

Fallacy Pitfalls Make Bad Arguments

How to See Them, How to Avoid Them

Fallacies are caused by an error in reasoning. A single fallacy can undermine an entire argument and generate doubt with the reader. There are many pitfalls to be aware of:

Post hoc, ergo propter hoc (after this, therefore because of this): The writer argues that **because one thing happened after another, it is therefore because of this.** This reasoning establishes a sequence of actions without adequate or logical justification. It fails to establish a clear and reasonable relationship between a cause and effect. *What to look for:* a logic leap between cause and effect. Ask if the relationship makes sense.

Ad hominem (to the man): The writer attacks the opponent's personal character rather than the opponent's argument. Attacking the opponent instead of defending your position is not an effective strategy with intelligent readers. *What to look for:* Ask if the argument talks about the person making the argument, rather than the topic itself. Any kind of name-calling is good clue.

Ad populum (to the people): The writer evades the issues by appealing to readers' emotional reactions to certain subjects. Instead of arguing the facts of an issue, a writer might play upon the reader's prejudices and positive and/or negative connotations of abstract ideas. This way the writer avoids any discussion of the merits or weaknesses of the argument and substitutes an emotional appeal.

Non sequitur (it doesn't follow): The writer's conclusion is not necessarily a logical result of the facts. The writer presents evidence that implies a basis in the facts previously presented but not actually linked to those facts logically. *What to look for:* ask if the relationship between the two points makes sense as presented by the author. The reader should not have to connect extra dots for it to make sense.

Red herring: The writer introduces an irrelevant point to divert the readers' attention from the main issue. The term originates from the old tactic used by escaped prisoners, of dragging a smoked herring, a strong-smelling fish, across their trail to confuse tracking dogs by making them follow the wrong scent. *What to look for:* carefully analyze that all the points made actually support the main issue.

Begging the question: The writer assumes the truth of the point that is supposed to be proven by the argument. A writer makes a second assertion to support the first, without supporting it. *What to look for:* look for extra claims or assertions, then ask if they are supported by argument and directly related to the primary argument made by the writer.

Straw Man: The writer selects the opposition's weakest or most insignificant point to argue against, to divert the readers' attention from the real issues. Instead of addressing the opposition's best arguments and defeating them, the writer "sets up a straw man" – that is, the writer picks out a trivial (or irrelevant) argument against his or her own position and easily knocks it down, like a figure made of straw. *What to look for:* Ask if the argument changes or rewords the topic to focus on something related to, but not actually important for or relevant to, the original issue.

False Dilemma: The writer tries to convince the readers that there are only two sides to an issue – one right and one wrong. The false dilemma is often called either/or thinking. It is the illogic of asserting that only two possibilities are available where there may be several. One choice is presented as terrible, thereby making the second choice sound good by contrast. *What to look for:* Ask if there are any other possibilities. If other possibilities exist, then only two choices is not accurate.

Slippery Slope: The writer implies that if something happens, an undesirable conclusion is the only possible outcome. The slippery slope fallacy makes the argument that we cannot allow A to take place because if we do, then we will head down a slope all the way to Z, a place where no one wants to be. The strategy is to make Z so awful that readers will agree with you that we should not do A. The error in logic is the unsupported assumption that if A takes place, Z will follow. *What to look for:* Ask if there is a lot of steps to connect A to Z – the more steps, the greater the likelihood that any one could follow a different outcome. Ask if there is another possible course of action that could take place - is Z the only possible, real outcome of action A.

Bandwagon: The writer tries to validate a point by intimating that “everyone else believes in this.” Another substitute for good argument is the appeal to join in, or join the majority, often without providing evidence that a majority holds the view of the arguer or, even more important, that the view is a sound one. *What to look for:* Any suggestion that the reason to agree with the argument is because it supports a larger group, or because it is the choice others would make, not because the argument itself is reasonable.

Common Practice: The writer tries to validate a point by intimating that “everyone else is doing it, so it must be a good thing.” Similar to the bandwagon fallacy, the appeal to common practice is the false logic that practice makes good reasoning. Motivation to conform does not provide enough support to justify an action. *What to look for:* Word clues such as no one or everyone to support why an action is taken. Ask if everyone or no one really does this behavior – even one exception points to a fallacy. Ask if everyone is doing the behavior, does it mean the behavior is correct or right.

Hasty Generalization or Overstatement: The hasty generalization or overstatement results from reaching a conclusion with very limited or minimal support. *What to look for:* Any language that uses absolutes, such as all, always, never, everybody and none. Again, any exceptions point to a fallacy. Ask if there is solid support or lots of evidence for the conclusion – the less evidence, the greater the chance for fallacy.

Oversimplification: Suggesting a simple solution to a complex problem. An example – If football players were made aware of the risks they take, they would change the sport. *What to look for:* does the solution address all of the topic’s related issues.

Faulty Analogy: The writer uses an inappropriate or superficially similar extended comparison as evidence. *What to look for:* make sure that an extended comparison and/or metaphor *really does compare similar or equal points*. An analogy can suggest similarities and support an argument. However, the comparison itself doesn’t **prove** a strong argument. If an argument is not supported by factual evidence, then an analogy isn’t persuasive.

Appeal to an Unqualified Authority: Using testimony from someone who is unqualified to give it. *What to look for:* how does the “authority” relate to the topic? Is there a clear connection that demonstrates appropriate knowledge?

Quick Fix: The writer relies on catchy phrases or empty slogans to make his argument. *What to look for:* ask if the phrase is *too simple* to support the argument, ask if the point being made *is relevant* to the argument.