

Syllogism

Syllogism Definition

Syllogism is a rhetorical device that starts an [argument](#) with a reference to something general, and from this it draws a conclusion about something more specific.

Let us try to understand the concept with the help of an example. We start with a general argument “All men are mortal.” We know that John is a man, so John is mortal. It is a deductive approach to reason, and is based on deducing specific conclusions from general facts.

We notice in the above example that syllogism is a three-part set of statements:

- a major statement or premise
- a minor statement or premise
- a conclusion that is deduced

Therefore, “All men are mortal” is a major statement or premise, which stands as a general fact. “John is a man” is minor statement or premise that is specific, and “John is mortal” is the logical conclusion deduced from the two prior statements.

Syllogism and Enthymeme

Syllogism takes the form of [enthymeme](#) when it is compressed. Enthymeme combines the minor premise and the conclusion, omitting the major statement. For instance, a syllogism “All dogs are canine. Tommy is a dog. Therefore, Tommy is a canine,” can be compressed in an enthymeme as “Tommy is a canine because it is a dog.” The major premise remains implied or hidden.

Syllogism Fallacy

Syllogism may also be used to form incorrect conclusions that are odd. For instance, “All crows are black, and the bird in my cage is black. So, the bird in my cage is a crow.” This is a false argument, as it implies a conclusion that “all blackbirds are crows,” which is incorrect. It is known as “syllogism [fallacy](#).” Another example of syllogism fallacy is “Some televisions are black and white, and all penguins are black and white. Therefore, some televisions are penguins.” You can easily see that the conclusion is practically impossible, and in fact has a comical outcome.

Examples of Syllogism in Literature

There are numerous examples of syllogism or coming-of-age novels in English literature. Let us briefly analyze a few:

Example #1: *Timon of Athens* (By William Shakespeare)

William Shakespeare employs this rhetorical device in his play *Timon of Athens*, Act 4, scene 3:

Flavius: “Have you forgot me, sir?”

Timon: “Why dost [ask](#) that? I have forgot all men;
Then, if thou grant’st thou’rt a man, I have forgot thee.”

Timon uses a witty syllogism to tell Flavius that he must have forgotten him like he has forgotten all other men. It can be expanded in a three-set argument as: “I usually do forget, as I have forgotten everyone. Therefore, I have forgotten you as well.”

Example #2: *To his Coy Mistress* (By Andrew Marvell)

Poetry is known for its passion and not reason, but we find syllogistic argument in Andrew Marvell’s poem *To his Coy Mistress*. The poet says to his bashful beloved:

“Had we but world enough, and time. This coyness, Lady, were
no crime.”

It implies a general truth that life is short and man is mortal. They do not have enough time to love, and cannot waste it in display of coyness.

Likewise, he and his darling may separate eternally before their union in this world is established. Therefore, he says:

“But at my back I always hear
Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near;”

and speaks to his beloved, with the conclusion that they should avail themselves of the time they have:

“Thy beauty shall no more be found...
Now let us sport us while we may,”

Example #3: *Elegy 2 The Anagram* (By John Donne)

Compressed syllogism is found in famous metaphysical poet John Donne’s [*Elegy 2 The Anagram*](#):

“All love is wonder; if we justly do
Account her wonderful, why not lovely too?”

If we expand the above syllogism, it will have the following organization of statements: All that is lovable is wonderful, and the mistress is wonderful. Therefore, the mistress is lovable.

Function of Syllogism

In logic, syllogism aims at identifying the general truths in a particular situation. It is a tool in the hands of a [speaker](#) or a writer to persuade the [audience](#) or the readers, as their belief in a general truth may tempt them to believe in a specific conclusion drawn from those truths. In literature, syllogism can contribute to add wit to the statements. Moreover, syllogism fallacy may give us an opportunity to enjoy nonsensical conclusions.