

Types of Writing Logical Fallacies

Strong, logical arguments are essential in writing. However, the use of faulty logic or reasoning to reach conclusions discredits arguments and shows lack of support and reasoning. This handout lists some of these logical errors—called **logical fallacies**—that are most commonly encountered in everyday communication.

SELECT LOGICAL FALLACIES

APPEAL TO AUTHORITY

Accepting someone's argument because of his or her authority in a field unrelated to the argument, rather than evaluating the person's argument on its own merits. (Also called *Argumentum ad Verecundiam*, or "argument from modesty.")

EXAMPLE: My dentist says she's voting for the conservative candidate, so I will too.

APPEAL TO EMOTION

Exploiting the audience's feelings to convert them to a particular viewpoint. Appeals to fear, flattery, ridicule, pity, or spite are among the most common forms this fallacy takes. In some circumstances, appealing to emotion may be appropriate, but writers should avoid appeals to emotion when reason and logic are expected or needed.

EXAMPLE: I'm sure someone with your vast experience can see that plan B is better. (Appeal to flattery)

APPEAL TO IGNORANCE

Basing a conclusion solely on the absence of knowledge. (Also called *Argumentum ad Ignoratiam*.)

EXAMPLE: I've never seen an alien, so they must not exist.

APPEAL TO POPULAR OPINION

Claiming that a position is true because most people believe it is. (Also called *Argumentum ad Populum*.)

EXAMPLE: Everyone cheats on their income taxes, so it must be all right.

ATTACKING THE PERSON

Discrediting an argument by attacking the person who makes it, rather than the argument itself. (Also called Poisoning the Well or *Argumentum ad Hominem*—literally, "argument against the man.")

EXAMPLE: Don't listen to Becky's opinion on welfare; she just opposes it because she's from a rich family.

BEGGING THE QUESTION

Using a premise to prove a conclusion when the premise itself assumes the conclusion is true. (Also called Circular Argument, *Circulus in Probando*, and *Petitio Principii*.)

EXAMPLE: I know I can trust Janine because she says that I can.

COMPLEX QUESTION

Combining two questions or issues as if they were one, when really they should be answered or discussed separately. Often involves one question that assumes the answer to another.

EXAMPLE: Why did you steal the CD? (Assumes you did steal the CD.)

COMPOSITION

Assuming that because parts have certain properties, the whole does as well. (The reverse of Division.)

EXAMPLE: All the parts of the engine were lightweight, so the engine should have been lightweight.

CORRELATION IMPLIES CAUSATION

Concluding that because two things occur at the same time, one has caused the other. (Also called *Cum Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc*—literally "with this, therefore because of this.")

EXAMPLE: There was a full moon the night I had my car accident, so I'm never driving again under a full moon.

DIVISION

Assuming that because a large body has certain properties, its parts do as well. (The reverse of Composition.)

EXAMPLE: Europe has great museums, so every country in Europe must have great museums.

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EQUIVOCATION

Applying the same term but using differing meanings.

EXAMPLE: The sign by the pond said, "Fine for Swimming," so I dove right in.

FALSE CAUSE AND EFFECT

Claiming that because one event occurred before a second, it caused the second. (Also called Coincidental Correlation and *Post-Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc* – literally "after this, therefore because of this.")

EXAMPLE: Yesterday I ate broccoli and then failed my test. I'm never eating broccoli before a test again.

FALSE DILEMMA

Suggesting only two solutions to a problem when other options are also available. (Also called Bifurcation.)

EXAMPLE: America – love it or leave it!

HASTY GENERALIZATIONS

When a writer arrives at a conclusion based on inadequate evidence or a sample that is too small.

EXAMPLE: I liked the last Chinese restaurant I went to, so I will like every Chinese restaurant in the world.

IGNORING THE ISSUE

Shifting the reader's attention from the real issue to a different argument that might be valid, but is unrelated to the first. (Also called Arguing beside the Point and *Ignoratio Elenchi*.)

EXAMPLE: No, the criminal won't say where he was on the night of the crime, but he does remember being abused repeatedly as an innocent child.

NON SEQUITUR

Using a premise to prove an unrelated point. Two common *non sequitur* fallacies include Affirming the Consequent and Denying the Antecedent.

◀ **Affirming the Consequent:** *Non sequitur* fallacy that takes the following pattern:

If A is true, then B is true.

A is false.

Therefore, B is false.

EXAMPLE: If I am a Texan, then I am an American. I am not a Texan. Therefore, I am not an American.

◀ **Denying the Antecedent:** *Non sequitur* fallacy that takes the following pattern:

If A is true, then B is true.

B is true.

Therefore, A is true.

EXAMPLE: Dogs are animals. Fluffy is an animal. Therefore, Fluffy is a dog.

RED HERRING

Introducing an unrelated or invalid point to distract the reader from the actual argument. Appeal to Emotion, Attacking the Person, Ignoring the Issue, and Straw Man are a few examples of Red Herring fallacies.

SLIPPERY SLOPE

Assuming a chain of cause-effect relationships with very suspect connections.

EXAMPLE: If I give you a free ticket, then I'll have to give everyone a free ticket. Then my boss will get mad and fire me, and I will become homeless. So giving you a free ticket will make me homeless.

STACKING THE DECK

When a writer tries to prove a point by focusing on only one side of the argument while ignoring the other.

EXAMPLE: Obviously the United States and China should have a free trade agreement, since it would reduce prices, increase efficiency, and pave the way to greater cultural exchange.

STRAW MAN

Attacking one of the opposition's unimportant or small arguments, while ignoring the opposition's best argument.

EXAMPLE: People from Quebec want to secede from Canada to get their own currency. Don't they realize money isn't everything?