



## Obstacles to Clear Thinking

Clear thinking is essential to all intelligent decision making. From the moment we begin to explore a problem until the end of the final debate on that problem, we have to constantly be on guard against obstacles to clear thinking. The obvious obstacles are readily detected. One type of obstacle, however, that is more subtle, and hence more deceptive, is called a fallacy. At first glance the error, unreasonableness, or falseness of the fallacy is not apparent, for the statement has the appearance of truth or reasonableness. Richard Whately defined a **fallacy** as “any unsound mode of arguing, which appears to demand our conviction, and to be decisive of the question in hand, when in fairness it is not.”<sup>1</sup>

Fallacies are usually easy to detect in isolation, but woven into the context of an argument, they may go unnoticed unless we are on guard. Debate gives those who render decisions one of the strongest protections against fallacies. Not only do they have the opportunity to detect fallacies themselves, but there is the added safeguard that the opposing advocates are motivated to point out fallacies in one another’s cases.

Fallacies may be used accidentally or deliberately. Some advocates intentionally introduce fallacies into their arguments to exploit their listeners or readers and secure an unfair decision. Contemporary examples of apparently deliberate use of fallacies can be found in any international crisis as the hostile parties create propaganda to sway world opinion. Much of this propaganda is prepared by persons intelligent enough to recognize the fallacies they are using. But some fallacies may be introduced into arguments unintentionally by well-meaning people. Advocates must be alert for obstacles to clear thinking at all times and from all sources.

For convenience fallacies are classified here under various groupings and subgroupings. In actual argument fallacies often are interwoven, and a fallacious argument may be a complex of several fallacies. In exposing fallacies in our opponent’s case, we will do little good by exclaiming, “Aha! In his last statement my opponent committed the fallacies of *circulus in probando* and *per negationem consequentiae*!” Although we may wish to identify and classify a fallacy for our own convenience, our task in the debate is not to name the fallacy but to show those who render the decision how or why the

1. Richard Whately, *Elements of Logic* (Boston: James Munroe, 1848), p. 143.

## Miniglossary

**Ambiguity** Arises when the meaning of a word, phrase, or passage may reasonably be interpreted in two or more ways.

**Appeal to ignorance** Advocates maintain that something cannot be so because they, or the audience, have never heard of it.

**Appeal to tradition** Support for an argument is based on customary and historical support for the argument.

**Arguing in a circle** Occurs when one assumes as a premise for the argument the very conclusion one intends to prove.

**Bandwagon** Support for an argument based on its popular support by a large number of people.

**Fallacy** Any unsound mode of arguing, which appears to demand our conviction, and to be decisive of the question at hand, when in fairness it is not.

**Denying a valid conclusion** Advocate admits or cannot refute the premises of an opponent, yet denies the conclusion that logically follows from these premises.

**Grammatical structure** Reasoning based on meaning distorted by incorrect or imprecise grammar.

**Hasty generalization** Argument from example in which the inference, or movement from specific example to generalization, is made on the basis of insufficient evidence, either nonrepresentative example(s) or an insufficient number of examples.

**Incomplete comparison** A type of grammatical fallacy in which the point of comparison is missing or not clearly identified.

**Irrelevancy** An argument in which proof is carried beyond its reasonable limits, and therefore does not pertain to the claim.

**Loaded language** Use of emotionally charged words in an effort to establish a conclusion without proof.

**Non sequitur** A conclusion that does not follow from the premises or evidence on which it is based.

**Popular appeal** An advocate tries to win support for a position by maintaining that he or she is merely an "ordinary person" like everyone else.

**Post hoc** Assuming a causal relationship where none has been proved.

**Pseudoargument** Fallacy created (by accident or design) by distortion, confusion, manipulation, or avoidance of the matters at issue or by substitution of matters not germane to the issue.

**Pseudoquestion** An advocate asks an unanswerable, "loaded," or ambiguous question or series of questions, or asks a question based on a false assumption.

