Do the arguments embedded in these three images look a little suspicious to you? Chances are, you recognize them as faulty reasoning of some kind. Such argumentative moves are called fallacies, arguments that are flawed by their very nature or structure. The first, a cartoon, represents a move familiar to all who follow political “attack” ads that focus on the character of the person (he’s a shrimp!) rather than substance. The second, a protest image, uses scare tactics to compare the Obama administration to the Nazis; and the third, from a news article, illustrates false cause: high IQs could be caused by any number of things, but probably not vegetarianism alone!

Using fallacies can hurt everyone involved, including the person using them, because they make productive argument more difficult. They muck up the frank but civil conversations that people should be able to have, regardless of their differences. But fallacies can be powerful tools, so it’s important that you can recognize and point them out in the works of others—and avoid them in your own writing. This chapter...
aims to help you meet these goals: here we’ll introduce you to fallacies of argument classified according to the emotional, ethical, and logical appeals we’ve discussed earlier (see Chapters 2–4).

**Fallacies of Emotional Argument**

Emotional arguments can be powerful and suitable in many circumstances, and most writers use them frequently. However, writers who pull on their readers’ heartstrings or raise their blood pressure too often can violate the good faith on which legitimate argument depends.

**Scare Tactics**

Politicians, advertisers, and public figures sometimes peddle their ideas by scaring people and exaggerating possible dangers well beyond their statistical likelihood. Such ploys work because it’s easier to imagine something terrible happening than to appreciate its rarity. **Scare tactics** can also be used to stampede legitimate fears into panic or prejudice. People who genuinely fear losing their jobs can be persuaded to fear that immigrants might work for less money. People who are living on fixed incomes can be convinced that minor changes to entitlement programs represent dire threats to their well-being. Such tactics have the effect of closing off thinking because people who are scared often act irrationally. Even well-intended fear campaigns—like those directed against the use of illegal drugs, smoking, or unprotected sex—can misfire if their warnings prove too shrill. People just stop listening.

**Either-Or Choices**

One way to simplify arguments and give them power is to reduce complicated issues to just two options, one obviously preferable to the other. Here is President Obama speaking to an Associated Press luncheon in 2012 and contrasting his vision of the country with what he wants listeners to believe is his opponents’ view:

> Ask any company where they’d rather locate and hire workers—a country with crumbling roads and bridges, or one that’s committed to high-speed Internet and high-speed railroads and high-tech research and development?

In “The Locavore’s Dilemma,” how does Christophe Pelletier try to avoid the either-or fallacy? Does he succeed? Why or why not?
Obama is arguing that his economic policies will provide funds for exciting infrastructure developments whereas Republicans are so concerned with deficits that they are willing to allow the country to crumble, literally. A moment’s thought, however, suggests that the choices here are too stark to reflect the complexity of the national economy. Yet, like most politicians, Obama can’t seem to resist the power of this mode of argument.

Either-or choices can be well-intentioned strategies to get something accomplished. Parents use them all the time (“Eat your broccoli, or you won’t get dessert”). But they become fallacious arguments when they reduce a complicated issue to excessively simple terms or when they’re designed to obscure legitimate alternatives. For instance, to suggest that renewable power sources such as wind and solar represent the only long-term solution to our energy needs may have rhetorical power, but the choice is too easy and uncomplicated. Energy shortages can be fixed in any number of ways, including wind and solar power.

Slippery Slope

The slippery slope fallacy portrays today’s tiny misstep as tomorrow’s slide into disaster. Some arguments that aim at preventing dire consequences do not take the slippery slope approach (for example, the parent who corrects a child for misbehavior now is acting sensibly to prevent more serious problems as the child grows older). A slippery slope argument becomes wrongheaded when a writer exaggerates the likely consequences of an action, usually to frighten readers. As such, slippery slope arguments are also scare tactics. In recent years, the issue of same-sex marriage has evoked many slippery slope arguments:

Anyone else bored to tears with the “slippery slope” arguments against gay marriage? Since few opponents of homosexual unions are brave enough to admit that gay weddings just freak them out, they hide behind the claim that it’s an inexorable slide from legalizing gay marriage to having sex with penguins outside JC Penney’s. The problem is it’s virtually impossible to debate against a slippery slope.

