

Writing Center

Tidewater Community
College
Phone: 757-822-7170
Fax: 757-427-0327
<http://www.tcc.edu/writing>
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Logical Fallacies

A fallacy is an error of reasoning. It can be used against you in an argument, but if you are familiar with them, you will be able to refute the fallacious argument. Likewise, if you are clever, you can use them to convince others.

Fallacies fall into two major categories:

Fallacies of Relevance: Premises are irrelevant to the conclusion,
Fallacies of Ambiguity: Ambiguous, changeable wording in the propositions.

Here are examples of each of the major fallacies. You figure out and write in a definition that makes sense to you.

Fallacies of Relevance:

Argumentum ad Bacculum (appeal to force): “Pay back the loan and 10% daily interest by Thursday, or be sure that you have your health insurance paid up.”

Argumentum ad Hominem (abusive): “Don’t believe anything John says; he’s a nerd.”

Argumentum ad Hominem (circumstantial): “Of course he thinks fraternities are great. He’s a Phi Delta.”

Argumentum ad Ignorantiam (argument from ignorance): There is no proof that witches exist; therefore, they do not.

Argumentum ad Misericordiam (appeal to pity): “Your honor, how can the prosecution dare try to send this poor, defenseless child to jail for the murder of his father and mother? Have a heart; the boy is now an orphan.”

Argumentum ad Populum: “Don’t be left out! Buy your Chevette today!”

Argumentum ad Vernicundiam (appeal to authority): Joe Namath selling pantyhose; Joe DiMaggio selling Mr. Coffee.

Accident: “What you bought yesterday, you eat today; you bought raw meat yesterday; therefore, you eat raw meat today.”

Converse Accident (hasty generalization): “That man is an alcoholic. Liquor should be banned.”

False Cause (post hoc ergo propter hoc) (Many of our superstitions stem from this fallacy.): “A black cat crossed Joe’s path yesterday, and he died last night.” or “Put your money where your mouth is. Whiter teeth and fresh breath will win Suzie.”

Petitio Principii (begging the question): “It’s time to come in the house now Billy.” “Why?” “Because I said so!” “Why?” “Because it’s time, and I said so.”

Complex Question: “Have you given up cheating on exams?”

Ignoratio Elenchi (irrelevant conclusion): In a law court, in attempt to prove that the accused is guilty of theft, the prosecution may argue that the theft is a horrible crime for anyone to commit.”

Fallacies of Ambiguity:

Equivocation: Some dogs have fuzzy ears. My dog has fuzzy ears. My dog is some dog!”

Amphibole (grammatical construction): “Woman without her man would be lost.” or “Save Soap and Waste Paper.”

Accent: “We should not speak ill of our friends.”

Composition: “Each part of this stereo weighs under one pound. This is a very light stereo.” of “...ONLY \$1.97 plus processing and postage.”

Division: “Perdue s a great engineering school. Mike went there; he must be a great engineer.”

Listen to your roommate, the T.V., and even your professors. You’ll be amazed how many fallacies we encounter each day. More importantly, check your papers.

Does your argument have premises and conclusions stated properly? Have you been guilty of fallacious reasoning?

Exercises: Identify the fallacies in the following passages and explain how each specific passage involves that fallacy or fallacies.

It is necessary to confine criminals and to lock up dangerous lunatics. Therefore there is nothing wrong with depriving people of their liberties. How much longer are you going to waste your time in school when you could be doing a man’s work in the world, and contributing to society? If you had any sense of social responsibility you would leave immediately. The army is notoriously inefficient, so we cannot expect Major Smith to do an efficient job. God exists because the Bible tells us so, and we know that what the Bible

tells us must be true because it is the revealed word of god. Congress shouldn't bother to consult the Joint Chiefs-of-Staff about the military appropriations. As members of the armed forces, they will naturally want as much money for the military purposes as they think they can get.

Mr. Brown: I will give you no more money to your cause next year.

Solicitor: That's right sir, we'll just put you down for the same amount that you gave this year. Narcotics are habit-forming. Therefore if you allow your physician to ease your pain with an opiate, you will become a hopeless drug addict. You can't prove that he was to blame for the misfortune, so it must actually have been someone else who was responsible. Cooks have been preparing food for generations, so our cook must be a real food expert. More young people are attending high schools and colleges than ever before in the history of our nation. But there is more juvenile delinquency among the youth so we must abolish schools. You say we ought to discuss whether or not to buy a new car now. All right, I agree. Let's discuss the matter. Which should we get, a Ford or a Chevy?

Our nation is a democracy and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. We believe in equality of opportunity for everyone, so our colleges and universities should admit every applicant, regardless of his economic or educational background. We should reject Mr. Watkins' suggestions for increasing the efficiency of our colleges. As a manufacturer he cannot be expected to realize that our aim is to educate the youth, not to make a profit. His recommendations can have no value for us. Everyone said that the soup had a very distinctive taste, so they must have found it very tasty. If we want to know whether a state is brave we must look at its army, not because the soldiers are the only brave people in the community, but because it is only through their conduct that the courage or cowardice of the community can be manifested.

--R. L. Nettleship, Lectures of the Republic of Plato

My client is the sole support for his aged parents. If he is sent to prison, it will break their hearts, and they will be left homeless and penniless. You surely cannot find it in your hearts to reach any other verdict than "Not guilty". There is no proof that the secretary "leaked: the news to the papers, so she can't have done it. Was it through stupidity or through deliberate dishonesty that the Administration has hopelessly botched its foreign policy? In either case, unless you are in favor of stupidity or dishonesty, you should vote against the incumbents. Since all men are mortal, the human race must someday come to an end.