## Miniglossary (Continued)

**Repeated assertion** An argument is presented as proof for itself.

**Special pleading** Urging that an exception be made to an accepted line of reasoning.

**Straw argument** Setting up an issue merely so it can be knocked down.

**Structured response** A pattern is established leading to an improper or unsupported conclusion.

**Verbalism** The abundant use of words without conveying much meaning.

matter in question is fallacious. This task is complicated by the fact that fallacies are often field dependent—that is, they must be considered in context. As Stephen Toulmin points out, “Most disturbingly to some people, arguments that are fallacious in one context may prove to be quite solid in another context. So we shall not be able to identify any intrinsically fallacious forms of argument; instead we shall try to indicate why certain kinds of argument are, in practice, fallacious in this or that kind of context.”<sup>2</sup>

One helpful way of exposing fallacies is to focus attention on the warrants (considered in Chapter 8) and see whether the expressed or implied warrant justifies the claim made.

Some hold that there is no such thing as a fallacy; rather there is a failure to apply the appropriate tests of evidence or reasoning or language. In this chapter the conventional fallacies are discussed and the appropriate tests recommended. The use of the concept of fallacies provides us with a means of double-checking our arguments and those of our opponents.

## I. FALLACIES OF EVIDENCE

Theater or film advertisements sometimes provide examples of fallacious use of evidence. One critic wrote of a Broadway musical:

*Interlude* represented an inept effort to make a dull story palatable by adding music. Unfortunately one brilliantly executed dance number in the first act was not enough to keep the show moving. Lavish costuming could not overcome the basic fact that the female lead simply does not have an adequate voice for the theater. The comedy routines showed brief flashes of inspiration, but they could not relieve the overall pedestrian pace of *Interlude*.

The newspaper advertisements quoted the reviewer as saying, “*Interlude* ... brilliantly executed ... lavish costuming ... flashes of inspiration.” We can guard against this kind of fallacious use of evidence by asking, “Is any evidence omitted?”

2. Stephen Toulmin, Richard Rieke, and Allan Janik, *An Introduction to Reasoning* (New York: Macmillan, 1979), p. 157.

<b>Fallacies of Evidence</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ An unsupported assertion is often presented as if it were a complete argument</li> <li>■ Violation of the tests of evidence discussed in Chapter 7 reveal fallacies of evidence</li> </ul>



One of the most common fallacies of evidence is the use of the unsupported assertion. Here the speaker offers no evidence to support a statement; he or she asks us to assume that something is so merely because he or she says it is so. The high-pressure used car salesperson may tell a customer, “This car is in perfect condition. You’d better buy it now before someone else gets it.” The prudent buyer would not accept this unsupported assertion but would look for evidence of the condition of the car. We can guard against this fallacy by asking, “Is the contention an unsupported assertion?”

The tests of evidence discussed in Chapter 7 can help us identify other fallacies of evidence.

## II. FALLACIES OF REASONING

Not only must we guard against fallacies of evidence, but we must also be alert to possible fallacies in each of the types of reasoning we considered earlier.

### A. Example

A speaker who maintained that the public schools are failing to educate our children offered as proof the following examples of their “failure”:

Last year 23 percent of the graduates of North High School who went to Omega State University were required to take remedial English; 37 percent of the North High graduates at Omega were required to take remedial math. I could cite dozens more examples of the failure of our schools, but this is enough to prove that we need a statewide system of competency testing before we grant high school diplomas.

Are you willing to accept this as an accurate picture of conditions statewide? Are the North High students typical of all students in the state? Are the North High students who go to Omega State typical of North High students in general? We can quickly expose this fallacy by asking, “Are the examples given typical of the whole?”

Another common fallacy of reasoning by example is committed by the person who knows two or three motorcyclists who have criminal records and concludes, “They’re all drug dealers.” Here one should ask, “Have sufficient

examples been given?” A **hasty generalization** based on insufficient evidence often leads to unsound conclusions that will not be accepted by those who render the decision.

Additional questions that can help us guard against other fallacies of reasoning by example can be found in the Chapter 9 section “Reasoning by Example.”

### B. Analogy

A Russian leader once told an American visitor: “With the death of communism, Russia is now completely democratic. We even have competing candidates running for some offices.” The American exposed the fallacy in this analogy by replying, “You have started toward democracy, but you still have a way to go. In America we have at least two well-established political parties and we are ruled by laws, not by decrees.” In this case the American applied the question, “Are there critical differences in the factors compared?” Her answer pointed out two essential differences between American and Russian governments.

Additional questions that will help us detect fallacies in reasoning by analogy can be found in the Chapter 9 section “Reasoning by Analogy.”

