

AP Language and Composition – Logical Fallacies



You may have used fallacious reasoning by trying to convince your parents or teachers to allow you to do something or to buy your excuses: “Why can’t I go to the party? Everyone else is!” or “You should accept this late essay and not count off any points because I am a nice person.” However, if you get caught doing this too often, you will lose credibility, and any future efforts at persuasion will be much harder.

All around us people try to manipulate us with invalid or illogical proof, insufficient choices, or conclusions that don’t follow from the proof. Advertisers and salespeople convince us to buy things we really don’t need. Politicians and diet books make promises they can’t keep. Photographers publish pictures that tell only part of the story. Parents make children obey “because we say so.” People use fallacies *because they work*. Fallacies are tricks of logic that often appear reasonable when in fact they are nothing more than means of manipulation—means that work all too often. All of us need to acquire skills to protect ourselves from falling victim to such tricks of logic. By learning to detect fallacies, you can protect your values, your self-image, and your buying habits.

The exercises below should give you the resources to defend yourself against the onslaught of persuasive messages you receive every day. Some people compare the knowledge you will gain to ammunition or martial arts. It’s like a war out there, so be prepared.

Identify Fallacies in Short Examples

Logical fallacies are defined as “gaps” in reasoning. Fallacies prevent the meaningful exchange of ideas by distracting the reader with various appeals instead of by using sound reasoning. There are several more fallacies than those listed here; many overlap and have more than one name. What is most important is to gain awareness of how to refute arguments that oppose your position and how to avoid fallacious reasoning in your own arguments.

- **Ad hominem:** A rhetorical fallacy intended to distract from an argument by attacking the character or circumstance of the proponent. This personal attack is intended to devalue the claim without regard for the evidence provided.
 - *That scientist could not be right about that theory; just look at how she wears her hair!*
 - *Senator Jones was a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, so his proposal to limit spending on the military has no merit.*
 - *Why should we think a candidate for governor who has cheated on his wife will keep his campaign promises?*
- **Bandwagon:** A persuasive technique, often used in media messages that appeal to the “everyone is doing it” mentality.
 - *Since 85% of consumers purchase PCs rather than Macs, PCs must be better computers.*
 - *Why can't I pierce my tongue? Everyone else is doing it.*
 - *Nobody drives that kind of car any more.*
- **Circular logic or circular reasoning:** A logical fallacy in which an assumption is made in a definition or argument that includes the very point that one is trying to prove.
 - *The candidate won the election because enough people voted for her.*
 - *George Bush is a good communicator because he speaks effectively.*
 - *Cruel and unusual experimentation on helpless animals is inhumane.*
- **Either/or:** A conclusion that oversimplifies the argument by reducing it to only two sides or choices.
 - *All drugs must be legalized or banned.*
 - *We can stop using oil products or destroy the earth.*
 - *America: Love It or Leave It.*
- **False analogy:** An inaccurate, inappropriate, or misleading comparison between two things.
 - *Gene-splicing is really no different than creating a new recipe by combining familiar foods in a novel way.*
 - *Letting prisoners out on early release is like saying they have never committed any crimes.*
 - *If we put humans on the moon, we should be able to find a cure for the common cold.*

- **Hasty generalization:** A conclusion (often the result of bias) drawn from limited or insufficient evidence, whether intentional or not.
 - *Fifty percent of the women who took the driving test on Tuesday failed. Women must be lousy drivers.*
 - *Even though it's only the first day, I can tell I won't like this teacher.*
 - *When attendance is down and the team is losing, the football coach should be fired.*

- **Non-sequitur:** A logical fallacy in which an inference is made that does not follow from its premise.
 - *If those protesters really loved their country, they wouldn't question the government.*
 - *Because my brother is wealthy, he will make a good husband.*
 - *Paul Smith has my vote for mayor because he has the best campaign organization.*

- **Post hoc:** A faulty conclusion that assumes that, because one thing followed another, it was caused by the other. The full Latin label for the fallacy is *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, which means "after this, therefore because of this."
 - *Mayor Davis raised taxes and then the rate of violent crime went up. Davis is responsible for the rise in crime.*
 - *She drank three large glasses of water and became ill soon after. Drinking too much water always leads to illness.*
 - *A year after the release of that violent video game, incidents of school violence tripled—surely not a coincidence.*

- **Red herring:** An argument that uses misleading or unrelated evidence to support a conclusion.
 - *I shouldn't have to pay a fine for running a red light. Many other people who are thieves and murderers are out there driving, and the police should be after them, not a decent citizen like me.*
 - *The level of mercury in seafood may be unsafe, but what will fishermen do to make a living?*
 - *I know I forgot to deposit the check into the bank yesterday. But nothing I do pleases you.*

- **Slippery slope:** A conclusion based on the premise that one thing will lead to another, oftentimes with disastrous results.
 - *If I get a B in high school, I won't get into the college of my choice and will never have a meaningful career.*
 - *If we ban SUVs because they are bad for the environment, eventually the government will ban all cars. So we should not ban SUVs.*
 - *We've got to stop the electric rate increase. Before we know it, they'll charge us \$100 per minute!*

- **Stereotyping:** A fallacy in which one classifies a person or group according to a common aspect that is oversimplified, rigidly applied, and often uncomplimentary.
 - *All librarians are shy and wear horned-rimmed glasses.*
 - *People who live in cities are unfriendly.*
 - *All blondes are dumb.*

Two more fallacies defined...

- **Begging the question** Assuming the truth of a premise with no other evidence than the premise itself.
- **Strawman** Substituting another issue for the issue at hand.

Can you identify the logical fallacy in each statement?

1. He went to the Mexican food restaurant three nights in a row, so he must love Mexican food.
2. Either we ban all Chinese imports, or America's economy will collapse.
3. Women are too emotional to fight in combat.
4. The overcrowded conditions in some parts of our city have forced people together like rats in a cage. Like rats, they will eventually turn on one another, fighting and killing until a balance is restored.
5. The mayor has proposed building a multi-million-dollar, Formula One race track near the airport. How can he even consider such an expensive project when professional car racers already make so much money?
6. If we ban the burning of the U.S. flag, next we may find laws against burning the presidential seal, state flags, and the Constitution.
7. Every time a Republican is elected president, a recession follows. If we want to avoid another recession, we should elect a Democrat as our next president.
8. The public should not take the County Commissioner's plans for the budget seriously. He is a former alcoholic whose wife recently divorced him.
9. Since 88% of the people polled believe in UFOs, they must exist.
10. If I buy this cell phone, everyone will love me.
11. I will go to college because it's the right thing to do. Going to college is the right thing to do because I've made that decision.