

Thirteen Illogical Arguments

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- 1. Irrelevant Reasoning:** Writers with faulty reasoning include reasons that aren't really relevant, or related, to the opinion or claim. Here, for example, is an argument that does not quite work because the author includes an irrelevant reason:

The 1996 tragedy on Mount Everest in which eight people died in a single day is proof enough that amateurs should not be scaling the world's highest mountain. Even with the most skillful and reliable guides, amateurs with little or no mountaineering experience cannot possibly know how to respond to the sudden storms that strike the mountain without warning. Dependent on their guides for every move they make, amateur climbers can easily lose sight of the guides when a heavy storm hits. Left to their own devices, they are more than likely to make a mistake, one that will harm themselves or others. Besides, rich people—the climb can cost anywhere from \$30,000 to \$60,000—shouldn't be encouraged to think that money buys everything. As F. Scott Fitzgerald so powerfully illustrated in *The Great Gatsby*, it's precisely that attitude that often leads to tragedy and death.

The point of this passage is clear: Amateurs should not be climbing Mount Everest. In support of that opinion, the author does offer a relevant reason. Mount Everest can be the scene of sudden storms that leave amateur climbers stranded, separated from their guides, and likely to harm themselves or others. But tucked away in the passage is a less relevant reason: Rich people should not be allowed to think money buys everything. Well, maybe they shouldn't. Yet that particular reason, along with the allusion, to *The Great Gatsby*, is not related to the author's claim. Neither one clarifies why amateurs and the world's tallest mountain don't mix. This is the point that needs to be argued with relevant reasons.

- 2. Circular Reasoning:** Writers using circular reasoning offer an opinion and follow it with a reason that says the same thing in different words; for example,

Currently, our food supply is in danger of being contaminated from many different sources. When the very food we put in our mouths endangers our health, it is clear that we need to institute strict and regular inspections of food raised or grown in the United States, as well as food imported from other countries. We should be able to sit down to a meal and not worry that the food we eat will make us sick, but we won't have that sense of security about our food supply unless we improve our current system of inspections.

The writer of the above passage believes that the United States' system of food inspection needs to be seriously overhauled. The author is so convinced he is right that he has forgotten to give us reasons why this change should occur. To consider sharing this opinion, we need to know what's the matter with the current system and

why a different one would be better. But, instead of offering reasons for his opinion, he just keeps repeating it.

- 3. Hasty Generalizations:** Only one or two examples are cited for broad generalizations. If an author generalizes about a large group on the basis of one or even two examples, you need to think twice before making the author's opinion your own; for example,

HMOs are not giving consumers adequate health care. Instead, budgeting considerations are consistently allowed to outweigh the patients' need for treatment. In one case, a child with a horribly deformed cleft palate was denied adequate cosmetic surgery because the child's HMO considered the surgery unnecessary, yet the child had trouble eating and drinking.

The author of the above passage makes a general statement about all HMOs. Unfortunately, that statement is based on one lone example, making it a **hasty generalization** or a generalization based on too few examples to be meaningful.

- 4. Unidentified Experts:** No names or unqualified names are given for alleged expert opinions. Consider, for example, the "expert" cited in the following passage.

Despite the doom-and-gloom sayers who constantly worry about the state of the environment, the Earth is actually in pretty good shape. As Dr. Paul Benjamin recently pointed out, "Nature is perfectly capable of taking care of herself; she's been doing it for hundreds of years."

The author uses Dr. Paul Benjamin to support her claim that environmentalists anxious about the Earth's future are dead wrong. Yet for all we know, Dr. Benjamin might be a dentist, and a dental degree does not qualify him as an environmental expert.

- 5. Inappropriate Experts:** A writer might attempt to support an argument by citing a famous person who doesn't truly qualify as an expert in the area under discussion; for example,

We should never intervene in the affairs of other countries. After all, didn't George Washington tell us to avoid entangling ourselves in the affairs of other nations? Even today, we should let his wisdom be our guide and steer clear of foreign involvements that drain our energy and our resources.

