

TRACING AN ARGUMENT

by Brian Vickers¹

I. Propositions

The first step in tracing the argument in a text is to divide the text into propositions.

A proposition is an assertion or statement about something.

To understand and interpret a sustained argument, you have to begin with the fundamental parts of the text – the propositions.

Ex: “Listen” – implies – “You listen”
“We are going to learn tracing”

The following is a short “argument” for learning tracing. It contains several propositions (P). See if you can pick them out.

“Listen. We are going to learn tracing because tracing is one of the best methods to learn in order to read the Bible carefully. And tracing is important to learn because it teaches us to read arguments by following the logic of the author. Therefore we should want to learn tracing.”

If you tried to pick them out, before looking below, you might have come up with something like this:

1. Listen.
2. We are going to learn tracing
3. because tracing is one of the best methods to learn
4. in order to read the Bible carefully
5. And Tracing is important to learn
6. because it teaches us to read arguments
7. by following the logic of the author
8. Therefore we should want to learn tracing.

Notice that a proposition is *not* the same thing as a sentence. One sentence may have several propositions. A proposition is simply some sort of statement. A sentence, on the other hand may contain a number of propositions. For instance, “in order to read the Bible carefully” is not a “complete sentence” but a proposition. It states the purpose of the preceding statement, “because tracing is one of the best methods to learn.” Note that “because tracing is one of the best methods to learn” is itself a proposition in the sentence that begins in with “We are going to learn tracing . . .”

¹ Most, if not all, of this material is based on what I have learned from Scott Hafemann and Tom Schreiner. Hafemann and Schreiner use the same tracing method (with a few, small differences). A more detailed discussion of tracing can be found in Schreiner’s, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, This handout by Brian Vickers has been adapted by Tom Schreiner (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); see chapter 6, “Tracing the Argument,” 97-124.

The Key to learning tracing is to learn how to recognize propositions (P).

Q: How do you recognize propositions?

A: By the ways they relate together. Often the key to identifying a P is noticing words like “and” “but” “because” etc. Notice these conjunctions in the example argument. When tracing a NT text, conjunctions and other logical connectors play a vital role in dividing and connecting propositions.

Here is a basic explanation of how each P relates logically to form an argument.

- P1, “Listen” makes a statement. It serves to get the attention of the reader.
- P2, “We are going to learn tracing.” P2 provides the “what” that you are expected to listen to. The argument really begins here.
- P3, “Because Tracing is one of the best methods to learn,” gives the reason why we are going to learn tracing. It provides the ground for the statement in P2.
- P4, “in order that. . .” supports P3 by stating the purpose of learning tracing.
- P5, “And Tracing is important to learn” introduces another argument.
- P6, “Because it teaches us to read arguments” gives the reason or the ground for why tracing is important to learn. P6 supports P5.
- P7, “by following the logic of the author” states the means by which tracing teaches us to read arguments. It supports P6, “. . . teaches us to read arguments.”
- P8 concludes the argument. It is the inference of the whole argument. In other words, all the preceding P’s support the assertion, “Therefore we should want to learn tracing.”

The method used in this simple example is the same method employed in tracing a biblical text. With practice, anyone who can understand the above example, can trace an argument in the Bible. That is not to say that every argument is as easy to follow as the example—arguments can be very complex and so require a great deal of time and thought, and often lots of effort before they become clear—but the time and effort put in to learning to trace is a very small price to pay in order to become better Bible readers and interpreters.

II. Linking Propositions: Following the logic of clauses in an argument.

Once an argument is divided into propositions, the next step is to link them together according to the logical flow of the argument. It must be remembered that although propositions are linked according to certain rules, it is not a completely objective exercise. Secondly, tracing is not the whole of exegesis. The student, therefore, must always beware of forcing a particular “logic” onto a proposition, and of thinking that once a text is traced, he or she “has it.”

Propositions are linked together by the ways they relate to one another. There are only two basic ways that propositions relate. A clause will be one of two types. It is extremely important to understand how clauses work. Even though this may seem elementary, understanding the two types of clauses is fundamental to learning how to trace an argument.

The two types of clauses are:

1. Coordinate (independent)
2. Subordinate (dependent)

1. *Coordinate* propositions are independent clauses that are joined together by words like “and,” “but,” “or.” These clauses form compound sentences. Each clause is independent of the other. The way to tell if two or more clauses are coordinate, is to see if each can stand alone.

