

Speaker Identifiers

In many LR questions, the first thing you see is a specific description of the type of speaker who is making the argument that follows. For example, you might see “Archaeologist” or “Expert,” as on one recent LSAT, or “Researcher” as in the problem on the prior page. Most students fly right by these speaker identifiers without further thought, but they shouldn’t—there are times when such identifiers can convey very useful information.

Before addressing some of the information we can derive from these identifiers, let us make clear that knowing the type of LSAT speaker making an argument does not tell you the specific level of logical difficulty in a question. For example, an argument made by a Mayor is not necessarily easier or harder than an argument made by a Journalist. And the questions and answers that accompany specific identifiers are not of a predictable degree of difficulty, either; you can’t just take a quick glance, see an identifier like “Dentist,” and make a determination that you are about to see an easy or difficult question. This should not be surprising at all—the makers of the LSAT are smart enough to avoid a pattern where every question preceded by something like Researcher is automatically difficult. However, just because the level of difficulty isn’t necessarily correlated with the type of speaker does not mean there aren’t other valuable lessons to be derived from these identifiers.

First, certain speaker identifiers tend to be strongly indicative of the topic of the argument. For example, arguments preceded by names such as Researcher or Scientist are generally more science-oriented than other arguments (which is not all that surprising—the “Scientist” identifier is there to tell you that this is someone with knowledge of science, and by definition someone who is more likely to talk about science!). So, as you read, take note of those identifiers because in many cases they can provide clues about the topic that is about to follow. And since being forewarned helps you to be forearmed, this can provide a small advantage as you attack the questions. Here are a few sample category examples with related identifiers that have appeared on previous LSATs:

Politics: Politician, Mayor, Councilmember, Council chair

Science: Scientist, Researcher, Astrophysicist, Zoologist

Medicine: Doctor, Dentist, Pediatrician, Physician

The topics each typically introduces are what you would expect based on their titles, and that same logic follows for the other groupings you encounter (such as “Coach” or “Business Owner”).

Ultimately, while the type of speaker won’t tell you the specifics of what will be discussed, any extra insight into the general topic can give you a slight advantage as you begin to decode the argument.

Speaker identifiers often foretell the broad topic addressed in the stimulus, but they do not indicate the specifics of the argument, the type of question, or the level of difficulty of the question.

Of course, not all identifiers give us a strong sense of what will follow. Personal names such as Brad or Ana do not give us any idea of what the topic of the stimulus will be, and even more specific terms aren't always helpful. For example, a Columnist could write about a wide variety of topics, from local politics to wildlife to a restaurant opening. This does not mean such a prefacing indicator is useless: columnists typically write columns with opinions, and so you know they will usually explain an issue or situation, and then take a certain position. And, even seemingly broad identifiers can tell you more than you might initially expect. For example, a Novelist may write about any topic, but it is almost certainly going to be linked to books; an Economist is typically going to discuss something related to money, taxes, or economic policies. The key is to not just gloss over the identifier—instead, become used to taking note of the identifier and relating that to what follows. Over time you will develop a better sense of which identifiers are likely to tip you off to what you are about to read, and which ones are not.

Second, although most identifiers do not give you a specific expectation of what argument will follow, there are a few types that do. For years, if you saw the term “Advertisement” in front of a stimulus, it meant that the stimulus would contain flawed reasoning. This continues today and it occurs because advertising is an easy target (because who really likes ads after all?). Arguments made by Politicians (or politically related persons) also often contain poor reasoning, and that is probably because they are such easy targets as well (because who, other than their families, really loves politicians?).

The important takeaway here is that you should not ignore the speaker identifier—sometimes it can provide valuable advance notice of what will follow, and sometimes it can even warn you to be on the lookout for a flawed argument.