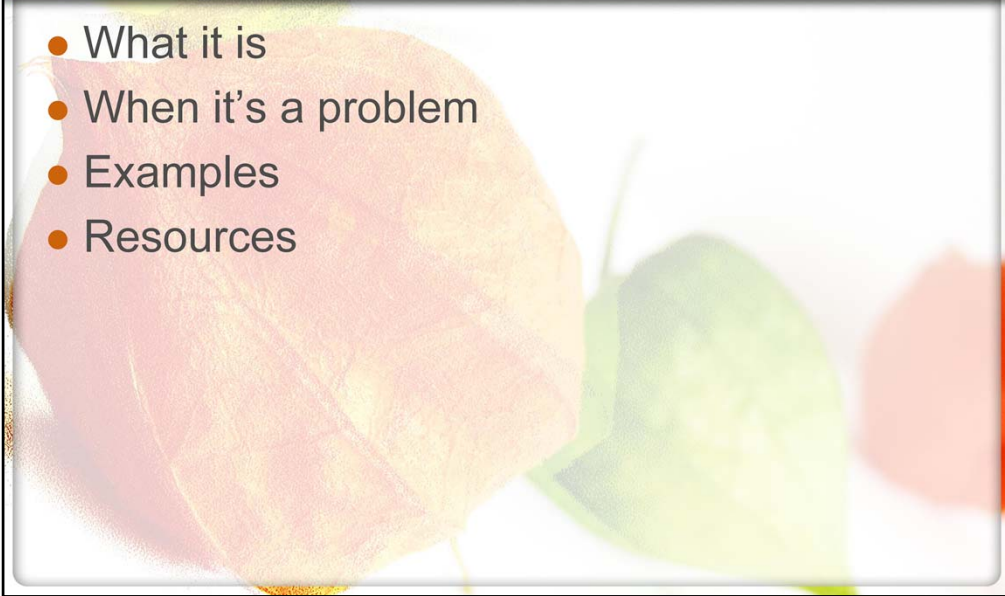




Appeal to Authority
Spice or specious?

In this lecture...

- What it is
- When it's a problem
- Examples
- Resources



What it is...

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The Form

Joe makes a claim
Joe says **John** agrees
Therefore, Joe's claim is true

An appeal to authority is borrowing credibility from someone else to support your claim. This is something we do all the time. Whenever we quote from an expert, we are making an appeal to authority. In fact, students are expected to use this type of appeal because they are, by definition, not considered experts (at least at undergraduate levels).

Many, perhaps most, appeals to authority are NOT fallacious. They make use of experts in the field being discussed. It is inappropriate to dismiss someone's authority just because I (or YOU) have never heard of the person being used as an authority. If someone is being held up as an expert, it's up to me to learn whether that is a reasonable claim.

When it's a problem...

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What are the benefits and risks of choosing a foreign surgeon for complex cardiac intervention?

An appeal to authority becomes fallacious when the authority selected is inappropriate to the subject under discussion. Consider the two doctors in this example. They both have extensive education. They are both highly skilled and respected in their fields. Yet only one of them is truly qualified to answer the question.

The most significant appeal to authority problem happens when someone with a strong following but without the in-depth understanding necessary decides to make proclamations that are inconsistent with scientific evidence. For instance, on March 16, 2011, Ann Coulter, a prominent columnist, wrote “With the terrible earthquake and resulting tsunami that have devastated Japan, the only good news is that **anyone** exposed to excess radiation from the nuclear power plants is now **probably much** less likely to get cancer.”

The blog post contains what appears to be a great deal of hard data in support of her position, and her argument has been widely spread on the ‘net. However, “Owen Hoffman, a radiation-risk expert at Senes Oak Ridge Inc., a center for risk analysis, said that studies show low levels of radiation might eliminate some cancer but initiate others” (Politifact).

Coulter is not an expert in radiation, so she borrowed from many who are, but she used only the bits of information that supported *her personal theory*. Politifact noted she neglected “the opinion shared by the majority in the scientific community, which doesn't buy into -- and in many cases outright rejects -- the idea that low levels of radiation can have beneficial health effects and reduce the risk of cancer.”

So, the problem occurs when the wrong type of “expert” is used to in order to bolster a less than credible position.

Of note: Look at the qualifiers in the statement. “Anyone” and “much” make Coulter’s claim seem very strong, even though it is based on flimsy evidence; “probably” leaves a bit of wiggle room in case her claim turns out not to be true after all.

Sources:

Coulter, Ann. “A Glowing Report on Radiation”. Blog post. 16 March 2011.
<http://www.anncoulter.com/columns/2011-03-16.html>

“Ann Coulter says exposure to low levels of radiation are good for you, reduces cancer risk.”
PolitiFact.com 27 July 2011.

Examples



The image displays three distinct examples of celebrity endorsements. On the left, a promotional graphic for a DVD titled "Live the Life You Dreamed" features Fred Thompson, a former presidential candidate, and advertises "Reverse Mortgages" with a "FREE DVD" and a "CLICK HERE >>" button. In the center, a photograph of Michael Jordan in pink and brown briefs is shown. On the right, a photograph of Jennifer Lopez in a glowing, ethereal outfit is shown, advertising a "sunkissed Glow" beauty product.

Fred Thompson, former presidential candidate, selling a reverse mortgage.

Jennifer Lopez selling a beauty product; Michael Jordan selling underwear.

We often see celebrity spokespersons hawking everything from cleaning products to financial investments. Why do so many ad campaigns include celebrities? It's because people respond to them positively. If someone like Michael Jordan looks amazing in pink and brown underwear, then surely I would too, right? If that product makes Jennifer Lopez glow like the dawn, then it will make my skin amazing, too. Well, that's fine. Underwear and beauty products don't hold a terribly important place in our lives, so having someone with little or no expertise selling them isn't the worst that could happen.

But what happens when someone considered fairly trustworthy starts selling financial advice? Take Fred Thompson, a former candidate for president and an actor on the Law and Order series. Were he only an actor, we could reasonably dismiss him as an advocate for reverse mortgages; however, his appearance on the bigger political stage gave him an aura of credibility which is NOT related to the product he is selling. In fact, the consumer has no idea whether Thompson knows anything about reverse mortgages. Does he know how expensive they are compared with other types of borrowing? Does he know the pitfalls a homeowner faces when choosing a reverse mortgage? Is he a financial expert? No. That makes his spokesperson position a **questionable** appeal to authority.

Resources...

- Appeal to Authority
 - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appeal_to_authority
- Fallacy: Appeal to Authority
 - <http://www.nizkor.org/features/fallacies/appeal-to-authority.html>
- Appeal to Misleading Authority
 - <http://www.fallacyfiles.org/authorit.html>
- Appeal to Authority
 - <http://info-pollution.com/appeal.htm>
- A List of Fallacious Arguments
 - <http://www.don-lindsay-archive.org/skeptic/arguments.html>