Fallacies in Rhetorical Argument

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Do words convey a multiplicity of meanings that are not addressed as such?
Do ideas veer from the matter at hand to tangential or irrelevant areas?
Do talking points or replies to a question side-step a topic, ignore evidence, and/or focus on attacks?
Does a conclusion fail to bear the weight of the premises?

If any of these questions apply to something you hear, one or more fallacies is likely in play. A fallacy is something purported as true but is not logically sound. Fallacies surface in structure, language, and content. If a conclusion does not follow from the premise, the structure does not support deductive reasoning. When the meaning is ambiguous or obscured, the fallacy resides in the language. As irrelevant points are used in argument, such content is the seat of a fallacy. Whether we search for fallacies or thrive on them, we experience a distancing from the truth when they arise.

The Challenge to Hear
Fallacies may safeguard a speaker's position, making it impervious to challenge through a false "certainty." Fallacies can also paint another's position as false without reasonable cause.
Intuition may tell us something is "off," fallacious, but naming what that is can be difficult.

The Challenge to Respond
Some fallacies overpower, acting like an undertow, pulling listeners far from the "topical" shore and into a sea of emotion. Other fallacies are barriers**,** walling off competing information and further exploration of ideas. Still others muddy the waters through irrelevances, tangents, and double meanings, making it difficult to find clarity and focus within an argument. And fallacies attract fallacies. Against a cascade of fallacies, what is reasonable or true can be buried.

This article looks at common fallacies, grouping them by how they achieve an effect. The hope is to make it easier to spot fallacies and to avoid using them.

Faulty Springboards: Conclusions launched beyond reasonable boundaries

Concluding something regarding a whole which can only be said of its parts individually.

- In my math class, students from Taswania get top marks. All Taswanian students are good at math.
- Because every person can have faulty recall, using the testimony of these five witnesses to place my client at the scene of the crime does not prove the defendant was there.

Arguing from a special case to a general principle:

- After eating at a restaurant in the square, I was sick for three days. Beware of dining establishments in that neighborhood.
- I've never seen them in church before; those people only go to church on Christmas and Easter.

False Disclaimer: Someone's action in the past is presented as a refutation for a present argument.

- Why should I stop smoking when you smoked at my age?
- You voted for her in the previous election, why should I listen to your argument against her now?

Fool's Gold: Conclusions dependent on false identification or attribution

Arguing from a general principle to a specific circumstance:

- Unmarried mothers have a lot "on their plate." She is unlikely to be a top student.
- Because every person has the right to express their opinion, the principal has a right to express his views on climate change in the classrooms. [See below Ambiguities: Equivocation.]

Concluding something about a part based on what is only true of a whole.

- Members of his family suffer from addiction; therefore, he must be an addict.
- The political party platform stood for X; therefore, she, as a member of that party, supports X.

False Cause: Claiming an event which preceded another event is the cause of the other event.

- When we stopped jailing people for minor offences, our streets became filled with criminals.
- Since we changed all members of the board, our work is now unbiased.
- When the bill is passed, your taxes will go down. (As a result of the legislation, taxes may go down, but this does not guarantee an individual's taxes will go down. A cause-and-effect relationship is falsely drawn.)

Ambiguities and Hidden Assumptions

Begging the Question:
The term "begs the question" is commonly used to refer to something that compels a further question or points to a new idea. However, as a fallacy, "begging the question" means the opposite: a premise does not advance an argument, it only appears to move toward a conclusion. "[T]he premises provide *no independent ground* or evidence for the conclusion, and no reason to accept the premises unless one already believes the conclusion."[1] This can be found when reasoning circles back on itself and through the use of code language, common used phrases that go unexamined.

Circular reasoning

- I find such arguments irrelevant to my life because they do not impact how I live.
- We believe the Peace Talks will lead to an agreement because the parties have agreed to talk.
- Learning a foreign language is a hallmark of education because the ability to speak another language is a sign of educational achievement.

Using code language signifying something already agreed to:

- This proposal goes forward because it supports the "Company X Way." (Tacit agreement that the "Company X Way" is desirable.)
- This action is "Un-Taswanian" and must be stopped. (Tacit agreement that what is "Un-Taswanian" is undesirable.)

Equivocation:
Through multiple meanings of a single word or phrase*:*

- Because every person has the right to express their opinion, the principal has a right to express his views on climate change in the classrooms.
- That can't be an ethical program because it does not insist on a strong work ethic.
- Our "Summit on Truth" will help people get to the truth.

Through syntax*:*

- We will give these students $5,000. ($5,000 to each student or will $5,000 be split between students?)

Bait and Switch

Some fallacies use irrelevancies to advance an argument. They act like undertows, pulling listeners swiftly from the "topical" shore. Two types of fallacious arguments are masters at this, each one highly persuasive and commonly used.

[1] https://www.logical-fallacy.com/articles/circular-reasoning/ June 11, 2025.

Argumentum ad Hominem: Shifting the subject of the argument "to the person."
When rhetoric shifts to the character or style of a person involved (either negatively or positively) it often happens in swift and decisive fashion. The conversation is propelled far from the intended focus. If a speaker does not have a reasonable idea about what to do or how to achieve something, *ad hominem* arguments create a diversion: *look at this person (instead of this issue)*. Attacking or praising the character of someone can be easy for a speaker and appealing to an audience. A complex issue is side-stepped.

