LOGICAL FALLACIES AND HOW TO AVOID THEM IN YOUR ARGUMENTS

Logical fallacies are flaws in reasoning that lead to illogical statements. They tend to occur when ideas are being argued, as in a typical English essay. Logical fallacies masquerade as reasonable statements, yet they are in fact statements designed to manipulate the reader by appealing to emotions rather than intellect. Here are examples of common logical fallacies.

A hasty generalization draws conclusions from inadequate evidence. Suppose someone states, “New York is the best place to live,” and gives only two examples to support the opinion. The person also fails to acknowledge or address contrasting information. This writer has drawn a hasty generalization. Using stereotyping and sexism in an argument are two more ways of drawing hasty generalizations.

A false analogy draws a comparison in which the differences outweigh the similarities or the similarities are irrelevant. For example, “Old Joe Smith would never make a good president because old dogs can’t learn new tricks” is a false analogy. Joe Smith is not a dog and one cannot compare learning the role of a president to a dog learning a trick. Homespun analogies like this have an air of wisdom, but tend to fall apart if examined closely.

Begging the question tries to offer proof of simply using another version of the argument itself. This is also called circular reasoning. For example, “Wrestling is a dangerous sport because it is unsafe” begs the question. Unsafe means the same as dangerous, so the statement goes round and round, getting nowhere.

An irrelevant argument reaches a conclusion that doesn't follow the premises. It is also called a non-sequitur (Latin for “it does not follow). An example of a non-sequitur is: “Jane is a forceful public speaker, so she would make a great mayor.” Why does being a good public speaker insure that a person would be a good mayor?

A false cause assumes that because two events are related in time, the first caused the second. For example, if someone claims that a new satellite launched last week is causing increased rain, that person is making a false cause by linking two events that have nothing to do with each other.

Jumping on the bandwagon means something is right because “everyone says it is” or because it is a popular belief. For example, just because many people eat at fast food restaurants, doesn’t mean that fast food is healthy. The illogical argument would be, “Fast food can’t be unhealthy or it wouldn’t be so popular.” This makes no sense.
Over simplification means the argument has no merit because the writer only presents one simplistic fact of support. Someone may argue that getting an A in Shakespearean English is easy if you study. However, that person fails to recognize all of the factors that go into achieving an A, such as writing skill, ability to interpret literature, and professor expectations, just to name a few.

Either/or reasoning tries to convince the reader that there is only one cause and one result to be considered. If one states, “Either we all stop drinking bottled water or we will face an environment disaster” is creating a false dilemma. Many lifestyle factors affect our environment.

Name-calling or attacking the person does not provide an authoritative argument. “Senator Smith is no well liked by the other Senators, so the new bill she is introducing must not be any good.” Since when does popularity have anything to do with the quality of one’s work.

A good argument avoids these logical fallacies and instead relies on well-conducted research, critical thinking and clearly presented facts. Good arguments are not based on emotion, but rather evidence, reason and example.