

Enthymeme

Definition of Enthymeme

An argumentative statement in which the writer or the [speaker](#) omits one of the major or minor premises, does not clearly pronounce it, or keeps this premise implied, is called an “enthymeme.” However, the omitted premise in an enthymeme remains understandable even if is not clearly expressed. For instance, in the sentence, “Where there is smoke, there is fire,” the hidden premise is: fire causes smoke.

Enthymeme is a rhetorical device like [syllogism](#), and is known as truncated or [rhetoric](#) syllogism. Its purpose is to influence the [audience](#), and allow them to make inferences. Such inferences can be easily recognized, as these statements comes after “because.”

Enthymeme vs. Syllogism

Enthymeme is like syllogism, and yet different. The difference is that a syllogism is a deductive logic that contains three parts, and in which both premises have valid conclusion such as:

All reptiles are cold-blooded animals. (Major premise)

A lizard is a cold-blooded animal. (Minor premise)

Therefore, a lizard is a reptile. (Conclusion)

Whereas in enthymeme, writers keep one premise implied, which means both premises do not have valid conclusions. It is an incomplete [argument](#) such as:

He could not have committed this heinous crime. (Major premise)

I have known him since he was a child. (Minor premise)

The hidden premise: He is innocent by nature and, therefore, could never be a criminal.

Popular Examples of Enthymeme

“Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy.” – Lloyd Bentsen to Dan Quayle in U.S. Vice–Presidential debate in 1988. (The hidden premise: Jack Kennedy was a great man, but you are not.) He is a U.S. citizen, so he is entitled to due process. (The hidden premise: All citizens of the U.S. are entitled to due process.) With a name like Bonanza, it has to be good. (The hidden premise: Bonanza is a prestigious company, therefore it is good.)

Examples of Enthymeme in Literature

Example #1: *Julius Caesar* (By William Shakespeare)

Plebian: “Mark’d ye his words? He would not take the crown. Therefore ’tis certain he was not ambitious.”

From the above line from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, it is clear that Brutus is an ambitious and honorable man. Thus, a major hidden premise is that all honorable and respectable men are ambitious.

Example #2: *New York Times Interview*, May 2, 2003 (By George Bush)

“The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11th, 2001, and still goes on ... With those attacks, the terrorists and their supporters declared war on the United States. And war is what they got.”

This is an example of classic enthymematic argumentative speech by U.S. President Bush. He stated that the reason the U.S. declared war against Iraq was because the U.S. was attacked on Sept 11, 2001. However, the missing piece in this argument is — Saddam Hussein was the culprit, and involved in the 9/11 attacks.

Example #3: *Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self* (By Alice Walker)

“[M]y parents decide to buy my brothers guns. These are not ‘real’ guns. They shoot ‘BBs,’ copper pellets my brothers say will kill birds. *Because I am a girl, I do not get a gun.*”

In this example, the speaker omits the major premise that her parents have not given her a gun. However, she directly lets the readers know the reason why she does not have the gun.

Example #4: *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (By Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors)

“The gun has the defendant’s fingerprints on the trigger. He is clearly guilty!”

In this example, the hidden premise is that fingerprints on an object show who has used it, therefore the defendant’s fingerprints on the gun proves he is guilty.

Function of Enthymeme

The usage of enthymeme is very common in advertisements, political speeches, and literature. It makes the audience work out their own conclusions, and nudges them to read further to get a clearer picture of the premise or an idea. By forcing the audience to take a final step, it strengthens the argument of the writer. Often enthymemes help to hide the underlying idea upon which a major argument relies. In addition, the purpose of using an enthymeme is to persuade the audience by using implied arguments.