

Logical Fallacies in Writing

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“Logical fallacies are flaws in reasoning that lead to illogical statements” (126). They tend to appeal to emotions rather than reason. The following logical fallacies often occur in writing:

Hasty Generalizations: These draw conclusions from inadequate evidence: “Franklin D. Roosevelt is the greatest American President because he was elected four times to the office,” is such a statement. The fact that he was elected more than anyone else says nothing about why others were not. It also says nothing about the impact of his policies. Ultimately, this is an opinion.

Stereotyping: This is also a type of hasty generalization. This involves saying something like, “Everyone in Europe is a socialist.” Sweeping claims about particular ethnic, religious, racial, national or political groups are stereotyping. Such statements can also apply to age and sex.

False Analogy: These draw comparisons in which the differences outweigh the similarities, or where the similarities are irrelevant. For example: “Learning to write a research paper is like learning to ride a bicycle; once you learn how, you never forget.” Well, not exactly. Research papers change based on the particular discipline (academic field) of the person writing, subject he or she is writing about, and a host of other factors.

Begging the Question: This is also known as “circular reasoning,” in which one offers “proof” by using another version of the argument itself. For instance, “Abortion does not hurt the unborn child because the unborn child does not feel pain.” Yes, this is the very question we are asking: “At what point in gestation does the unborn child feel pain?”

Irrelevant Argument: These arguments reach conclusions that do not follow the premises. For instance, “John is out-going, so he would make a good evangelist.” Although being out-going might aid in being an evangelist, it is certainly not a qualification, biblical or otherwise, for such a calling. This is sometimes referred to as a *non sequitur*, from Latin meaning, “it does not follow.”

False Cause: This argument assumes that because two events are related in time, the first event must have caused the second. For example, “Because Luther believed in predestination, Calvin must have learned it from him.” Not at all. In Latin, this is called, *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, meaning, “After this, therefore because of this.”

Self-Contradiction: This is an argument in which two premises cannot both be true at the same time. For instance, “Only when nuclear weapons have finally destroyed us will we be convinced of the need to control them.” This is obviously contradictory. However, one could make such an absurd claim to illustrate their opinion that we shall never be convinced of the need to control nuclear weapons.

Red Herring: This is when one ignores the original question by bringing in a second item unrelated to the first in an effort of distraction. So when arguing about the constitutionality of “same-sex marriage,” one brings in topics of human dignity and the meaning of love, which all might be fine and well, but have nothing to do with the question of the constitutionality of “same-sex marriage.”

Argument to the Person: This is also known in Latin as *ad hominem* (“to the man”), in which one attacks the person making the argument and not the subject under discussion. Such an example might be, “I would listen to her argument if she weren’t such a mean-spirited person.” Whether or not she is mean-spirited, her argument is the source of discussion.

Guilt by Association: This means that one’s ideas or opinions lack merit because of his or her associations with other people. An example might be, “Senator Smith from Iowa was just discovered to be involved in a money-laundering scheme. Nor shall I vote for his junior colleague in the next election.” Or, “The business of which Mrs. Jones is the accountant just declared bankruptcy; I bet she would make a poor city councilwoman.”

Jumping on the Bandwagon: This means something is right or permissible because everyone is doing it or agrees with it. For example, “The majority of contemporary scholars do not think Paul wrote the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, so he must not have written it.” Perhaps, but that is no argument for whether or not the Apostle Paul wrote *Hebrews*.

False or Irrelevant Authority: This is using someone as an authority who has no expertise in the field of question. For instance, a commercial advertises that a celebrity wears a certain brand of watch or cologne. So what?

Card-Stacking: Such a tactic ignores the evidence on the other side of the issue. Of all possible evidence, a person chooses the evidence that best fits his or her case. Examples abound in advertising. This is also known as “special pleading.”

Either-Or Fallacy: This type of argument sets the issue up as containing only two possibilities when others exist. An example might be, “If you can’t preach a topical sermon, then you can’t preach at all.” This obviously ignores other types of sermons.

Taking Something Out of Context: This takes a statement from its original context and then reapplies it to a context not relevant or simply distorts the original meaning. For example, a source writes that Social Security payments for next year will not be increased as much as the previous year’s percentage. The next day, someone uses the source to write that Social Security payments are being “cut,” leading some to think that recipients will not even receive as much as they received the previous year.

Appeal to Ignorance: This fallacy seeks to argue on the basis of something that has not been proven false, or perhaps not been proven true. For instance, “Because it hasn’t been proven that John F. Kennedy was not shot by only one person, then we must assume that he was assassinated by one person.” Notice the double-negatives that make the statement more confusing.

Ambiguity and Equivocation: These are statements that are open to more than one interpretation and thereby conceal truth. An office worker reports, “This week I achieved unprecedented levels of unverifiable productivity.”