

# Identifying Logical Fallacies

Fallacies are \_\_\_\_\_—that is, bits of fuzzy, \_\_\_\_\_, or \_\_\_\_\_ . They may crop up in your own thinking, in your opposition’s thinking, or in such public “arguments” as ads, political appeals, and talk shows. Because fallacies may \_\_\_\_\_ an unsuspecting audience, they are dangerously \_\_\_\_\_. By learning to recognize fallacies, however, you may identify them in \_\_\_\_\_ arguments and eliminate them from your own writing. In this section, logical fallacies are grouped according to how they \_\_\_\_\_ an argument.

## \_\_\_\_\_ the Issue

The following fallacies falsify an argument by twisting the issue out of a logical framework.

\_\_\_\_\_ The most basic way to distort an issue is to deny that it exists. This fallacy claims, “That’s just how it is.”

\*The private ownership of handguns is a constitutional right.  
(*Objection:* The claim shuts off discussion of the U.S. Constitution or the reasons for regulation.)

\_\_\_\_\_ Also known as circular reasoning, this fallacy arises from assuming in the basis of your argument the very point you need to prove.

\*We don’t need a useless film series when every third student owns a DVD player or VCR.  
(*Objection:* There may be uses for a public film series that private video viewing can’t provide. The word “useless” begs the question.)

\_\_\_\_\_ This fallacy reduces complexity to simplicity. Beware of phrases like “It’s a simple question of.”

\*Serious issues are rarely simple. Capital punishment is a simple question of protecting society.

\_\_\_\_\_ Also known as black-and-white thinking, this fallacy reduces all options to two extremes. Frequently, it derives from a clear bias.

\*Either this community develops light-rail transportation or it will be impossible to grow in the future.  
(*Objection:* The claim ignores the possibility that growth may occur through other means.)

\_\_\_\_\_ Sometimes by phrasing a question a certain way, a person ignores or covers up a more basic question.

\*Why can’t we bring down the prices that corrupt gas stations are charging?  
(*Objection:* This question ignores a more basic question—“Are gas stations really corrupt?”)

\_\_\_\_\_ In this fallacy, the writer argues against a claim that is easily refuted. Typically, such a claim exaggerates or misrepresents the opponents’ actual arguments.

\*Those who oppose euthanasia must believe that the terminally ill deserve to suffer.

## the Argument

These fallacies falsify the argument by twisting it. They destroy reason and replace it with something hollow or misleading.

\_\_\_\_\_ This strange term comes from the practice of dragging a stinky fish across a trail to throw tracking dogs off the scent. When a person puts forth a volatile idea that pulls readers away from the real issue, readers become distracted. Suppose the argument addresses drilling for oil in the ANWR of Alaska, and the writer begins with this statement:

\*In 1989, the infamous oil spill of the *Exxon Valdez* led to massive animal deaths and enormous environmental degradation of the coastline.

(*Objection:* Introducing this notorious oil spill distracts from the real issue—how oil drilling will impact the ANWR.)

\_\_\_\_\_ Jokes, satire, and irony can lighten the mood and highlight a truth; when humor distracts or mocks, however, it undercuts the argument. What effect would the mocking tone of this statement have in an argument about tanning beds in health clubs?

\*People who use tanning beds will just turn into wrinkled old prunes or leathery sun-dried tomatoes!

\_\_\_\_\_ This fallacy engages in a misleading tug on the heartstrings. Instead of using a measured emotional appeal, it seeks to manipulate the audience into agreement.

\*Affirmative action policies ruined this young man's life. Because of them, he was denied admission to Centerville College.

\_\_\_\_\_ A simple but unethical way of sabotaging an argument is to threaten opponents. More often than not, a threat is merely implied: "If you don't accept my argument, you'll regret it."

\*If we don't immediately start drilling for oil in the ANWR, you will soon face hour-long lines at gas stations from New York to California.

\_\_\_\_\_ Someone implies that a claim cannot be true because a majority of people are opposed to it, or it must be true because a majority support it. (History shows that people in the minority have often had the better argument.) At its worst, such an appeal manipulates people's desire to belong or be accepted.

\*It's obvious to intelligent people that cockroaches live only in the apartments of dirty people.

(*Objection:* Based on popular opinion, the claim appeals to a kind of prejudice and ignores scientific evidence about cockroaches.)

\_\_\_\_\_ This fallacy consists of associating your position with something popularly loved: the American flag, baseball, apple pie. Appeals to popular sentiment sidestep thought to play on feelings.

\*Anyone who has seen *Bambi* could never condone hunting deer.