Examples “This semester I am learning Tracing *and* I am learning Greek”
 “This semester I am learning Tracing *but* I am not learning Hebrew”
 “Next semester I will learn Greek *or* I will learn Hebrew”
 *Each clause in the three examples is independent of the other clause in the sentence.

2. *Subordinate* propositions are clauses that relate together by one P making a statement (independent clause) and the other P supporting (dependent clause) it. These clauses may be joined together by a variety of words and logical relationships. Subordinate clauses form complex sentences. That is, a sentence in which an independent clause is supported by one or more other clause(s). The way to tell if a clause is subordinate is to see if it *cannot* stand alone. For instance: “Because I can trace” cannot stand alone – it *depends* on another clause.

Examples: “I am learning Tracing *by* taking this class”
 *The second clause is subordinated to the first by the word “by.”
 It *supports* the first clause.
 “I am learning Tracing *because* my teacher is making me do it.”
 *The second clause is the reason, the *support* for the first.
 “I will learn Tracing *even if* it kills me.”
 * The second clause *supports* the first by giving a *condition*.

Note that clause order does not always determine which clause is dependent and which is independent.

Example: “*If* I learn tracing, I will be a better Bible reader.”
 *Here the subordinate clause comes first. The independent clause, “I will be a better Bible reader is supported by the condition, “If I learn tracing.”

Once a student can divide an argument into propositions, and can recognize the difference between coordinate and subordinate clauses, he or she is ready to begin tracing the argument. Now it is time to learn the different kinds of coordinate and subordinate clauses. There are not that many, and anyone who can understand any language—including their own—already uses these clauses in everyday speech. Learning to trace is really just learning to pay close attention to the way people, in our case the biblical authors, speak and write.

There are always some people who look at the tracing method and dismiss it because they think it is too mechanical, a waste of time, or just scholarly nonsense with which no “regular” person need bother. One may indeed arrive at these conclusions about tracing – but only *after* learning how to do it; otherwise, saying that tracing is nonsense is to make a nonsensical statement. It is like saying, “Spinach tastes horrible” without ever actually tasting spinach for yourself. Take the example from a story of two men discussing NT Greek: One man tells the other how much benefit he has gained from learning to read the NT in Greek. The other man begins making fun of “Greek scholars” and says, “Learning Greek is a waste of time, it won’t help you read the Bible any better than knowing English.” The first man, who had studied Greek and knew the benefits he gained by it, could hardly believe that someone would call Greek a waste of time. So after thinking about it for a second, he calmly responded by asking: “Did you arrive at that conclusion *after* learning Greek yourself?” The first man, of course, could not reply. The point is that until you have tried to learn and apply the principles of tracing, you do not yet know if it is a waste of time. The only way to know that, is to learn it. There are many people who believe that learning tracing transformed their Bible reading. If that result is even a *possibility*, isn’t it worth the time to find out for yourself? After all, shouldn’t we try everything we can in order to read and understand God’s word?

Linking Propositions – Examples

I. Coordinate Relationships between Propositions (Do Not Support)

1. Series:

Matthew 24:29

- | | |
|--|--|
| <div style="font-size: 4em; line-height: 1;">[</div> <div style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; margin-top: 10px;">S</div> | a. the sun will be darkened |
| | b. the moon will not give its light |
| | c. the stars will fall from heaven |
| | d. <u>and</u> the powers of heaven shall be shaken |

2. Progression:

Romans 8:30

- | | |
|--|---|
| <div style="font-size: 4em; line-height: 1;">[</div> <div style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; margin-top: 10px;">P</div> | a. Those whom he predestined he called |
| | b. <u>and</u> those he called also justified |
| | c. <u>and</u> those whom he justified he also glorified |

*Note: It is often difficult to make a distinction between a series and a progression since “and” is often the connecting word in both. If the propositions are moving toward a climax, then it is a progression; if it is simply supplying more information it is a series.

3. Alternative:

Acts 28:24

- | | |
|--|------------------------------|
| <div style="font-size: 4em; line-height: 1;">[</div> <div style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; margin-top: 10px;">A</div> | a. Some were convinced |
| | b. while others disbelieved. |

II. Subordinate Relationships between Propositions (Supportive)

A. Support by Restatement

1. Action-Manner:

Romans 3:28

- | | |
|---|---|
| <div style="border-left: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> <div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 5px;">Ac</div> <div style="text-align: center;">Mn</div> </div> | a. For we maintain that a person is justified |
| | b. by faith apart from the works of the law. |

2. Comparison:

Ephesians 5:1

- | | |
|---|---|
| <div style="border-left: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> <div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 5px;">Cf</div> </div> | a. and walk in love |
| | b. <u>just as</u> Christ also loved you |

