

Think Again: How to Untangle an Arguments

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1 Argument Markers

To spot an argument, we need to understand how language indicates that some sentences are intended as reasons for others. Certain words, which we will call **argument markers**, signal the presence of an argument by clarifying the relationship between premises and conclusions.

1.1 Identifying Intent

The difference between simply stating two facts and presenting an argument lies in the speaker's intent, which is revealed through word choice.

- **Conjunction:** In the sentence, "I am tall, and I am good at sports," the word "and" simply conjoins two separate statements. The order can be reversed without changing the meaning.
- **Argument:** In "I am tall, so I am good at sports," the word "so" indicates a rational connection. The order matters greatly; reversing it ("I am good at sports, so I am tall") creates a different argument.

1.2 Types of Argument Markers

Argument markers fall into two main categories based on what they signal.

1.2.1 Conclusion Markers

These words indicate that the statement immediately following them is the conclusion of an argument.

- **Examples:** so, therefore, thus, hence, accordingly.
- **Structure:** [Premise], so [Conclusion].
- **Example:** "I am tall, *therefore* I am good at sports."

1.2.2 Reason Markers (Premise Markers)

These words indicate that the statement immediately following them is a reason (a premise) for a conclusion.

- **Examples:** because, for, as, since, for the reason that.
- **Structure:** [Conclusion] because [Premise].
- **Example:** "I am good at sports *because* I am tall."

Argument Markers

Conclusion Markers

so
therefore
thus
hence
accordingly

Reason (Premise) Markers

because
for
as
since
for the reason that

1.3 The Importance of Context

A word that functions as an argument marker in one context may not in another. You must analyze the role the word is playing.

- **Example with “since”:**

- *As a reason marker:* “I’m good at sports **since** I am tall.” (Here, being tall is the reason for being good at sports).
- *As a temporal marker:* “It has been raining **since** my vacation began.” (This indicates timing, not a causal or rational link).

- **Example with “so”:**

- *As a conclusion marker:* “I am tall, **so** I am good at sports.”
- *As an intensifier:* “You don’t need to eat **so** much.” (This does not indicate a conclusion).

1.4 The Substitution Test

To determine if a word is being used as an argument marker, try substituting it with a clear, unambiguous marker like “therefore” (for conclusions) or “because” (for reasons).

- **Rule:** If the substitution can be made without changing the fundamental meaning of the sentence, then the original word was likely being used as an argument marker.

- **Example 1:** “Since he failed out of college, he’s unemployed.”

- *Substitute with “because”:* “**Because** he failed out of college, he’s unemployed.” The meaning is preserved.
- *Conclusion:* “Since” is used as a reason marker here.

- **Example 2:** “He’s so cool!”

- *Substitute with “therefore” or “because”:* “He’s therefore cool” or “He’s because cool.” Both are nonsensical and change the meaning.
- *Conclusion:* “So” is not used as an argument marker here.

1.5 A Special Case: The Word “If”

The word “if,” often found in “if...then” statements (conditionals), is **not** an argument marker.

- An “if-then” statement by itself does not make an argument because it does not assert that the “if” clause (the antecedent) is true.
 - **Conditional Statement (Not an Argument):** “If I am rich enough, then I can buy a baseball team.” This doesn’t claim I am rich, nor that I can buy a team.
 - **Full Argument:** “If I’m rich enough, I can buy a baseball team. I am rich enough. Therefore, I can buy a baseball team.”
 - Because the word “if” alone does not assert a premise, we do not count it as an argument marker.
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2 Arguments and Argument Markers: Worked Examples

Question 1

Statement: Charles went bald because most men his age go bald.

Correct Answer: Is an argument

Reason: This sentence claims that the fact that most men his age go bald is a reason that explains why Charles went bald. According to this claim, his age helps us understand why he went bald and makes it less surprising that he went bald.

Question 2

Statement: Charles went bald, and most men his age go bald.

Correct Answer: Is not an argument

Reason: This sentence says only that both facts are true and does not explicitly say that one is a reason for the other.

Question 3

Statement: My roommate likes to ski, so I do, too.

Correct Answer: Is an argument

Reason: This sentence claims that the fact that my roommate likes to ski is a reason that explains why I like to ski. According to this claim, my roommate’s likes help us understand why I like to ski and make it less surprising that I like to ski.