### C. Cause

Many causal factors are at work in most situations. For example, following the disastrous 1989 oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska, oil prices rose dramatically nationwide. Some consumer advocates were quick to charge that the price increase was excessive. Industry experts, however, pointed out that the price increase was only partially related to the costs of cleaning up the spill; OPEC had earlier decided to decrease oil production, and new EPA regulations had just come into effect tightening fuel-grade requirements. Was the price increase due solely to the costs of cleaning up the oil spill, or was it caused by a combination of factors? Fallacies of this type may be detected by asking, “Is a partial causal relationship treated as the sole or distinguishing causal factor?”

Additional questions we may ask to expose fallacies of causal reasoning are found in the Chapter 9 section “Causal Reasoning.”

### D. Sign

The ability to use reasoning by sign effectively is an essential part of the work of all who seek rational decisions. The physician, for example, must constantly be on guard against fallacies in interpreting signs. In diagnosing a case, the neurologist may look for the Babinski sign, a certain type of movement of the toes after stimulus. This sign is apparently inherent in certain types of illness and, when found in adults, is taken as an indication of the presence of disease of the corticospinal pathway. The Rossolimo sign, a certain type of flexing of the toes after stimulus, indicates disease of the pyramidal tract. It is a much less reliable sign, however, because it is sometimes absent when the disease is present and it

Fallacies of Reasoning
<p>For each, the fallacy represents a violation of the tests identified for each category in Chapter 9.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Example</li> <li>■ Analogy</li> <li>■ Cause</li> <li>■ Sign</li> </ul>

is sometimes found in healthy individuals. All who use reasoning by sign should be on guard against fallacies that might lead to false conclusions.

Questions that can help us detect fallacies in reasoning by sign in argumentative situations are considered in the Chapter 9 section “Reasoning by Sign.”

### III. FALLACIES OF LANGUAGE

The fallacies of language are often interwoven with other fallacies. Some of the more common fallacies of language that advocates should guard against are discussed here.

#### A. Ambiguity

**Ambiguity** arises when the meaning of a word, phrase, or passage may reasonably be interpreted in two or more ways. For example, what does a speaker mean when saying, “I favor the American way of doing things”? A candidate for public office once campaigned on the slogan of “more teamwork in government.” “Teamwork” may sound good, but what does it mean? A government official recently testified that he had not received any “improper” gifts from a constituent and that he had not made any “unreasonable” requests of governmental agencies on behalf of this constituent. His opponents viewed these same activities as “corruption” and “influence.” Such terms as *feminist*, *family values*, *egalitarian*, *multicultural*, *liberal*, *conservative*, and *middle of the road* have so many different meanings to so many different people that they are often ambiguous.

#### B. Verbalism

**Verbalism** refers to the abundant use of words without conveying much meaning. There is a story of a politician who, seeking to avoid taking a position on gun control legislation, said, “The question is not a simple one. Indeed anyone could say—and they would be more or less right—that it is complex. In the second instance there is the First Amendment to the Constitution. I mean in the first place there is the Second Amendment—or whatever. This is perfectly clear until you get to the part that isn’t. About the militia that is. And I wonder

what the Founding Fathers would say about that? And why it isn't. When I was a boy my father took me hunting and fishing. And I was duck hunting only last month. I think fathers should take their sons hunting unless they have daughters. And more recently the Tenth Amendment business. And, of course, daughters should go hunting too. And we need to look at this thing from the law and order point of view as well also."

### C. Loaded Language

Loaded language provides many possibilities for obstacles to clear thinking. **Loaded language** involves the use of emotionally charged words in an effort to establish a conclusion without proof. In a recent political campaign one candidate declared, "The time has come to throw this do-nothing, corruption-riddled administration out of office." Obviously such an administration should be thrown out of office, but the mere use of these labels did nothing to prove that the administration was guilty of either of the charges.

Loaded language, or name-calling, is too often used in political campaigns. The *New York Times* reported this example:

What's in a name? When it comes to winning elections, it could be everything. In fact, here is some choice advice for candidates about names to call your campaign opponents and yourselves.

Call your opponent a "sick, pathetic, liberal, incompetent, tax-spending traitor." Reserve for yourself the label "humane, visionary, confident, candid, hard-working reformer."