3. Negative-Positive:

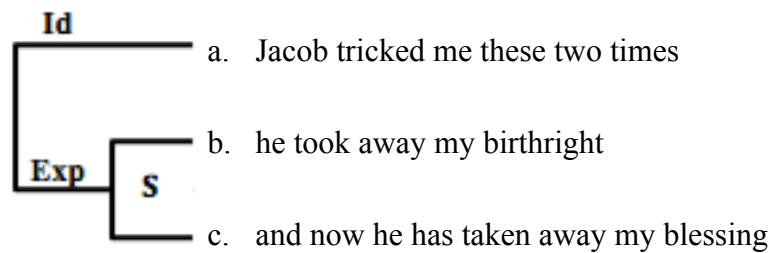
Ephesians 5:17

- | | |
|---|---|
| <div style="border-left: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> <div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 5px;">-</div> <div style="text-align: center;">+</div> </div> | a. Do not be foolish |
| | b. <u>but</u> understand what the will of the Lord is |

*Note: It is often difficult to distinguish between an Alternative and Negative-Positive. Ask yourself if one proposition is making a contrast with the other proposition, or if one proposition is denied, while the other is enforced (as in the example from Ephesians 5:17).

4. Idea-Explanation:

Genesis 27:36

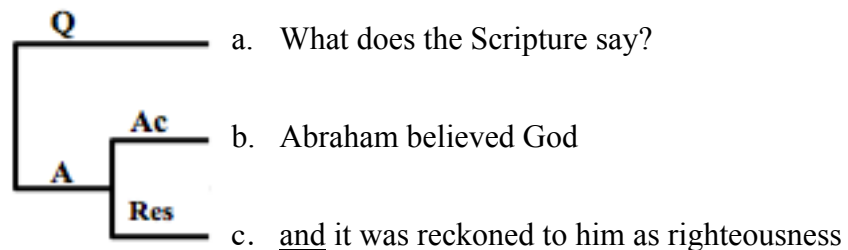


*Note: Idea-Explanation is very often used to link larger sections of a discourse. You will not find it quite so often linking two propositions as in the example above. Identifying an Idea-Explanation will come with practice.

*Also: Notice that the Series in “b” and “c” was connected before being linked with “a”. The series in “b” and “c” is the explanation of the idea in “a”. It is very important to look for the small connections first, and then link up larger units.

5. Question-Answer:

Romans 4:3

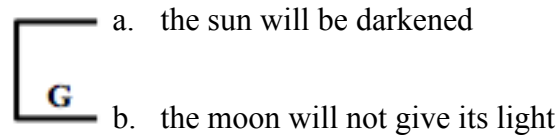


*Note: Again, the Series was connected before the Q-A. The whole series in “b” and “c” is the answer to the question in “a”.

B. Support by Distinct Statement

1. Ground:

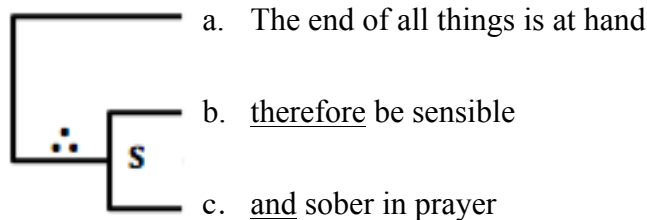
Matthew 5:4



*Note: The Ground clause comes after the proposition it supports. Proposition “b” gives the reason for “a”.

2. Inference:

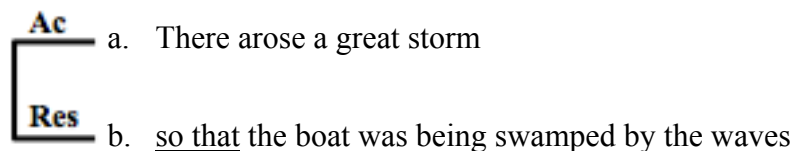
1 Peter 4:7



*Note: An Inference is like an upside-down Ground clause. That is, the supporting proposition (“a” in the example) comes before the supported inference in “b” and “c”.

3. Action-Result:

Matthew 8:24



* Note: The Action-Manner in “b” and “c” is connected first. If “a” and “b” were connected first, then connected to “c”, then “by the waves” would be the “manner” by which not only the boat was swamped but also by which the storm arose – which is obviously impossible. Make sure to read all the propositions in a discourse before connecting them.