- *He is terrible at his job.*
- *She is a terrific person.*
- *She lies.*
- *This is the most honest person I know.*
- *He doesn't wear a suit; how can he be trusted?*
- *Look at her, how could anyone say she is not trustworthy?*
- *His parents were arrested for protesting.*
- *Her son is a criminal.*
- *The judge is acting out of ambition.*

Argumentum ad Populum: Shifting the subject of the argument "to the people."
When a speaker appeals to emotions or prejudices to sway opinion, the argument quickly falls into fallacious territory. Sympathy, anger, pride, and fear can be accelerants to faulty reasoning. Stoking a prejudice, already an unreasoned opinion, can be a binding agent among like-minded people: *If we all feel or believe X, it must be true.*

- She must shield her family from these attacks on her actions.
- We are better than they are.
- They are laughing at us.
- They are beating us.
- What will happen if we allow black and white students in the same classroom?
- What if someone like that moved next door to you?
- If we let them get away with this…
- Foreign adversaries could be backing these protests.

Setting Traps

False Dichotomy (It's black or it's white. Period.)
This fallacy lays down two options: a right and a wrong with no middle ground.

- *You are with me, or you are against me.*
- *When they send us proposals, they send nothing but the worst ideas, nothing that we would want.*
- *If they are not going to send people to protect our agents, we have to.*
  Here there is both a false dichotomy and two hidden assumptions:
  1) The agents need protection, 2) No other group but ours will protect the agents.

Many Questions
It can be difficult to pull apart a question that is two questions in one.

Have you stopped cheating on your taxes? (Assumption: you cheat)
Q1) Did you ever cheat on your taxes?
Q2) if so, have you stopped this practice?

What lapse in judgment would make you sign up for a skydiving course? (Assumption: you are likely to have poor judgment)
Q1) What is your interest in a skydiving course?
Q2) Are you going to sign up for a course?

Do you agree that the countless people abusing the system should be penalized? (Assumption: abuse of the system is rampant)
Q1) Do you know if people abuse the system?
Q2) If there are, how many people do this?
Q3) Do you think those who abuse the system should be penalized?

The Straw Man
This fallacy brings something into a debate that does not actually exist or is an exaggerated version of something that does exist. The argument may seem like something coming "out of left field."
With its over-simplified narrative and false assumptions, a straw man walking is an attractive, easily repeated rejoinder, making a mockery of reasoned debate.

Reasonable Argument: Our concern is whether reducing sugar intake will improve our children's health.
Straw Man using hyperbole: You want to ban all sugary food and drinks.

Reasonable Argument: We have not seen much improvement when we have added funds to public schools.
Straw Man over-simplifying an issue: You think throwing money at schools will solve all our problems.

Reasonable Argument: Where is the balance between care for the environment and care for the economy?
Straw Man inserting a false dichotomy: You care more about animals than about people's livelihoods.

The Boogey Man
These false narratives are daggers aimed at slicing open fears and insecurities. They label an individual or a group: *They are fascists. They are socialists. They are trying to indoctrinate our children. These people hate our country. They are misogynists.*

These two false creatures draw upon the wells of *argumentum ad hominem* and *argumentum ad populum*.

When Structure Causes Confusion

While the content of a statement may grab our attention, the structure can lead us astray. Using an *if-then* style of argument may only appear to be a logical deduction. We saw this in Part 2 (False Cause) when an if-then structure was implied:

It is useful to the understanding of fallacies to explore the variations of *if-then* statements. Listen for what is being confirmed or denied. The logic (or illogic) flows as the confirmation or denial is linked to an antecedent (the "if" term) or a consequent (the "then" term).

Logical: An "If" confirmed also confirms the "then."
If zebras exist, then striped animals exist.
Zebras exist; therefore, striped animals exist.

Logical: A "then" denied also denies the "if."
If zebras exist, then striped animals exist.
Striped animals do not exist; therefore, zebras do not exist.

NOT logical: An "if" denied does not deny the "then."

If zebras exist, then striped animals exist.
Zebras do not exist; therefore, stiped animals do not exist.
Fallacy: Other animals can exist that have stripes.
An antecedent denied does not squash the possibility for the consequent to exist. *An antecedent denied harbors no grudge*.

NOT logical: A "then" confirmed does not simultaneously confirm the "if."

If zebras exist, then striped animals exist.
Striped animals exist; therefore, zebras exist.
Fallacy*:* The existence of striped animals does not cause the existence of zebras.
A consequent upheld stays in its lane. It does not cross over to confirm the antecedent.

Conclusion:
Fallacies of argument are compelling. They encourage blind trust in a speaker's words. It takes effort to listen for fallacies and resist the force they exude. Knowing that fallacies stand in the way of finding truth - by dismantling or entangling a free exchange of ideas and information - is also compelling. Spotting fallacies and not using them encourages the pursuit of truth.

Is my "reasoning" employing a fallacy of logic or rhetoric? What is that fallacy?
Does my language curtail dialogue or further thinking by others? How could I state something differently?
Am I hearing fallacious arguments? What are the fallacies being used?
Will I move beyond frustration and stand up for clarity in language and reasoning?