



# Rhetorical Fallacies

**Rhetorical fallacies**, or **fallacies of argument**, don't allow for the open, two-way exchange of ideas upon which meaningful conversations depend. Instead, they distract the reader with various appeals instead of using sound reasoning. They can be divided into three categories:

1. **Emotional fallacies** unfairly appeal to the audience's emotions.
2. **Ethical fallacies** unreasonably advance the writer's own authority or character.
3. **Logical fallacies** depend upon faulty logic.

Keep in mind that rhetorical fallacies often overlap.

## EMOTIONAL FALLACIES

**Sentimental Appeals** use emotion to distract the audience from the facts.

**Example:** *The thousand of baby seals killed in the Exxon Valdez oil spill have shown us that oil is not a reliable energy source.*

**Red Herrings** use misleading or unrelated evidence to support a conclusion.

**Example:** *That painting is worthless because I don't recognize the artist.*

**Scare Tactics** try to frighten people into agreeing with the arguer by threatening them or predicting unrealistically dire consequences.

**Example:** *If you don't support the party's tax plan, you and your family will be reduced to poverty.*

**Bandwagon Appeals** encourage an audience to agree with the writer because everyone else is doing so.

**Example:** *Paris Hilton carries a small dog in her purse, so you should buy a hairless Chihuahua and put it in your Louis Vuitton.*

**Slippery Slope** arguments suggest that one thing will lead to another, oftentimes with disastrous results.

**Example:** *If you get a B in high school, you won't get into the college of your choice, and therefore will never have a meaningful career.*

**Either/Or Choices** reduce complicated issues to only two possible courses of action.

**Example:** *The patent office can either approve my generator design immediately or say goodbye forever to affordable energy.*

**False Need** arguments create an unnecessary desire for things.

**Example:** *You need an expensive car or people won't think you're cool.*

## ETHICAL FALLACIES

**False Authority** asks audiences to agree with the assertion of a writer based simply on his or her character or the authority of another person or institution who may not be fully qualified to offer that assertion.

**Example:** *My high school teacher said it, so it must be true.*

**Using Authority Instead of Evidence** occurs when someone offers personal authority as proof.

**Example:** *Trust me – my best friend wouldn't do that.*

**Guilt by Association** calls someone's character into question by examining the character of that person's associates.

**Example:** *Sara's friend Amy robbed a bank; therefore, Sara is a delinquent.*

**Dogmatism** shuts down discussion by asserting that the writer's beliefs are the only acceptable ones.

**Example:** *I'm sorry, but I think penguins are sea creatures and that's that.*

**Moral Equivalence** compares minor problems with much more serious crimes (or vice versa).

**Example:** *These mandatory seatbelt laws are fascist.*

**Ad Hominem** arguments attack a person's character rather than that person's reasoning.

**Example:** *Why should we think a candidate who recently divorced will keep her campaign promises?*

**Strawperson** arguments set up and often dismantle easily refutable arguments in order to misrepresent an opponent's argument in order to defeat him or her

**Example:** A: *We need to regulate access to handguns.*

B: *My opponent believes that we should ignore the rights guaranteed to us as citizens of the United States by the Constitution. Unlike my opponent, I am a firm believer in the Constitution, and a proponent of freedom.*

## LOGICAL FALLACIES

A **Hasty Generalization** draws conclusions from scanty evidence.

**Example:** *I wouldn't eat at that restaurant—the only time I ate there, my entree was undercooked.*

**Faulty Causality** (or **Post Hoc**) arguments confuse chronology with causation: one event can occur after another without being caused by it.

**Example:** *A year after the release of the violent shoot-'em-up video game Annihilator, incidents of school violence tripled—surely not a coincidence.*

A **Non Sequitur** (Latin for “It doesn't follow”) is a statement that does not logically relate to what comes before it. An important logical step may be missing in such a claim.

**Example:** *If those protesters really loved their country, they wouldn't question the government.*

An **Equivocation** is a half-truth, or a statement that is partially correct but that purposefully obscures the entire truth.

**Example:** *“I did not have sexual relations with that woman.” – President Bill Clinton*

**Begging the Question** occurs when a writer simply restates the claim in a different way; such an argument is circular.

**Example:** *His lies are evident from the untruthful nature of his statements.*

A **Faulty Analogy** is an inaccurate, inappropriate, or misleading comparison between two things.

**Example:** *Letting prisoners out on early release is like absolving them of their crimes.*

**Stacked Evidence** represents only one side of the issue, thus distorting the issue.

**Example:** *Cats are superior to dogs because they are cleaner, cuter, and more independent.*

**Further Resources:** Lunsford, Andrea A. and John Ruskiewicz. Everything's an Argument. 3rd ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.