4. Action-Purpose:

1 Peter 5:6

- | | |
|-----|---|
| Ac | a. Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God |
| Pur | b. <u>so that</u> he may lift you up |

* Note: Action-Result and Action-Purpose may look very similar since the connecting words may often be very similar. The way to distinguish them is to remember that in an Action-Result the consequence or result accompanies the action, like a boat being swamped as a result of a storm. In an Action-Purpose once action is intended to come as a result of another action. Still, even with the distinction it can be difficult to tell the difference. It will come with practice.

5. Conditional:

Galatians 5:18

- | | |
|----|--|
| If | a. <u>If</u> you are led by the Spirit |
| Th | b. (then) you are not under the law |

*Note: In a Conditional clause, the “if” part of the clause supports the “then” part of the clause. The “if” gives the condition for how the other statement is fulfilled.

6. Temporal:

Matthew 6:16

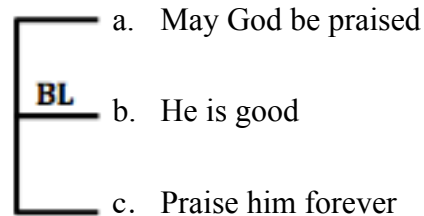
- | | |
|---|-------------------------|
| T | a. <u>When</u> you fast |
| | b. do not look gloomy |

7. Locative:

Matthew 18:20

- | | |
|---|---|
| L | a. <u>Where</u> two or three are gathered together in my name |
| | b. there I am in their midst |

8. Bilateral:

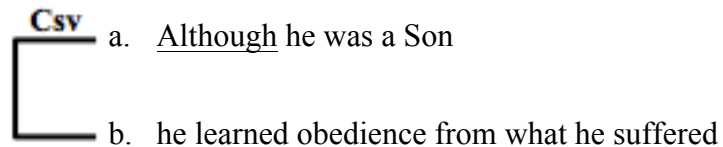


*Note: Bilaterals are more frequently found at the paragraph level, not with an individual verse. In this made up example proposition “b” functions as the ground for “a”. Proposition “c” is an inference drawn from “b”. Hence, proposition “b” functions as the support for both “a” and “c”.

C. Support by Contrary Statement

1. Concessive:

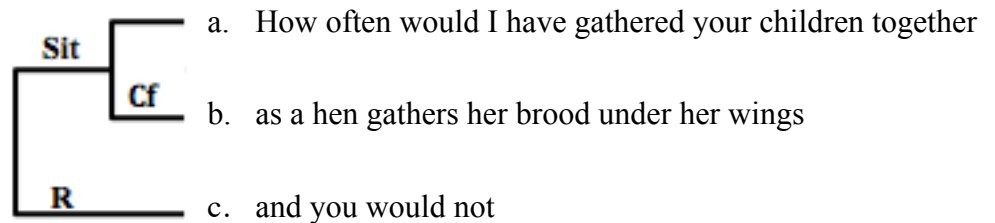
Hebrews 5:8



* Note: The Concessive clause supports the main clause because it highlights the strength of the main clause which stands despite the obstacle of the concessive clause.

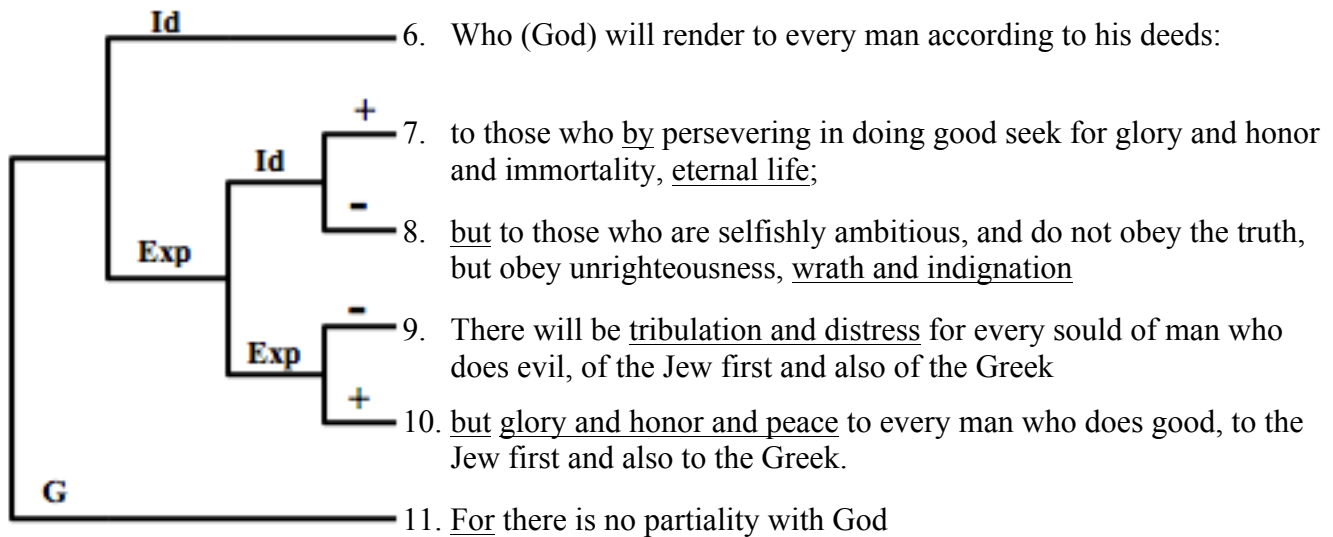
2. Situation-Response:

