

Rhetorical (Logical) Fallacies

Fallacies are defects that weaken arguments. By learning to look for them in your own and others' writing, you can strengthen your ability to evaluate the arguments you make, read, and hear. It is important to realize two things about fallacies: first, fallacious arguments are very, very common and can be quite persuasive, at least to the casual reader or listener. You can find dozens of examples of fallacious reasoning in newspapers, advertisements, and other sources. Second, it is sometimes hard to evaluate whether an argument is fallacious. An argument might be very weak, somewhat weak, somewhat strong, or very strong. An argument that has several stages or parts might have some strong sections and some weak ones. The goal is not to teach you how to label arguments as fallacious or fallacy-free, but to help you look critically at your own arguments and move them away from the "weak" and toward the "strong" end of the continuum.

Ad Hominem and Tu Quoque: Like the appeal to authority and ad populum fallacies, the ad hominem ("against the person") and tu quoque ("you, too!") fallacies focus our attention on people rather than on arguments or evidence. In both of these arguments, the conclusion is usually "You shouldn't believe So-and-So's argument." The reason for not believing So-and-So is that So-and-So is either a bad person (ad hominem) or a hypocrite (tu quoque). In an ad hominem argument, the arguer attacks his or her opponent instead of the opponent's argument.

Ad Populum: The Latin name of this fallacy means "to the people." There are several versions of the ad populum fallacy, but what they all have in common is that in them, the arguer takes advantage of the desire most people have to be liked and to fit in with others and uses that desire to try to get the audience to accept his or her argument. One of the most common versions is the bandwagon fallacy, in which the arguer tries to convince the audience to do or believe something because everyone else (supposedly) does.

Appeal to Authority: Often we add strength to our arguments by referring to respected sources or authorities and explaining their positions on the issues we're discussing. If, however, we try to get readers to agree with us simply by impressing them with a famous name or by appealing to a supposed authority who really isn't much of an expert, we commit the fallacy of appeal to authority.

Appeal to Ignorance: In the appeal to ignorance, the arguer basically says, "Look, there's no conclusive evidence on the issue at hand. Therefore, you should accept my conclusion on this issue."

Appeal to Pity: The appeal to pity takes place when an arguer tries to get people to accept a conclusion by making them feel sorry for someone.

Begging the Question: A complicated fallacy; it comes in several forms and can be harder to detect than many of the other fallacies we've discussed. Basically, an argument that begs the question asks the reader to simply accept the conclusion without providing real evidence; the argument either relies on a premise that says the same thing as the conclusion (which you might hear referred to as "being circular" or "circular reasoning"), or simply ignores an important (but questionable) assumption that the argument rests on. Sometimes people use the phrase "beg the question" as a sort of general criticism of arguments, to mean that an arguer hasn't given very good reasons for a conclusion, but that's not the meaning we're going to discuss here.

Equivocation: Equivocation is sliding between two or more different meanings of a single word or phrase that is important to the argument.

False Dichotomy: In false dichotomy, the arguer sets up the situation so it looks like there are only two choices. The arguer then eliminates one of the choices, so it seems that we are left with only one option: the one the arguer wanted us to pick in the first place. But often there are really many different options, not just two—and if we thought about them all, we might not be so quick to pick the one the arguer recommends.

Hasty Generalization: Making assumptions about a whole group or range of cases based on a sample that is inadequate (usually because it is atypical or too small). Stereotypes about people (“librarians are shy and smart,” “wealthy people are snobs,” etc.) are a common example of the principle underlying hasty generalization.

Missing the Point: The premises of an argument do support a particular conclusion—but not the conclusion that the arguer actually draws.

Post Hoc (False Cause): This fallacy gets its name from the Latin phrase “post hoc, ergo propter hoc,” which translates as “after this, therefore because of this.” Assuming that because B comes after A, A caused B. Of course, sometimes one event really does cause another one that comes later—for example, if I register for a class, and my name later appears on the roll, it’s true that the first event caused the one that came later. But sometimes two events that seem related in time aren’t really related as cause and event. That is, correlation isn’t the same thing as causation.

Red Herring: Partway through an argument, the arguer goes off on a tangent, raising a side issue that distracts the audience from what’s really at stake. Often, the arguer never returns to the original issue.

Slippery Slope: The arguer claims that a sort of chain reaction, usually ending in some dire consequence, will take place, but there’s really not enough evidence for that assumption. The arguer asserts that if we take even one step onto the “slippery slope,” we will end up sliding all the way to the bottom; he or she assumes we can’t stop partway down the hill.

Straw Man: One way of making our own arguments stronger is to anticipate and respond in advance to the arguments that an opponent might make. In the straw man fallacy, the arguer sets up a weak version of the opponent’s position and tries to score points by knocking it down. But just as being able to knock down a straw man (like a scarecrow) isn’t very impressive, defeating a watered-down version of your opponent’s argument isn’t very impressive either.

Weak Analogy: Many arguments rely on an analogy between two or more objects, ideas, or situations. If the two things that are being compared aren’t really alike in the relevant respects, the analogy is a weak one, and the argument that relies on it commits the fallacy of weak analogy.