

Argument Diagramming Exercises #4: Discussion

Construct an argument diagram for each of the following arguments.

4. The thief was not an automotive expert, as shown by the botched attempt to hotwire the car, and the use of a crowbar to open the door. So, since the members of the South Side gang are all quite skilled in the functioning of cars, it's safe to conclude that the thief isn't a member of their crew.

Discussion: The first sentence is a **combo** sentence; the phrase “as shown by” is a **premise** marker.

(1) The thief was not an automotive expert, as shown by (2) the botched attempt to hotwire the car, and the use of a crowbar to open the door.

Note that “the botched attempt to hotwire the car, and the use of a crowbar to open the door” isn't a full sentence as it stands – it's short for a sentence such as “[there was a] botched attempt to hotwire the car, and ... use of a crowbar to open the door.”

Also, though this (modified) sentence is an “and” sentence, made of two smaller sentences as parts, in argument diagramming we do not break “and” sentences (nor “if” or “or” sentences) into their two parts. **We only break up combo sentences**; and “and” sentences are **not** combo sentences.

So the first sentence of this passage is broken up, and diagrammed like this.

(2) ==> (1)

The second (and final) sentence of this passage is the following.

So, since the members of the South Side gang are all quite skilled in the functioning of cars, it's safe to conclude that the thief isn't a member of their crew.

At first glance, this sentence might be confusing – because it's stacking up two different types of markers, right at the outset. The first word, “so,” is a conclusion marker. But immediately following this is the word “since,” which is a premise marker. So what is this sentence – a premise, or a conclusion?

It's both, in fact – it's another combo sentence. Note that the sentence also contains, a little later, the conclusion marker “it's safe to conclude that”. Now if we temporarily set aside that first word, “so” we would get the following very unconfusing combo sentence.

[] *since* (3) the members of the South Side gang are all quite skilled in the functioning of cars, *it's safe to conclude that* (4) the thief isn't a member of their crew.

And this sentence will be diagrammed like so.

(2) ==> (1)

(3) ==> (4)

We know, from the **No Useless Sentences** Principle, that these two disconnected chains must somehow come together, to lead to a single main conclusion. And here again, the arrangement of the sentences makes it fairly clear which will be the main conclusion.

(1) The thief was not an automotive expert, as shown by (2) the botched attempt to hotwire the car, and the use of a crowbar to open the door. So, since (3) the members of the South Side gang are all quite skilled in the functioning of cars, it's safe to conclude that (4) the thief isn't a member of their crew.

Sentence (4) – coming in a **likely place** (the end of the passage) and marked with the **conclusion marker** “it's safe to conclude that” – bears all the signs of being the main conclusion.

You might wonder why sentence (1) gets ruled out – after all, it *also* comes in a likely place for a conclusion (the beginning of the passage), and follows from a premise just like (4) does.

This is where that extra conclusion marker “**so**,” at the beginning of the second sentence tips the balance, in favor of sentence (4).

So, since (3) the members of the South Side gang are all quite skilled in the functioning of cars, it’s safe to conclude that (4) the thief isn’t a member of their crew.

This “so” tells us: given what we’ve established so far (Sentence 1), we can now proceed to the main conclusion – but the “*since*” immediately after says: before getting to the main conclusion, we add another piece of evidence in support of it (namely, the sentence immediately following “since”: sentence 3).

$$(2) ==> (1)$$
$$(3) ==> \therefore (4)$$

Since (1) currently looks useless (it’s not the main conclusion, but it’s not supporting anything), we suppose (1) is *combining* with (3) in support of main conclusion (4).

$$(1) + (3) ==> \therefore (4)$$

And so the whole argument diagram will be as follows.

$$(2) ==> (1)$$
$$(1) + (3) ==> \therefore (4)$$

Closing remark: the curious ‘double-marker’ phrasing we’ve just looked at – “So, since...” – will in general indicate this sort of ‘premise combining’. That is: when you see a sentence phrased in this pattern,

(1). *So, since* (2), (3).

you know that the sentences (1) and (2) are combining in support of (3), like this.

(1) + (2) ==> ∴ (3)

In English phrasings of this sort, the conclusion – sentence (3) – is indeed marked by the conclusion marker “so.” But before we get to that conclusion, we insert an additional premise in its support; and in order to make clear that we’re inserting a premise, we mark that intervening sentence with a sentence marker “since” (or one of its cousins, such as “because,” or “from the fact that”).