

The Straw Man Fallacy

THE MISCONCEPTION: *When you argue, you try to stick to the facts.*

THE TRUTH: *In any argument, anger will tempt you to reframe your opponent's position.*

When you are losing an argument, you often use a variety of deceptive techniques to bolster your opinion. You aren't trying to be sneaky, but the human mind tends to follow predictable patterns when you get angry with other people and do battle with words.

One of the most reliable and sturdy logical fallacies is the straw man, and even though its probability of appearing is high, you often don't notice when you are using it or being beat over the head with it.

It works like this: When you get into an argument about either something personal or something more public and abstract, you sometimes resort to constructing a character who you find easier to refute, argue, and disagree with, or you create a position the other person isn't even suggesting or defending. This is a straw man.

It happens so often, professional debaters and science advocates

are trained to look for the straw man fallacy both in themselves and opponents when asserting their opinions or shooting down the claims of others. The straw man fallacy takes the facts and assertions of your opponent and replaces them with an artificial argument you feel more comfortable dealing with.

The straw man fallacy follows a familiar pattern. You first build the straw man, then you attack it, then you point out how easy it was to defeat it, and then you come to a conclusion.

For instance, say you are arguing about whether or not people should be allowed to own pet chickens. You think chickens are hideous creatures, thanks to an unfortunate incident in childhood when you were attacked by a bloodthirsty hen at a petting zoo, and since then you have made it your life's mission to keep poultry away from children. Your opponent wants the city ordinances to be changed so he can breed fancy varieties of chickens who look like sea anemones and sell them to pet stores.

You say, "If we allow people to breed chickens in their backyards, soon they'll be in the streets and on the subway. Eventually, people will be taking their chickens to work with them and including them in Christmas cards with the rest of the family. In a world like that, what will happen to the poultry industry? No one will want to eat something that could be their pet. I don't think I want to live in a world like that, would you? So, no, we shouldn't allow this ordinance to pass."

In creating a fantasy scenario where the world goes mad if the other person's argument were to win, you have constructed a straw man. It is easy to see the downsides of and hard to defend, but it also isn't what the other person was suggesting. Now the other person has to clarify his or her argument by assuring everyone he or she has no desire to see restaurant chains close because of this proposal. The

other person now must argue against the feathery doomsday you've invented instead of just pointing out the reasonable ways people could be allowed to raise a few domesticated fowl.

Within any debate over a controversial topic, you will see straw men tossed out by both sides. Sometimes people morph the straw man into a warning about a slippery slope where allowing one side to win would put humanity on a course of destruction. Any time someone begins an attack with "So you're saying we should all just . . ." or "Everyone knows . . .," you can bet a straw man is coming. When you start or someone else starts to imagine a future hellscape thanks to the ideas of the opposition becoming reality, there is a straw man in the room. Straw men can also be born out of ignorance. If someone says, "Scientists tell us we all come from monkeys, and that's why I homeschool," this person is using a straw man, because science doesn't say we all come from monkeys.

Pay attention the next time you disagree with someone, and see if you start or the other person starts to construct a man out of straw. Keep in mind whoever does it is using a logical fallacy, and even if that person succeeds, he or she didn't really win.