—Dahlia Lithwick, “Slippery Slop”

Ideas and actions do have consequences, but they aren’t always as dire as writers fond of slippery slope tactics would have you believe.
Overly Sentimental Appeals

Overly sentimental appeals use tender emotions excessively to distract readers from facts. Often, such appeals are highly personal and individual and focus attention on heartwarming or heartwrenching situations that make readers feel guilty if they challenge an idea, a policy, or a proposal. Emotions become an impediment to civil discourse when they keep people from thinking clearly.

Such sentimental appeals are a major vehicle of television news, where tugging at viewers’ heartstrings can mean high ratings. For example, when a camera documents the day-to-day sacrifices of parents who are trying to meet their mortgage payments and keep their kids in college in a tough economy, their on-screen struggles can represent the spirit of an entire class of people threatened by callous bankers. But while such individual stories stir genuine emotions, they seldom give a complete picture of a complex social or economic issue.

This image, taken from a gun control protest, is designed to elicit sympathy by causing the viewer to think about the dangers guns pose to innocent children and, thus, support the cause.
Bandwagon Appeals

Bandwagon appeals urge people to follow the same path everyone else is taking. Rather than think independently about where to go, it’s often easier to get on board the bandwagon with everyone else.

Many American parents seem to have an innate ability to refute bandwagon appeals. When their kids whine, *Everyone else is going camping without chaperones*, the parents reply, *And if everyone else jumps off a cliff (or a railroad bridge or the Empire State Building), you will too?* The children groan—and then try a different line of argument.

Unfortunately, not all bandwagon approaches are so transparent. In recent decades, bandwagon issues have included the war on drugs, the nuclear freeze movement, the campaign against drunk driving, campaign finance reform, illegal immigration, the defense of marriage, and bailouts for banks and businesses. These issues are all too complex to permit the suspension of judgment that bandwagon tactics require.

Cartoonist Roz Chast’s take on bandwagon appeals.
Fallacies of Ethical Argument

Because readers give their closest attention to authors they respect or trust, writers usually want to present themselves as honest, well-informed, likable, or sympathetic. But not all the devices that writers use to gain the attention and confidence of readers are admirable. (For more on appeals based on character, see Chapter 3.)

Appeals to False Authority

Many academic research papers find and reflect on the work of reputable authorities and introduce these authorities through direct quotations or citations as credible evidence. (For more on assessing the reliability of sources, see Chapter 18.) False authority, however, occurs when writers offer themselves or other authorities as sufficient warrant for believing a claim:

- **Claim**: X is true because I say so.
- **Warrant**: What I say must be true.
- **Claim**: X is true because Y says so.
- **Warrant**: What Y says must be true.

Though they are seldom stated so baldly, claims of authority drive many political campaigns. American pundits and politicians are fond of citing the U.S. Constitution and its Bill of Rights (Canadians have their Charter of Rights and Freedoms) as ultimate authorities, a reasonable practice when the documents are interpreted respectfully. However, the rights claimed sometimes aren’t in the texts themselves or don’t mean what the speakers think they do. And most constitutional matters are debatable—as volumes of court records prove. Likewise, religious believers often base arguments on books or traditions that wield great authority in a particular religious community. But the power of such texts is usually limited to that group and less capable of persuading others solely on the grounds of authority.

In short, you should pay serious attention to claims supported by respected authorities, such as the Centers for Disease Control, the National Science Foundation, or the Globe and Mail. But don’t accept information simply because it is put forth by such offices and agencies. To quote a Russian proverb made famous by Ronald Reagan, “Trust, but verify.”
Dogmatism

A writer who asserts or assumes that a particular position is the only one that is conceivably acceptable is expressing dogmatism, a fallacy of character that undermines the trust that must exist between those who make and listen to arguments. When people write dogmatically, they imply that no arguments are necessary: the truth is self-evident and needs no support.

Some arguments present claims so outrageous that they’re unworthy of serious attention: attacks on the historical reality of the Holocaust fall into this category. But few subjects that can be defended with facts, testimony, and good reasons ought to be off the table in a free society. In general, whenever someone suggests that raising an issue for debate is totally unacceptable—whether on the grounds that it’s racist, sexist, unpatriotic, blasphemous, insensitive, or offensive in some other way—you should be suspicious.

