Identifying Logical Fallacies

Arguments rely on logic and facts for support, yet speakers and authors, whether intentionally or not, can mislead an audience with a flaw in reasoning. Readers must be able to recognize when an author uses logical fallacies.

**Loaded Question**

A loaded question is a question that has assumptions built into it already, so that it cannot be answered without appearing guilty.

- **Loaded:** How long have you been beating your wife?
- **Not Loaded:** Do you beat your wife?

The first question assumes that the person beats his or her wife, and the second one does not.

**Circular Reasoning**

Circular reasoning is making a claim and using that claim as the reason the claim is true.

- **Example:** America has the best education system because nobody else has an education system as good as America’s.

A good argument would need to include reasons why this is the case rather than restating that it is the case.

**Begging the Question**

A begging the question fallacy assumes that the conclusion is true without proving that assumption. It is a circular argument that relies on the claim it is trying to make.

- **Example:** Assisted suicide is wrong because it is against the law.

This example states assisted suicide is wrong because it is wrong in the eyes of the law. The question that needs to be discussed is, “Should assisted suicide be illegal?”
Slippery Slope

With this fallacy, a speaker suggests that if one idea or event happens, it will always lead to additional consequences; however, these consequences or events may not happen.

**Example:** If the government recognizes same sex marriages, then soon it will be acceptable for pedophiles to marry children.

This example suggests that same sex marriage must lead to pedophilia, but homosexuality among consenting adults is not related in any way to molesting children. There is no logical reason to suggest that one would result from the other.

Non Sequitor

A *non sequitur* is a conclusion that does not necessarily come from the evidence that has been given.

**Example:** People are poor because they are lazy.

While a person might be poor because he or she does not work hard enough, people can be poor because they have not had opportunities that other people have had, they have had health issues, as well as many other possible reasons.

Self-Contradiction

Self-contradictory arguments involve statements that disagree with each other.

**Example:** People need to develop self-sufficiency, which is why they should work together.

If people need to develop self-sufficiency, they would need to work alone rather than working with each other.

Red Herring

A red herring fallacy is when the author or speaker distracts the audience from the main issue by focusing on an irrelevant detail.

**Example:** Augusto Pinochet was a brutal dictator. He dressed in a military uniform, which showed his complete lack of fashion sense.

Pinochet’s fashion sense has nothing to do with the brutality of his regime.
False Cause

A false cause fallacy states that if one event follows another, the first event caused the second. This relationship does not always exist.

**Example:** I became a cocaine addict because I tried marijuana first.

Despite the popularity of the argument that marijuana is a gateway drug, no studies have ever proven that smoking marijuana causes a person to try other illegal drugs.

False Dichotomy

A false dichotomy, sometimes called an either-or argument, presents a complex argument as if it has only two possible positions when there can be numerous positions to take.

**Example:** Either you are for the war or you are against it.

A person could support the idea of going to war while being against the way a war is carried out. A person could be against a ground invasion but support an airstrike or cyber-attack, as well as numerous other possible positions.

False Analogy

A false analogy tries to compare two or more things that resemble each other in some ways, but the similarities do not include the point being argued.

**Example:** Corporations are like people in that they are collections of people; therefore, a corporation should have freedom of speech just like people do.

Although a corporation consists of people, its goal is to bring a profit to its shareholders. People, on the other hand, can be motivated by many things other than profit, such as love or concern for another.

False Authority

A false authority fallacy assumes someone is qualified to make a particular statement when they are not.

**Example:** As a twenty-year marijuana smoker, I can definitively say that marijuana does not change your brain chemistry at all.

Being a marijuana does not make a person an expert on brain chemistry, which would be more appropriate for a brain surgeon or neurologist.
Ad Hominem

Ad hominem is attacking the character of the person rather than their argument.

Example: Polonius argues that you should be true to yourself, but he’s such a flatterer that what he says cannot possibly be true.

Polonius being a flatterer might make him less credible, but this has nothing to do with whether his statement is correct.

Straw Man Argument

In a straw man argument, the arguer makes statements about what the other side thinks, but only chooses arguments that are easy to knock down. These arguments may or may not truly represent that other side’s opinion.

Example: Pro-choice groups encourage women to murder their babies.

Rather than representing good reasons to support a woman’s right to have an abortion, the statement uses language that makes pro-choice groups seem evil.

Guilt by Association

A guilt by association fallacy involves discrediting a person based on the company he or she keeps.

Example: President Obama used to go to a church run by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who has criticized the US; therefore, President Obama must hate America, too.

Bandwagon Appeal

A bandwagon appeal involves the suggestion that since a certain group of people believe a certain idea, this idea must be true.

Example: The Twilight series is so popular that it must be the greatest work of fiction ever.

While the Twilight books are popular, this does not necessarily mean they have literary merit.

Hasty Generalization

A hasty generalization draws a conclusion from evidence that is not sufficient to arrive at that conclusion.

Example: The amateur scholar looked at the front pages of thirty newspapers from the South during the buildup to the Civil War; since none of them mentioned slavery, the scholar concluded that the Civil War was not fought over slavery.
While thirty newspapers are not enough to draw such a conclusion. Also, arguments about slavery may be in the opinion section of newspapers, rather than on the front page.

**Sweeping Generalization**

A sweeping generalization is a statement that might be true in specific cases, but the speaker has tried to apply it to all cases. Sweeping generalizations tend to use words such as *all, everyone, always, never, nobody*, etc.

**Example:** Republicans are white, male, and wealthy.

Since not all Republicans are white, male, and wealthy, this statement over-generalizes what might be true in some cases.

**Emotional Fallacy**

An argument that consists entirely of appeals to another person’s emotions without appealing that person’s reason is an emotional fallacy. This type of fallacy appears in advertisements against animal cruelty or childhood hunger.