. Will you?

You can. And to get your best score, you should.

Memorize these.

Tape these on the bathroom mirror.

Put them on flash cards and keep them on your bedside table.

Whenever you see a sentence with one of these, come up with different ways of phrasing it.

You don't want conditional reasoning to be something you can work with.

You want conditional reasoning to be something you can't possibly mess up.

Conditional Reasoning Indicator Words

Sufficient Condition Indicators

- If
- When
- Whenever
- Every
- Any
- People who
- The only
- In order to (or simply, "to")

Necessary Condition Indicators

- Then
- Must
- Requires
- Necessitates
- Needs
- Relies on
- Depends on
- Crucially
- Hinges upon
- Only if (only when; only people who)
- Unless/Until/Except/Without

As above, so below:

Memorize these.

Tape these on the bathroom mirror.

Put them on flash cards and keep them on your bedside table.

Whenever you see a sentence with one of these, come up with different ways of phrasing it.

You don't want arguments to be concepts you can grasp.

You want arguments to be concepts you can't possibly mess up.

Argumentative Indicator Words

Premise Indicators:

Because
For
As
Since
For
For example
For the reason that
Given that
As shown by
After all
Moreover
In addition
Furthermore
What's more

Conclusion Indicators:

In conclusion (obviously)
Hence
Thus
Therefore
Consequently
So
It follows that
As a result
Clearly
Accordingly

Not An Exhaustive List

The above lists are a selection of words that it is essential you memorize as words you can't miss, words you memorize to the point that they glow off the page at you. They are not a list of all possible indicators of conditional reasoning, premises, or conclusions. What you should do is to use them as a starting point. Create your own list, and add to them.

(I'm writing this in March of 2025. For at least the next two years, anyone who emails info@LSAT.academy asking whether or not a new word they've found **is** or **is not** a valid indicator word for conclusions, premises, or conditional reasoning will get a response. These words will become vital to your success. Become interested in them, and interested in finding more!)

Understanding Indicators Lessens the Need to Understand Ideas

Let's get really basic with this: Here's a sufficient assumption question (and if you don't have the Sufficient Assumption pamphlet yet, you can get it here.) This may seem easy because you do understand these ideas, but even if we didn't we could get it right in under 60 seconds with just basic knowledge of logic, and a solid grasp of indicator words.

"Without a law degree I can't get the job I want in big law, so in the absence of taking the LSAT, I can't get that job, since law school admission requires all of us to take the LSAT."

"Which of the following would serve to fully justify the argument above?"

We're told there's an argument.

Our job is to find an answer choice that bridges the hole in the argument.

What do we do?

Unpack it, using indicator words.

- Find the conclusion, followed by (at least one) premise

"Without a law degree I can't get the job I want in big law, **so** in the absence of taking the LSAT, I can't get the job I want in big law, **after all** law school admission does require me to take the LSAT."

The "**so**" indicates that a conclusion follows it.

The "**after all**" indicates that a premise follows it.

And the "**so**" indicates that **a premise precedes it**.

General Pro Tip

Conclusion indicators don't just indicate that a conclusion **follows** them, they **also indicate that a premise precedes them**. That's why the very first words of a stimulus are never a conclusion indicator, never a "thus," or "therefore," **even when** the first line of a stimulus is a conclusion. Because conclusion indicators **also** indicate that a premise is on some line before them... which is impossible when the first line is a conclusion.

Right now we have:

P: Without a law degree I can't get the job I want in big law

P: Law school admission does require me to take the LSAT.

C: In the absence of taking the LSAT, I can't get the job I want in big law

But we're not yet ready to find a gap in the argument, let alone bridge a gap.

- Note that each statement is conditional.

P: **Without** a law degree I can't get the job I want in big law

P: Law school admission does **require** me to take the LSAT.

C: **In the absence** of taking the LSAT, I **can't** get the job I want in big law

This is interesting, but it might be that the hole we need to bridge still eludes us.

- Simplify: turn them into if-then statements

P: If Big Law job, then law degree.

P: If law school admission, then LSAT.

C: If Big Law job, then LSAT.

Now we're getting closer, but if we weren't so familiar with the concepts, it would still be possible to miss it.

- Simplify: diagram the statements if you find them helpful

When diagramming **always** remember to keep your premises and your conclusions separate. Write the premises above the conclusion. After all, the premises are supposed to lead to the conclusion, in the same way numbers being added are kept above a line and the sum of all those numbers is kept beneath a line. If they're not separated, we're going to get confused.

