Description of Fallacies

A fallacy is, very generally, an error in reasoning. This differs from a factual error, which is simply being wrong about the facts.
To be more specific, a fallacy is an "argument" in which the premises given for the conclusion do not provide the needed degree of support.

TYPES OF FALLACIES

Hasty generalization
This is a conclusion based on insufficient or biased evidence. In other words, you are rushing to a conclusion before you have all the relevant facts.

Example: "My roommate said her philosophy class was hard, and the one I'm in is hard, too. All philosophy classes must be hard!" Two people's experiences are, in this case, not enough on which to base a conclusion.

Missing the point
Definition: The premises of an argument do support a particular conclusion—but not the conclusion that the arguer actually draws.

Example: "The seriousness of a punishment should match the seriousness of the crime. Right now, the punishment for drunk driving may simply be a fine. But drunk driving is a very serious crime that can kill innocent people. So the death penalty should be the punishment for drunk driving." The argument actually supports several conclusions—"The punishment for drunk driving should be very serious," in particular—but it doesn't support the claim that the death penalty, specifically, is warranted.

Post hoc (also called false cause)
This fallacy gets its name from the Latin phrase "post hoc, ergo propter hoc," which translates as "after this, therefore because of this."

This is a conclusion that assumes that if 'A' occurred after 'B' then 'B' must have caused 'A.' Example:

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I drank bottled water and now I am
sick, so the water must have made
me sick.
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In this example the author assumes that if one event chronologically follows another the first event must have caused the second. But the illness could have been caused by the burrito the night before, a flu bug that had been working on the body for days, or a chemical spill across campus. There is no reason, without more evidence, to assume the water caused the person to be sick.

Slippery slope

This is a conclusion based on the premise that if A happens, then eventually through a series of small steps, through B, C,..., X, Y, Z will happen, too, basically equating A and Z. So, if we don't want Z to occur, A must not be allowed to occur either. Example:

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If we ban Hummers because they are
bad for the environment eventually
the government will ban all cars,
so we should not ban Hummers.
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In this example the author is equating banning Hummers with banning all cars, which is not the same thing.

Weak analogy
Definition: Many arguments rely on an analogy between two or more objects, ideas, or situations. If the two things that are being compared aren't really alike in the relevant respects, the analogy is a weak one, and the argument that relies on it commits the fallacy of weak analogy.

Example: "Guns are like hammers—they're both tools with metal parts that could be used to kill someone. And yet it would be ridiculous to restrict the purchase of hammers—so restrictions on purchasing guns are equally ridiculous."

Appeal to authority
Definition: Often we add strength to our arguments by referring to respected sources or authorities and explaining their positions on the issues we're discussing. If, however, we try to get readers to

agree with us simply by impressing them with a famous name or by appealing to a **supposed authority who really isn't much of an expert,** we commit the fallacy of appeal to authority.

Example: "We should abolish the death penalty. Many respected people, such as actor Guy Handsome, have publicly stated their opposition to it." While Guy Handsome may be an authority on matters having to do with acting, there's no particular reason why anyone should be moved by his political opinions—he is probably no more of an authority on the death penalty than the person writing the paper.

Ad populum

Definition: The Latin name of this fallacy means "to the people." There are several versions of the ad populum fallacy, but what they all have in common is that in them, the arguer takes advantage of the desire most people have to be liked and to fit in with others and uses that desire to try to get the audience to accept his or her argument.

One of the most common versions is the bandwagon fallacy, in which the arguer tries to convince the audience to do or believe something because everyone else (supposedly) does.

Example: "Gay marriages are just immoral. 70% of Americans think so!"

Type 2: This is an emotional appeal that speaks to positive (such as patriotism, religion, democracy) or negative (such as terrorism or fascism) concepts rather than the real issue at hand. Example:

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If you were a true American you
would support the rights of people
to choose whatever vehicle they
want.
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In this example the author equates being a "true American," a concept that people want to be associated with, particularly in a time of war, with allowing people to buy any vehicle they want even though there is no inherent connection between the two.

Ad hominem:

This is an attack on the character of a person rather than their opinions or arguments. Example:

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Green Peace's strategies aren't
effective because they are all
dirty, lazy hippies.
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In this example the author doesn't even name particular strategies Green Peace has suggested, much less evaluate those strategies on their merits. Instead, the author attacks the characters of the individuals in the group.

Appeal to pity

Definition: The appeal to pity takes place when an arguer tries to get people to accept a conclusion by making them feel sorry for someone.

Examples: "I know the exam is graded based on performance, but you should give me an A. My cat has been sick, my car broke down, and I've had a cold, so it was really hard for me to study!"

Appeal to ignorance

Definition: In the appeal to ignorance, the arguer basically says, "Look, there's no conclusive evidence on the issue at hand. Therefore, you should accept my conclusion on this issue."

Example: "People have been trying for centuries to prove that God exists. But no one has yet been able to prove it. Therefore, God does not exist." Here's an opposing argument that commits the same fallacy: "People have been trying for years to prove that God does not exist. But no one has yet been able to prove it. Therefore, God exists."

Straw man

This move oversimplifies an opponent's viewpoint and then attacks that hollow argument.

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People who don't support the
proposed state minimum wage
increase hate the poor.
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In this example the author attributes the worst possible motive to an opponent's position. In reality, however, the opposition probably has more complex and sympathetic arguments to support their point. By not addressing those arguments, the author is not treating the opposition with respect or refuting their position.

Red herring

This is a diversionary tactic that avoids the key issues, often by avoiding opposing arguments rather than addressing them. Example:

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The level of mercury in seafood
may be unsafe, but what will
fishers do to support their
families?
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In this example the author switches the discussion away from the safety of the food and talks instead about an economic issue, the livelihood of those catching fish. While one issue may effect the other it does not mean we should ignore possible safety issues because of possible economic consequences to a few individuals.

False dichotomy

Definition: In false dichotomy, the arguer sets up the situation so it looks like there are only two choices.

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We can either stop using cars or
destroy the earth.
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In this example where two choices are presented as the only options, yet the author ignores a range of choices in between such as developing cleaner technology, car sharing systems for necessities and emergencies, or better community planning to discourage daily driving.

Circular Argument: This restates the argument rather than actually proving it. Example:

George Bush is a good communicator because he speaks effectively.

In this example the conclusion that Bush is a "good communicator" and the evidence used to prove it "he speaks effectively" are basically the same idea. Specific evidence such as using everyday language, breaking down complex problems, or illustrating his points with humorous stories would be needed to prove either half of the sentence.

So how do I find fallacies in my own writing?

Here are some general tips for finding fallacies in your own arguments:

Pretend you disagree with the conclusion you're defending. What parts of the argument would now seem fishy to you? What parts would seem easiest to attack? Give special attention to strengthening those parts.

List your main points; under each one, list the evidence you have for it. Seeing your claims and evidence laid out this way may make you realize that you have no good evidence for a particular claim, or it may help you look more critically at the evidence you're using.

Learn which types of fallacies you're especially prone to, and be careful to check for them in your work. Some writers make lots of appeals to authority; others are more likely to rely on weak analogies or set up straw men. Read over some of your old papers to see if there's a particular kind of fallacy you need to watch out for.

Be aware that broad claims need more proof than narrow ones. Claims that use sweeping words like "all," "no," "none," "every," "always," "never," "no one," and "everyone" are sometimes appropriate—but they require a lot more proof than less-sweeping claims that use words like "some," "many," "few," "sometimes," "usually," and so forth.