A BRIEF GUIDE TO FALLACIES

Fallacies are ubiquitous; they permeate our lives in advertisements, political punditry, and everyday conversations. Why are they so common? They are common because they are easy; a fallacy depends on lazy thinking in order to survive, for if the reader uses his or her critical thinking and analytical skills, a fallacy cannot keep from perishing. But what is a fallacy? A fallacy is a breakdown in logic and a misrepresentation of reality. While the use of fallacies is often unintentional, the presence of one or more of these lapses in logic can affect the extent to which you can convince an audience of the validity of your claims. On a more superficial level, they can also affect the scores you earn on your arguments at the college level.

Every argument needs to contain a number of coordinate parts: thesis, supporting arguments (claims), evidence, and opposition. Unfortunately, fallacies can occur at each of these levels; for example, “Appeal to Authority” is a form of fallacious evidence, and “Ad Hominem” is a way of fallaciously addressing the opposition. Therefore, both writers and readers must maintain their vigilance in being on the lookout throughout an argument for the presence of these gaps in logic.

How does identifying these fallacies benefit you? Obviously, by recognizing what these fallacies are and why they are weak, you will be much less likely to use them in essays you write. Conversely, recognizing others’ use of fallacies will enable you to craft more successful critiques and to aid you in addressing the opposition in arguments you write, for if the opposition’s argument depends on fallacious reasoning, that would be a definite weakness you would want to discuss.

Fallacies may be omnipresent, but that does not mean we have to continue to give them power. When you see a fallacy—on television, in a newspaper, from an instructor or friend—point it out. Doing so will keep you an active thinker, something of which this world could always use a few more.

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Ad Hominem: attacking against your opponent on a personal level rather than critiquing your opponent’s argument.

“We shouldn’t take John Kerry’s argument on Iraq seriously; he’s just a flip-flopper.”

Appeal to Authority: using an “expert” quote as support when the person is not an expert in that specific topic.

“According to my proctologist, these tax-cuts are going to bolster the economy.”

Appeal to Ignorance: basing an argument on the lack of evidence; for this to avoid being a fallacy, Negative Evidence must be presented. Negative Evidence refers to the extent to which the evidence has been sought. Based on Negative Evidence, there is probably no Loch Ness Monster (based on the defined boundaries of the lake and the number of searches), but based on Negative Evidence, we can make no claims about the existence or non-existence of space aliens.

“Who knows how many murders have been deterred by the death penalty? If we didn’t have the death penalty, many more people would have been murdered.”

Appeal to Popularity (a.k.a. “Bandwagon”): basing an argument on the fact that many people believe it and thus must be correct.

“Everyone else is investing in these technology stocks; I had better invest my money in them, too.”

Appeal to Tradition: basing an argument on the fact that “it has always been this way” and thus must be correct.

“The wife has always been the one to cook and clean; if a marriage is to succeed, the woman must be a homemaker.”

Begging the Question: supporting an argument with a paraphrased version of that same idea without providing evidence.

“He should be elected President because he is the best man for the job.”

Death by a 1000 Qualifications: making a statement that is technically true but that has so many qualifiers that it is insignificant.

“She is the best Congresswoman we have ever had in this district! (and also the first)”

Equivocation: relying on a term that has multiple meanings in order to manipulate two or more to prove your point.

“America has the right to self-defense; therefore, we should attack Iran before they can attack us.”

Fallacy of Omission: leaving out information that is relevant but that could weaken your position.

John Kerry: “Bush’s plans for war were flawed from the start.”

False Analogy: basing an argument on a comparison of two things when that comparison is not valid.

“Iraq is just like Vietnam; therefore, we should just get out like we did in Vietnam and the country will take care of itself.”

False Dichotomy (Either / Or): presenting only two options or ideas when there may be a third (or fourth...).

“You are either a patriot and for the war, or you are a traitor to America.”

Hasty Generalization (a.k.a. “Stereotyping“): making blanket judgments about a group based on too small of a sample.

“Why do Muslims hate America?”

Many Questions: asking a question that has a number of implicit attacks.

“President Bush, why are you so intent on turning America into a police state?”

Oversimplification: presenting absolutes when they may not be relevant; or presenting simplistic explanations when the truth is more complex.

“All we need to do to jump-start the economy is to lower taxes.”

Non Sequitur: attempting to connect two disparate ideas without making that connection clear.

“He must be intelligent; he graduated from Yale!”

Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc (a.k.a. “False Cause and Effect”): making a causal argument based solely on chronology; the cause must be proved.

“First, the Democrats criticized the war; then the terrorists bombed the building in Baghdad. See what happens when we criticize the war!”

Protecting the Hypothesis: manipulating and mischaracterizing data and information to prove your claim.

“Global warming isn’t occurring; all those studies prove is that our summer was a little hotter than usual.”