First, Separate the conclusion from the premises. Label it ("C:") and put a long arrow between the two halves of the conditional statement, like this:

C: BLJ → LSAT

Second, diagram the premises above them, placing them above the matching parts conclusion, so that the matching terms are juxtaposed

P: BLJ → LSD LSA → LSAT
C: BLJ → LSAT

- Find the hole in the argument

And now, if we hadn't seen it before, the correct answer should have swum into view:

P: BLJ → LSD LSA → LSAT
C: BLJ → LSAT

Now the hole in the argument should be clear. The argument would be perfect if the “LSD” led to the “LSA.” The right answer choice will be some version of that. So in this case we want, “If law school degree, then law school admission,” or any of the many ways that that conditional statement can be phrased.

“ $LSD \rightarrow LSA$ ” will be our answer, or “ $\text{no LSA} \rightarrow \text{no LSD}$ ”

This all takes much longer to describe than to do, once the indicator words have been memorized.

The Same Structure in a Real LSAT Problem

“Whoever is kind is loved by somebody or other, and whoever loves anyone is happy. It follows that whoever is kind is happy.”

The conclusion follows logically if which one of the following is assumed?”

Unpack it, using indicator words.

- Find the conclusion, followed by (at least one) premise

“Whoever is kind is loved by somebody or other, **and** whoever loves anyone is happy. **It follows that** whoever is kind is happy.”

The “it follows that” indicates that something is about to be concluded.

The “[comma] and” indicates the first two statements are similar. So in context, the first two statements are premises.

P: Whoever is kind is loved by somebody or other.

P: Whoever loves anyone is happy.

C: Whoever is kind is happy.

- Note that each statement is conditional.

P: **Whoever** is kind is loved by somebody or other.

P: **Whoever** loves anyone is happy.

C: **Whoever** is kind is happy.

- Simplify: turn them into if-then statements

P: If kind, then loved by somebody or other.

P: If loves anyone, then happy.

C: If kind, then happy.

LSAT Danger Warning

The LSAT likes to throw little monkey wrenches at us, so that even when we're following the proper structure we can still get knocked off course. Here it's about the broad term "love," which is used once in the conclusion, and used twice in the premise. ***Is this love always the same term? Or does it shift as it's used?***

It shifts. Observe closely the language used. For one sad truth about the world: sometimes ***loving someone*** is not necessarily the same as ***being loved by someone***. Just because someone ***loves***, they don't have to be ***loved***.

If we don't catch this, we're going to flounder a bit in the next part.

- Simplify: diagram the statements if you find them helpful

P: Kind → loved

P: loves → happy.

C: kind → happy.

First, Separate the conclusion from the premises. Label it, and put a long arrow between the two halves of the conditional statements...

C: Kind → Happy

Second, diagram the premises above them, placing them above the conclusion so that the matching terms are juxtaposed..

P: Kind → loved loves → Happy

C: Kind → Happy

LSAT Danger Warning

If we hadn't noted that the terms were the same, we would have been confused staring at this:

P: Kind → love → Happy

C: Kind —————→ Happy

...because there's no hole to fill here! This would be a perfect argument, in which we **can't** find a sufficient assumption: there are no holes to fill in a perfect argument. Which would of course would have been a tipoff that we were doing something wrong.

If that happened, we wouldn't freak out, we'd simply return to the stimulus and double check our steps, seeing more and more clearly that basically everything looked right, and so re-reading more and more literally until finally it clicked: Is **loved** the same as **loves**...? You know the rest. We'd disentangle those terms and realize that they needed to be linked.

- Find the hole in the argument

P: Kind → loves loved → E
C: Kind —————→ E

We're looking for something along the lines of "people who love anybo

A Final Boss Question

The following was one of the last questions on a challenging LSAT:

"Clearly, a democracy cannot thrive without effective news media. After all, a democracy cannot thrive without an electorate that is knowledgeable about important political issues, and an electorate can be knowledgeable in this way only if it has access to unbiased information about the government."

The argument's conclusion is properly inferred if which one of the following is assumed?"

This question stumped a lot of students. But not us:

- Find the conclusion, followed by (at least one) premise

"**Clearly**, a democracy cannot thrive without effective news media. **After all**, a democracy cannot thrive without an electorate that is knowledgeable about important political issues, **and** an electorate can be knowledgeable in this way only if it has access to unbiased information about the government."

The "**clearly**" indicates that a conclusion follows it.

The "**after all**" indicates that a premise follows it.

And the “**and**” indicates that a second premise follows the first.

So we have:

P: Democracy cannot thrive without an [informed] electorate

P: An electorate can be [informed] only if it has access to unbiased information about the government

C: Democracy cannot thrive without effective news media.

Can we bridge the hole? Do we even see a hole?

- Note that each statement is conditional.

P: Democracy **cannot** thrive **without** an [informed] electorate

P: An electorate can be [informed] **only if** it has access to unbiased information about the government

C: Democracy **cannot** thrive **without** effective news media.

