

23 Find the flaw in the argument

Topics: **critical thinking, media literacy, safety online**

Recommended age group: 15+

Participant count: up to 30 participants

Activity duration: 40 - 60 minutes

Methods of education: group work, discussion, reflection

Aims of the activity:

- find and identify types of argumentative fouls and explain them,
- recognise manipulative communication techniques used,
- give an argument to support a certain claim,
- notice the impact of argumentative fouls (on oneself and on others),
- name the reasons for the use of argumentative fallacies,
- notice different ways of arguing and assess own personal argumentation skills.

Equipment:

- paper, pens, flip charts, markers,
- printed examples of argumentative fouls for each participant,
- handout for each participant: argumentative fouls and strategies of manipulative techniques.

Keywords: argumentation, cognitive biases, argumentative fouls, manipulative techniques

Activity process:

1. Introduction to the topic: *Part of critical thinking is taking in and re-evaluating the information we receive. Assessing its validity, accuracy or objectivity is our daily task. Knowing how to question and argue helps us to navigate the flood of information all around us. However, the ability to assess arguments is hindered by the various manipulative techniques of others or by our own cognitive biases."*

In the next activity, we will focus on argumentative fouls. These are arguments in which someone tries to confuse us or divert our attention and which can involve logical fallacies or other manipulative techniques. A handout with the types of argumentative fouls and three strategies of manipulative techniques will be provided to participants.

Topics



Age category



15+

Group size



up to 30

Time



40 - 60 minutes

2. Divide the trainees into groups of 3-4 members. We will give them examples of argumentative fouls from the attachment (without solutions). We can give each group a different example of an argumentative foul or all groups can work on the same examples (depending on the training needs and time allocation). The participants read the excerpt as a group, discuss and work on these tasks together:

- *Assess whether there are argumentative fouls in the example. If so, try to identify which ones.*
- *Suggest what you think a correct argument should look like.*

Allow sufficient time for the participants to work out the tasks (at least 10 min. per example). The information in the handout may be helpful.

3. After completing the assignment, the results are presented and discussed together. A selected group member reads the example aloud, names the problems they found in the statement and explains why it is manipulative. At the same time, they will offer suggestions as to what better arguments could have been used. If the groups work on the same examples, the results can be written down on a flip chart / board and compared. If necessary, the lecturer will provide the solution for the example, help to identify the argumentative flaw and correct it. They can also offer examples of appropriate arguments to support the claim in the example.

In this activity, it is best to use excerpts of texts on current topics that may be of interest to the participants. A selection of fictional examples is attached, together with the highlighted argumentative fouls they contain.

Final analysis:

- *How did the text (example of an argumentative foul) affect you?*
- *Have you encountered similar types of communication before? Where? How often?*
- *Who do you think uses similar manipulative techniques? Why?*
- *How does the use of argumentative fallacies impact us? What effect does it have on us?*

Final summary: Lack of awareness of manipulative techniques and not being aware of what/who influences us and how we can eliminate these influences results in stereotypes and prejudices and opens up space for the spread of hate speech, whether towards individuals or groups of people.

Activity variations:

Participants can:

- try to write (create) an example using appropriate arguments or argumentative fallacies,
- search for examples of posts on the internet themselves,
- use posts related to the topic under discussion.

Source: MARKOŠ J, GAŽOVIC O, N Magazine, Critical Thinking. Bratislava: N Press, s.r.o, October 2017. [online]. Available at: <<https://dennikn.sk/941774/stiahnite-si-prirucku-o-kritickom-mysleni/>>.

Attachment: Example of logical fallacies and their solutions

Example 1: A left-wing government has decided to increase both the minimum wage and parental allowance in the country. At the same time, it has introduced substantial social grants to enable pupils from poorer families to cover the full cost of their travel to school and their working materials. The right-wing opposition has reacted to these measures as follows: *„It is clear, the Prime Minister is a liar and a thief, nothing good can come of such a proposal! He is sailing on a yacht and playing at being a philanthropist. The money could be used much more wisely.“*

Example 2: The government has decided to improve conditions in refugee camps, which are extremely overcrowded. It has started intensive construction of new facilities and increased the number of teachers who work with child refugees in these camps. The tabloids reacted to these measures as follows: *„The government is inviting more migrants here! At this rate, they will soon each get a new car and their own house with a garden as a bonus.“*

Example 3: The website of a company offering questionable medical treatments published the following text: *„Little Sarah has conquered cancer. The harsh treatment in the hospital almost killed her, the doctors stuck one needle after another into her despite her crying. Her desperate parents couldn't stand to watch any more, so they took her home. They turned to us, and we provided them with our daily nutrition plan. We put her on a special programme of fasting, eating sauerkraut, and gargling our product three times a day. The effects were miraculous and today the beautiful little girl is smiling again. Are you suffering too? Are your loved ones suffering? Contact us and we will cure you as we cured Sara.“*

Materials for the lecturer:

Solution to Example 1: Contains a personal attack. Even if the Prime Minister in question did steal, it says nothing about the usefulness of the measures he has put in place. It is also irrelevant whether he has a yacht. It is necessary to comment on the core of the measures (can they realistically help anyone? how many people and how fundamentally? at what cost? could these people be helped more effectively? how, for example?) and it is wrong to attack the personality of the proponent.

Solution to Example 2: It contains a false claim (the government has not invited anyone, the proposal is for refugees who already are in the country) and a slippery slope (no one mentioned cars, houses and gardens). A fair criticism of the proposal should go to the heart of the measures (do we have enough money for this? Can we get new teachers quickly when it takes several years to train them? etc.) and to the possible alternatives (wouldn't it be more effective to better protect common borders first in order to reduce the number of illegal migrants? shouldn't we be investing money primarily in educational courses and language training for adult refugees so that they can become more employable in the labour market and then find independent accommodation with their families? etc.).

Solution to Example 3: The article uses highly emotional language (“harsh treatment”, “doctors stuck despite crying”, “miraculous effects and a beautiful little girl”) to evoke the difference between a bad hospital and a good alternative. There is also the problem of confusing causality and correlation - even if Sarah happened to be cured after fasting, being on a special cabbage diet and gargling, there is no evidence that she recovered as a result of that. The hospital's treatment is based on strict medical standards and research that has shown the beneficial effects of that treatment on particular types of cancer. Its impact and effect require careful assessment and the consideration of options and consequences.