

strawman

Misrepresenting someone's argument to make it easier to attack.

By exaggerating, misrepresenting, or just completely fabricating someone's argument, it's much easier to present your own position as being reasonable or valid, but this kind of dishonesty serves to undermine rational debate.

After Will said that we should put more money into health and education, Warren responded by saying that he was surprised that Will hates our country so much that he wants to leave it defenceless by cutting military spending.

slippery slope

Asserting that if we allow A to happen, then Z will consequently happen too, therefore A should not happen.

The problem with this reasoning is that it avoids engaging with the issue at hand, and instead shifts attention to baseless extreme hypotheticals. The merits of the original argument are then tainted by unsubstantiated conjecture.

Colin Closet asserts that if we allow same-sex couples to marry, then the next thing we know we'll be allowing people to marry their parents, their cars and Bonobo monkeys.

special pleading

Moving the goalposts or making up exceptions when a claim is shown to be false.

Humans are funny creatures and have a foolish aversion to being wrong. Rather than appreciate the benefits of being able to change one's mind through better understanding, many will invent ways to cling to old beliefs.

Edward Johns claimed to be psychic, but when his 'abilities' were tested under proper scientific conditions, they magically disappeared. Edward explained this saying that one had to have faith in his abilities for them to work.

the gambler's fallacy

Believing that 'runs' occur to statistically independent phenomena such as roulette wheel spins.

This commonly believed fallacy can be fairly said to have created an entire city in the desert of Nevada USA. Though the overall odds of a 'big run' happening may be low, each spin of the wheel is itself entirely independent from the last.

Red had come up six times in a row on the roulette wheel, so Greg knew that it was close to certain that black would be next up. Suffering a kind of economic form of natural selection with this thinking, he soon lost all of his savings.

black-or-white

Where two alternative states are presented as the only possibilities, when in fact more possibilities exist.

Also known as the false dilemma, this insidious tactic has the appearance of forming a logical argument, but under closer scrutiny it becomes evident that there are more possibilities than the either/or choice that is presented.

Whilst rallying support for his plan to fundamentally undermine citizens' rights, the Supreme Leader told the people they were either on his side, or on the side of the enemy.

false cause

Presuming that a real or perceived relationship between things means that one is the cause of the other.

Many people confuse correlation (things happening together or in sequence) for causation (that one thing actually causes the other to happen). Sometimes correlation is coincidental, or it may be attributable to a common cause.

Pointing to a fancy chart, Roger shows how temperatures have been rising over the past few centuries, whilst at the same time the numbers of pirates have been decreasing, thus pirates cool the world and global warming is a hoax.

ad hominem

Attacking your opponent's character or personal traits instead of engaging with their argument.

Ad hominem attacks can take the form of overtly attacking somebody, or more subtly casting doubt on their character. The result of an ad hominem attack can be to undermine someone without actually having to engage with their argument.

After Sally presents an eloquent and compelling case for a more equitable taxation system, Sam asks the audience whether we should believe anything from a woman who isn't married, was once arrested, and smells a bit weird.

loaded question

Asking a question that has an assumption built into it so that it can't be answered without appearing guilty.

Loaded question fallacies are particularly effective at derailing rational debates because of their inflammatory nature - the recipient of the loaded question is compelled to defend themselves and may appear flustered or on the back foot.

Grace and Helen were both romantically interested in Brad. One day, with Brad sitting within earshot, Grace asked in an inquisitive tone whether Helen was having any problems with a drug habit.

bandwagon

Appealing to popularity or the fact that many people do something as an attempted form of validation.

The flaw in this argument is that the popularity of an idea has absolutely no bearing on its validity. If it did, then the Earth would have made itself flat for most of history to accommodate people's popular belief.

Shamus pointed a drunken finger at Sean and asked him to explain how so many people could believe in leprechauns if they're only a silly old superstition. Sean, however, had had a few too many Guinness himself and fell off his chair.

begging the question

A circular argument in which the conclusion is included in the premise.

This logically incoherent argument often arises in situations where people have an assumption that is very ingrained, and therefore taken in their minds as a given. Circular reasoning is bad mostly because it's not very good.

The word of Zorbo the Great is flawless and perfect. We know this because it says so in The Great and Infallible Book of Zorbo's Best and Most Trustworthy Things that are Definitely True and Should Not Ever Be Questioned.



appeal to emotion

Manipulating an emotional response in place of a valid or compelling argument.

Appeals to emotion include appeals to fear, envy, hatred, pity, pride, and more. Though a valid argument may sometimes have an emotional aspect, one must be careful that emotion doesn't replace sensible logic.

Luke didn't want to eat his sheep's brains with chopped liver and brussel sprouts, but his father told him to think about the poor, starving children in a third world country who weren't fortunate enough to have any food at all.

tu quoque

Avoiding having to engage with criticism by turning it back on the accuser - answering criticism with criticism.

Literally translating as 'you too' this fallacy is commonly employed as an effective red herring because it takes the heat off the accused having to defend themselves and shifts the focus back onto the accuser themselves.

