

Fallacies & emotional appeals

A fallacy is a breakdown of logic that uses faulty or deceptive arguments to reach a flawed conclusion. Appeals to emotion are not illogical in the same way that fallacies are, but they are non-logical. Instead, for impact, they depend on suggestion and loaded language. Recognizing fallacies and emotional appeals can help you evaluate what you read and write better arguments of your own.

“Be afraid!” Appeals to Emotion

Appeals to emotion tap into and exploit our feelings, such as indignation, enthusiasm, compassion, fear, ambition, desire for belonging. Appeals to emotion are often used in calls to action—donate, buy, vote, join, do me this favor...

What it looks like: “Republicans want to deny voting rights to millions of Americans!”

“Through the school systems, Democrats treat our children like a social experiment.”

“You are doing more than joining an organization; you are becoming a part of a community” (NAACP).

What’s wrong with it: Because the focus is on arousing emotion, these appeals tend to make sweeping, general assertions and offer little factual evidence, so their underlying claims cannot be easily verified. Some facts may be offered, but they may be incomplete or out of context. Still, the selected facts give the argument a superficial appearance of logic. Hitler fabricated “facts” about Jews in propaganda campaigns designed to stir up hatred and fear. While it is possible to challenge facts, it is hard to argue against emotion; there can be no real counterargument to a straightforward emotional appeal.

At the same time, just because an appeal is primarily emotional does not necessarily mean it is bad. For instance, animal rescue groups use vivid images of suffering animals to appeal to pity and elicit compassionate action; both the NAACP (cited above) and Habitat for Humanity appeal to our desire to share companionship and build community.

What you can do: Resist the temptation to empathize without asking any questions. But if you decide an emotional response is well founded and appropriate, go all in and take whatever action you find fitting!

“Idiot.” Ad Hominem (“against the man”) Fallacy

The ad hominem fallacy is the name-calling fallacy. Imagine any name you wish—neocon, hater, hypocrite, racist, bigot, tree-hugger, one-percenter. *Poisoning the well* is a variation in which you disparage your opponent by attacking his integrity or intelligence preemptively in hopes of undermining his position.

What it looks like: “This president is a lying, neo-Fascist colonialist (or a self-serving, overreaching social engineer).”

What’s wrong with it: Name calling is not an argument.

What you can do: You *could* get defensive and try to explain why you’re not a neo-Fascist hater (or whatever) but then you’re just falling into the trap. If you think it’s worthwhile, you could try to refocus to a more discussable topic.

Ad Nauseum (“to the point of nausea”) Fallacy

The ad nauseum fallacy is the frequent unsupported repetition of a claim. The subsequent claims are propped up by the original claim (and vice versa) but little else.

What it looks like: Columbus was the first person to discover America (until recently, repeated and restated and reiterated in elementary school textbooks all over the U.S.)

What’s wrong with it: Saying it doesn’t make it true, and repeating it doesn’t make it truer. The insidious thing is that, with enough repetition, people start to assume there is good evidence to support the claim. The claim becomes self-perpetuating as long as no one looks for the evidence—or for evidence to the contrary. Researchers have traced claims asserted in the news stories of reputable newspapers only to find that the newspapers were actually citing each other, and that objective supporting evidence did not exist. You could also think of this as an [appeal to common belief](#) (below).

What you can do: Look for the supporting evidence, not just for corroboration or another similar assertion.

“Any reasonable person would agree…” Appeal to Common Belief

The appeal to common belief or common practice urges you to agree with a group consensus that may or may not actually exist. This fallacy can be fine-tuned to appeal to a particular group.

What it looks like: “Parents and educators fear that vouchers will seriously undermine funding for public schools.” Other textual clues: *Ask anyone...Everyone knows...It’s obvious...*

What’s wrong with it: If a group consensus exists (and the statement above doesn’t actually show that it does, although it implies it), that doesn’t make a claim true. After all, there used to be that common belief that Columbus discovered America. Sometimes there isn’t a clear consensus at all, even though it is implied. Especially if the group is not specifically identified, there is at least a chance that the statement represents only one viewpoint among others which have been omitted.

