
Rhetorical Fallacies

Writers make appeals (ethos, pathos, logos, mythos) to sway—to persuade—a specific audience of a particular claim. Solid arguments (that withstand investigative, critical thinking) include a balance of appropriate and truthful appeals. Fallacies are appeals that do not stand up to investigation, that in some way stretch or step beyond the bounds of accuracy and relevancy, or that create a break or weakness in reasoning. A writer creates a fallacy in any number of ways, including crafty wording, inaccurate comparisons, and reliance on audience emotion and assumption. Sometimes we're unaware of our own fallacious rhetoric; sometimes we use it on purpose.

A writer often has more than one purpose in the construction of a text, and the explicit purpose might be different than the implicit purpose. When this is the case, fallacies can be effective means of persuasion. We've all fallen for fallacies, and politicians and advertisers hope we keep doing so. One (of many) reasons we fall for fallacies is that we often have a belief—a what—without understanding the why and the how of that belief. Fallacies of all kinds manipulate this dynamic.

There are many ways to categorize fallacies (like these at www.onegoodmove.org/fallacy/toc.htm or these at www.fallacyfiles.org/taxonomy.html), though this handout is organized by appeal, though many of the fallacies exist under the umbrella of more than one appeal. Many of the following examples are taken from a variety of online sources.

Fallacies of Ethos

1. **False Authority** asks audiences to agree with an assertion based simply on the character or the authority of an author or institution—or one that may not be fully qualified to offer that assertion. *Example:* Is a panel of middle-aged men (at least one of whom has taken a vow of celibacy) a reasonable authority to make recommendations about women's health and reproduction?
2. **Using Authority Instead of Evidence** occurs when someone offers personal authority as proof. *Example:* Trust me – your mother wouldn't do that, so you shouldn't. Or, when someone succumbs to peer pressure, a parent might say: if all of your friends jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge, would you?
3. **Moral Equivalence** compares two issues that don't have the same moral gravitas or that should not be considered on the same scale. *Example:* "Smoking cigarettes is nothing short of suicide: the smoker is willingly killing herself." Or, the common moral equivocation of gay marriage with bestiality and pedophilia: "If this law is passed, what is going to happen? Do they believe that if they change the definition of marriage being between one man and one woman, what is going to stop two men one woman, two women one man, one man against a horse, one man with a boy, one man with anything" (Pastor Ken Hutcherson).

4. **Ad Hominem** (Latin for “to the man”) arguments attack a person’s character rather than that person’s reasoning, or, more commonly, an argument is rejected in advance on the basis of the person’s character. Scientific American did a great piece on how to apply this fallacy (<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=character-attack>). *Example:* I refuse to read Thomas Jefferson. He was a slaveholder, and therefore has nothing of value to say.
5. **Straw man** arguments set up and dismantled easily refutable arguments in order to misrepresent an opponent’s argument to defeat him or her. Imagine a fight in which one of the combatants sets up a man of straw, attacks it, then proclaims victory. All the while, the real opponent stands by untouched.

Fallacies of Pathos

1. **Red Herrings** use misleading or unrelated evidence to support a conclusion. The term originates from the practice of using a smoked herring in fox hunting to throw the dog’s off the foxes’ scent. The fallacy refers to throwing the audience off the trail of an initial claim to raise (or solve) another. Nearly every procedural detective drama has a red herring character to throw the audience off the scent of the true criminal. (There is a great video on Philosophy Freak about this one.)
2. **Appeals to Fear, or Scare Tactics** try to frighten people into agreeing with the arguer by threatening them or predicting unrealistically dire consequences. *Example:* If you keep making those funny faces, your face will stay that way. Or, if you have sex before marriage, you’ll spend eternity in hell.
3. **Slippery Slope** arguments suggest that one thing will lead to another negative thing, or that one thing will spark a chain of negative events. *Example:* If you get bad grades in high school, you won’t get into the college of your choice, then you won’t get a good job and therefore you’ll be alone and unsuccessful your whole life. A variation on this theme is the idea that marijuana is a gateway drug, and thus smoking pot leads to other kinds of addictions and/or violent crimes.
4. **Either-or and False Dilemma** reduce complicated issues to only two possible courses of action. Either-or suggests there are only two sides, two choices, two possibilities; false dilemma insists that the only options are limited to those stated. *Example:* Rick Santorum has established this either-or: there is no such thing as a liberal Christian. A famous false dilemma is: You’re either with us or against us.
5. **Poisoning the Well** is an argument that is delivered in such a biased way or with such charged language that the response looks inherently dishonest or immoral. This might also be such an unreasonable accusation or claim that any response seems ridiculous. *Example:* Ask that little liar where he put the remote—I bet he won’t tell you!