Saying good things about yourself and bad things about your opponent may seem basic, in life as much as in politics. But now, this specific advice on which names to use has been drawn up and a list is being distributed to Republican state legislative candidates across the country.<sup>3</sup>

A more creative example of loaded language was reported from a Florida senatorial campaign by *Time* magazine:

[George] Smathers used fancy language to convey sinister meanings to benighted rural listeners. "Are you aware that Claude Pepper is known all over Washington as a shameless extrovert? Not only that, but this man is reliably reported to practice nepotism with his sister-in-law, and he has a sister who was once a thespian in wicked New York. Worst of all, it is an established fact that Mr. Pepper before his marriage habitually practiced celibacy."

Pepper was defeated by 67,000 votes. "On election night people came up to our house in cars, shouting obscenities, cheering the fact that I had been defeated," Pepper recalls. "They wanted to destroy me and just about did."<sup>4</sup>

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3. *New York Times*, national edition, Sept. 9, 1990, p. 18.

4. *Time*, Apr. 25, 1983, p. 29.

Fallacies of Language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Ambiguity</li> <li>■ Verbalism</li> <li>■ Loaded Language</li> <li>■ Grammatical Structure</li> </ul>

### D. Grammatical Structure

**Grammatical structure** can, and often does, alter the meaning of a sentence. At a recent Republican convention the first draft of the party platform contained the sentence “[Republicans] oppose any attempts to increase taxes which would harm the recovery and reverse the trend to restoring control of the economy to individual Americans.” A harmless bit of political rhetoric; of course everyone would oppose *harmful* tax increases, yet the door was left open to *unharmful* tax increases. The party’s conservatives fought “The Battle of the Comma” and changed the sentence to read, “oppose any attempts to increase taxes, which would harm the recovery and reverse the trend to restoring control of the economy to individual Americans.” The sentence, as punctuated with the comma, held *all* tax increases to be harmful. When the sentence was read aloud, the presence or absence of a pause would indicate the presence or absence of a comma.

**Incomplete comparison** is another grammatical fallacy—for example, “The present foreign aid program is unquestionably more effective.” More effective than what? The advocate must guard against these hazards of grammatical usage.

## IV. FALLACIES OF PSEUDOARGUMENTS

**Pseudoarguments** are fallacies created (by accident or design) by distortion, confusion, manipulation, or avoidance of the matters at issue or by substitution of matters not germane to the issue. Some common fallacies are considered here.

### A. Offering Irrelevancy

The fallacy of **irrelevancy** carries an argument beyond its reasonable limits. For example, some opponents of “right-to-work” laws argued that these laws did not provide jobs for the unemployed. These laws were intended not to provide jobs but merely to eliminate the requirement of union membership as a condition of employment. It would be just as reasonable to criticize the polio vaccine because it does not prevent pneumonia.



### B. Arguing in a Circle

The fallacy of **arguing in a circle** occurs when one assumes as a premise for the argument the very conclusion one intends to prove. For example, consider this exchange: “William Shakespeare is a greater writer than Danielle Steel because people with good taste in literature prefer Shakespeare.” “How do you know who has good taste in literature?” “Why, that’s simple; people with good taste in literature prefer Shakespeare to Danielle Steel.” Even though Shakespeare is undoubtedly a greater writer than Steel, this circular argument does not prove the claim.

### C. Ignoring the Issue

In a debate on the proposition “Resolved: That the United States federal government should significantly increase exploration and/or development of space beyond the Earth’s mesosphere,” an affirmative team proposed a particularly weak and ineffective plan. In a thoughtful, closely reasoned refutation, the negative demonstrated that the affirmative’s plan was completely unworkable. In their remaining speeches the affirmative speakers completely ignored the issue of the workability of their plan; instead they spent their time claiming the great advantages that would come from their plan. By ignoring the issue, the affirmative lost this debate.

### D. Baiting an Opponent

Sometimes advocates will bait their opponents by insulting them, attacking them personally, criticizing their friends, or doing anything that will cause them to lose their tempers. Once advocates lose their cool, they are likely to lose control of the argument and make reckless statements that will undermine their case. Advocates can defend themselves against this kind of baiting only by holding their tempers during the argument.

### E. Repeating an Assertion

The fallacy of **repeated assertion** occurs when an argument is repeated, with the repetition treated as proof. In a debate on guaranteed annual wages, members of the affirmative team stated repeatedly, without offering any proof, that American working persons need a guaranteed annual wage. A negative speaker, exposing this fallacy, pointed out that saying something three times did not make it true. This fallacy is not always so easily brushed off, however. Adolf Hitler developed to a fine art the technique of repeating a “big lie” so often that many came to believe it.