What you can do: Try to identify the group alluded to—is it most parents and educators or some? Is it parents and educators in suburban areas? In poorer school districts? Be skeptical if you can’t identify the constituency of the group being cited. Try to identify what the involved groups may have to gain or to lose in the matter. Look for (factual) supporting reasons and evidence that go beyond insinuation.

“This, therefore that.” Questionable Cause Fallacy

A questionable cause fallacy is the result of incorrectly identifying causes of events, often by mistaking a statistical correlation for a cause. The questionable cause fallacy may jump to the wrong conclusion as a result, or it may oversimplify a set of complex causes. The *slippery slope fallacy* is a variation that links supposed causes and effects in an improbably long chain that is increasingly unlikely the longer it gets.

What it looks like: During hot summer months, rates of violent crime tend to rise. At the same time, the rates of ice cream sales rise. Does eating more ice cream cause more violent crime, or does violent crime cause more ice cream to be eaten?

What’s wrong with it: When two events occur together, either by chance or because they are both results of another cause, this is a *correlation*. But it does not show *causation*. The two trends above are *correlated* (they occur together), but neither causes the other. The more likely explanation is that hot weather contributes to both.

What you can do: There has to be a logical mechanism that links a cause and an effect. If you can’t find the logical link, maybe it isn’t there. Don’t overlook the possibility that there is another, shared cause, or several smaller contributing causes.

“He has ties to...” Guilt by Association

Guilt by association connects an idea, organization, or person with some unpleasant thing in order to undermine trust in their credibility. Other phrases that might signal guilt by association: *is connected with...was a member of...is the parent company of...is a subsidiary of...is associated with...works alongside...*

What it looks like: “The candidate has ties to Bullwinkle Real Estate Development, which has been cited for numerous health and safety violations in apartment buildings it owns in five major American cities.”

What’s wrong with it: This implies (but does not state outright) that Bullwinkle Development is negligent in managing its apartments. However, it’s at least possible that Bullwinkle recently bought the apartments from a slumlord and undertook a comprehensive fix-up campaign. Second, it implies (but does not state) that the candidate himself was complicit in the health and safety violations. But what “ties” are we talking about? He could be a second cousin to the window washer of Bullwinkle Developments. So what? A secondary dig at Bullwinkle may be the suggestion that it is “guilty” of owning a lot of property, which for some people further implies that it has come by its assets by depriving poorer people of theirs.

A flipped version of guilt by association is *transfer*, where positive attributes make a product (or person) more appealing. For example, images of Mount Everest appeal to buyers of outdoor products even though most of them have never climbed and will never climb Everest. Images of Arlington National Cemetery might be used to raise money for veterans’ groups. A candidate might be sure to appear in video clips and photos alongside blue-collar workers, amid ethnically diverse crowds or American flags.

What you can do: Be on guard when you see emotionally evocative phrases or images like these, especially if everything is implied and nothing is spelled out. If the issue seems worthwhile, try to find out what the “tie” is, what is actually going on, and what *else* is going on. Try to place the claim in a wider context.

Straw Man Fallacy

The straw man fallacy takes a complex position, usually on a controversial matter, and misrepresents it in order to more easily argue against it. The straw man fallacy works best if the characterization closely resembles the real one; that is, if I choose to misrepresent your position, I should not *be too* obvious about it. *Stacking the deck* is a similar fallacy in which I omit certain evidence that might undermine my position.

What it looks like: “Catholic families are pressured by an all-male hierarchy to have large families that they can’t afford, and are forbidden to use birth control except for the rhythm method. Catholic women need to come into the twenty-first century and take charge of their own bodies.”

What’s wrong with it: Instead of engaging with the best Catholic arguments on complex issues of family ethics, the speaker misrepresents the Catholic position, weakening it in order to better argue against it. (It also interjects male-female gender struggles and an implied criticism of an all-male priesthood—issues that may be related, but which do not clearly support an argument pressing for use of artificial contraception among Catholic women. See [red herring](#), below.)

