Fake News and Fallacies

With the recent prevalence of "fake news," being able to identify the validity of an argument has become essential to understanding the world in our daily lives. Identifying fallacies is one way to assess the legitimacy of an argument. In developing this skill, you can become more confident that your argument is reasonable in both your writing and speaking and that you aren't swayed by flawed arguments or false information.

Common Fallacies

A fallacy is a statement or argument based on faulty reasoning. Fallacies weaken the argument and should be avoided in order to form a sound argument. This section will introduce a selection of common fallacies, but this list is not comprehensive—many different types of fallacies exist; however, this list can act as a starting point for identifying common fallacies in arguments.

Ad Hominem

This fallacy discredits the opponent's argument by discrediting the opponent. It can involve bringing up the opponent's attributes or circumstances. One particular and common example of ad hominem is *tu quoque*, also known as the appeal to hypocrisy, which attacks the opponent by turning an accusation back onto the opponent.

> "My parents used to speed on the highway, so they don't have any right to tell me to slow down. They are hypocrites, and I shouldn't have to slow down when I'm driving."

Here, the focus of the argument switches from whether you should slow down to how your parents are hypocrites. This argument doesn't address whether it is better to slow down or not, focusing instead on whether your parents have the right to give this advice.

Appeal or Argument to/from Ignorance

This is a fallacy that says something is true because it hasn't been proven false yet.

> "She must be straight and cisgender because she hasn't said otherwise."

It's important to consider how much we know about a situation. When there's a lack of information or research, the only conclusion that should be drawn is that we don't understand enough to be able to form any conclusions.

Appeal to Authority

This fallacy uses the opinion of a person of authority as evidence for their argument.

> "Because the Pope says that people can't be transgender, transgender people must be confused."

Although a person of authority can set a good example at times, their words aren't justification for anything being a fact. There should be concrete evidence before something is stated as a fact.

The Bandwagon Fallacy
This fallacy uses the assumption that the majority is right, and that whatever the majority believes or does, you should too.

> "Everyone else doesn't vote because they think that there's no point, so I shouldn't vote either."

Here, there is no actual reason stating why voting is or isn't a good idea; it only discusses what other people are doing, and what the majority of people are doing isn't necessarily correct.

False Dichotomy
This fallacy falsely creates an "either/or" situation.

> "I have to turn in a perfect assignment every time, on time for full points, or I shouldn't turn in the assignment at all."

This argument zeroes in on only two options when, in reality, there's the option to talk to your professor for an extension as well as to turn in an assignment late or to turn in an assignment regardless of quality in order to gain partial credit.

Hasty Generalization
This fallacy forms an assumption without sufficient or appropriate evidence.

> "My friend didn't respond to my text yesterday, so he won't reply if I text him again today."

It's important to avoid basing any conclusions on one or even several events. Evidence should be relevant and comprehensive. Moreover, this evidence is inappropriate as there are multiple situational reasons why someone might not have responded that cannot be extrapolated on.

Red Herring
This fallacy brings an irrelevant concept into an argument to distract from the actual focus.

> "Does having a minimum wage below the living wage negatively impact the population? Let's take a look at whether minimum wage workers are working hard enough first."

This statement draws the focus from whether a low minimum wage harms people to whether minimum wage workers deserve higher pay. These statements aren't dependent on each other, so they shouldn't be coupled together.

Slippery Slope
This fallacy assumes that one step in a particular direction will culminate into a (usually negative) result later and that it's impossible to stop midway.

> "If we allow the government to regulate the economy, then, eventually, we'll become socialists."

This statement ignores the possibility that there's a middle ground where the economy is partially regulated; it goes directly to the most extreme scenario without any evidence that the most extreme scenario is certain to happen.

The Straw Man Fallacy
This fallacy takes the opponent's argument and creates a weaker version of it that is easily knocked down.

> "We should ensure that the police are held accountable for their actions like other citizens." This statement could be made weaker by saying, "The police are bad."