The blue candidate accused the red candidate of committing the tu quoque fallacy. The red candidate responded by accusing the blue candidate of the same, after which ensued an hour of back and forth criticism with not much progress.

burden of proof

Saying that the burden of proof lies not with the person making the claim, but with someone else to disprove.

The burden of proof lies with someone who is making a claim, and is not upon anyone else to disprove. The inability, or disinclination, to disprove a claim does not make it valid.

Bertrand declares that a teapot is, at this very moment, in orbit around the Sun between the Earth and Mars, and that because no one can prove him wrong his claim is therefore a valid one.

no true scotsman

Making what could be called an appeal to purity as a way to dismiss relevant criticisms or flaws of an argument.

In this form of faulty reasoning one's belief is rendered unfalsifiable because no matter how compelling the evidence is, one simply shifts the goalposts so that it wouldn't apply to a supposedly 'true' example.

Angus declares that Scotsmen do not put sugar on their porridge, to which Lachlan points out that he is a Scotsman and puts sugar on his porridge. Furious, like a true Scot, Angus yells that no true Scotsman sugars his porridge.

the fallacy fallacy

Presuming that because a claim has been poorly argued, or a fallacy has been made, that it is necessarily wrong.

There are few things more frustrating than watching someone poorly argue a position one holds. Much of the time a debate is won not because the victor is right, but because s/he is better at debating than their opponent.

Recognising that Amanda had committed a fallacy in arguing that we should eat healthy food because it was popular, Alyse resolved to eat bacon double cheeseburgers every day.

personal incredulity

Saying that because one finds something difficult to understand that it's therefore not true.

Complex subjects like biological evolution through natural selection require some amount of understanding of how they work before one is able to properly grasp them; this fallacy is usually used in place of that understanding.

Kirk drew a picture of a fish and a human and with effusive disdain asked Richard if he really thought we were stupid enough to believe that a fish somehow turned into a human through just, like, random things happening over time.

ambiguity

Using double meanings or ambiguities of language to mislead or misrepresent the truth.

Politicians are often guilty of using ambiguity to mislead and will later point to how they were technically not outright lying if they come under scrutiny. It's a particularly tricky and premeditated fallacy to commit.

When the judge asked the defendant why he hadn't paid his parking fines, he said that he shouldn't have to pay them because the sign said 'Fine for parking here' and so he naturally presumed that it would be fine to park there.

appeal to authority

Using the opinion or position of an authority figure, or institution of authority, in place of an actual argument.

Much of the time experts have better information and understanding than others, but holding a position of authority doesn't necessarily mean that someone is right. After all, the highest medical authorities used to think that bleeding people was a good general cure for sickness.

Not able to defend his position that evolution 'isn't true', Bob says that he knows a scientist who also questions evolution (and presumably isn't a primate).

composition /division

Assuming that what's true about one part of something has to be applied to all, or other, parts of it.

Often when something is true for the part it does also apply to the whole, but because this isn't always the case it can't be presumed to be true. We must show evidence for why a consistency will exist.

Daniel was a precocious child and had a liking for logic. He reasoned that atoms are invisible, and that he was made of atoms and therefore invisible too. Unfortunately, despite his thinky skills, he lost the game of hide and go seek.

anecdotal

Using personal experience or an isolated example instead of a valid argument, especially to dismiss statistics.

It's often much easier for people to believe someone's testimony as opposed to understanding variation across a continuum. Quantitative scientific measures are almost always more accurate than individual perceptions and experiences.

Jason said that that was all cool and everything, but his grandfather smoked, like, 30 cigarettes a day and lived until 97 - so don't believe everything you read about meta analyses of sound studies showing proven causal relationships.

the texas sharpshooter

Cherry-picking data clusters to suit an argument, or finding a pattern to fit a presumption.

This 'false cause' fallacy is coined after a marksman shooting at barns and then painting bullseye targets around the spot where the most bullet holes appear. Clusters naturally appear by chance, and don't necessarily indicate causation.

The makers of Sugarette Candy Drinks point to research showing that of the five countries where Sugarette drinks sell the most units, three of them are in the top ten healthiest countries on Earth, therefore Sugarette drinks are healthy.

middle ground

Saying that a compromise, or middle point, between two extremes is the truth.

Much of the time the truth does indeed lie between two extreme points, but this can bias our thinking: sometimes a thing is simply untrue and a compromise of it is also untrue. Half way between truth and a lie, is still a lie.

Holly said that vaccinations caused autism in children, but her scientifically well-read friend Caleb said that this claim had been debunked and proven false. Their friend Alice offered a compromise that vaccinations cause some autism.

thou shalt not commit logical fallacies

A logical fallacy is often what has happened when someone is wrong about something. It's a flaw in reasoning. Strong arguments are void of logical fallacies, whilst arguments that are weak tend to use logical fallacies to appear stronger than they are. They're like tricks or illusions of thought, and they're often very sneakily used by politicians, the media, and others to fool people. Don't be fooled! This poster has been designed to help you identify and call out dodgy logic wherever it may raise its ugly, incoherent head. If you see someone committing a logical fallacy online, link them to the relevant fallacy to school them in thinky awesomeness and win the intellectual affections of those who happen across your comment by appearing clever and interesting e.g. yourlogicalfallacyis.com/strawman