

Logical Appeals

Before we get into fallacies, we need to be reminded of the three rhetorical appeals: *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. Those Greek words are translated into character, logic, and emotion, respectively. Ethos is very important because audiences for millennia have supported leaders with strong character. Logos is an appeal to reason and logic—speakers are convincing because what they say makes sense. Finally, speakers invoking pathos try to appeal to the emotions of an audience. The above appeals are all important for rhetoric, and thus communication. However, they can be misused. This section covers some of the ways speakers misuse rhetoric.

Although there are many more logical fallacies, I've put together the following “common” ones for our discussion (in the order of assumed frequency):

Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc

Latin for ‘after this, therefore because of this.’ This is a typical fallacy most of us have fallen victim to and have also propagated ourselves. A *post hoc* fallacy occurs when someone argues that a causal link exists between sequential events. For instance,

The stock market went up after the Red Sox won the World Series; therefore, the Red Sox winning caused the market to go up.

Mt. Etna erupted after I left Sicily; therefore, my leaving caused Mt. Etna to erupt.

George started drinking beer during his first semester of college, and he failed out after that first semester; therefore, George's drinking caused him to fail out of school.

Obviously, these examples are foolish. Cause-and-effect isn't as simple as the above examples would like us to believe. The *post hoc* fallacy glosses over or ignores the many other possibilities for an occurrence. Personal, social, economic, and political events often happen because of many different factors or because of factors we can't see. If a certain sports team wins the big game, whatever happens afterwards may just be coincidence. Natural phenomena will happen regardless of your travel plans. Also, George's drinking may have been one factor that got him to fail out of school, but there were probably other reasons—dating, skipping class, not doing homework, playing video games, etc.

False Dilemma

“If you're not with me, you're against me!” This fallacy doesn't allow for any middle ground. The audience is given a choice of two options, which are made to seem like the only two available. This is very common when speakers are trying to oversimplify an issue; they want to boil an issue down for the audience and ignore the possible complex issues that surround a topic. For instance,

We can either have universal health care for all Americans, or we'll have thousands of poor, sick children.

We can either privatize social security, or let it bankrupt us by 2050.

You can either go to college or live a life of extreme poverty.

Notice that in each of the above examples the speaker presents the audience with an either-or decision. Remember, reality is often more complex and rarely can be honestly boiled down to a choice of only two options. Even without universal health care, there are ways that children won't die by the truck load—maybe their parents could get jobs or just not have kids they can't afford. Social Security is such a far reaching and complex program that one simple plan probably isn't enough to fix its problems. Finally, there are other options besides college or poverty; in fact, many poor people do go to college and there are rich people who don't.

Absolutes

“The only absolute is that there are **NO** absolutes.” Without getting into a tricky, time-consuming philosophical discussion on absolute truth or reality, we will consider the most basic absolute statements. Be careful of speakers who use the following absolute terms and phrases: *always, never, every, all the time, as sure as the sun rises*, etc. Those are statements that can be disproved by one example that is contrary to the absolute statement. Think of responses to these absolute statements:

Inflation always rises after a Democrat is elected as president.

As sure as the sun rises, you can bet that I'll always have the best interests of the people in mind.

I will never drink again.

Obviously, the above statements can be refuted because there's no 100% guarantee that they can be fulfilled. Don't use absolute statements without carefully thinking about your reasons. For instance, you can say, “Always have your time card signed by your supervisor,” or, “always wash your hands before handling food” because those are commands that you want followed. Whether or not they get followed is an entirely different issue...

Ad Hominem

Another popular fallacy is to attack the proponent of an argument instead of the argument itself. Politicians (often rightfully) get attacked this way, but it's important to know that this argument is fallacious. An argument must be examined for its validity regardless of the proponent's character. Obviously, character is an important appeal rhetorically, but sound arguments can be made by unpopular people or groups. Here are some examples of *ad hominem* fallacies:

President Bush backs Social Security privatization, so that policy must be bad because he's a conservative moron.

Anything Michael Jackson stands for is wrong because he's allegedly into little boys.

Ratzinger can't be a good Pope because he was once part of the Hitler Youth Movement.