If it's not swimming into view yet, just keep methodically doing the work...

- Simplify: turn them into if-then statements

P: If D thrive, then informed E

P: If informed E, then unbiased info access

C: If D thrive, then effective news media.

Now we're getting closer, but we still might miss it.

- Simplify: diagram the statements if you find them helpful

Always remember when diagramming to keep your premises and your conclusions separate. The premises are supposed to lead to the conclusion. The conclusion is the main point. The conclusion is the lynchpin of the whole argument.

First, Separate the conclusion from the premises. Label it, and put a long arrow between the two halves of the conditional statements

C: D thrive —————→ effective news media

Second, diagram the premises above them, placing them above the conclusion so that the matching terms are juxtaposed

P: D thrive → informed E → unbiased info access

C: D thrive —————→ effective news media

● Find the hole in the argument

P: D thrive → informed E → **unbiased info access**

C: D thrive → **effective news media**

We need to bridge the gap from “access to unbiased information” in the premises, to “effective news media” in the conclusion. So we’re looking for:

unbiased info access → effective news media

“If someone has access to unbiased information, they have an effective news media,”

...or...

“If there’s no effective news media, then they lack access to unbiased information.”

All we have to do is to find that in the answer choices, and be able to recognize it no matter what type of conditional reasoning language it’s dressed up in. And sure enough,

“Without effective news media, an electorate will not have access to unbiased information about the government.”

We didn’t need to think about the ideas at all. All we needed to do was to be able to follow the rules of sufficient assumptions, and to have all our indicator words memorized.

Successfully Solving Problems We Don’t Even Understand

The LSAT is a test of structure, not a test of deep, meaningful, ideas. We often don’t need to understand the ideas being discussed if we can simply understand the fundamental language of reasoning surrounding those ideas.

Observe the following ridiculous stimulus:

In the absence of fuggedy there’s never flixor since fialzepan requires fuggedy, and without fleegleborg there can be no flixor.

Which one of the following would serve to fully justify the argument above?

We don’t NEED to understand the ideas. We just need the fundamentals. You know the drill by now:

Unpack it, using indicator words.

- Find the conclusion, followed by (at least one) premise

In the absence of fuggedy there's never flixor, **since** fialzepan requires fuggedy, **and because** without fleegleborg there can be no flixor.

The “**since**” indicates that a premise follows it.

The “**and because**” immediately indicates that a second premise follows it.

And since there's only one other statement on the page, we know that that is the conclusion.

So we have:

- P: Fialzepan requires fuggedy.
P: Without fleegleborg there can be no flixor.
C: In the absence of fuggedy there's never flixor.

I wouldn't be able to bridge a hole at this point. I would have no idea what it was. I wouldn't understand anything! But I wouldn't be worried at all. I'd simply move on to the next step.

- Note that each statement is conditional.

- P: Fialzepan **requires** fuggedy.
P: **Without** fleegleborg there can be **no** flixor.
C: **In the absence of** fuggedy there's **never** flixor.

Still no idea of the answer, still not worried...

- Simplify: turn them into if-then statements

- P: If FZ, then FGY
P: If FX, then FGB
C: If FX, then FGY.

As usual, we're getting closer, but we still might miss it.

- Simplify: diagram the statements if you find them helpful

Always remember when diagramming to keep your premises and your conclusions separate. The premises are supposed to lead to the conclusion. The conclusion is the main point. The conclusion is the lynchpin of the whole argument.

First, Separate the conclusion from the premises. Label it, and put a long arrow between the two halves of the conditional statements

C: FX —————→ FGY

Second, diagram the premises above them, placing them above the conclusion so that the matching terms are juxtaposed

P: FX → FGB FZ → FGY
C: FX —————→ FGY

● Find the hole in the argument

P: FX → **FGB** **FZ** → FGY
C: FX —————→ FGY

Now I know what the right answer is, and I still have no idea what the stimulus is talking about!
I'm looking for some version of

FGB → FZ

...or...

No FZ → no FGB

Something like “Fialzepan requires fleegleborg” will be the right answer, we KNOW that, and we never wasted any time worrying about ideas we didn’t understand.

In Conclusion: Fundamentals Beat Raw Intelligence on the LSAT

The LSAT is happy to give you a 180 if you’re so crazily super smart that you can breeze through all the questions without any form of preparation. But none of my students, not the Tier One students, not the Yale students, not the Harvard students, none of them so far have been crazy super smart. They’ve been regular human beings who knew how to put in the work. If you’re willing to put in the work learning the methods for solving each question stem type, and mastering the fundamentals, there’s no reason why your score can’t increase as well.

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