

chapter nineteen

Fallacies of Argument



“Either you eat your broccoli or you don’t get dessert!”

“But if you don’t give me an “A,” I won’t get into medical school.”

“You would if you loved me.”

“Make love, not war.”

“All my friends have AOL. I’m the only one who can’t get instant messages!”

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Fallacies are arguments supposedly flawed by their very nature or structure; as such, you should avoid them in your own writing and question them in arguments you read. That said, it’s important to appreciate that one person’s fallacy may well be another person’s stroke of genius.

How can that be, if fallacies are faulty arguments? Remember that arguments ordinarily work in complex social, political, and cultural environments where people are far more likely to detect the mote in someone else's eye than the beam in their own.

Consider, for example, the fallacy termed *ad hominem* argument—"to the man." It describes a strategy of attacking the character of those with whom one disagrees rather than the substance of their arguments: *So you think government entitlement programs are growing out of control? Well, you're an idiot.* It's an argument of a kind everyone has blurted out at some time in their lives.

But there are also situations when an issue of character is germane to an argument. If that weren't so, appeals based on character would be pointless. The problem arises in deciding when such arguments are legitimate and when they are fallacious. You are much more likely to regard attacks on people you admire as *ad hominem*, and attacks on those you disagree with as warranted. Moreover, debates about character can become quite ugly and polarizing; consider Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas, Paula Jones and Bill Clinton, Pete Rose and major league baseball. (For more on arguments based on character, see Chapter 6.)

It might be wise to think of fallacies not in terms of errors you can detect and expose in someone else's work, but as strategies hurtful to everyone (including the person advancing them) because they make civil argument more difficult. Fallacies are impediments to the kind of rich conversations experienced writers ought to cultivate—regardless of their differences.

To help you understand fallacies of argument, we've classified them according to three rhetorical appeals discussed in earlier chapters: emotional arguments, arguments based on character, and logical arguments. (See Chapters 4, 6, and 7.)

FALLACIES OF EMOTIONAL ARGUMENT

In Western tradition, emotional arguments have long been dismissed as "womanish" and, therefore, weak and suspect. But such views are not only close-minded and sexist; they're flat-out wrong. Emotional arguments can be both powerful and appropriate in many circumstances, and most writers use them as a matter of course. However, writers who attempt to evoke either excessive or inappropriate feelings on the part of their

audiences violate the good faith on which legitimate argument depends. The essential connection between writers and readers won't last if it is built on deception or manipulation.

Scare Tactics

Corrupters of children, the New Testament warns, would be better off dropped into the sea with millstones around their necks. Would that the same fate awaited politicians, advertisers, and public figures who peddle ideas by scaring people. It is the essence of demagoguery to reduce complicated issues to threats or to exaggerate a possible danger well beyond its statistical likelihood. Yet scare tactics, which do just that, are remarkably common in everything ranging from ads for life insurance to threats of audits by the Internal Revenue Service. Such tactics work because it is usually easier to imagine a dire consequence than to appreciate its remote probability. That may be why so many people fear flying, despite the fine safety record of commercial aviation.

Scare tactics can also be used to magnify existing, sometimes legitimate fears into panic or prejudice. People who genuinely fear losing their jobs can be persuaded, easily enough, to mistrust all immigrants as people who might work for less money; people living on fixed incomes can be convinced that even minor modifications of entitlement programs represent dire threats to their standard of living. Such tactics have the effect of closing off thinking because people who are scared seldom act rationally.

Even well-intended fear campaigns—like those directed against drugs or HIV infection—can misfire if their warnings prove too shrill. When AIDS failed to occur within the heterosexual population at the rate health professionals originally predicted, many people became suspicious of the establishment's warnings and grew unduly careless about their own sexual behavior, thereby greatly increasing their risk of exposure to infection.

Either-Or Choices

Presenting arguments that require people to choose one of only two alternatives can be a kind of scare tactic. The preferred option is drawn in the warmest light, whereas the alternative is cast as an ominous shadow. Sometimes *either-or* choices are benign strategies to get something accomplished: *Either you eat your broccoli or you don't get dessert.* Such arguments become fallacious when they reduce a complicated issue to excessively simple terms or when they deliberately obscure other alternatives.