By taking out any nuance and simplifying it, the argument is easily knocked down by arguing that the police help catch criminals to keep the public safe. However, this restatement distorts the original argument, and the rebuttal addresses only the distorted restatement.

The Texas Sharpshooter Fallacy
This fallacy is when someone cherry picks data to suit their argument (ignoring differences) or finds patterns to fit their presumptions (overemphasizing similarities). Clusters of data will almost always occur by random chance, and humans have a tendency to find patterns, but that doesn't indicate that there actually is a pattern.

> "I failed my exam, spilled my coffee on my computer, and broke up with my partner all today. I knew that because it's Friday the 13th, something bad would happen!"

This example doesn't consider other Friday the 13ths when bad things didn't happen or the possibility that all these events could have happened on Friday the 13th by chance. As there already was the assumption that bad things happen on this date, a pattern is found where there isn't necessarily one.

The Middle Ground Fallacy
This fallacy is based on the assumption that compromise is always good and that the truth or the best solution can always be found by looking at the middle ground between two arguments.

> "One parent says their child should live with them. The other parent says the same child should live with them. The best solution would be to have the child alternate living with each of them."

The solution of having the child alternate living with each of the parents doesn't take into consideration which parent the child is more comfortable with or which schooling or housing environment would be more suitable for the child, and it also ignores how the instability of alternating between parents may have a negative effect on the child.

The Fallacy Fallacy
This fallacy is based on the assumption that because there's a fallacy in the argument, the conclusion must be wrong.

> "As 'I should watch the news and try to understand current events because my parents said so' is an example of 'appeal to authority,' the statement is a fallacy, so I shouldn't watch the news and try to understand current events."

The statement "I should watch the news and try to understand current events because my parents said so" is a fallacy; however, it doesn't make the statement "I should watch the news and try to understand current events" incorrect. In reality, there is a good reason for doing so: being informed allows us to better understand a situation and make better decisions.

Identification of Fallacies in Arguments
It's important to be able to identify fallacies in both your own arguments and the arguments of others. The following steps are a way to help identify those fallacies:

1. Begin by listing the main points of the argument.
2. Follow by listing the evidence for each main point.
3. Consider whether any fallacies apply to the evidence. (Hint: If it's your own writing, then you can look over old writing to identify fallacies you tend to use. This way you have a better idea of what to watch for.)
4. Here are some questions to keep in mind:
   a. Is the main point specific enough to be provable?
   b. Does the main point use absolutes? If so, they should be avoided. (Absolutes include words like never, always, forever, best, definitely, nothing, everything, and all.)
   c. Is the evidence true? (Where is the evidence sourced from? Does the source have any potential conflicts of interest or biases?)
   d. Is the evidence relevant to the main point? (Is it focusing on the point without bringing up irrelevant information?)

It's especially important to keep these questions in mind when it comes to news articles. Fake news can use these fallacies to distort the truth to readers, offering incorrect or biased information. To make well-informed decisions, the quality of the information in question should be assessed before acting on it.

Activity: Identify the Fallacy or Fallacies in Each Statement

Identify the fallacy in the argument.

1. I had multiple unpleasant experiences with Canadians. Therefore, I think all Canadians are unpleasant.
2. My T.A. is only a year older than me, so I shouldn't trust the concepts that they teach.
3. My dad believes there should be only men in the House and Senate. My mom believes that there should be both men and women in the House and Senate. Therefore, the House and Senate should be a majority of men.
4. The president said that there are fires because we don't properly rake the forest floor, so we need to start raking the forest floors if we want to prevent fires.
5. If Indigenous peoples reclaim their land, then, eventually, they'll take back all of the land, and we'll have nowhere to live.

Answer Key for Activity

1. Hasty generalization
2. Ad hominem
3. The middle ground fallacy
4. Appeal to authority
5. Slippery slope

Outside Activity

An interesting learning resource is "Love Is a Fallacy" by Max Shulman, a short story about fallacies that is accessible for free online, and it discusses multiple fallacies in an entertaining narrative.

References

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