### F. Structuring a Response

The fallacy of **structured response** is often found in cross-examinations or any other situation in which the advocate has an opportunity to ask a series of questions. The advocate first asks a series of unimportant questions, which the re-

spondent must answer in a predetermined way, until the pattern of a response has been established. Then the critical question is asked. An old routine of insurance salespersons, for example, goes something like this: “You love your spouse, don’t you?” “You love your children, don’t you?” “You want your children to go to college, don’t you?” “You want your family to continue to live in this lovely house, don’t you?” “If something should happen to you, you want your family to be provided for, don’t you?” “You would still want your children to go to college, wouldn’t you?” “You want to provide protection for them, don’t you?” “To be safe, don’t you feel you should sign your name on this routine form today?” Any prospects who have been lulled into a series of “yes” responses may find that they have signed an application for insurance without fully realizing the commitment they have undertaken.

The structured response was used effectively by Senator Edward Kennedy at the 1988 Democratic Convention, when after each recitation of supposed Republican shortcomings he asked, “Where was George?” (The Republican candidate, Vice President George Bush, had stated that he was not present when certain controversial decisions were made.) The partisan audience quickly picked up the theme and chanted “Where was George?” along with Kennedy as he continued the list.

### G. Special Pleading

The fallacy of **special pleading** occurs when advocates accept a line of reasoning and its conclusions but urge a special exception for their case. Examples of special pleading are sometimes found in Congress. In the early 1990s, for instance, there was tremendous pressure on Congress to produce a balanced budget. Virtually all members of Congress favored a balanced budget—but not, of course, at the expense of cutting from the budget any items of interest to their constituents.

### H. Substituting the Person for the Argument

This fallacy involves attempting to have an argument accepted or rejected not because of any merit or defect intrinsic to the argument but because of the character of the person advancing the argument. For example, some people said that compulsory wage and price controls should be rejected because Socialists favored them. Conversely it may be argued that because someone is good in some respect, his or her arguments on some other matter must also be good. To counter the prosecution’s claim that his or her client shot a business rival, the defense attorney in a murder trial might try to present the client as, for example, a kindly man who helps old ladies across busy streets, who is good to his wife and his children, who gives generously to charities, and who sings in the church choir. Traditionally the country rallies behind the president at the time of an international crisis, the theme being, “We must support the president during this crisis.” Thus Roosevelt during World War II, Kennedy at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, and Bush during Operation Desert Storm enjoyed great initial support for

policies that later came under criticism. President George W. Bush relied on such support when he began his presidential reelection campaign in 2004 with spot advertisements reminding voters of the ongoing war on terrorism by presenting images of the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

Note that an argument about a person is legitimate when the character of the person is intrinsic to the matter at issue. Evidence that John Doe was a child molester would be legitimate if the issue were his employment as a teacher. Evidence that Jane Roe was a convicted embezzler would be germane if the issue were her employment as an accountant. These examples emphasize the point made at the beginning of this chapter that fallacies are often field dependent. Doe's sexual activities or Roe's criminal record are critical, legitimate evidence in the context considered here; they would be irrelevant and thus fallacious in many other contexts.

### I. Substituting Bombast for Argument

When no evidence or reasoning is available, advocates may sometimes attempt to support their argument by sheer noise and histrionics. In a debate on the mass media proposition, for example, a novice debater inserted in her affirmative case the impromptu claim that the federal government had a moral obligation to mandate a massive increase in the number of hours of closed-captioned programs that television stations provided for the hearing-impaired. The next negative speaker, in cross-examination, asked her to define moral obligation. Caught in her error, she replied with more hope than confidence, "My partner will define the term in the second affirmative." The second affirmative speaker, now on the spot, frantically searched his evidence files but was unable to find a single scrap of evidence defining moral obligation or any notion of lines of argument that he could use to support his colleague's claim. There may have been some arguments to support this assertion, but they were not available at that moment. In desperation he decided to bluff his way by *bombast*. In a voice seemingly choked with emotion, he said, "The negative has asked us to define 'moral obligation.'" Eyes flashing with apparent righteous indignation, he glared at his opponents: "We all know what 'moral obligation' is!" Pounding the lectern with his fist, he cried, "A 'moral obligation' is a 'moral obligation'!" The negative, cowed by these histrionics, never dared mention the subject again. Had the next negative speaker, in sharp contrast to the bombast of the affirmative, calmly and thoughtfully pointed out the absurdity of the affirmative's definition, he might well have punctured the balloon the affirmative speaker had used so effectively to conceal his lack of an adequate answer to a reasonable question.

