

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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