Ad Hominem Arguments

Ad hominem (Latin for “to the man”) arguments attack the character of a person rather than the claims he or she makes: when you destroy the credibility of your opponents, you either destroy their ability to present reasonable appeals or distract from the successful arguments they may be offering. Here Christopher Hitchens questions whether former secretary of state Henry Kissinger should be appointed to head an important government commission:

But can Congress and the media be expected to swallow the appointment of a proven coverup artist, a discredited historian, a busted liar, and a man who is wanted in many jurisdictions for the vilest of offenses?

—Christopher Hitchens, “The Case against Henry Kissinger”

Ad hominem tactics like this turn arguments into two-sided affairs with good guys and bad guys, and that’s unfortunate, since character often does matter in argument. People expect the proponent of peace to be civil, a secretary of the treasury to pay his taxes, and the champion of family values to be a faithful spouse. But it’s fallacious to attack an idea by uncovering the foibles of its advocates or by attacking their motives, backgrounds, or unchangeable traits.
Stacking the Deck

Just as gamblers try to stack the deck by arranging cards so they are sure to win, writers stack the deck when they show only one side of the story—the one in their favor. In a Facebook forum on the documentary film Super Size Me (which followed a thirty-two-year-old man who ate three meals a day at McDonald’s for thirty days with drastic health consequences), one student points out an example of stacking the deck:

One of the fallacies was stacking the deck. Spurlock stated many facts and gave plenty of evidence of what can happen if you eat fast food in abundance. Weight gain, decline in health, habit forming, and a toll on your daily life. But he failed to show what could happen if you ate the fast food and participated in daily exercise and took vitamins. The fallacy is that he does not show us both sides of what can happen. Possibly you could eat McDonalds for three meals a day for thirty days and if you engaged in daily exercise and took vitamins maybe your health would be just fine. But we were not ever shown that side of the experiment.

—Heather Tew Alleman, on a Facebook forum

In the same way, reviewers have often been critical of Michael Moore’s documentaries, like Sicko, that resolutely show only one side of the story (in this case, the evils of American health care). When you stack the deck, you take a big chance that your readers will react like Heather and decide not to trust you: that’s one reason it’s so important to show that you have considered alternatives in making any argument.

Fallacies of Logical Argument

You’ll encounter a problem in any argument when the claims, warrants, or proofs in it are invalid, insufficient, or disconnected. In theory, such problems seem easy enough to spot, but in practice, they can be camouflaged by a skillful use of words or images. Indeed, logical fallacies pose a challenge to civil argument because they often seem reasonable and natural, especially when they appeal to people’s self-interests. Whole industries (such as online psychics) depend on one or more of the logical fallacies for their existence. Political campaigns, too, rely on them in those ubiquitous fifteen-second TV spots.
Hasty Generalization

A hasty generalization is an inference drawn from insufficient evidence: because my Honda broke down, then all Hondas must be junk. It also forms the basis for most stereotypes about people or institutions: because a few people in a large group are observed to act in a certain way, all members of that group are inferred to behave similarly. The resulting conclusions are usually sweeping claims of little merit: Women are bad drivers; men are slobs; English teachers are nitpicky; computer jocks are . . . , and on and on.

To draw valid inferences, you must always have sufficient evidence (see Chapter 17) and you must qualify your claims appropriately. After all, people do need generalizations to make reasonable decisions in life. Such claims can be offered legitimately if placed in context and tagged

“Google must be anti-American because the company decorates its famous logo for occasions such as the anniversary of Sputnik, Earth Day, and Persian New Year but not Memorial Day in the United States.” A hasty generalization? Check “doodles” at Google, and decide for yourself.
with appropriate qualifiers—some, a few, many, most, occasionally, rarely, possibly, in some cases, under certain circumstances, in my limited experience.

**Faulty Causality**

In Latin, this fallacy is known as *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, which translates as “after this, therefore because of this”—the faulty assumption that because one event or action follows another, the first causes the second. Consider a lawsuit commented on in the *Wall Street Journal* in which a writer sued Coors (unsuccessfully), claiming that drinking copious amounts of the company’s beer had kept him from writing a novel.