During the eighteenth century, George Washington may well have qualified as an expert in foreign affairs. But to cite him as an authority on modern problems is misleading. It is doubtful that Washington could have imagined America's current

status as an international power. Because his opinion could not be considered adequately informed, critical readers would not be impressed by references to his name and authority.

6. Unidentified Research: Studies are mentioned with no description of who conducted them; for example:

Because pornography puts women's lives in danger, it must be more strictly censored. Studies have shown again and again that pornography is directly related to the number of rapes and assaults on women. As if that weren't enough, by repeatedly presenting women as sexual objects, pornography encourages sexual discrimination, a cause-and-effect relationship noted by several prominent researchers.

To be convincing as support, scientific research needs attribution; in short, readers need to know who conducted the research. References to unnamed studies like the one in this passage should arouse skepticism in critical readers.

7. Dated Research: Research used as evidence is out-of-date; for example,

The threat of radon gas is not as serious as we have been led to believe. In 1954, a team of government researchers studying the effects of radon in the home found no relationship between high levels of the gas in private dwellings and the incidence of lung cancer.

Here we have an author trying to prove a point about radon gas with a more than half-century-old study. To be considered effective evidence for an opinion, scientific research should be considerably more up-to-date. A writer who uses out-of-date studies rightfully runs the risk of losing readers' confidence

8. Personal Character Attacks: Writers respond to opposing points of view by attacking the actions or past behavior of the opposition; for example,

Once again, David DeGrecco, columnist for the *New Jersey Sun*, has presented his tired old case for gun control. As usual, DeGrecco serves up the argument that gun-control laws can help eliminate some of the violence plaguing city streets across the country. Outspoken as usual, DeGrecco is curiously silent about his recent bout with criminal activity. Less than two weeks ago, he and several others were arrested for demonstrating at the opening of a nuclear power plant. For one so determined to bring law and order to our streets, DeGrecco does not seem to mind breaking a few laws himself.

The author attacks the man personally, pointing out that he was recently jailed for protesting at a nuclear power plant. Yet DeGrecco's position on nuclear power has nothing to do with

the issue at hand—gun control. This, then, is a clear instance of bias clouding the writer’s ability to respond fairly and respectfully to opposing points of view.

- 9. Slippery Slope:** Writers who use slippery slope thinking believe that if the action, position, or behavior they don’t like is allowed to occur, then a whole train of disasters will invariably follow; for example,

If we ban handguns, the next step will be the banning of rifles, and then people who hunt for food will no longer be able to feed their families.

It’s true that many people want to ban handguns because statistics show a connection between handguns in the home and violent crime, both in and outside the home. That same connection does not exist between hunting rifles and crime. Thus it makes no sense to claim that banning handguns will *automatically* lead to banning rifles. Handguns and rifles are similar kinds of weapons, but they are used in very different ways and under very different circumstances.

- 10. Pure Insults:** Insults are a close relative of the distracting personal attack. The author who uses insults doesn’t go after the behavior or past experience of the opposition. Instead, the writer just labels the opposing point of view as ridiculous, stupid, outrageous, etc.; for example,

Social Media Needs to Stay Outside the Classroom

It appears that a growing number of instructors are trying to make social media like Twitter, Facebook and Flickr part of their courses. Flip through the contents of highly esteemed journals on education and instruction, and you can find articles describing how teachers can make Tweets a part of class discussions or use Facebook to discuss homework assignments.

As a veteran instructor of more than two decades, I have seen numerous, silly educational fads come and go, this one just takes the cake for sheer idiocy. As Mark Bauerlein, the author of *The Dumbest Generation* has eloquently pointed out, “the fonts of knowledge are everywhere but the rising generation is camped in the desert passing stories, pictures, tunes, and texts back and forth.”

