

Necessary and Sufficient Causes

You will not be tested on your knowledge of the terms “sufficient cause” or “necessary cause” on the LSAT.

In Chapter Six we discuss the difference between conditionality and causality. In their purest forms, the two types of reasoning are different, and are introduced by different types of language. With that said, in Advanced Causality the ideas of sufficiency and necessity can be further applied to causes, and it is the case that some causes are themselves sufficient for the effect or necessary for the effect (or both).

A sufficient cause guarantees that the effect will occur, and in this way operates in a very similar fashion to the basic causal arguments we covered earlier. For example:

Jumping into a pool of molten lava while unclothed is a sufficient cause of death for humans. Every time someone jumps into a pool of lava, that person will die. There can be other causes of death, but jumping into lava while unclothed *always* results in death.

Why unclothed? Because otherwise someone could make the argument that the person was wearing some ultra-protective full body suit or inside of some impenetrable sphere. Jumping straight into lava while unclothed removes those possibilities, and is a guaranteed way to die. That guarantee is important in sufficient causes.

In contrast, a necessary cause is a cause that must be present if the effect is to occur. If the effect has occurred, then the cause must have occurred, but if the cause occurs, the effect may or may not occur. For example:

Mycobacterium tuberculosis is a necessary cause of the disease tuberculosis. Tuberculosis never occurs without the presence of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, but *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* may be present in a body without causing tuberculosis.

In a necessary cause instance, then, the causal agent may or may not force the effect to occur, but if the effect occurs, then the cause must have been present.

While sufficient cause situations are relatively easy to handle and appear frequently on the LSAT, necessary cause questions can be more complicated. Fortunately, with necessary cause situations, the test makers typically provide additional information to help you better understand the situation.