### J. Denying a Valid Conclusion

The fallacy of **denying a valid conclusion** occurs when an advocate admits or cannot refute the premises of an opponent yet denies the conclusion that logically follows from these premises. For example, in a debate on federal aid for higher education, one negative team admitted that more money was needed

for education and that the money must come from either the federal government or state and local governments. Furthermore the negative was unable to refute the affirmative's argument that many state and local governments could not increase their aid to education. The logical conclusion from the admitted and unrefuted premises was that the federal government was the only source of the needed money, but the negative attempted to deny this valid conclusion. The negative team's error was twofold. They admitted too much and failed to advance arguments they could have used. Other negative teams successfully argued that state and local governments could increase their aid to education and that the dangers of federal control outweighed the benefits of federal funds.

### K. Using Popular Appeal

The fallacy of **popular appeal** occurs when an advocate tries to win support for a position by maintaining that he or she is merely an "ordinary person" like everyone else. This approach was popular with rural politicians at the turn of the nineteenth century and is still common today. During the 1988 presidential campaign Michael Dukakis liked to contrast his "son of immigrants" background with the "preppy" image of Vice President George Bush by proclaiming, "My friends, there is only one country on the face of the earth where this son of immigrants could aspire to be the president of the United States, and that's the United States." As the governor of Massachusetts, the son of a millionaire physician, and a Harvard Law School graduate himself, Dukakis was, of course, not exactly a typical son of immigrants. And one might be forgiven for asking where else but the United States could one reasonably aspire to be president of the United States?

Another aspect of the same fallacy is the **bandwagon** technique—arguing that something should be done because "everybody" is doing it. In many political campaigns both candidates will proclaim their confidence that they will win by an overwhelming majority. They hope by this method to induce many undecided voters to vote for them simply because they are going to win anyway. Only one brand of cigarettes or soap or any other type of product can be the most popular, yet note the number of companies that claim their product is the most popular. They hope their product will be bought because "everyone" is buying it.

### L. Offering a "Straw Argument"

The fallacy of the **straw argument** occurs when advocates set up an issue merely so they can knock it down. Sometimes they attack a minor argument of their opponents and claim that they have refuted the whole case. Or they might refute an argument their opponents did not advance and claim that they have thus refuted their opponents' position.

An example of this fallacy occurred in a debate on the proposition "Resolved: That the federal government should implement a program which guarantees employment opportunities for all United States citizens in the labor force."

Many affirmative plans were vulnerable to attack on the grounds that the plan to regulate businesses would be burdensome and would negatively affect those businesses. One affirmative team prepared for such an argument by carefully designing its plan to include tax credits to decrease the burden on businesses. A negative team, meeting this affirmative, failed to note the tax credits in the affirmative plan and ran its own prepared argument briefs attacking the plan on the basis of the increased cost of regulations. This was an attack on a “straw argument,” which the affirmative quickly pointed out and the judge duly noted.

### M. Appealing to Ignorance

The fallacy of the **appeal to ignorance** occurs when advocates maintain that something cannot be so because they, or the audience, have never heard of it. Uninformed persons, for example, at one time declared the telephone to be an impractical gadget because “Everyone knows you can’t talk over wires.” Another example of the appeal to ignorance occurred in a debate on guaranteed employment opportunities. The concept of “cyclical fluctuations” was important in many of these debates. One freshman debater, who had not yet taken his first economics course, had never heard of the term when he met it in an early-season debate. Faced with an unknown concept, he stoutly maintained, “Well I never heard of, ah, uh, those, err, fluctuations, and I certainly don’t think they influence our economy.” The appeal to ignorance did not work in this instance—the judge had heard of cyclical fluctuations.

Unfortunately the appeal to ignorance is sometimes successful with an uninformed audience. The defense against this fallacy is to provide the audience with the knowledge necessary to understand the argument. But this is not always easy. Before the moon landings, it would have been almost impossible to refute the argument “Of course, you can’t get to the moon, that’s science fiction” before a popular audience without giving a lengthy technical explanation. In fact the explanation would have probably had to be so lengthy and technical that it could not be presented within the available time.