Some actions do produce reactions. Step on the brake pedal in your car, and you move hydraulic fluid that pushes calipers against disks to create friction that stops the vehicle. In other cases, however, a supposed connection between cause and effect turns out to be completely wrong. For example, doctors now believe that when an elderly person falls and breaks a hip or leg, the injury usually caused the fall rather than the other way around.

That’s why overly simple causal claims should always be subject to scrutiny. In summer 2008, writer Nicholas Carr posed a simple causal question in a cover story for the *Atlantic*: “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” Carr essentially answered yes, arguing that “as we come to rely on computers to mediate our understanding of the world, it is our own intelligence that flattens” and that the more one is online the less he or she is able to concentrate or read deeply.

But others, like Jamais Cascio (senior fellow at the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies) soon challenged that causal connection: rather than making us stupid, Cascio argues, Internet tools like Google will lead to the development of “fluid intelligence—the ability to find meaning in confusion and solve new problems, independent of acquired knowledge.” The final word on this contentious causal relationship—the effects on the human brain caused by new technology—is still out, and will probably be available only after decades of intense research.

**Begging the Question**

Most teachers have heard some version of the following argument: You can’t give me a C in this course; I’m an A student. A member of Congress accused of taking kickbacks can make much the same argument: I can’t be...
guilty of accepting such bribes; I’m an honest person. In both cases, the claim is made on grounds that can’t be accepted as true because those grounds themselves are in question. How can the accused bribe taker defend herself on grounds of honesty when that honesty is in doubt? Looking at the arguments in Toulmin terms helps to see the fallacy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim</th>
<th>You can’t give me a C in this course . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>. . . because I’m an A student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrant</td>
<td>An A student is someone who can’t receive Cs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim</th>
<th>Representative X can’t be guilty of accepting bribes . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>. . . because she’s an honest person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrant</td>
<td>An honest person cannot be guilty of accepting bribes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the warrants stated, you can see why begging the question—assuming as true the very claim that’s disputed—is a form of circular argument that goes nowhere. (For more on Toulmin argument, see Chapter 7.)

**Equivocation**

Equivocations—half truths or arguments that give lies an honest appearance—are usually based on tricks of language. Consider the plagiarist who copies a paper word for word from a source and then declares that “I wrote the entire paper myself”—meaning that she physically copied the piece on her own. But the plagiarist is using wrote equivocally and knows that most people understand the word to mean composing and not merely copying words. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, critics of the Bush administration said its many denials that torture was being used on U.S. prisoners abroad amounted to a
long series of equivocations. What Bush described as the CIA’s use of “an alternative set of procedures” was just another equivocal phrase used to cover up what was really going on, which was torture, at least as defined by the Geneva Convention.

**Non Sequitur**

A non sequitur is an argument whose claims, reasons, or warrants don’t connect logically. Children are notably adept at framing non sequiturs like this one: You don’t love me or you’d buy me that bicycle! Taking a look at the implied warrant shows no connection between love and bikes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim</th>
<th>You must not love me . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>. . . because you haven’t bought me that bicycle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrant</td>
<td>Buying bicycles for children is essential to loving them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A five-year-old might buy that warrant, but no responsible adult would because love doesn’t depend on buying bicycles.
Non sequiturs occur when writers omit a step in an otherwise logical chain of reasoning. For example, it’s a non sequitur to argue that the poor performance of American students on international math exams means that the country should spend more money on math education. Such a conclusion might be justified if a correlation were known or found to exist between mathematical ability and money spent on education. But the students’ performance might be poor for reasons other than education funding alone, so the logical connection fails.

**Straw Man**

Those who resort to the *straw man* fallacy attack an argument that isn’t really there, often a much weaker or more extreme one than the opponent is actually making. The speaker or writer “sets up a straw man” in this way to create an argument that’s easy to knock down, proceeds to do so, and then claims victory over the opponent whose real argument was quite different. In *Arguing with Idiots*, Glenn Beck argues against “the idiot” who says that if we spent as much on education as we do on defense, all would be well, saying that:

We are all familiar with the bumper stickers pining for the day that the defense budget goes to the schools and the Pentagon has to hold a bake sale, but comparing educational spending with national defense isn’t particularly fair, clever, or logical.

First of all, we have to spend money on defense because if we don’t defend our country—we’ll, the schools won’t matter much. Take the Republic of Georgia, for instance. Do you really think citizens there are worried about standardized test scores or drunk Russian soldiers driving tanks down their streets?

