



THE 'ALTHOUGH' MISCONCEPTION



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Time and again, students have come to me with a 'rule' they had heard or read somewhere. Well, it turns out there's no such rule; it's only a misconception that is shared by many test takers. The purpose of this article is to dispel that misconception by offering official GMAT SC questions as examples. The article goes on to show that the 'rule' is wrong even more generally.

So, what is that rule or, rather, misconception? Here it is:



WHAT IS 'ALTHOUGH'?

'Although' is a subordinate conjunction.

(Well, I know some people don't like grammatical terms such as "subordinate conjunction". Even I don't. And to ace GMAT, you do not need to remember a lot of grammatical terms. But then, why did I use this term? Because it is easy to understand and once you understand it, you know what it does.)

'Subordinate' means someone lower in rank, and 'Conjunction' means something that joins two things. So, a subordinate conjunction means something that makes a clause into a subordinate clause and helps join it to the main clause (the one with the higher rank!). Examples of

subordinate conjunctions are although, though, once, if, when, since, before, and after. (Please note that this is not an exhaustive list)

Here's one sentence from one of my favourite books:

Although people with scarcity mentality might verbally express happiness for others' success, inwardly they are eating their hearts out.

In the above example, the word 'although' is followed by a clause, and the presence of 'although' makes it a dependent or a subordinate clause, which is then attached to the main clause (Independent clause) – "inwardly they are eating their hearts out".

In a lot of cases, 'Although' is indeed followed by a clause. For example:

- Certification programs for veterinary technicians require algebra, **although** none of the graduates I've met have ever used it in diagnosing or treating their patients.
- **Although** the aspirational customers at entry price points are behaving more cautiously, the brand is resonating ever more strongly with our core luxury audience.
- **Although** the capuchins eat several species of insects, they do not eat the type of millipede they use to rub on their bodies.

In all of the above example sentences, 'although' is followed by a clause.

However, it is **not true** that 'although' needs to be always followed by a clause, and there are examples galore in official questions that make this point conclusively. Rather, official questions in which 'although' is not followed by a clause go back to OG13, released more than three years ago. So, it is high time now that we put an end to this misconception!

SENTENCE #1

Let's consider Q48 from OG13. Try to solve it on your own before looking at the answer below.

It is called a sea, but the landlocked Caspian is actually the largest lake on Earth, which covers more than four times the surface area of its closest rival in size, North America's Lake Superior.

- A. It is called a sea, but the landlocked Caspian is actually the largest lake on Earth, which covers
- B. Although it is called a sea, actually the landlocked Caspian is the largest lake on Earth, which covers
- C. Though called a sea, the landlocked Caspian is actually the largest lake on Earth, covering
- D. Though called a sea but it actually is the largest lake on Earth, the landlocked Caspian covers
- E. Despite being called a sea, the largest lake on Earth is actually the landlocked Caspian, covering

The correct option is C.

The correct sentence, thus, is:

Though called a sea, the landlocked Caspian is actually the largest lake on Earth, covering more than four times the surface area of its closest rival in size, North America's Lake Superior.

In the above sentence, "Though" is followed not by a clause but by a noun modifier (in this case, a verb-ed modifier or a past participle).

In the sentence, "called" is a noun modifier that modifies the subject of the clause "the landlocked Caspian". Rather, whenever a subordinate conjunction is followed by a noun modifier, the modifier always modifies the subject of the clause in which the subordinate conjunction appears or of the closest clause. In this case, it modifies the subject of the closest clause.

Also, whenever a subordinate conjunction is followed by a noun modifier, the meaning of the sentence can be better understood by inserting the subject (the subject that is modified) and the appropriate verb before the modifier so that we get a subordinate clause. In the above case, we can do the same as:

*Though **it (the landlocked Caspian) is** called a sea, the landlocked Caspian is actually the largest lake on Earth, covering more than four times the surface area of its closest rival in size, North America's Lake Superior.*

SENTENCE #2

Here's the correct sentence from OG13 – Q36:

*Along with the drop in producer prices announced yesterday, the strong retail sales figures released today seem to indicate that the economy, **although growing slowly**, is not nearing a recession.*

The relevant part for us, after 'that', is:

The economy, although growing slowly, is not nearing a recession.

In this sentence, "although" is followed by a verb-ing modifier, not a clause. The verb-ing modifies the subject of the clause "The economy". The sentence can be better understood by inserting the subject and the appropriate verb in the "although" part. The above sentence means the same as:

Although **it is** growing slowly, the economy is not nearing a recession.