Political parties and candidates often use the straw man fallacy. They paint extreme caricatures of their opponents’ actual, more thoughtful, positions in order to argue more easily, in short, marketable sound-bites, against them.

What you can do: Homework. You may have to do some research if you don’t know what someone’s real position is on an issue. If you want to know what Catholics say about family ethics and contraception, try a Catholic source. You may have to triangulate on the truth by reading about an issue from several sources—and from several viewpoints. If you consult only Catholic sources, you may miss important criticisms, and if you consult sources

exclusively critical of the Catholic position, you may miss valid arguments on the other side. Educating yourself can be time consuming, so you will have to choose your battles by researching the issues that interest you the most.

“You’re either for us or against us.” False Dilemma Fallacy

The false dilemma fallacy steers you toward only those choices that serve the ends of its user. It tries to force you to choose from two extremes, and implicitly denies any middle ground or any complex, nuanced response.

What it looks like: “If you vote against the hospital bond measure, you’re voting for more children to die of cancer.”

“Do you want to expand NSA eavesdropping powers, or do you want to see another terrorist attack?”

What’s wrong with it: Somewhere between giving taxpayer money to the hospitals and wanting children to die of cancer lies a vast middle ground of possibilities. The choice is presented in black-and-white terms that do not reflect these possibilities. For instance, it is possible to vote against the bond measure and be a regular donor to American Cancer Society research. It is possible to vote against the bond measure because it is poorly written and will not do the positive things it promises to do. In short, it is possible to vote against the bond measure and not be a hater. The dilemma is a false one.

What you can do: Poll questions (like the second one above) sometimes present choices in the form of false dilemmas. Don’t fall for it. If any proposition offers only two extremes, stop and ask yourself: What is the vast, omitted middle ground here?

Jumping to Conclusions--Hasty Generalization Fallacy

A hasty generalization draws an unwarranted conclusion from insufficient evidence. It often happens when the sample is too small to support the conclusion.

What it looks like: “My first day on the job was awful. I’m going to hate this job!”

“I use to share an apartment with an art major. They’re pretty undependable.”

“Bullwinkle Moose is 30 points ahead in the Mr. Wizard polls, virtually assuring him an easy win.”

What’s wrong with it: One’s first day on the job seldom predicts how the job will turn out, and a single experience with an art major can’t tell us about the character of any other art major; there are too many variables *not* taken into consideration.

Polls and surveys fall into hasty generalization when they use too small a sample or a sample that is not random enough to fairly represent the population. For example, if Mr. Wizard polled 100 voters, his sample size may be too small to support the prediction of a Bullwinkle victory. If Mr. Wizard polled 100,000 voters, all of them located in the Midwest, his sample size might not represent the opinions of people outside the Midwest. If Mr. Wizard polled 10 million voters, all of them registered Democrats, his sample size wouldn’t represent millions of other voters registered to other political parties.

What you can do: In the case of polls, news outlets usually tell which poll they are citing, and the polling organization itself discloses how it samples the population. If you’re interested, you can make a guess about whether the claim seems warranted by backtracking to the source and the source’s methodology.

“You can’t prove it.” Argument from Ignorance

The argument from ignorance declares that something must be true if it cannot be proven false.

What it looks like: “I know mental telepathy exists, because no one has ever proved it doesn’t exist.”

“I know mental telepathy doesn’t exist, because no one has ever proved it does exist.”

What’s wrong with it: The obligation to provide proof belongs to the person making the assertion; I cannot fairly shift the burden of proof to someone holding an opposing position. The person who declares mental telepathy exists is obligated to prove it. Similarly, the person who declares that mental telepathy doesn’t exist is obliged to support his claim. However, he is in a much more difficult position because he cannot prove non-existence (try it!). The absence of evidence of mental telepathy (“no one has ever proved it does exist”) may mean that the evidence is still out there and just hasn’t been found. On the other hand, positive evidence of the absence of mental telepathy is impossible to provide.