To suggest that Social Security must be privatized or the system will go broke may have rhetorical power, but the choice is too simple. The fiscal problems of Social Security can be addressed in any number of ways, including privatization. To defend privatization, fallaciously, as the only possible course of action is to lose the support of people who know better.

But then *either-or* arguments—like most scare tactics—are often purposefully designed to seduce those who aren't well informed about a subject. And that cynical rationale is yet another reason the tactic violates principles of civil discourse. Argument should enlighten people, making them more knowledgeable and more capable of acting intelligently and independently.

Slippery Slope

The slippery slope fallacy is well named, describing an argument that casts a tiny misstep today as tomorrow's avalanche. Of course, not all arguments aimed at preventing dire consequences are slippery slope fallacies: the parent who corrects a child for misbehavior now is acting sensibly to prevent more serious problems as the child grows older. And like the homeowner who repairs a loose shingle to prevent an entire roof from rotting, businesses and institutions that worry about little problems often prevent bigger ones. The city of New York learned an important lesson in the 1990s about controlling crime by applying what had become known as "the broken window theory": after the mayor directed police to crack down on petty crimes that make urban life especially unpleasant, major crimes declined as well.

The slippery slope fallacy arises when a writer exaggerates the future consequences of an action, usually with the intention of frightening readers. As such, slippery slope arguments are also scare tactics. But people encounter them so often that they come to seem almost reasonable. For instance, defenders of free speech typically regard even mild attempts to govern behavior as constitutional matters: for example, a school board's request that a school pupil cut his ponytail becomes a direct assault on the child's First Amendment rights, litigated through the courts. Similarly, opponents of gun control warn that any legislation regulating firearms is just a first step toward the government knocking down citizens' doors and seizing all their weapons. Ideas and actions do have consequences, but they aren't always as dire as writers fond of slippery slope tactics would have you believe.

Sentimental Appeals

Sentimental appeals are arguments that use emotions excessively to distract readers from facts. Quite often, such appeals are highly personal and individual—focusing attention on heart-warming or heart-wrenching situations that make readers feel guilty about raising legitimate objections to related proposals or policies. Emotions become an impediment to civil discourse when they keep people from thinking clearly.

Yet, sentimental appeals are a major vehicle of television news, where it is customary to convey ideas through personal tales that tug at viewers' heartstrings. For example, a camera might document the day-to-day life of a single mother on welfare whose on-screen generosity, kindness, and tears come to represent the spirit of an entire welfare clientele under attack by callous legislators; or the welfare recipient might be shown driving a Cadillac and trading food stamps for money while a lower-middle-class family struggles to meet its grocery budget. In either case, the conclusion the reporter wants you to reach is supported by powerful images that evoke emotions in support of that conclusion. But though the individual stories presented may be genuinely moving, they seldom give a complete picture of a complex social or economic issue.

Bandwagon Appeals

Bandwagon appeals are arguments that urge people to follow the same path everyone else is taking. Curiously, many American parents seem endowed with the ability to refute bandwagon appeals. When their kids whine that *Everyone else is going camping overnight without chaperones*, the parents reply instinctively, *And if everyone else jumps off a cliff (or a railroad bridge, or the Empire State Building), you will too?* The children stomp and groan—and then try a different line of argument.

Unfortunately, not all bandwagon approaches are so transparent. Though Americans like to imagine themselves as rugged individualists, they're easily seduced by ideas endorsed by the mass media and popular culture. Such trends are often little more than harmless fashion statements. At other times, however, Americans become obsessed by issues selected for their attention by politicians or by media or cultural elites. In recent years, issues of this kind have included the "war on drugs," health care reform, AIDS prevention, gun control, tax reform, welfare reform, teen smoking, and campaign finance reform. Everyone must be concerned by

this issue-of-the-day, and something—anything—must be done! More often than not, enough people jump on the bandwagon to achieve a measure of reform. And when changes occur because people have become sufficiently informed to exercise good judgment, then one can speak of “achieving consensus,” a rational goal for civil argument.

