

Questions and Arguments

We noted earlier how a question can (indirectly) play a role in an argument.

If you want to pass logic, you should study. Do you want to pass logic, or fail it? (Clearly,) you should study.

Here the second sentence, a question, seems to be an integral part of the argument, though we insisted that every premise in an argument is a declarative sentence. The apparent conflict between these claims was resolved by noting that the question serves only to **point to its obvious answer**: that *you want to pass logic*. The unspoken **answer** to this question was the real the second premise of the argument. As evidence, we noted how sensible the argument appears when we replace the question with its obvious answer.

1. If you want to pass logic, you should study.
 2. [You want to pass logic.]
-

∴ You should study.

A question stated only in order to point out its obvious answer is called a **rhetorical question**. Rhetorical questions are familiar from ordinary conversation.

Are you deaf? I said stop it.
What have you got to lose?
Would I lie to you?
What do I care?
Did I say you could leave?
Didn't I tell you that would happen?
How cool is that?

Here the speaker isn't in the dark about the correct answer. On the contrary, the answer is taken to be so obvious that it literally goes without saying.

Like all non-declarative sentences, rhetorical questions are omitted from the standard form of an argument. But simply omitting the question from our

earlier argument would leave us with a deficient statement of the argument's standard form.

1. If you want to pass logic, you should study.
-

∴ You should study.

With answers too obvious to need saying, rhetorical questions highlight the possibility that essential parts of an argument can be left unspoken. In that case the correct standard form of the argument will include this unspoken material –in brackets, to note that it wasn't stated explicitly.

1. If you want to pass logic, you should study.
 2. [You want to pass logic.]
-

∴ You should study.

Of course we don't, willy-nilly, include every sentence left unstated. If we did, the standard form of an argument would never end.

1. If you want to pass logic, you should study.
 2. [You want to pass logic.]
 3. [Zebras are mammals]
 4. [Two plus two is four]
 5. [Jupiter is the biggest planet in our solar system]
 - ...
-

∴ You should study.

Obviously most sentences are left unstated because the author never intended them. By contrast, we had good reason to believe that the second, unspoken premise of our argument was intended: it was conversationally *marked* by a rhetorical question, which the author took the trouble to say.

The following example illustrates a *second* kind of question that can play a role in arguments.

Will the Bobcats make it to the finals? Do the math: their center will be out for the next month with a torn ligament, and one of their guards is laid up with a hamstring injury. But they'll need both of those players to beat the Polecats, to make it even to the semi-finals. So clearly, the Bobcats won't make it to the finals.

In standard form the argument reads like so.

1. Their [the Bobcat's] center will be out for the next month with a torn ligament, and one of their guards is laid up with a hamstring injury.
2. They'll need both of those players to beat the Polecats, to make it even to the semi-finals.

∴ The Bobcats won't make it to the finals.

That first sentence – “*Will the Bobcats make it to the finals?*” – isn't a rhetorical question, pointing to some obvious but unspoken answer. Instead, it's a question **which the conclusion directly answers**.

Question: Will the Bobcats make it to the finals?

Conclusion: The Bobcats won't make it to the finals.

A question directly answered by the conclusion is an **issue question** – because it states what's *at issue* in the argument, the *issue* (topic of controversy) being argued about.

An issue question serves the communicative function of clueing us in, early on, to what the conclusion will be. For a “Yes-No” question like

Will the Bobcats make it to the finals?

only two direct answers are possible.

(Yes,) The Bobcats will make it to the finals

(No,) The Bobcats will not make it to the finals

Other sorts of questions allow a wider range of direct answers.

How much, in kilograms, does Rex weigh?

Rex weighs 1 kilogram

Rex weighs 2 kilograms

Rex weighs 3 kilograms

....

But even with an infinite number of declarative sentences capable of answering the question, any such answer fits an obvious pattern.

Question: How much, in kilograms, does Rex weigh?

General pattern for Direct Answer: Rex weighs ____ kilograms.

From the question alone we know the general structure of its answer. Likewise, on seeing that issue question at the beginning of the argument

Will the Bobcats make it to the finals?

we know the conclusion will either be “*The Bobcats will make it to the finals,*” or “*The Bobcats will not make it to the finals.*”

Issue questions thus act as another kind of **conclusion marker**: they serve the communicative function of alerting us to what the conclusion will be, by narrowing down the range of possible conclusions to just those directly answering the question. And like markers generally, issue questions do not appear in standard form.

Both rhetorical and issue questions illustrate an important general principle at work in communication: even when a sentence isn’t an essential part of an argument, it is still stated for some purpose. Just as we earlier assumed speakers *don’t* intend an infinite number of unspoken sentences, we likewise assume that speakers don’t randomly ask pointless questions. In general, **every sentence** (even those not strictly part of the argument) **will serve some function** in the statement of the argument.

This general principle of communication plays a crucial role in argument diagramming, and will take center stage in our later study of pragmatics.

Summary: Questions and Arguments

Rhetorical Question: a question only stated in order to point to its obvious answer.

Rhetorical questions are useful for pointing out unspoken sentences – in particular, unspoken premises.

Issue Question: a question which the conclusion directly answers.

Issue questions are useful in narrowing down what the conclusion of the argument can be.

Questions and Standard Form: Questions are never included in the standard form of the argument.

However, if a question serves to point out an unspoken declarative sentence which *is* an essential part of the argument, that unspoken sentence should be included in the argument's standard form (in brackets, to note that it was unstated).