## Evidence

This group of fallacies falsifies the argument by short-circuiting proper logic in favor of assumptions or faulty thinking.

\_\_\_\_\_ This fallacy suggests that because no one has proved a particular claim, it must be false; or, because no one has disproved a claim, it must be true. Appeals to ignorance unfairly shift the burden of proof onto someone else.

\*Flying saucers are real. No scientific explanation has ruled them out.

\_\_\_\_\_ Such a claim is based on too little evidence or allows no exceptions. In jumping to a conclusion, the writer may use intensifiers like *all*, *every*, or *never*.

\*Today's voters spend too little time reading and too much time being taken in by 30-second sound bites. (*Objection:* Quite a few voters may, in fact, spend too little time reading about the issues, but it is unfair to suggest that this is true of everyone.)

\_\_\_\_\_ This well-known fallacy confuses sequence with causation: If *A* comes before *B*, *A* must have caused *B*. However, *A* may be one of several causes, or *A* and *B* may be only loosely related, or the connection between *A* and *B* may be entirely coincidental.

\*Since that new school opened, drug use among young people has skyrocketed. Better that the school had never been built.

\_\_\_\_\_ This fallacy argues that a single step will start an unstoppable chain of events. While such a slide may occur, the prediction lacks real evidence.

\*If we legalize marijuana, it's only a matter of time before hard drugs follow and America becomes a nation of junkies and addicts.

## Evidence

These fallacies falsify the argument by abusing or distorting the evidence.

\_\_\_\_\_ In this case, the writer drowns readers in statistics and numbers that overwhelm them into agreement. In addition, the numbers haven't been properly interpreted.

\*At 35 ppm, CO levels factory-wide are only 10 ppm above the OSHA recommendation, which is 25 ppm. Clearly, that 10 ppm is insignificant in the big picture, and the occasional readings in some areas of between 40 and 80 ppm are aberrations that can safely be ignored. (*Objection:* The 10 ppm may be significant, and higher readings may indicate real danger.)

\_\_\_\_\_ A half-truth contains part of, but not the whole truth. Because it leaves out "the rest of the story," it is both true and false simultaneously.

\*The new welfare bill is good because it will get people off the public dole. (*Objection:* This may be true, but the bill may also cause undue suffering for some truly needy individuals.)

\_\_\_\_\_ An appeal to authority has force only if the authority is qualified in the proper field. If he or she is not, the testimony is irrelevant. Note that fame is not the same thing as authority.

\*On her talk show, Alberta Magnus recently claimed that most pork sold in the United States is tainted.

(*Objection:* While Magnus may be an articulate talk show host, she is not an expert on food safety.)

\_\_\_\_\_ This fallacy directs attention to a person's character, lifestyle, or beliefs rather than to the issue.

\*Would you accept the opinion of a candidate who experimented with drugs in college?

\_\_\_\_\_ This fallacy relies on "if only" thinking. It bases the claim on an assumption of what would have happened if something else had, or had not, happened. Being pure speculation, such a claim cannot be tested.

\*If only multiculturalists hadn't pushed through affirmative action, the U.S. would be a united nation.

\_\_\_\_\_ Sometimes a person will argue that *X* is good (or bad) because it is like *Y*. Such an analogy may be valid, but it weakens the argument if the grounds for the comparison are vague or unrelated.

\*Don't bother voting in this election; it's a stinking quagmire.

(*Objection:* Comparing the election to a "stinking quagmire" is unclear and exaggerated.)

## Language

Essentially, all logical fallacies misuse language. However, three fallacies falsify the argument especially by the misleading use of words.

\_\_\_\_\_ This fallacy involves using fuzzy terms like *throughput* and *downlink* to muddy the issue. These words may make simple ideas sound more profound than they really are, or they may make false ideas sound true.

\*Through the fully functional developmental process of a streamlined target refractory system, the U.S. military will successfully reprioritize its data throughputs.

(*Objection:* What does this sentence mean?)

\_\_\_\_\_ Ambiguous statements can be interpreted in two or more opposite ways. While ambiguity can result from unintentional careless thinking, writers sometimes use ambiguity to obscure a position.

\*Many women need to work to support their children through school, but they would be better off at home.

(*Objection:* Does *they* refer to *children* or *women*? What does *better off* mean? These words and phrases can be interpreted in opposite ways.)

\_\_\_\_\_ By choosing words with strong positive or negative connotations, a writer can draw readers away from the true logic of the argument. Here is an example of three synonyms for the word *stubborn* that the philosopher Bertrand Russell once used to illustrate the bias in slanted language:

\*I am firm. You are obstinate. He is pigheaded.