

Fallacies

Logicians have categorized many types of fallacies that commonly occur in arguments; knowing their names can help you in intelligently critiquing arguments. Here, I've selected ten common fallacies.

The page <http://www.datanation.com/fallacies/> discusses other types of fallacies.

Ad hominem argument Somebody counterargues by appealing to characteristics of the person making the argument.

Ex. Why should we listen to your arguments against abortion? You're just following the Catholic Church's teaching.

Ad populum argument An argument based on the opinion of a large number of people.

Ex. Same-sex couples should not be allowed to marry because the majority of Americans believe it should continue to be illegal.

Affirming the consequent An argument that establishes that if A is true, B is true, and concludes that since B is true, A must be true also.

Ex. Water pollution causes fish populations to decrease. Since fish populations are decreasing, there must be too much water pollution.

Begging the question / circular reasoning An argument in which the conclusion appears in the premises of the argument.*

*People often use the term "begging the question" to talk about a new question prompted by a position (as in "if aerosol cans are contributing to the greenhouse effect, then this begs the question of what we should do

Ex. God must exist, because the Bible says so, and we can trust the Bible because God inspired it.

False analogy An argument extending an analogy beyond its limits.

Ex. Saint Patrick likened the Trinity to the three leaves of a clover. Clovers are mortal, so the Trinity must also be mortal.

False dilemma An argument for something by arguing against an opposing possibility, when in fact another alternative is possible.

Ex. If you don't own a car, you'll never be able to go anywhere.

Hasty generalization An argument appealing to a small number of particular cases.

Ex. Catholic colleges always have excellent football programs: Look at SJU and Notre Dame.

Post hoc reasoning An argument that since something happened after taking an action, the action must have caused it.

Ex. When the speed limit was reduced to 55 mph, traffic fatalities dropped dramatically. The reduced speed limit has saved thousands of lives.

Slippery slope An argument saying not to do something because what might possibly happen next.

Ex. If we allow same-sex couples to marry legally, then allowing marriage among three people is inevitable.

Strawman argument An argument based on counterarguing a weak argument for the opposing side.

Ex. We didn't need to invade Iraq: We already had access to plenty of oil in Saudi Arabia.

about it"). People knowledgeable about logical fallacies do not use the term in this way.

Fallacies Exercise

For each of the following, select which of the following fallacies applies. None of the fallacies are used more than once.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| A. Ad hominem argument | F. False dilemma |
| B. Ad populum argument | G. Hasty generalization |
| C. Affirming the consequent | H. Post hoc reasoning |
| D. Begging the question | I. Slippery slope |
| E. False analogy | J. Strawman argument |

- ___ 1. Many monks at St John's Abbey are liberal, so the Benedictine Order must be a liberal religious order.
- ___ 2. Bill Clinton was a liar. How can we listen to him about health care?
- ___ 3. We should not believe Clinton's claims about what he did with Monica Lewinsky, because he was lying.
- ___ 4. Students are customers of the college, and the customer is always right, so all students should get A's.
- ___ 5. 18-year-olds should not be allowed to buy alcohol. After all, the bars can do well without their business.
- ___ 6. Slaves don't receive any wages for their work, and students aren't paid to do work in their classes, so students are being treated like slaves.
- ___ 7. The Titanic is the best movie ever: Just look at how much money it made in the box office!
- ___ 8. If we legalize marijuana, we'll also have to legalize cocaine.
- ___ 9. Kerry voted against funding the soldiers in Iraq, so Kerry does not support the military.
- ___ 10. Alcohol should continue to be legal: Remember that the Great Depression occurred shortly after Prohibition.