Question 4

Statement: My roommate likes to ski, and so do I.

Correct Answer: Is not an argument

Reason: This sentence says only that both facts are true and does not explicitly say that one is a reason for the other. The word “so” here is simply short for “also” and does not function as an argument marker.

Question 5

Statement: I have been busy since Tuesday.

Correct Answer: Is not an argument

Reason: The sentence says only that I have been busy after the time or day when it was Tuesday. It does not say that I have been busy *because* that day was Tuesday. The sentence states a single fact and does not contain both a premise and a conclusion. Since an argument requires at least one premise and a conclusion, this sentence is not an argument.

Question 6

Statement: I am busy, since my teacher assigned lots of homework.

Correct Answer: Is an argument

Reason: This sentence claims that the assignment of lots of homework is a reason why I am busy.

Question 7

Statement: He apologized, so you should forgive him.

Correct Answer: Conclusion marker

Reason: The word “so” indicates that the sentence following it is a conclusion. The meaning does not change if we replace “so” with “therefore”:

He apologized. Therefore, you should forgive him.

Question 8

Statement: In view of the fact that he apologized, you should forgive him.

Correct Answer: Premise marker

Reason: The phrase “In view of the fact that” introduces a premise. The meaning does not change if we substitute “because” for the phrase:

Because he apologized, you should forgive him.

Question 9

Statement: He apologized. Accordingly, you should forgive him.

Correct Answer: Conclusion marker

Reason: The word “*accordingly*” signals that what follows is a conclusion. This is shown by the fact that the meaning remains the same if we replace it with “*therefore*”.

Question 10

Statement: After he apologizes, you should forgive him.

Correct Answer: Neither

Reason: The word “*after*” indicates only a temporal relationship, not a logical relationship of premise to conclusion. Replacing it with “*because*” or “*therefore*” changes the meaning of the sentence.

Question 11

Statement: Seeing as he apologized, you should forgive him.

Correct Answer: Premise marker

Reason: The phrase “*seeing as*” introduces a premise. The meaning remains unchanged if we substitute “*because*”:

Because he apologized, you should forgive him.

3 Standard Form

Now that we’ve identified arguments, and we’ve also identified premises and conclusions, we need to put them in order. The actual word order doesn’t always tell us the order of the argument. Compare these two sentences: “Because I am a professor, I teach classes,” and “I teach classes, because I am a professor.” In those two examples, the phrase “I am a professor” occurs at the beginning in one instance and at the end in the other. However, they express exactly the same argument: the fact that I’m a professor is a reason why I teach classes.

Contrast both of those with this example: “I teach classes, so I must be a professor.” The point there must be something like, “nobody but professors can teach classes,” and whether or not that’s true, the point here is that this is a different argument from the first one.

We need to represent the difference between these arguments very carefully. To show what is shared by the first two examples that’s different from the third, we put the arguments

in what's called **standard form**. It's really easy. Basically, you write the premise, and if there's another premise, you write that down on a new line. Then you draw a line. After the line, you put a "dot pyramid" (\therefore)—three dots with two at the bottom and one at the top—and then you write the conclusion.

It's also useful to number the premises and the conclusion so that we can refer back to them by number instead of having to repeat them. That's all there is to standard form. You list the premises on different lines, draw a line, add the dot pyramid, and then write the conclusion, numbering all the parts.

This standard form accomplishes what we want: it helps us show what's common to the first two examples that distinguishes them from the third.

The first two examples were, "I teach classes because I'm a professor," and "Because I'm a professor, I teach classes." In standard form, the premise that goes above the line is "I am a professor," and the conclusion that goes below the line is "I teach classes."

(1) I am a professor.

\therefore (2) I teach classes.

The third example was, "I teach classes, so I must be a professor." Here, "I am a professor" is the conclusion that goes below the line, and the premise is "I teach classes."

(1) I teach classes.

\therefore (2) I must be a professor.

When you put these two arguments in standard form next to each other, it makes the difference absolutely clear. No matter how easy this seems, it's worthwhile to practice with a few exercises to make sure we've got it straight, because this notion of standard form will become important later.