

Recognize Fallacies

Writers of arguments make claims based on reasons and evidence (see Chapters 11–14). When you read critically, you stay alert for flaws in reasoning and evidence. The kinds of faulty reasoning called logical fallacies reflect a failure to provide sufficient evidence for a claim that is being made.

Fallacies of logic

Begging the question

Politicians are inherently dishonest because no honest person would run for public office. The fallacy of begging the question occurs when the claim is restated and passed off as evidence.

Either-or

Either we eliminate the regulation of businesses or else profits will suffer. The either-or fallacy suggests that there are only two choices in a complex situation. Rarely, if ever, is this the case. (In this example, the writer ignores the fact that Enron was unregulated and went bankrupt.)

False analogies

Japan quit fighting in 1945 when we dropped nuclear bombs on them. We should use nuclear weapons against other countries. Analogies always depend on the degree of resemblance of one situation to another. In this case, the analogy fails to recognize that circumstances today are very different from those in 1945; many countries now possess nuclear weapons, and we know their use could harm the entire world.

Hasty generalization

We have been in a drought for three years; that's a sure sign of climate change. A hasty generalization is a broad claim made on the basis of a few occurrences. Climate cycles occur regularly over spans of a few years; climate trends must be observed over centuries.

Non sequitur

A university that can raise a billion dollars from alumni should not have to raise tuition. A non sequitur (which is a Latin term meaning "it does not follow") ties together two unrelated ideas. In this case, the argument fails to recognize that the money for capital campaigns is often donated for special purposes such as athletic facilities and is not part of a university's general revenue.

Oversimplification

No one would run stop signs if we had a mandatory death penalty for doing it. This claim may be true, but the argument would be unacceptable to most citizens. More complex, if less definitive, solutions are called for.

Post hoc fallacy

The stock market goes down when the AFC wins the Super Bowl in even years. The post hoc fallacy (from the Latin post hoc ergo hoc,

which means "after this, therefore this") assumes that things that follow in time have a causal relationship.

Rationalization

I could have finished my paper on time if my printer was working. People frequently come up with excuses and weak explanations for their own and others' behavior that often avoid actual causes.

Slippery slope

We shouldn't grant citizenship to illegal immigrants now living in the United States because no one will want to obey our laws. The slippery slope fallacy maintains that one thing inevitably will cause something else to happen.

Fallacies of emotion and language

Bandwagon appeals

It doesn't matter if I copy a paper off the Web because everyone else does. This argument suggests that everyone is doing it, so why shouldn't you? But on close examination, it may be that everyone really isn't doing it—and in any case, it may not be the right thing to do.

Name calling

Name calling is frequent in politics and among competing groups (radical, tax-and-spend liberal, racist, fascist, right-wing ideologue). Unless these terms are carefully defined, they are meaningless.

Polarization

Feminists are all man-haters. Polarization, like name-calling, exaggerates positions and groups by representing them as extreme and divisive.

Straw man

Environmentalists won't be satisfied until not a single human being is allowed to enter a national park. A straw man argument is a diversionary tactic that sets up another's position in a way that can be easily rejected. In fact, only a small percentage of environmentalists would make an argument even close to this one.



Analyze opinion writing

WRITE NOW

Examine writing that expresses opinions: blogs, discussion boards, editorials, advocacy Web sites, the letters to the editor on the editorial pages of your campus or local newspaper. Read with a pencil in hand, and mark where you think there may be fallacies. Select the example that has the clearest fallacy. Explain in a paragraph the cause of the fallacy.

