Reasoning Errors

Chapter 6
Intro to Critical Reasoning
Fallacies

This chapter will cover —

Fallacies (errors in reasoning) as reasons that do not provide adequate support for conclusions

Fallacies in the form of statements that lead listeners away from the real issue

A reasonable approach to handling fallacies
When we look at an individual’s support for his beliefs, we may perceive that something doesn’t make sense....

Fallacies can be seen as:
- Reasons that seem logical but don’t necessarily support the conclusion
- Statements that distract listeners from the real issue
Inadequate Reasons as Fallacies

Faulty Analogies 183

- The key to an accurate analogy is that the two things being compared are similar in all significant aspects. If there are significant differences between the items being compared, then we have a faulty analogy.
Inadequate Reasons as Fallacies

False Cause: Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc 187

The Latin translates to “after this, therefore because of this,” and refers to the practice of stating that because one event followed another, the first event caused the second event.
Ad Hominem: Attacking the Person

Ad hominem is a Latin term meaning “to the man” or attacking the person.

The use of ad hominem arguments has been a staple of political rhetoric for a long time. People resort to ad hominem argument when they can’t think of strong reasons to counter someone else’s argument.
Inadequate Reasons as Fallacies

Ad Hominem: Attacking the Person 189

Many logicians believe that discussing an opponent’s personal qualities is always a diversionary tactic. However, there are times when attacking the person is valid, because the area of attack is pertinent to the issue under consideration. 191
Inadequate Reasons as Fallacies

The Slippery Slope 193

Slippery slope refers to the domino effect. If you push one domino in a pattern, then all the others will fall, that if one event occurs, then others will follow, usually in an uncontrollable way.
Hasty Conclusions 195

When we want to know the answer to a serious problem or event, we may be tempted to draw a hasty conclusion; that is to draw a conclusion on the basis of insufficient information.
The Red Herring 201

The red herring fallacy gets its name from the practice of drawing a herring—a smoked fish—to distract hunting dogs from following the trail.

It is used in conversation to sidetrack pointed questions or demands.
The ad populum fallacy consists of a false appeal to the authority of "everyone." We are told that a course of action should be taken, or an idea should be supported, because "everyone" is doing it or believes it.
Fallacies That Mislead

Appeal to Tradition: “We’ve Always Done it This Way” 204

Closely related to ad populum fallacy is the appeal to tradition, which occurs when a belief or action is supported simply because it conforms to traditional ideas or practices.
The False Dilemma: Either-Or 205

When someone makes the error of the false dilemma or the either-or fallacy, he or she polarizes a situation by presenting only two alternatives at extreme ends of the spectrum of possibilities. Moderate choices are left out of the discussion.
Fallacies That Mislead

Begging the Question or Circular Reasoning 207

Begging the question takes place in two ways:

1. The speaker asks you to prove that his or her belief is not correct. Instead of giving reasons for a conclusion, he or she places the burden of proof on the listener. 208

2. The speaker builds on an unproven assumption as if it were a given fact. 208
Fallacies of Irrelevant Appeal  
K. Codell Carter  
A First Course in Logic

Appeal to Force (ad baculum) 83

Convincing one’s opponent does not rely on appeal to reason alone, but the threat of force. “If you kiss Hattie, I’ll break your arm.”

Appeal to Ignorance (ad ignorantiam) 85

One seeks to win agreement by pointing out that we don’t really know whether the conclusion is true or false.
Fallacy of Accident 87

This occurs where one applies a good general rule to a case where it does not fit.

Any child who brings drugs to school, must be punished. This child brought prescription medicine to school. Prescription medicine is a drug. Therefore, this child must be punished.
Fallacy of Straw Man 93

This involves distorting an opponent's views into something indefensible. When the indefensible views are shown to be false, the person making the fallacious argument pretends to have refuted the original views of the opponent.
Questions to Test By

K. Codell Carter, A First Course in Logic

1. Does the author use irrelevant appeals?
2. Does the author distort the facts?
3. Does the author shift ground during the argument?
4. Does the author assume what he is trying to prove?
5. What does the author mean by...?
You may find it hard to categorize errors in reasoning under one label or another; some speakers manage to use a whole group of fallacies at once.
The good news is that you don’t need to be obsessed with finding the exact title of a fallacy and attacking your opponent with it. You only need to see that certain reasons people give to justify their conclusions are insufficient or irrelevant.
The labels we give to the reasoning errors are useful only in helping us define and avoid inadequate and faulty support for our conclusions. These labels also provide guideposts for evaluating and refuting reasons others give.