### N. Asking Pseudoquestions

The fallacy of the **pseudoquestion** occurs when an advocate asks an unanswerable, “loaded,” or ambiguous question; or a question based on a false assumption; or so many questions that an opponent cannot possibly answer them adequately within the available time. An example of this type of question is, “Have you stopped cheating on examinations?”

Another example of this type of fallacy occurred when a second negative speaker posed a series of 11 pseudoquestions about the plan. If the first affirmative rebuttalist had attempted to answer them, she would never have had the time to get to the “case-side” arguments and probably would have lost the debate. Rather than trying to answer the questions individually, she grouped them: “The first seven questions have to do with funding; please group them and note that our funding plank clearly provides.... The next four questions have to do

with enforcement; please consider these together and note that our enforcement plank provides for....” In this way she was able to dispose of the 11 questions quickly and effectively and thus meet her responsibilities for defending the plan and the case.

### O. Appealing to Tradition

The fallacy of the **appeal to tradition** occurs when the advocate maintains that we should follow a certain policy because we have “always” done things that way. Thus a negative speaker, in a debate on a proposition on comprehensive medical care for all citizens argued against the affirmative’s plan by saying it was unnecessary because physicians and hospitals had always provided free medical care for the indigent. The fact that something has been a long-standing tradition does not prove its merit. As a famous senator once pointed out, murder and larceny have been practiced in all nations in all ages, but this does not make either murder or larceny meritorious.

### P. Posing a Non Sequitur

Thus far we have avoided the Latin names of fallacies, but the **non sequitur**—which is simply a conclusion that does not follow from the premises or evidence on which it is based—is best known by its Latin designation. In the medical care debates, some affirmatives cited evidence showing that many people could not afford medical care and then argued that the government should provide free medical care for all citizens. In other debates some negatives argued that the affirmative plan would be administered by a government agency and so would be inefficient. Bureaucracy does have a bad reputation—but it does not follow that all government agencies are inefficient.

### Q. Arguing Post Hoc

This title is shorthand for the longer Latin phrase *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, meaning “after the fact, therefore because of the fact.” The fallacy of **post hoc** lies in assuming a causal relationship where none has been proved. American history provides one of the best known illustrations of this fallacy. Every American president elected at a 20-year interval since 1840 died in office (Harrison, Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, Harding, Roosevelt, and Kennedy) until Ronald Reagan broke the morbid chain of coincidence. A remarkable coincidence, surely, but their election in a particular year was hardly the cause of their death.

Obviously there are many fallacies, and the possibility of their being introduced into arguments is almost unlimited. As advocates, we must constantly be on guard against these obstacles to clear thinking, not only in statements of others but in our own statements as well.

### Fallacies of Pseudoarguments

- Offering irrelevancy
- Arguing in a circle
- Ignoring the issue
- Baiting an opponent
- Repeating an assertion
- Structuring a response
- Special pleading
- Substituting the person for the argument
- Substituting bombast for argument
- Denying a valid conclusion
- Using popular appeal
- Offering a “straw argument”
- Appealing to ignorance
- Asking pseudoquestions
- Appealing to tradition
- Posing a non sequitur
- Arguing post hoc

## EXERCISES

1. Find the full text of a recent speech by a public figure. Find the speech online and listen to it as you follow along with the text. You may also wish to compare this with excerpts of the speech printed in the newspapers or newsmagazines. Do you find a fallacy of omitted evidence? Remember, there is a big difference between an accurate condensation and the fallacy of omitted evidence.
2. Analyze some newspapers and newsmagazines published within the last month. Locate five fallacies in the editorial or news sections of these publications, and locate five fallacies in the advertisements.
3. Some of the following statements contain one or more fallacies. List the fallacies you discover in these statements.
  - a. The Championship Tally and Sharmin Kennels use Wags Dog Food exclusively. Get Wags Dog Food for your dog today!
  - b. Canada has nationalized its health care. The same system would work well in the United States.
  - c. Gun control laws are bad; that’s how Hitler came into power in Germany.
  - d. Q: What will be the cost of this plan during its first five years of operation? A: Our country owes a debt of gratitude to the farmer. The