



Fallacies

Specious Spices!

In this lecture...

- What is a fallacy?
- Why worry about fallacies?
- Common fallacies
- Resources

As we begin to focus on fallacies, I'd like to offer a word of caution. For a substantial portion of this class, we'll be zeroed in on what's **wrong** with an argument, any argument. That sort of forced focus often leads to one thinking that every argument is flawed, and that's simply not the case. Yet it's vitally important to learn how to recognize when an arguer is using tactics that do not serve you well. If you're being asked to make a decision or change your way of thinking and maybe even your life based on what you're being told, you have a right to expect honesty and full disclosure so you can make a well informed decision. And you need to have some protection against those who would purposely lead you astray. Learning how to recognize fallacies is almost as good as a strong shield in battle.

What is a fallacy?



A fallacy is a flaw in reasoning. It is a misrepresentation that causes us to see less than a clear picture of the question or issue under discussion. Some fallacies play to our desires making us want to believe in the error because it makes us feel good, it doesn't require us to change our way of thinking, or it holds out hope for fame, fortune, or other fantasy. Others are not so nice; they frighten us with dire consequences or they flatter or use false information to lead us astray. Fallacies come in many varieties, each with a uniquely useful purpose, but almost always resulting in some form of misdirection that can prevent someone from making a fully informed choice.

Why worry about fallacies?



The simplest reason for being concerned about fallacies is that you have to make some very big decisions in life. You may want to buy a car or a home or some other major purchase. You may need to invest for your future or buy insurance to protect your home and family. You may be asked to vote.

Some of the biggest decisions we make are based on the arguments someone else has made. We trust those arguments to be valid, to be based on facts that are fairly and accurately interpreted, and if they are not, we can find that we've made a very costly wrong decision. Thus, learning how to spot flaws in arguments can help us to make better decisions.

This doesn't mean we should start tearing apart every argument and become so nit-picky that our decision-making process becomes cynical or even paralyzed. It does mean that we can become more aware of the subtle ways in which others may try to persuade us. It does mean we can have more control over the choices we make, which means we can be in better control of our lives.

Common fallacies...

● We'll discuss...

- Ad hominem
- Cause/effect
- Either/or (false dilemma)
- Explaining by naming
- Faulty analogy
- Hasty generalization
- Ignorance
- Perfect solution
- Pseudoscience
- Questionable authority
- Questionable statistics
- Quibbling
- Slippery slope
- Straw man
- Suppressed evidence
- Two wrongs
- Wishful thinking

● You should explore...

- Begging the question
- Equivocation
- Inconsistency
- Non-sequitur
- Post hoc
- Questionable appeals
 - Tradition
 - Popularity (bandwagon)
 - Emotion (pity, fear, vanity)
- Red herring
- Tokenism

MANY fallacies have been formally defined and categorized. Trying to get a handle on all of those can take an entire career. However, there are some fallacies used so frequently we should be aware of how to spot them and what purpose each of them serves in an argument. This list shows some of the most common fallacies, and I've divided into categories of fallacies we will discuss and those you should try to learn about independently.

Some fallacies are used because they simplify a problem making it seem as if the answer is really easy. Others just try to confuse us by moving our attention away from the point being discussed to anything else, like someone's character, a totally different issue, or unlikely consequences. And there are many types of appeals to get us thinking with our hearts or feelings rather than our heads. In addition to information in our text, there are a number of useful websites which offer explanations and examples. I've listed some of them on the resources page.

Resources

- Fallacy
 - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Logical_fallacy
- Fallacy Files
 - <http://www.fallacyfiles.org/>
- Logical Fallacies
 - <http://www.logicalfallacies.info/>
- Logical Fallacies and the Art of Debate
 - <http://www.csun.edu/~dqw61315/fallacies.html>
- Logical Fallacies Handlist
 - http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/fallacies_list.html
- Nizkor Project
 - <http://www.nizkor.org/features/fallacies/>
- Skeptics' Guide to the Universe
 - <http://www.theskepticsguide.org/logicalfallacies.asp>