So what should instructors do in response to the fact that our students could care less about their cultural inheritance when the thrill of being connected to their peers beckons? Why what else, just capitulate totally to standards established by the students they are allegedly teaching. After all, not to capitulate might actually require some serious planning and effort on their part, and time is what they don’t have, given all the texting and tweeting they have to do.

The author of this passage expresses a very strong bias against bringing social media into the classroom. There's nothing wrong with that opinion. Many people share it. What the writer fails to do, however, is to address, in any way, the reasons put forth by people who believe that social media like Facebook and Twitter can play a significant role in education. To adopt the author's sarcastic tone, that might take "some serious planning and effort," and he would rather insult the opposing point of view than seriously examine it.

11. False Alternatives: Authors determined to persuade may insist that there are only two possible alternatives or answers to a problem or question when, in fact, there are several; for example:

Moviemakers intent on creating a realistic atmosphere are forced to use brand names. Were an actor in a scene to open a can simply labeled tuna, the audience's attention would be distracted by the label, and the effect of the scene would be destroyed. People are used to seeing brand names like "Chicken of the Sea" and "Bumble Bee." Filmmakers who want realism in their films must use brand names.

According to the reasoning here, there are only two alternatives: Moviemakers accept money for using brand names *or* they use general names that distract the audience. What have been left out here are some other alternatives: (1) Accept no money for product placement and use a variety of brand names, (2) Arrange the scene so that audiences don't see labels, or (3) Invent brand names that resemble the real ones. Faced with the above either-or thinking, critical readers would start looking for other alternatives.

12. Careless Comparisons: Comparisons used to illustrate a point are a useful tool for writers. However, be wary of authors who use comparison *not to illustrate a point, but to prove it*. Often the differences between the two things compared are more crucial than the similarities; for example,

Using name brands in films is just like paying famous people to wear name brands in public.

While that reasoning might sound convincing at first, the differences between the two practices may, in fact, be more important than the similarities. Certainly that is what the following writer believes:

Product placement and celebrity endorsements are not the same at all. Highly publicized celebrity contracts have made the public fully aware that athletes are paid large sums of money to sport a sponsor's clothing or footwear. In contrast, the average moviegoer usually doesn't know about the fees paid to filmmakers using brand names. Thus the effects of

product placement in films work on a far more subconscious level. Members of the audience have no idea they are seeing paid advertising.

As the author of this passage points out, there are some crucial differences between athletes who wear name brand clothing and filmmakers who use name brands in their movies. Those differences considerably weaken the first author's argument for product placement.

13. Red Herring: Originally, the red-herring technique was a method of testing hunting dogs. To be sure their dogs could follow a scent without being distracted, hunters would drag a red herring—a very smelly fish—across the trail and watch to see if the smell of the fish could distract the dogs from the hunt.

Today, when speakers or writers make use of the red-herring technique, they start by discussing one subject and then suddenly veer off to another quite different topic. For example:

The local mayor is running for reelection. He has a very good record and his opponent is finding it hard to come up with reasons why she should be elected instead. During the campaign, she gives a speech and tells voters that the current mayor hasn't been effective in his job. She then begins to talk about the harm that pornography has caused the city. She mentions a recent exhibit at a local gallery that was filled with sexual images. She says pornography harms everyone, not just children, and she calls on voters to speak out against pornography. She ends by saying that she hopes voters will elect her mayor because she is against pornography and, besides, the current mayor has not been effective, so it's time for a change.

In this example, the opponent uses the red-herring technique to distract her audience from the fact that she can't support her claim that the mayor is ineffective. She states that he is ineffective and then presents a red herring—pornography—so the audience loses track of the original subject: why the mayor is ineffective. At the end, she says again that the mayor is ineffective and "it's time for a change." She hopes no one will notice that she hasn't given any reasons to support her opinion. Even more, she hopes her audience might start linking her opponent to pornographic literature.