But sometimes bandwagons run downhill and out of control, as they did in the 1950s when many careers were destroyed by “witch hunts” for suspected communists during the McCarthy era and in the late 1980s when concerns over child abuse mushroomed into indiscriminate prosecutions of parents and child care workers. In a democratic society, the bandwagon appeal is among the most potentially serious and permanently damaging fallacies of argument.

FALLACIES OF ETHICAL ARGUMENT

The presence of an author in an argument is called *ethos*. To build connections with readers, writers typically seek an *ethos* that casts themselves as honest, well informed, and sympathetic. Not surprisingly, readers pay closer attention to authors whom they respect. But *trust me* is a scary warrant. People usually need more than promises to move them to action—and they don’t like to be intimidated by writers who exploit issues of character to limit how readers can respond to complex problems. When choice is constricted, civil discourse usually ends. (For more on *ethos*, see Chapter 6.)

Appeals to False Authority

One of the best strategies a writer can employ to support an idea is to draw on the authority of widely respected people, texts, or institutions. Relying on respected voices, past and present, is a mainstay of civil discourse; in fact, some academic research papers are essentially exercises in finding and reflecting on the work of reputable authorities. Writers may introduce these authorities into their arguments through allusions, citations, or direct quotations. (See Chapter 21 for more on assessing the reliability of sources.)

False authority occurs chiefly when writers offer themselves, or other authorities they cite, as *sufficient* warrant for believing a claim:

<i>Claim</i>	X is true because I say so.
<i>Warrant</i>	What I say must be true.
<i>Claim</i>	X is true because Y says so.
<i>Warrant</i>	What Y says must be true.

Rarely will you see authority asserted quite so baldly as in these examples, because few readers would accept a claim stated in either of these ways. Nonetheless, claims of authority drive many persuasive campaigns. American pundits and politicians are fond of citing the U.S. Constitution or Bill of Rights, a reasonable practice when the documents are interpreted respectfully. However, as often as not, the constitutional rights claimed aren't in the texts themselves or don't mean what the speakers think they do. And most constitutional issues are self-evidently debatable.

Likewise, the claims of religion are often based on texts or teachings of great authority within a community of believers. However, the power of these texts is usually more limited outside that group and, hence, less capable of persuading solely on the grounds of their authority—though arguments of faith often have power on other grounds.

Institutions can be cited as authorities within their proper spheres. Certainly, serious attention should be paid to claims supported by authorities one respects or recognizes—the White House, the FBI, the FDA, the National Science Foundation, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and so on. But one ought not to accept facts or information *simply* because they have the imprimatur of such agencies. To quote a Russian proverb made famous by Ronald Reagan, "Trust, but verify."

Dogmatism

A writer who attempts to persuade by asserting or assuming that a particular position is the only one conceivably acceptable within a community is trying to enforce dogmatism. Dogmatism is a fallacy of ethos because the tactic undermines the trust that must exist between those who would make and those who would receive arguments. In effect, arbiters of dogmatic opinion imply that there are no arguments to be made: the truth is self-evident to those who know better.

Doubtless, there are arguments beyond the pale of civil discourse—positions and claims so outrageous or absurd that they are unworthy of serious attention. Attacks on the historical reality of the Holocaust fall into this category. But relatively few subjects in a free society ought to be off the table—certainly none that can be defended with facts, testimony,

and good reasons. In general, therefore, the suggestion that merely raising an issue for debate is somehow "politically incorrect"—whether racist or sexist, unpatriotic or sacrilegious, or insensitive or offensive in some other way—may well represent a fallacy of argument deployed to constrict the range of acceptable opinion.

Moral Equivalence

A fallacy of argument perhaps more common today than a decade ago is moral equivalence—that is, suggesting that serious wrongdoings don't differ in kind from more minor offenses. A warning sign that this fallacy is likely to come into play is the retort of the politician or bureaucrat accused of wrongdoing: *But everyone else does it too!* Richard Nixon insisted that the crimes that led to his resignation did not differ in kind from the activities of previous presidents; Bill Clinton made similar claims about the fund-raising and other scandals of his administration. Regardless of the validity of these particular defenses, there is a point at which the scale of a morally questionable act overwhelms even its shady precedents.

