

The Enthymeme: Connecting Reasons and Conclusions

At this point, we need a name for the relationship created between a reason and a conclusion. I will call this combination of assertions an *enthymeme*, a term adopted from classical rhetoric.

It is more open and flexible than any of the terms I might have adopted from formal logic. For many people, *logic* suggests mathematical formulas and rules that must be followed. For the purpose of gaining more control of the logical process that underlies our writing, it is sufficient to think of reasoning as a creative, generative process rather than a system of prescribed rules and formulas. We reason all the time without trying to follow any rules or fit our thoughts into predefined patterns or stopping to consider whether those connections conform to logical models. I use the term *enthymeme* to refer to any combination of ideas in which a conclusion of any kind is supported by a reason.

Enthymemes occur throughout our discourse whenever we connect ideas in this way:

Idea 1	because	Idea 2
	or	
Idea 1	therefore	Idea 2

In the first case, Idea 1 is the conclusion. In the second case, Idea 2 is the conclusion. The following pairings of ideas are each enthymemes because they connect a conclusion to a reason:

The toxic waste disposal business is a noble career goal, because a healthy environment in the future will depend on proper elimination of harmful chemicals.

Free the monkeys now! (We need the laughs.)

We have to win this election. So vote early and vote often!

As the examples show, the conclusion-reason model by itself does not guarantee that an enthymeme makes connections that are reasonable. Some ideas can be put into such a relationship and seem unreasonable, whereas others seem reasonable. What makes the difference? What makes some enthymemes seem compelling? What makes a conclusion seem to follow?

Connecting the Enthymeme and the Audience

The relationship created between a reason and a conclusion is not self-contained. It makes implicit reference to other ideas that help to bind the reason to the conclusion, making it seem to follow. Before discussing serious examples of this process, let me give you a nonsense one, just to show how it works:

Suppose two moms are talking about the man one of their daughters is dating. One says, "That boy Jason, he stays out too late at night." The other replies, "And that's why he'll never be wealthy." Has the second parent jumped to a conclusion? Well, that depends. It depends on whether the two ideas these two moms have asserted are connected by a third idea, which neither of them actually said. Of course, that idea is the proverb "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." If these parents both believe that proverb is true, then the second mom may not be jumping as far as it first seemed. She asserted a reason, but it only seems like a reason if we perceive and accept that connecting truth. The second mom's statement assumed that this truth was shared between the two of them. She didn't have to say it out loud. It was implicit in her reasoning.

So, the inferential process at work in the second mom's thinking is something like this:

Stated reason: Jason stays out late at night.

Unstated assumption: Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.

Stated conclusion: Jason won't ever be wealthy.

As long as this unstated assumption is a matter of agreement, the reason seems like a reason. As soon as the assumption is denied, or if it is not shared at the outset, then the reason seems like no reason at all.

When enthymemes are asserted, they imply more than they say because reasons somehow appeal to assumptions that constitute the given condition behind the reasoning. Enthymemes therefore can be said to derive from beliefs that the particular audience is assumed already to have accepted as given. The choice of one reason or another to support a conclusion results from an understanding of what sorts of agreements can be assumed in one's audience.

If I were to argue, for instance, that "America is in great shape," I could draw on a wide variety of potential reasons to use as support for this assertion.

if I chose to support it by saying "because hamburger consumption grows by 10 percent every year," I would be making a very risky assumption (as well as imagining a very uncritical reader who would share it). I would be basing my reasoning on the implied precondition that consumption of hamburgers is an index to a country's well-being. If I chose to support the assertion by arguing "because our products set the trends in international markets," I would be assuming my reader already believed that "Any country that sets the trends for other countries' markets must be in great shape"—also a risky assumption. If I chose to argue the assertion by saying "because national unemployment has fallen to 6 percent," I might be basing my reasoning on an assumption that is somewhat more likely to be acceptable to a critical audience, that falling rates of unemployment signify national health. This is not a complete argument, of course, but it is on somewhat firmer ground.

Here is an example of enthymemes used in an actual argument, in a brief passage from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law.

Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up the state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?

Having already seen that certain dialectical oppositions are at work here (in Chapter 3), let's now consider the logic of King's case. King's reasoning supports the conclusion that Alabama's segregation laws are unjust. This conclusion is itself unstated, but we perceive it because the reasoning makes it seem to follow. That reasoning depends on enthymemes that also work on the basis of assumptions, either stated or unstated:

Conclusion: Alabama's segregation laws are unjust.

Reason: Those laws are inflicted on a minority that had no role in enacting them.

Assumption: Any law that is inflicted on a minority that had no role in enacting it is an unjust law.

The reason here is itself the conclusion of another enthymeme:

Conclusion: African Americans had no role in enacting Alabama's segregation laws.

Reason: African Americans were prevented from voting for the state legislature.

Assumption: Anyone prevented from voting for the legislature has no role in enacting laws passed by that legislature.

Real arguments, like King's, are often hard to reduce to the underlying enthymemes from which they derive their reasoning. But the enthymemes are there, nevertheless, providing the basis on which the argument's actual sentences are formed. The enthymemes represent the reasoning of the argument, even though that reasoning may be explicit or implicit, directly or indirectly conveyed in the language of the argument.

I have thus far talked about enthymemes as a basic structure of reasoning. I have distinguished three kinds of statements that make up enthymemes: conclusion, stated reason, and unstated reason or assumption. In the sections that follow, I explain how principles of informal reasoning can help you to think about selecting a line of reasoning, and then how you can test its logic.

Informal Reasoning

In our various discourse communities, we rarely demand a standard of proof as rigorous as that which pertains in science and mathematics. Some people think we ought to demand such a standard, but they are not always able to define it. The mathematical truth that $9 + 5 = 14$ is expressed in symbols that are assumed to mean exactly the same thing to everyone. The quantities referred to by the numbers and the operations referred to by the symbols are said to come very close to this degree of certainty: "Water is wet." Obviously. But the statement is self-evident; that is, it needs no evidence other than itself. It is so obvious that no one would argue with it. And if anyone did decide to argue with it, testing its self-evidence, they would begin by asking "What do these words mean?" This is one of the ways that lawyers are taught to think of the so-called self-evident in language. It seems self-evident that, if there is a law against spitting on the sidewalk, and if somebody spits on the sidewalk, he or she has broken that law. Yet this person's lawyer might ask us to ponder the unpleasant (and deceptively simple) question "What is spit?" before rendering judgment. We might, in the process, discover that what seemed obvious is not.

When we reason about ideas that are not self-evident and when we use ordinary language (rather than mathematical symbols) to do it, we must think of reasoning as an activity *guided* by a sense of probability but not *governed* by rules of valid inference. In other words, rather than mathematical formulas to tell us whether our reasons lead to true belief in our conclusions, we rely instead on our sense that they *seem* to support conclusions with more or less certainty. Although rules guide our sense that $9 + 5 = 14$, no such rules are available to us to account fully for our belief in (or disbelief of) statements about most actual questions at issue, statements such as "Computer simulations can replace tests on live animals in medical research" or "Politicians' private conduct is an important measure of their suitability for public office." In the world of real issues that demand real answers from us, we must settle for agreement based on the best available reasons rather than expect perfectly reliable methods of reaching conclusions.