Fallacies of Logos

6. **Hasty Generalizations** draw conclusions from scanty evidence. Many stereotypes are based on hasty generalizations. *Example:* My car broke down, and thus Fords are worthless garbage. Or, My sister has to borrow twenty dollars, so she must be irresponsible with money.
7. **Equivocation** fallacy occurs when a partially synonymous or unclear—equivocal—word or phrase makes an unsound argument appear sound. It might be a half-truth, or a statement that is partially correct but that purposefully obscures the entire truth. *Example:* “I did not have sexual relations with that woman” (President Bill Clinton).
8. **Shifting the Burden of Proof** occurs when one person will not provide support for their own claim but requires proof from their opponent. The burden to provide proof in support of a claim is always on the person advancing the idea.
9. **Faulty Causality, or Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc** (Latin for “after this, therefore because of this”) arguments confuse chronology with causation: one event can occur after another without being caused by it. *Example:* The Urban Institute, a research organization based in Washington...released...[a] report that suggests that the proliferation of iPods helps account for the...rise in violent crime in 2005 and 2006.
10. **A Non Sequitur** (Latin for “it doesn’t follow”) is a statement that does not logically relate to what comes before it. An important logical step may be missing in such a claim. “Therefore” or “thus”—spoken and unspoken—are often clues to breaks in logic. *Example:* Steven Johnson grew up in poverty. Therefore, he will make a fine President of the United States.
11. **Faulty Analogies** are inaccurate, inappropriate, or misleading comparisons between two things. (These might also be moral equivocation fallacies.) *Example:* Roger Ailes called NPR “the left wing of Nazism.”
12. **Quoting out of Context, or Quote Ambiguity** is when, because of lack of context or completion, the intended meaning of an idea is distorted and lost entirely. *Example:* Mitt Romney was quoted as saying, “I’m not concerned about the very poor.” The actual quote was: “I’m in this race because I care about Americans. I’m not concerned about the very poor—we have a safety net there, if it needs repair I’ll fix it. I’m not concerned about the very rich, they’re doing just fine. I’m concerned about the very heart of America, the 90-95 percent of Americans that right now are struggling.”
13. **Stacked Evidence** represents only one aspect of an issue to the point of distortion. *Example:* I’m trying to find a new home for my dog and write an ad in which I detail how sweet and cuddly she, and discuss how much enthusiasm she has for chasing squirrels and taking walks. I fail to mention in this ad that she eats her own poop,

pees in the living room and barks incessantly at the neighbors. (She's pretty though; are you interested?)

14. **Sloganeering** reduces the solution of a complex issue or controversy to a single statement that is recalled often, or is used as shorthand for an entire situation. *Example:* Rudy Giuliani saying "9/11" as often as possible, as a stand-in for his patriotism and leadership. Also, during the health care debates, the term "death panel" was thrown around as shorthand for all that was hateful and horrible about the health care bill. It didn't matter in the least that there was no such thing as a "death panel."
15. **If-by-whiskey** is an argument that supports both sides of an issue by using terms that are selectively emotionally sensitive. *Example:* If by war you mean the loss of thousands of human lives, some of the innocent bystanders, then I'm against it. But if by war you mean the protecting of our sovereign nation against forces that would seek to destroy us, then I'm for it.
16. **Ad Nauseam** is when an argument is discussed extensively and repeatedly—to the point of making the audience "sick" of hearing it. No matter how many times something is said, that doesn't make it true or persuasive. Often this is a practice used to wear down the opponent. Or, it might be used to speak specifically to a very narrow audience when the majority of the audience has moved on or tuned out. *Example:* The Obama birth certificate fiasco. Although Obama tried to ignore the non-argument for a while, birthers kept at it, ad nauseam, until he was required to make an official statement and released the document. And, people are still talking about it even though most sane people think it's a non-issue.

Fallacies of Mythos

17. **Appeal to Tradition** Appeal to Tradition is a fallacy that occurs when it is assumed that something is better or correct simply because it is older, traditional, or "always has been done." *Example:* Marriage has always been between a man and a woman so we shouldn't allow same sex marriage.