Moral equivalence can work both ways. It is not uncommon to read arguments in which relatively innocuous activities are raised to the level of major crimes. Some would say that the national campaign against smoking falls into this category—a common and legally sanctioned behavior now given the social stigma of serious drug abuse. And if smoking is almost criminal, should one not be equally concerned with people who use and abuse chocolate—a sweet and fatty food responsible for a host of health problems? You see how easy it is to make an equivalence argument. Yet suggesting that all behaviors of a particular kind—in this case, abuses of substances—are equally wrong (whether they involve cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, or fatty foods) blurs the subtle distinctions people need to make in weighing claims.

***Ad Hominem* Arguments**

One obviously gendered term that feminists have not been eager to neuter—probably with good reason—is the argument *ad hominem*, "to the man." *Ad hominem* arguments are attacks directed at the character of a person rather than at the claims he or she makes. The theory is simple: destroy the credibility of your opponents, and you either destroy their ability to present reasonable appeals or you distract from the successful arguments they may be offering. Critics of Rush Limbaugh's conservative

stances rarely fail to note his heft; opponents of Bill Clinton's military policies just as reliably mention "draft dodging."

In such cases, *ad hominem* tactics turn arguments into ham-fisted, two-sided affairs with good guys and bad guys. Civil argument resists this destructive nastiness, though the temptation to use such tactics persists even (some would say, especially) in colleges and universities.

Of course, character does matter in argument. People expect the proponent of peace to be civil, the advocate of ecology to respect the environment, the champion of justice to be fair even in private dealings. But it is fallacious to attack an idea by exposing the frailties of its advocates or attacking their motives, backgrounds, or unchangeable traits.

FALLACIES OF LOGICAL ARGUMENT

Logical fallacies are arguments in which the claims, warrants, and/or evidence are invalid, insufficient, or disconnected. In the abstract, such problems seem easy enough to spot; in practice, they can be camouflaged by artful presentations. Indeed, logical fallacies pose a challenge to civil argument because they often seem quite reasonable and natural, especially when they appeal to people's self-interests. Whole industries (such as phone-in psychic networks) depend on one or more of the logical fallacies for their existence; political campaigns, too, rely on them to prop up that current staple of democratic interchange—the fifteen-second TV spot.

Hasty Generalization

Among logical fallacies, only faulty causality might be able to challenge hasty generalization for the crown of most prevalent. A hasty generalization is an inference drawn from insufficient evidence: *Because my Honda broke down, all Hondas must be junk.* It also forms the basis for most stereotypes about people or institutions: because a few people in a large group are observed to act in a certain way, one infers that all members of that group will behave similarly. The resulting conclusions are usually sweeping claims of little merit: *Women are bad drivers; men are boors; Scots are stingy; Italians are romantic; English teachers are tweedy; scientists are nerds.* You could, no doubt, expand this roster of stereotypes by the hundreds.

To draw valid inferences, you must always have sufficient evidence: a random sample of a population, a selection large enough to represent

fully the subjects of your study, an objective methodology for sampling the population or evidence, and so on (see Chapter 18). And you must qualify your claims appropriately. After all, people do need generalizations to help make reasonable decisions in life; and such claims can be offered legitimately if placed in context and tagged with appropriate qualifiers: *some, a few, many, most, occasionally, rarely, possibly, in some cases, under certain circumstances, in my experience.*

You should be especially alert to the fallacy of hasty generalization when you read reports and studies of any kind, especially case studies based on carefully selected populations. Be alert for the fallacy, too, in the interpretation of poll numbers. Everything from the number of people selected to the time the poll was taken to the exact wording of the questions may affect its outcome.

Faulty Causality

In Latin, the fallacy of faulty causality is described by the expression *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, which translates word-for-word as “after this, therefore because of this.” Odd as the translation may sound, it accurately describes what faulty causality is—the fallacious assumption that because one event or action follows another, the first necessarily causes the second.