Matthew 23:37



* Note: Situation-Response appears mostly in narrative (like in the Gospels) and occasionally in the Epistles when a writer is recounting events.

Romans 2:6-11



Summary Outline of Relationship Between Propositions

I. Coordinate Relationships

1. Series (S)
2. Progression (P)
3. Alternative (A)

II. Subordinate Relationships

A. Support by Restatement

1. Action-Manner (Ac-Mn)
2. Comparison (Cf)
3. Negative-Positive (-/+)
4. Idea-Explanation (Id/Exp)
5. Question-Answer (Q/A)

B. Support by Distinct Statement

1. Ground (G)
2. Inference (\therefore)
3. Action-Result (Ac-Res)
4. Action-Purpose (Ac-Pur)
5. Conditional (If/Th)
6. Temporal (T)
7. Locative (L)
8. Bilateral (BL)

C. Support by Contrary Statement

1. Concessive (Csv)
2. Situation-Response (Sit-R)

Tracing Guide

Symbols and Definitions

by Brian Vickers

This may look slightly mechanical, but remember it is merely a simple way to identify propositions. It is important to study this chart. The “Key Words” given in the fourth column are not exhaustive lists, but just some typical examples. There are other kinds of propositions not listed in this chart, but these are the basic propositions. While the symbols may be new, these are the kinds of statements you make and understand every day of your life.

	NAME	SYMBOL	DEFINITION	KEY WORDS	
	Series	S	Each proposition makes a contribution to whole	and, moreover, furthermore, likewise	Coordinate
	Progression	P	Each proposition is a further step toward a climax	then, and, moreover, furthermore	
	Alternative	A	Each proposition expresses an opposite possibility arising from a situation	but, while, or, on the other hand	
Support by Restatement	Action-Manner	Ac - Mn	Statement of an action and statement which tells more explicitly what is involved in carrying out action	by, in that	Subordinate
	Comparison	Cf	Statement expressing an action and one making that action clearer by showing what it is like	as, just as, even as, as... so, so also, like	
	Negative-Positive	- / +	Two alternative statements, one of the statements is denied by the other statement	but, not... but, though, although	
	Idea-Explanation	Id - Exp	Proposition stating a whole and one or more which sets forth the parts of the whole, or clarifies the meaning of the proposition	that is, for **Often no specific key words**	
	Question-Answer	Q - A	A question and the answer to the question	Question words: what, when, how	
Support by Distinct Statement	Ground	G	Statement and the argument or basis/reason for which it stands (a ground clause always supports). Not the “main point”	because, for, since	
	Inference	∴	A statement that is preceded by its supporting statement (upside down ground clause). Unlike a ground clause, an inference can be a main point	therefore, thus, wherefore, consequently	
	Action-Result	Ac - Res	An action and another action that comes automatically as a result	so that, that, with the result that	
	Action-Purpose	Ac - Pur	An action and another action that is intended as a result	in order that, that, lest, to the end that	
	Conditional	If - Th	Like Action-Result, but the causing action is only possible or potential	if... then, if, except	
	Temporal	T	Proposition and the occasion when it will occur	when, whenever, after, before	
	Locative	L	Relationship between the main proposition and the place where it can be true	where, wherever, etc.	
	Bilateral	BL	A bilateral proposition supports two other propositions, one preceding and one following	*See key words for Ground & Inference*	
Support by Contrary Statement	Concessive	Csv	The relationship between a main clause and a contrary statement	although... yet, although, yet, nevertheless, but, however	
	Situation-Response	Sit - R	A statement of response to a situation or action. Sit-R is most often found in narrative discourses.	**No specific key words**	