Each of the above *ad hominem* fallacies attacks the person and not the issue or potential issues they support. Instead of attacking Bush's character, the speaker should describe why Social Security privatization is a bad idea; on the flip side, giving Bush's proposal credit because one values his character is equally fallacious (more on that in the "false authority" section). Michael Jackson's support for cancer, AIDS research, eliminating poverty, etc. has nothing to do with what may or may not have gone on in his bedroom. Finally, Ratzinger being part of the Hitler Youth Movement does not make him a NAZI or a bad Pope. In 1930s and 40s Germany, parents would have had to answer to the Gestapo if their children didn't have Hitler Youth uniforms. Also, "membership" was compulsory (Bainbridge; The History Place). Remember, character is important, but it can't replace sound argumentation.

False Authority

This fallacy is the opposite of the *ad hominem* fallacy above. When speakers put their support behind an argument (or product as the case usually is in our ferociously consumerist society) that they have no expertise in, it's fallacious. This fallacy is also called "borrowed authority" because the speakers are often experts (or just popular) in one area, but they support an issue or product for which they have no expertise. Consider the following examples:

A prominent basketball coach endorses a local jewelry business, so the jeweler must be a great place to buy precious gems.

Jessica Simpson uses a certain acne medication that gives her a shiny, clear complexion; if she looks good after using it, you will too.

Tons of celebrities are hopping on the anti-poverty bandwagon and asking for money to help poor people in Africa; if all these *important* people are doing it, their organization must be beneficial.

We see these statements and endorsements often. A great basketball coach can probably help improve your jump shot, but he or she has no expertise of jewelry quality or service. Jessica Simpson may be considered a beautiful woman, and the acne medication may have cleared up her complexion, but read the fine print—"individual results may vary." It's not likely that any acne medication is going to transform a person's complexion the way make-up, airbrushing, special lighting, and plastic surgery will. Finally, celebrities who endorse social issues are trying to do their part to make this world a better place for you, me, and the entire human race, but they have no authority when it comes to sociology, economics, history, or even diplomacy. Reality is often more complex than just having things taken care of by sending in money to an organization. As

I stated before, character is an extremely important rhetorical appeal; however, good or bad character (or popularity) is no substitute for sound argumentation.

Begging the Question

A speaker makes this fallacy when he or she incorporates an unfounded claim into a question or statement, or when he or she places the burden of proof on the audience. When arguing properly a speaker cannot assume the conclusion of an argument within a question. For instance, the following are “begging the question” fallacies:

Are you still an alcoholic who can't control yourself?

When are you going to stop loafing around and get a job?

[To a lawyer] When will you stop chasing ambulances and start promoting justice?

These questions make it difficult for the receiver to avoid the slander without addressing the attack. Anyone who answers “no” to the first question implicitly admits to the speaker’s accusation of his or her past alcoholism and volatile temperament. Also, “begging the question” fallacies place the burden of proof on the audience. For instance, the following are unproved statements that the receiver has to deal with before he or she can move on:

How do you know I don't have a magic carpet at home that allows me to fly over the active missile silos?

We all know aliens have visited our planet, so why is the government continuing to cover it up?

Whoa! The above are a bit extreme, but that’s a common form of this type of begging the question (a.k.a. the *X-Files* arguments). Don’t think that you have to disprove a speaker’s claim that he or she has a magic carpet (more on this in the *ad absurdum* section). Likewise, you don’t have to debate whether or not aliens are among us. The second question mixes an absolute statement—“we all know”—with begging the question. Remember, the burden of proof is on the speaker to prove something exists. Magic carpets are fantasy, and alien landings are sci-fi; they make interesting stories but false realities.

Circular Arguments

This fallacy occurs when a speaker restates his or her statement and tries to pass the restatement off as proof. Repetition and redundancy are not ways to prove an argument; rhetorically, they may help emphasize a point, but they cannot stand alone as proof. Consider the following circular arguments:

Bill Clinton is lying because he never tells the truth.

Children must grow up in two-parent families because children are created by two parents.

A happy house is a home where happiness abounds.