Some actions, of course, do produce reactions. Step on the brake pedal in your car, and you move hydraulic fluid that pushes calipers against disks to create friction that stops the vehicle. Or, if you happen to be chair of the Federal Reserve Board, you raise interest rates to increase the cost of borrowing to slow the growth of the economy in order to curb inflation—you hope. Causal relationships of this kind are reasonably convincing because one can provide evidence of relationships between the events sufficient to convince most people that an initial action did, indeed, cause others.

But as even the Federal Reserve example suggests, causality can be difficult to control when economic, political, or social relationships are involved. That's why suspiciously simple or politically convenient causal claims should always be subject to scrutiny.

Begging the Question

There's probably not a teacher in the country who hasn't heard the following argument from a student: *You can't give me a "C" in this course; I'm an "A" student.* The accused felon's version of the same argument goes this

way: *I can't be guilty of embezzlement; I'm an honest person.* In both cases, the problem with the claim is that it is made on grounds that cannot be accepted as true because those grounds are in doubt. How can the student claim to be an "A" student when she just earned a "C"? How can the accused felon defend himself on the grounds of honesty when that honesty is now suspect? Setting such arguments in Toulmin terms helps to expose the fallacy:

- Claim + Reason** You can't give me a "C" in this course because I'm an "A" student.
- Warrant** An "A" student is someone who can't receive "C"s.
- Claim + Reason** I can't be guilty of embezzlement because I'm an honest person.
- Warrant** An honest person cannot be guilty of embezzlement.

With the warrants stated, you can see why begging the question—that is, assuming as true the very claim that is disputed—is a form of circular argument, divorced from reality. If you assume that an "A" student can't receive "C"s, then the first argument stands. But no one is an "A" student by definition; that standing has to be earned by performance in individual courses. Otherwise, there would be no point for a student who once earned an "A" to be taking additional courses; "A" students can only get "A"s, right?

Likewise, even though someone with an honest record is unlikely to embezzle, a claim of honesty is not an adequate defense against specific charges. An honest person won't embezzle, but merely claiming to be honest does not make it so. (For more on Toulmin argument, see Chapter 8.)

Equivocation

Both the finest definition and the most famous literary examples of equivocation come from Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*. In the drama, three witches, representing the fates, make prophecies that seem advantageous to the ambitious Macbeth, but that prove disastrous when understood more fully. He is told, for example, that he has nothing to fear from his enemies "till Birnam wood/Do come to Dunsinane" (*Mac.* V.v.44-45); but these woods do move when enemy soldiers cut Birnam's boughs for camouflage and march on Macbeth's fortress. Catching on to the game, Macbeth begins "[t]o doubt the equivocation of the fiend/That lies like truth" (V.v.43-44, emphasis added). An equivocation, then, is an argument that gives a lie an honest appearance; it is a half-truth.

Equivocations are usually juvenile tricks of language, the kind children relish when claiming "I don't even have a nickel," knowing that they have dimes. Consider the plagiarist who copies a paper word-for-word from a source and then declares—honestly, she thinks—that "I wrote the entire paper myself," meaning that she physically copied the piece on her own. But the plagiarist is using "wrote" equivocally—that is, in a limited sense, knowing that most people would understand "writing" as something more than the mere copying of words.

As you might suspect, equivocations are artful dodges that work only as long as readers or listeners don't catch on. But once they do, the device undermines both the logic of the appeal and the good character of the writer. A writer who equivocates becomes, to use yet another Shakespearean phrase, a "corrupter of words."

Non Sequitur

A *non sequitur* is an argument in which claims, reasons, or warrants fail to connect logically; one point does not follow from another. As with other fallacies, children are notably adept at framing *non sequiturs*. Consider this familiar form: *You don't love me or you'd buy me that bicycle!* It might be more evident to harassed parents that no connection exists between love and Huffy's if they were to consider the implied warrant:

Claim	You must not love me
Reason	... because you haven't bought me that bicycle.
Warrant	Buying bicycles for children is essential to loving them.

A five-year-old might endorse that warrant, but no responsible adult would because love does not depend on buying things, at least not a particular bicycle. Activities more logically related to love might include feeding and clothing children, taking care of them when they are sick, providing shelter and education, and so on.