Writing for *Media Matters* about “Glenn Beck and the Great Straw Man Massacre,” critic Simon Maloy takes Beck to task for using the strategy in this passage:

I’m not familiar with those bumper stickers, nor am I familiar with any public education advocates who argue that we stop spending money on national defense. And what does Georgia have to do with any of this? Does anyone begrudge Georgia for spending on its national defense? None of this makes any sense.

By suggesting that those who want to cut defense spending don’t want to “defend our country,” Beck is setting up a straw man.
Red Herring

This fallacy gets its name from the old British hunting practice of dragging a dried herring across the path of the fox in order to throw the hounds off the trail. A red herring fallacy does just that: it changes the subject abruptly to throw readers or listeners off the trail.

In the highly political item above, from spring 2009, cartoonist William Warren depicts the red herring fallacy when he has President Obama interrupt his Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor as she replies to a question from a reporter about the Constitution. Obama’s words represent what the cartoonist regards as red herring qualifications offered in defense of her appointment. When presented comically like this, red herrings may seem easy to spot. But be on the lookout for them whenever you read, and avoid them in your own writing. If you must resort to red herrings to support an argument, you probably should rethink your claim.

Faulty Analogy

Comparisons can help to clarify one concept by measuring it against another that is more familiar. Consider how quickly you make a judgment
about Britney Spears after reading this comparison with Madonna in a blog posting:

She’s, regardless of how hard she tries, not Madonna. To be fair, Madonna wasn’t Madonna at first either, but emulating someone else—even if they’re as successful as Madonna—usually doesn’t work in the end.

—Erik J. Barzeski, NSLog (); (blog)

When comparisons are extended, they become analogies—ways of understanding unfamiliar ideas by comparing them with something that’s already known. But useful as such comparisons are, they may prove false either taken on their own and pushed too far, or taken too seriously. At this point, they become faulty analogies—inaccurate or inconsequential comparisons between objects or concepts. An editorial in the Taipei Times, for example, found fault with analogies between Egypt and Taiwan in 2011:

Following weeks of demonstrations in Egypt that ultimately forced former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to step down on Friday, some commentators have suggested that events in North Africa could serve as a catalyst for discontent with President Ma Ying-jeou. There are, however, a number of reasons why this analogy is wrongheaded and Taiwanese not only cannot—but should not—go down that road.

For one, the situations in Egypt and Taiwan are very different. Taiwan does not have a radicalized and easily mobilized political opposition such as Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, which has a long tradition of opposing despotic rule.

This editorial writer goes on to write a lengthy column analyzing the flaws in this analogy.

RESPOND

1. Examine each of the following political slogans or phrases for logical fallacies.

“Resistance is futile.” (Borg message on Star Trek)

“It’s the economy, stupid.” (sign on the wall at Bill Clinton’s campaign headquarters)

“Remember the Alamo.” (battle cry)

“Make love, not war.” (antiwar slogan popularized during the Vietnam War)

“A chicken in every pot.” (campaign slogan)
“Guns don’t kill, people do.” (NRA slogan)
“If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.” (attributed to Harry S. Truman)
“Yes we can.” (Obama campaign slogan)

2. Choose a paper you’ve written for a college class and analyze it for signs of fallacious reasoning. Then find an editorial, a syndicated column, and a news report on the same topic and look for fallacies in them. Which has the most fallacies—and what kind? What may be the role of the audience in determining when a statement is fallacious?

3. Find a Web site that is sponsored by an organization (the Future of Music Coalition, perhaps), business (Coca-Cola, Pepsi), or other group (the Democratic or Republican National Committee), and analyze the site for fallacious reasoning. Among other considerations, look at the relationship between text and graphics and between individual pages and the pages that surround or are linked to them. How does the technique of separating information into discrete pages affect the argument?

4. Political blogs such as DailyKos.com and InstaPundit.com typically provide quick responses to daily events and detailed critiques of material in other media sites, including national newspapers. Study one such blog for a few days to see whether and how the blogger critiques the material he or she links to. Does the blogger point to fallacies in arguments? If so, does he or she explain them or just assume readers understand them? Summarize your findings in an oral report to your class.