There is no proof in any of the above statements: lying means not telling the truth; two parents are needed (for now) to produce children, but they don't always hang around; and a happy house must have happiness, right? Often definitions fall victim to this fallacy: *running* is a sport in which a person *runs*.

The next five fallacies are a bit trickier than the ones above because there may be circumstances when one's point of view dictates the fallacious nature of an argument. In other words, there are no absolutes when it comes to the following fallacies:

False Analogy

Well, if I tell you it's "in the eye of the beholder," I'm only giving you half the story. Speakers use analogies to compare seemingly separate issues by relating the issues to each other. Metaphors and similes are also analogies because they compare two things: 'love is a rose' is a metaphor, and 'love is like a rose' is a simile. False metaphors happen when a speaker uses the wrong analogy to compare two things. Unfortunately, by that logic, all analogies can be shown to be false if pressed hard enough because an analogy, by definition, compares two unlike things which have "similarity without identity" ("Analogy" 35). Therefore, analogies won't be 100% identical, but they don't have to be. Their comparison need only be close enough to carry the argument. Consider the following analogies below. Which are "true," and which are false?

Love is like opening a Christmas present; if you feel around and shake it enough, you'll know exactly what you're about to get before unwrapping it.

The Internet is the most significant invention to the 20th century just as the printing press was the most significant invention to the 16th century.

Buying a boat is like taking a bucket of money and dumping it overboard.

Globalization is the new colonialism of today.

The president's rise to power was like Adolf Hitler's rise.

Don't forget the clichés:

... is like throwing out the baby with the bath water.

... a penny saved is a penny earned.

... it's like grandma just died, and everyone's asking if she'll be making dinner for the funeral.

... what's good for the goose isn't always good for the gander.

Clichés are those tired, overused expressions that have been passed down from the old days. Speakers use them and think that they universally appeal to the senses of all people. These statements are so ingrained in our language that we often forget that they lack substance. Avoid clichés in professional communications unless you are in an informal situation.

Honestly, what's good for a goose but bad for a gander?

Red Herring

This fallacy is a big one for our media and politicians—dodging the issue by bringing attention to something else. In Barry Glassner's book *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) he discusses how the media blows certain issues out of proportion (like shark attacks, killer Halloween candy, deadly plane crashes, etc.) but ignores other important topics. Also, Glassner notes that politicians attack easy targets in order to show that they are trying to do something for the nation. For instance, liberal and conservative politicians alike in the mid-1990s attacked teen moms as the worst social and economic problem facing America (Glassner 90-95). Glassner's argument was that these politicians were chasing a red herring; instead of examining the causes of poverty and crime, these politicians chose to claim teen moms caused poverty and had children that grew up to be criminals.

Below are examples of more explicit red herrings, ones that are used in the heat of argument:

People who don't support the President's decision to go to war don't support the troops defending our country.

[In response to air pollution caused by old cars] But consumers with older cars can't afford the newer, expensive, more fuel efficient cars; the new Clean Air Act hurts them.

Sometimes red herring fallacies bring up important issues when they dodge the issue at hand. After all, most people are concerned with the troops' well-being and hope for their safe return, but disagree with them going to fight or that they're fighting to *defend* America. Investing in more efficient pollution-reduction technologies costs money; consumers and businesses often have to pay a premium for environmentally friendly technologies. However, that is a separate issue from the fact that current goods or manufacturing processes pollute the environment. The cost issues on environmental cleanup gets even thornier when we look at the environment as a good in and of itself—clean air, clean water, clear skies, etc. all have a value. Sometimes red herring fallacies are combined with other fallacies like the one below:

“The new civil rights act was passed to protect 14 percent of the people. I'm also worried about the other 86 percent.” —George H. W. Bush quoted in Carter

While campaigning for U.S. Senate in 1964, papa Bush dodged the issue of rampant discrimination and implied that he would look out for the white majority that wasn't protected by the Act. In the context of his speech to an audience of white workers (Carter xiii), Bush was also trying to scare the workers into thinking they'd be harmed by the Act, which is an *ad baculum* fallacy. Bush's strategy is typical of those who claim an oppressed group is trying to gain "special rights"—rights that somehow supercede their rights. Sometimes people of a majority argue against civil rights by (fallaciously) claiming that they—people of the majority—aren't being helped by a certain piece of legislation. That strategy is a red herring because they try to put the spotlight on themselves instead of on the reasons for civil rights laws.

