

Red Herring

Red Herring Definition

Red herring is a kind of [fallacy](#) that is an irrelevant topic introduced in an [argument](#) to divert the attention of listeners or readers from the original issue. In literature, this fallacy is often used in detective or [suspense](#) novels to mislead readers or characters, or to induce them to make false conclusions.

Let us consider a simple example of a red herring. A teacher catches a student cheating during a test. The student in response says, “I know I’ve made a mistake. But think of my parents. They’re going to be heartbroken.” The student uses a red herring in his response. He tries to appeal to pity to distract his teacher from the real issue.

The term red herring literally refers to a kind of dried red fish, which has a pungent smell. In fox hunting, hounds are prevented from catching the fox by distracting them with the strong scent of red herring. Similarly, a person can be stopped from proving his point, or discovering something important, in an argument by distracting him with an irrelevant issue.

Common Red Herring Examples

Some examples of red herring fallacy in casual conversations are given below:

Example 1:

Mother: It’s bedtime Jane

Jane: Mom, how do ants feed their babies?

Mother: Don’t know dear, close your eyes now.

Jane: But mama, do ant babies cry when they’re hungry?

This conversation shows how a child tries to distract her mother so that she [Jane] can stay awake a little longer.

Example 2:

There is a lot of commotion regarding saving the environment. We cannot make this world an Eden. What will happen if it does become Eden? Adam and Eve got bored there!

The idea of Adam and Eve getting bored in Eden throws the listeners off the real issue of damaging the environment.

Examples of Red Herring in Literature

Mystery and suspense novels are rich with red herring examples, as writers frequently use them to veil the facts from the readers in order to develop their interest.

Example #1: *Da Vinci Code* (By Dan Brown)

The [character](#) of Bishop Aringarosa, in Dan Brown's novel *Da Vinci Code*, serves as an example of a red herring throughout the novel. The character is presented in such a way that the readers suspect him to be the mastermind of the whole conspiracy in the church.

Later, it is revealed that he is innocent. This example of a red herring in the novel distracts the readers from who the real bad guy is, and thus adds to the mystery of the story. Interestingly, the Italian surname of the bishop "Aringarosa" translates in English as "red herring."

Example #2: *Sherlock Holmes: Hound of the Baskervilles* (By Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes: Hound of the Baskervilles* presents a classic example of red herring. The readers are thrown off the real murderer and start suspecting the escaped convict and Barrymore. In the end, however, the mystery is resolved by the unexpected confession of Beryl that her husband Stapleton was the real culprit, and was behind the

Example #3: *The Withdrawing Room* (By Charlotte Macleod)

We observe the killer planting false clues and providing red herrings in Charlotte Macleod's *The Withdrawing Room*. Augustus Quiffen, a lodger at Sarah's Brownstone home, is killed falling under the train. Seemingly, it was an accident, until Mary Smith tells Sarah that it was a murder, but she cannot identify the murderer. Sarah and Max Bittersohn investigate the matter, and find that the killer had planned the death beforehand, and that he was well-prepared to conceal it with a convincing red herring.

Function of Red Herring

A red herring is a common device used in mystery and thriller stories to distract the reader from identifying the real culprit. The red herring in a story can take the form of characters that the reader suspect, but who turn out to be innocent when the real murderer is identified. It aims at keeping the readers guessing at the possibilities until the end, and therefore keeps them interested in the story. Readers enjoy solving the mysteries created by red herrings in the story. Undoubtedly, it would be difficult to keep the reader's interest, if thrillers exposed the killer from the start.

Moreover, for politicians, red herrings come in handy as they use them frequently to dodge difficult questions in a discussion or an argument. They do it by referring to a different issue, which of course is irrelevant, to sidetrack from the original issue under discussion.