

Rhetorical Appeals

Common Logical Fallacies

A fallacy is a particular kind of defect in an argument, attributable to unsound and incomplete reasoning. It weakens an argument and makes it vulnerable to attack. Not only should you be familiar with the common fallacies so you can avoid them in your own argumentative essays, you *should* also be able to identify your opponent's defective arguments, allowing you to refute his assertions more easily. The following list includes a few of the most common fallacies in student argumentative essays.

Hasty Generalization. An argument that draws a conclusion based on insufficient or inappropriate samplings: "My Oldsmobile is a real lemon; therefore, General Motors manufactures inferior automobiles." "Students at the University of Houston are rude. Last night the guys in the room next to mine played their stereo at full blast until two in the morning, and as I was on my way to class this morning a bicyclist almost ran me down."

Red Herring. In hunting, a strongly scented object drawn across a trail will distract hounds and cause them to follow the new scent. In argument, a red herring is a different issue raised to lead attention away from the issue being debated or argued. Usually the new issue arouses an emotional response that creates a digression. "According to the newspapers, sexually transmitted diseases are climbing at an alarming rate among children in their teens. This raises a serious question about the wisdom of teaching sex-education in middle school."

Begging the Question. An argument based on an assumption that has yet to be proven: "The immoral experimentation on animals for research must be abolished"; "My narrow-minded English instructor seems to have forgotten how difficult it is to be a student." Either/or Reasoning. An argument that suggests that only two alternatives exist when more than two actually exist. "If you quit college, you will never succeed in anything you do." "We can recognize that athletes who participate in major sports must be given special consideration at Texas A&M, or we can let the university sink into athletic oblivion."

Faulty Analogy. An argument based on a comparison of two things that share few or no common and relevant features. An analogy should be carefully examined to be sure that the things being compared are alike in ways essential to the conclusion being drawn. The fact that they are alike in some ways is not enough. "Since he was a good actor, I'm sure he will make a good President." "Bill, you are a superb computer technician. You seem to have a natural talent for analyzing system problems and remedying them. Surely, then, you should be able to analyze the problems in the rough drafts of your papers and turn them into polished essays."

Argumentum ad Hominem. The Latin phrase means *argument against the man* and names the fallacy of attacking the person rather than his argument. Such an attack may be legitimate when someone presents no argument but his own unsupported testimony. For example, the procedure

is frequently used in courts to impeach witnesses who are testifying as experts. If it can be shown that they are not experts or that their testimony cannot be relied on, their trustworthiness as witnesses is seriously challenged. However, if someone presents evidence to support a claim, simply attacking his character is illegitimate. “Mr. Grumpy should not be allowed to serve on the school board because he is a non-Christian.” “I went to a meeting on gender issues last night. The speakers were about as homely a group of women as I’ve ever seen. No wonder they hate men. Maybe if they dressed a little better and put on some makeup they wouldn’t have to be concerned about gender issues.”

Argumentum ad Populum. This “appeal to the people” is used particularly by politicians and advertisers. This fallacy ignores the issue at hand to appeal to the in-group loyalties and fears of the audience. Appeals to prejudice and self-interest are also part of this appeal. For example, one might argue that people should be against any form of government regulation of business since America was founded on the principle of freedom from oppression.

Appeal to Ignorance. This argument implies that since no one has proved a particular claim, it must be false; or, since no one has disproved a claim, it must be true. This fallacy usually involves a matter that is either incapable of being proved or has not yet been proved. “Since no one has convincingly disproved Darwin’s theory, it must be valid.”

Tokenism. This fallacy occurs when one makes only a token gesture (does very little of what is required), but then shouts or brags about it as loudly as one can. For example, a company might point to a highly placed executive who is female to show how well they treat and promote women when, in fact, she is the only woman in an executive position in the whole company.

The Straw Man Fallacy. This fallacy occurs when a person misinterprets or distorts an opponent’s position to make it easier to attack, or when he attacks weaker opponents while ignoring stronger ones. For example, when opponents of gun control characterize those who are for some limitations on the ownership and use of weapons as radicals who would do away with hunting and Americans’ constitutional right to bear arms, they are attacking a straw man.

Bandwagon Fallacy. An argument that claims that something cannot be true (or false) because a majority of people support (or oppose) it. Based on popular opinion, the argument appeals to prejudice and ignores the facts. For example, it is obvious that any caring parent would not want his/her child attending school where a classmate has HIV.

Slippery Slope. An argument based on an unlikely chain reaction; it rests on an alleged chain of events, and there is not sufficient reason to believe that the implied effect will actually occur. For example, “If we legalize marijuana, the United States will become a nation of addicts and criminals.” (If . . . then . . .)

Selective Sampling. Proof offered that contains part of, but not the whole truth. Since not all the facts are stated, the claim can be true and false (misleading?) at the same time (half-truths). For example, “Three out of five dentists surveyed preferred Brand X toothpaste.”

Common Logical Fallacies

Unreliable Testimony. An argument based on an untrustworthy, biased, or unqualified authority. (Fame/celebrity doesn't qualify as authoritative or expert opinion). For example, "Several of my neighbors support the termination of our school's head coach."

Circular Reasoning. An argument based on the repetition of an assertion as a reason for accepting it: "Drugs are harmful because they injure the body." "The president would never lie to the public because he is an honest man."

False Cause. An argument that confuses a causal relationship (see Chapter 3). For example, one might mistake a contributory cause for a sufficient one, or assume that because one event occurred before a second event, the first caused the second (an example of the Post Hoc, ergo Propter Hoc fallacy, a Latin phrase meaning after this; therefore because of this.) "Because the city council outlawed firearms, the crime rate declined." "Research shows that successful people have large vocabularies; therefore one way to become successful is to develop a large vocabulary."