In effect, *non sequiturs* occur when writers omit a step in an otherwise logical chain of reasoning, assuming that readers agree with what may be a highly contestable claim. For example, it is a *non sequitur* simply to argue that the comparatively poor performance of American students on international mathematics examinations means the country should spend more money on math education. Such a conclusion *might* be justified if a correlation were known or found to exist between mathematical ability and money spent on education. But the students' performance might be poor for reasons other than education funding, so a writer should first establish the nature of the problem before offering a solution.

Faulty Analogy

Comparisons give ideas greater presence or help clarify concepts. Consider all the comparisons packed into this reference to Jack Kennedy from a tribute to Jacqueline Kennedy by Stanley Crouch:

The Kennedys had spark and Jack had grown into a handsome man, a male swan rising out of the Billy the Kid version of an Irish duckling he had been when he was a young senator.

—Stanley Crouch, "Blues for Jackie"

When comparisons are extended, they become analogies—ways of understanding unfamiliar ideas by comparing them with something that is already known. Some argue that it is through comparisons, metaphors, and analogies that people come to understand the universe. Neil Postman draws readers' attention to the importance of analogies when he asks them to consider how the brain works:

Is the human mind, for example, like a dark cavern (needing illumination)? A muscle (needing exercise)? A vessel (needing filling)? A lump of clay (needing shaping)? A garden (needing cultivation)? Or, as some may say today, is it like a computer that processes data?

—Neil Postman, "The Word Weavers/The World Makers"

Useful as such comparisons are, they may prove quite false either on their own or when pushed too far or taken too seriously. At this point they become faulty analogies, inaccurate or inconsequential comparisons between objects or concepts. To think of a human mind as a garden has charm: gardens thrive only if carefully planted, weeded, watered, pruned, and harvested; so too the mind must be cultivated, if it is to bear fruit. But gardens also thrive when spread with manure. Need we follow the analogy down that path? Probably not.

RESPOND

1. Following is a list of political slogans or phrases that may be examples of logical fallacies. Discuss each item to determine what you may know about the slogan and then decide which, if any, fallacy might be used to describe it.

"It's the economy, stupid." (sign on the wall at Bill Clinton's campaign headquarters)

"Nixon's the one." (campaign slogan)

"Fifty-four forty or fight."

"Make love, not war." (antiwar slogan during the Vietnam War)

"A chicken in every pot."

"No taxation without representation."

"No Payne, your gain." (aimed at an opponent named Payne)

"Loose lips sink ships."

"Guns don't kill, people do." (NRA slogan)

"If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."

2. We don't want you to argue fallaciously, but it's fun and good practice to frame argumentative fallacies in your own language. Pick an argumentative topic—maybe even one that you've used for a paper in this class—and write a few paragraphs making nothing but fallacious arguments in each sentence. Try to include all the fallacies of emotional, ethical, and logical argument that are discussed in this chapter. It will be a challenge, since some of the fallacies are difficult to recognize, much less produce. Then rewrite the paragraphs, removing all traces of fallacious reasoning, rewriting for clarity, and improving the quality of the argument. This may be an even greater challenge—sometimes fallacies are hard to fix.
3. Choose a paper you've written for this or another class, and analyze it carefully for signs of fallacious reasoning. Once you've tried analyzing your own prose, find an editorial, a syndicated column, and a political speech and look for the fallacies in them. Which fallacies are most common in the four arguments? How do you account for their prevalence? Which are the least common? How do you account for their absence? What seems to be the role of audience in determining what is a fallacy and what is not? Did you find what seem to be fallacies other than the kinds discussed in this chapter?
4. Arguments on the Web are no more likely to contain fallacies than are arguments in any other text, but the fallacies can take on different forms. The hypertextual nature of Web arguments and the ease of including visuals along with text make certain fallacies more likely to occur there. Find a Web site sponsored by an organization, business, government entity, or other group (such as the sites of the Democratic and Republican National Committees that were discussed in Chapter 16), and analyze the site for fallacious reasoning. Among other considerations, look at the relationship between text and graphics, and between individual pages and the pages that surround or are linked to them. How does the technique of separating information into discrete pages affect the argument? Then send an email message to the site's creators, explaining what you found and proposing ways the arguments in the site could be improved.