

FALLACIES FOR PERSUASIVE WRITING

PART II

Red Herring

Begging the Question

Argument from False Authority

Appeal to Anonymous Authority

Non Sequitor

Weasel Wording

Poisoning the Well

Burden of Proof

Misunderstanding the Nature of Statistics

Argument by Rhetorical Questions

RED HERRING

A Red Herring is a fallacy in which an irrelevant topic is presented in order to divert attention from the original issue.

The basic idea is to "win" an argument by leading attention away from the argument and to another topic.

This sort of "reasoning" has the following form:

Topic A is under discussion.

Topic B is introduced under the guise of being relevant to topic A (when topic B is actually not relevant to topic A).

Topic A is abandoned.

This sort of "reasoning" is fallacious because merely changing the topic of discussion hardly counts as an argument against a claim.

EXAMPLE OF RED HERRING

"Argument" for making grad school requirements stricter:

"I think there is great merit in making the requirements stricter for the graduate students. I recommend that you support it. We are in a budget crisis and do not want our salaries affected."

BEGGING THE QUESTION

Begging the Question is a fallacy in which the premises include the claim that the conclusion is true or (directly or indirectly) assume that the conclusion is true.

This sort of "reasoning" is fallacious because simply assuming that the conclusion is true in the premises does not constitute evidence for that conclusion. Obviously, simply assuming a claim is true does not serve as evidence for that claim. This is especially clear in particularly blatant cases: "X is true. The evidence for this claim is that X is true."

Some cases of question begging are fairly blatant, while others can be extremely subtle.

EXAMPLES OF BEGGING THE QUESTION

Bill God must exist.

Jill How do you know.

Bill Because the Bible says so.

Jill Why should I believe the Bible?

Bill Because the Bible was written by God.

"If such actions were not illegal, then they would not be prohibited by the law."

Interviewer Your resume looks impressive but I need another reference."

Bill Jill can give me a good reference."

Interviewer How do I know Jill is trustworthy?"

Bill Certainly. I can vouch for her."

Avoid begging the question by writing out your premises and conclusion in a short, outline-like form.

Are there gaps? Steps required to move from one premise to the next or from the premises to the conclusion. Write down the statements that would fill those gaps. If the statements are controversial and you've just glossed over them, you might be begging the question. Next, check to see whether any of your premises basically says the same thing as the conclusion (but in other words). If so, you're begging the question.

ARGUMENT FROM FALSE AUTHORITY

A strange variation on
Argument from Authority.

For example, the TV
commercial which starts "I'm
not a doctor, but I play one
on TV." Just what are we
supposed to conclude?

APPEAL TO ANONYMOUS AUTHORITY

Appeal to Authority is made, but the authority is not named. For example, "Experts agree that ..", "scientists say .." or even "they say ..". This makes the information impossible to verify, and brings up the very real possibility that the arguer himself doesn't know who the experts are. In that case, he may just be spreading a rumor.

The situation is even worse if the arguer admits it's a rumor.

NON SEQUITUR

Something that just does not follow.

For example, "Tens of thousands of Americans have seen lights in the night sky which they could not identify. The existence of life on other planets is fast becoming certainty!"

"Bill lives in a large building, so his apartment must be large."

WEASEL WORDING

This is like Euphemism, except that the word changes a concept rather than soften a old concept. For Example:

an American President may not legally conduct a war without a declaration from Congress. So, Presidents have conducted "police actions", "armed incursions", "protective reaction strikes," "pacification," "safeguarding American interests," and a wide variety of "operations". Similarly, the War Department have become the Department of Defense, and untested medicines become alternative medicines.

POISONING THE WELL

Discrediting the sources
used by your opponent.

This is a variation of
Ad Hominem.

BURDEN OF PROOF

Burden of Proof is a fallacy in which the burden of proof is placed on the wrong side.

A common name for this is an Appeal to Ignorance. This sort of reasoning typically has the following form:

Claim X is presented by side A and the burden of proof actually rests on side B. Side B claims that X is false because there is no proof for X.

The difficulty is determining on which side, burden of proof rests. In some cases the burden of proof is set by the situation. For example, in American law a person is assumed to be innocent until proven guilty (hence the burden of proof is on the prosecution).

In most cases the burden of proof rests on those who claim something exists: bigfoot, psychic powers, ghost, aliens or God.

EXAMPLES OF BURDEN OF PROOF

Bill I think that we should invest more in expanding the interstate system.

Jill I think that would be a bad idea, considering the state of the treasury.

Bill How can anyone be against highway improvements?

You cannot prove that God does not exist, so He does.

MISUNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF STATISTICS

President Dwight Eisenhower expressed astonishment and alarm on discovering that fully half of all Americans had below average intelligence. Similarly, some people get fearful when they learn that their doctor wasn't in the top half of his class. (But that's half of them.)

“Statistics show that of those who contract the habit of eating, very few survive.” -- Wallace Irwin.

Very few people seem to understand "regression to the mean". This is the idea that things tend to go back to normal. If you feel normal today, does it really mean that the headache cure you took yesterday performed wonders? Or is it just that your headaches are always gone the next day?

ARGUMENT BY RHETORICAL QUESTION

Asking questions in a way that leads to a particular answer. Example:

"When are we going to give the old folks of this country the pension they deserve?" The speaker leads the audience to the answer "Right now."

Alternatively, one could say, "When will we be able to afford a major increase in old age pensions?" In that case, the answer aimed for is almost certainly *not* "Right now."

THE END