SENTENCE #3

Here's a question from Verbal Review 2016 – Q47:

Though being tiny, blind, and translucent, a recently discovered species of catfish lessens their vulnerability with thickened bones and armor plates on their sides.

- A. Though being tiny, blind, and translucent, a recently discovered species of catfish lessens their vulnerability with thickened bones and armor plates on their sides.
- B. Though tiny, blind, and translucent, a recently discovered species of catfish has thickened bones and armor plates on its sides that lessen its vulnerability.
- C. A recently discovered species of catfish has thickened bones and armor plates on its sides that lessen their vulnerability, though tiny, blind, and translucent.
- D. Thickened bones and armor plates on their sides lessen the vulnerability of a recently discovered species of catfish that is tiny, blind, and translucent.
- E. Tiny, blind, and translucent, thickened bones and armor plates on its sides lessen the vulnerability of a recently discovered species of catfish.

The correct option is B.

Once again, we can see that “Though” is followed not by a clause but by a noun modifier. The modifier ‘tiny, blind, and translucent’ modifies the subject of the clause ‘a recently discovered species of catfish’. The meaning of the correct option is same as:

Though **it is** tiny, blind, and translucent, a recently discovered species of catfish has thickened bones and armor plates on its sides that lessen its vulnerability.

This structure, in which a subordinate conjunction is followed by a noun modifier, is not specific to just “Although” and “Though” but applies to other subordinate conjunctions as well.

SENTENCE #4 - IF

Rising inventories, **if not accompanied** by corresponding increases in sales, can lead to production cutbacks that would hamper economic growth.

The above sentence is the correct choice in OG 2016 Q16. We can see that “if” is followed not by a clause but by a verb-ed modifier. The meaning of the sentence is same as:

If **they are** not accompanied by corresponding increases in sales, rising inventories can lead to production cutbacks that would hamper economic growth.

SENTENCE #5 - IF

Here's another sentence (from correct option in Verbal Review 2016 – Q74)

Certain pesticides can become ineffective **if used** repeatedly in the same place; one reason is suggested by the finding that there are much larger populations of pesticide-degrading microbes in soils with a relatively long history of pesticide use than in soils that are free of such chemicals.

In this sentence, even though the modifier “used” appears at a distance from the subject of the clause “certain pesticides”, it still modifies the subject. The meaning of the part before the semi-colon is:

Certain pesticides can become ineffective if ***they are*** used repeatedly in the same place;

SENTENCE #6 - AFTER

Here's the another sentence from OG16 (Correct option in Q100):

The results of the company's cost-cutting measures are evident in its profits, which have increased five percent during the first three months of this year **after falling** over the last two years.

In this sentence, “after” is followed a verb-ing modifier, and even though the modifier appears at a distance from the subject of the clause i.e. which, it modifies the subject. The sentence means the same as below:

The results of the company's cost-cutting measures are evident in its profits, which have increased five percent during the first three months of this year after ***they (profits) fell*** over the last two years.

Here it is important to understand that since modifiers (including verb-ed and verb-ing modifiers) do not have a verb tense of their own, their tense is dictated by the context of the argument. Therefore, in the above sentence, “falling” changed to “they fell”, since the action happened in the past (last two years).

SENTENCE #7 - WHEN

Lastly, let's look at this sentence from an official RC passage:

Many politicians, business leaders, and scholars discount the role of public policy and emphasize the role of the labor market **when explaining** employers' maternity-leave policies.

In this sentence, “when” is followed by a verb-ing modifier, which modifies the subject of the clause “many politicians, business leaders, and scholars”.

The above sentence has the same meaning as the below sentence:

Many politicians, business leaders, and scholars discount the role of public policy and emphasize the role of the labor market when **they are** explaining employers' maternity-leave policies.

Now, what do we learn from the above examples. I believe we have three takeaways from this article.

TAKEAWAYS

- Subordinate conjunctions, including but not limited to although, though, and if, do not always need to be followed by a clause; they can be followed by a clause or a noun-modifier.
- When a subordinate conjunction is followed by a noun modifier, the modifier always modifies the subject of the clause in which the subordinate conjunction appears or of the closest clause.
- When a subordinate conjunction is followed by a noun modifier, the meaning of the sentence can be better understood by inserting the subject and the appropriate verb in the subordinate part.