

# STRATEGIES FOR AVOIDING FALLACIES

Once you have learned how to identify informal fallacies, the next step is to develop strategies for avoiding them. Here are some strategies that can help you become a better critical thinker:

- *Know yourself.* Self-knowledge is a cardinal rule for good critical thinking. Knowing which fallacies you are most likely to fall for and which you are most likely to commit will make you less vulnerable to lapses in critical thinking.
- *Build your self-confidence and self-esteem.* Working on your self-confidence and self-esteem will make you less likely to give in to peer pressure and, in particular, to the fallacy of popular appeal. People who are self-confident are also less likely to back down when others use a fallacy on them or to become defensive and use fallacies on others.
- *Cultivate good listening skills.* Be a respectful listener of other people's views, even if you disagree with them. Do not be thinking of how you are going to respond before you have even heard the other person's argument. After the other person has presented his or her view, repeat it back to make sure you understand it correctly. Look for common ground. If you notice a fallacy in the argument, respectfully point it out. If the argument appears to be weak, ask the person for better support or evidence for his or her position rather than simply dismissing it.
- *Avoid ambiguous and vague terms and faulty grammar.* Cultivate good communication and writing skills. Clearly define your key terms in presenting an argument. And expect the same of others. Don't be afraid to ask questions. If you are unclear about the definition of a term or what someone else means, ask the person to define the term or rephrase the sentence.

- *Do not confuse the soundness of an argument with the character or circumstances of the person making the argument.* Focus on the argument that is being presented, not on the person presenting the argument. Also, resist the temptation to counterattack if another person attacks your character or threatens you because of your position on a particular issue. When two people trade insult for insult instead of focusing on the real issue, an argument may escalate out of control and both people may end up feeling frustrated and hurt. The tacit belief that if the other person is using fallacies or is being illogical then it's okay for you to do the same is a sign of immature thinking. If another person attacks your character, step back and take a deep breath before responding.
- *Know your topic.* Don't jump to a conclusion without first doing your research. Knowing your subject makes it less likely that you will commit a fallacy simply because you are unable to defend your position. This strategy involves being familiar with the relevant evidence, as well as a willingness to learn from others. In evaluating new evidence, make sure that it is based on credible sources.
- *Adopt a position of skepticism.* We should be skeptical but not close our minds to claims we disagree with, unless there is clear evidence that contradicts that claim. Don't just take people's word for it, especially if they are not authorities in the field under discussion. Also, remain skeptical about your own position and open to the possibility that you are mistaken or don't have the whole truth.
- *Watch your body language.* Fallacies need not be written or spoken. For example, the fallacies of personal attack and appeal to force can be conveyed through body language, such as rolling your eyes, glaring, looking away, and even walking away when someone is speaking.
- *Don't be set on "winning."* If your purpose is to win the argument rather than get to the truth about the issue, you're more likely to use fallacies and rhetoric when you can't rationally defend your position.



Learning how to recognize and avoid fallacies will make you less likely to fall victim to faulty arguments, whether those of cult recruiters, advertisers, politicians, authority figures, friends, or family. It is especially important to be able to identify and avoid using fallacies in your own life, thereby improving your critical-thinking skills.

The habitual use of fallacies can damage relationships and leave people feeling upset and frustrated. By avoiding fallacies, your relationships will be more satisfying and your arguments stronger and more credible. This, in turn, will make it easier for you to achieve your life goals.