Ad Absurdum (appeal to absurdity)

This appeal often falls under "begging the question" but is a unique enough case to separate. Again, absurdity may be in the eye of the beholder, but there are some cases beyond rational thought. Whenever a speaker tries to make the audience prove a ridiculous statement, the speaker is guilty of trying to appeal to absurdity. Often these things only get "proved" on the *X-Files*. Consider the following examples:

I was abducted by Aliens. You don't believe me? Well, you can't prove I wasn't!

God told me that I must raise \$1,000,000 or he'll take my life. [One month later] God has given me another chance to live; I thank all of you who had faith and gave to my cause.

"The water that Jesus turned into wine was actually non-alcoholic wine."
—actual statement from a traveling evangelist to a crowd at Virginia Tech in 1994.

"I now have absolute proof that smoking even one marijuana cigarette is equal in brain damage to being on Bikini Island during an H-bomb blast."
—Ronald Regan

Being abducted by aliens is science fiction. In fact, we can argue that the *X-Files* is really an allegory about government abuse or global influences affecting humanity without our knowledge. You don't have to prove aliens have landed. In fact, the best response I've ever heard to counter a government conspiracy theory was, "why is it that the government screws up all the time and secrets get leaked, but they've been able to keep a lid on the whole Roswell issue?" (I've heard a few variations of that statement over the years). The next three examples are pretty obvious.

Ad Baculum (appeal to fear)

Otherwise known as scare mongering, *ad baculum* arguments are tactics of intimidation:

Premise: You should vote for me for student body president because, if you don't, I'm going to break your legs.

Conclusion: You accept and vote for the candidate to avoid harm.

In this fallacy the speaker threatens the audience, so they accept the speaker's argument out of fear. These arguments involve the threat of force and the assumption within the hearer that the speaker has the means of carrying out such action (Wreen 131). These fear appeals are based on "the premise that the respondent may be presumed to have the goal of self-preservation," and also "that the respondent understands [...] that certain actions on his or her part will contribute to that goal, or will be contrary to its realization" (Walton 310). This fallacy also happens when a speaker tries to scare an audience into believing his or her position:

Saddam Hussein tried to buy uranium from Africa...he must be stopped.

We need to invade Iraq in order to bring the War on Terror to them instead of fighting it here.

We can't wait for a smoking gun...because it may come in the form of a mushroom cloud.

Don't blame me that the Bush administration has supplied us with perfect *ad baculum* examples; I'm just an observer. Notice that the speaker in each case tries to scare the audience, so they will support the speaker's plan of action. Obviously, some issues about danger and safety might be warranted. But it's up to us to figure out when something is honestly being presented as a real danger as opposed to an issue being manipulated so that we think it's worse than it actually is.

In conclusion, these fallacies are just part of many illogical constructions. Be careful not to use them or fall victim to them. It's our goal as communicators to persuade, but we must do so fairly or we risk credibility.

Juxtaposition

This is another common political or talk radio fallacy. Whenever a speaker puts two unrelated subjects together in order to fuse an unsubstantiated relation, a juxtaposition fallacy occurs. Sometimes two subjects might be related on one level, but the fallacy occurs when the speaker tries to manufacture an artificial connection to make an argument. Does this sound familiar?

Saddam is an evil man...he has supported terrorism...we don't want another 9/11.

The above example is a carefully crafted juxtapositioning of "facts" about Saddam Hussein and terrorism. It's true Saddam supported Palestinian suicide bombers; killing hundreds of thousands of people and invading a sovereign nation warrants the term *evil*; and, presumably, no American wants another 9/11-type terrorist attack. However, what's the relationship? On face this seems to be a combination of fallacies, but its effect was to link Saddam with 9/11 in order to gather public support for invading Iraq. The Bush administration denied ever saying Saddam was behind 9/11, but public opinion polls showed that people believed he was. Therefore, the Bush administration was telling the "truth" because they didn't explicitly state a connection. They really didn't even imply one; they simply put ideas together and let the connection make itself.

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