What you can do: Avoid making negative claims of your own that you can’t support. Be willing to live with some uncertainty about the claims of others.

Red Herring or Smokescreen Fallacy

The smokescreen or red herring fallacies deflect a challenge by changing the subject or interjecting irrelevant facts. (A herring, a salt-cured fish, has a very strong odor; if you drag one across the trail of an animal, tracking dogs will be misled and abandon the animal’s scent for the herring’s.)

What it looks like: Speaker one: “I think your zero-tolerance rule is crazy. When he’s at school, my son can’t even carry his asthma inhaler or calamine lotion for his poison oak.” Speaker two: “No, what’s really crazy is how they’re selling drugs on the sidewalk right outside the playground fence. That’s a much bigger problem.”

What’s wrong with it: A red herring argument is a change of subject. No effective discussion, response, or solution is forthcoming.

What you can do: Try to re-direct the conversation to the original topic.

Begging the Question

Begging the question is a type of circular assertion that leads to a “conclusion” that has already been pre-supposed or implied.

What it looks like: “This English final exam is obviously bogus. I’ve taken it three times now, and they won’t pass me no matter what I do!”

What’s wrong with it: The student concludes that the test is bogus because he hasn’t been able to pass it. His implied premise (he doesn’t state it, but he evidently believes it) is that his essays are fine. The question is this: *are* his essays fine? The test purports to determine this, but the student rejects the evidence of three exams to simply assert otherwise. Simply asserting (or implying) otherwise does not prove his point; it begs the question.

What you can do: Ask “Why do you say that?” or “How do you know?”

“They’re all like that…” Distribution Fallacies

Distribution fallacies arise two ways: In the *composition fallacy*, I know the characteristics of the whole, and wrongly attribute those characteristics to each of the parts. In its converse, the *division fallacy*, I know the characteristics of a part, and wrongly attribute those characteristics to the whole.

What it looks like: I have read that many high school graduates are not well prepared for college because they lack basic skills, motivation, and discipline. I meet a new student in my biology class who just graduated from Marysville High School. I assume she is unskilled, unmotivated, and undisciplined.

Alternately, I meet a new student in my biology class who is brilliant, curious, and hard-working. She just graduated from Marysville High School. I assume Marysville High School must be a high school full of brilliant, curious, and hard-working students.

What's wrong with it: These fallacies underlie all kinds of stereotypes from the harmless to the truly vicious. The composition fallacy leads us to stereotype individuals based on generalized information about groups. The division fallacy leads us to broadly stereotype entire groups based on limited specific information about an individual.

What you can do: Don't assume that a statistical fact will be true in every case or that any person is representative of an entire group. Expect to be surprised.

"I have a right to my opinion." Subjectivist or Relativist Fallacy

The subjectivist or relativist fallacy turns all disagreements into matters of opinion by claiming that true and false are different for different people.

What it looks like: Speaker one: "This spring Arctic sea ice extent was one of the lowest in the last 30 years, but Antarctic sea ice set record highs for the same period." Speaker two: "I disagree, and I have a right to my opinion."

Speaker one: "Cheating is wrong." Speaker two: "Maybe it's wrong for you, but it's okay for me."

What's wrong with it: A statement of fact is not an opinion subject to disagreement—only to being proved false. If a fact is observable and measurable, opinions are irrelevant; "disagreeing" with gravity will not keep you from falling. The fact itself is either true for everyone or false for everyone.

A subjective claim like the one about cheating is a value judgment. The relativist response suggests there are multiple standards of right and wrong, and that they may all be equally true even though they contradict one another. However, "Cheating is right" and "Cheating is wrong" cannot both be correct without neither being correct. This response reduces moral and ethical choices to nonsense and eliminates common ground for discussion of what "good" behavior looks like.

What you can do? Know where your own facts come from. Fact-check others using multiple reliable sources to lessen the chance of facts being twisted by bias. On subjective claims, ask the other person to explain his standards, define his terms (what exactly is "okay"?) and spell out the limits of his believe (Always? Sometimes?). Or just let it go...

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