

AVOIDING THE FATAL FALLACY

A **fallacy** is strictly defined as guile or trickery or a false or mistaken idea. Fallacies have the appearance of truth but are erroneous. Let's say that you really want to attend a famous university in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and you've heard that the acceptance rate for the institution is 25 percent higher for early decision applicants than for regular applicants. However, it is a fallacy that applying early would increase your chances of being accepted. But why? Because if you have a 2.8 GPA, then that university isn't going to accept you regardless of when you apply.

Does this sound more like logic and rhetoric than language to you? What is it doing on the AP English Language and Composition exam? Well, as we mentioned earlier, although "language" is contained in the title of this exam, the exam primarily tests rhetoric and composition. In other words, this exam tests how language works.

In this chapter we provide you with an overview of some common rhetorical fallacies. You should be familiar with *all* of these for the exam. Rhetorical fallacies may appear as answers on the multiple-choice sections. In addition, they may be relevant to your essays in the free-response questions.

COMMON RHETORICAL FALLACIES

Oftentimes, when writers have trouble making convincing "honest" arguments with the facts that they have in hand, they resort to using rhetorical fallacies. As you may expect, when you begin to write your essays in the free-response section of the exam, you shouldn't resort to these tactics. However, you should be able to recognize the use of these common fallacies in the reasoning of others; this will help you substantially on test day.

***Ad Hominem* Argument**

An *ad hominem* (in Latin, "to the man") argument is any kind of fallacious argument that criticizes an idea by pointing something out about the person who holds the idea, rather than directly addressing the actual merit of the idea. There are people who learn this form of rhetorical fallacy at a very tender age and may argue thusly: "You're wrong because you're a jerk." But there are plenty of mature examples of *ad hominem* arguments, too.

Example: Of course that writer supports gun control; she's a Democrat!

The attack shifts from the issue (gun control) to the political affiliation of the writer (Democrat).

Argument from Authority (or Argument from False Authority)

An **argument from authority** tempts us to agree with the writer's assumptions based on the authority of a famous person or entity or on his or her own character (when the writers are well-known).

Example: It is absurd to believe that professional baseball players have used steroids because the most famous slugger of our time has repeatedly asserted that such a claim is false.

You see how it works? Or how about this: If The Princeton Review put the following quotation on the back cover of a book, how impressed would you be?

"This is absolutely awesome—it's the best review book ever written."—John Schiff

Would that convince you? Probably not. How about this quote?

"This is absolutely awesome—it's the best review book ever written."—Shakira

Even though the rock star didn't have to take AP exams in her native Colombia, her fame may give her the authority necessary to get some students to buy the book.

APPEAL TO IGNORANCE

Appeal to ignorance is based on the assumption that whatever has not been proven false must be true (or, similarly, whatever has not been proven true must be false).

Example #1: No one can prove that the Loch Ness monster does not exist; therefore the Loch Ness monster exists.

Example #2: No one can prove that the Loch Ness monster exists; therefore the Loch Ness monster does not exist.

This is a fairly common form of rhetorical fallacy.

BEGGING THE QUESTION

Begging the question is a fallacious form of argument in which someone assumes that parts (or all) of what the person claims to be proving are proven facts. (Keep in mind that this does not refer to incomplete or illogical statements that actually would prompt someone to ask a question.) This circular form of reasoning is easier to grasp by example than explanation.

Example #1: The Loch Ness monster spoke to me in my dreams, so it must exist.

Well, wouldn't you want me to prove to you *first* that the Loch Ness monster really did speak to me in my dreams before you would accept my conclusion? I hope so. It may have been the pepperoni pizza that was speaking to me in my dreams.

Example #2: Examine the following scenario.

Interviewer: Your resume looks impressive, but I need another reference.

Brendan: Heidi can give me a good reference.

Interviewer: Good, but how do I know that Heidi is trustworthy?

Brendan: I can vouch for her.

HASTY GENERALIZATION

Sometimes a writer will deliberately lead you to a conclusion by providing insufficient, selective evidence. This is called a **hasty generalization**.

Example: Ping-pong is an extremely dangerous sport; last year, my friend got hit in the eye with a ping-pong ball and almost lost his vision in that eye.

This rhetorical fallacy can be used very effectively. In the case of hasty generalization, often statistics that are “good”—meaning empirically true—are used to “prove” things that aren’t true.

NON SEQUITUR

In Latin, *non sequitur* means “It doesn’t follow.” In English, a *non sequitur* is a statement that does not relate logically to what comes before it.

Example: If you really wanted to earn a 5 on the AP English Language and Composition exam, you wouldn’t spend so much time reading Isabel Allende’s novels.

Wait a second. First of all, reading novels may help you prepare for the exam. Second, who says that you don’t have plenty of time for preparing for the exam and reading—especially now that you’ve stopped wasting time in front of the television? In a *non sequitur*, there is no logical connection between the initial phrase and the one that follows it, so you shouldn’t try to make one.

FALSE DICHOTOMY

False dichotomy consists of a consideration of only the two extremes when there are one or more intermediate possibilities.

Example: AP Calculus BC class is impossible; either you get it or you don’t.

This statement sounds like a great way to explain to your parents why you just earned a less-than-stellar grade on your last calculus test, but it sets up a false dichotomy. In fact, there are various levels of understanding and thus various degrees of success in AP Calculus, and as is the case in many fields, success is a direct result of effort.

SLIPPERY SLOPE

Slippery slope arguments suggest dire consequences from relatively minor causes.

Example: If we stop requiring men to wear coats and ties in the dining room, pretty soon they’ll start coming in dressed in beachwear.

Another way that the slippery slope fallacy can be expressed is by the phrase “give ‘em an inch, and they’ll take a mile.”

FAULTY CAUSALITY

Faulty causality refers to the (sometimes unintentional) setting up of a cause-and-effect relationship when none exists. In faulty causality, one event can happen after another without the first necessarily being the direct cause of the second.

Example: Violent crime among adolescents has risen in the past decade, and that is the result of increased sales of violent video games.

As is the case with all examples of faulty causality, there is no proof for the video game argument, and it is possible to think of a dozen other convincing reasons for the rise of violent crime—a trend that we just made up.

STRAW MAN ARGUMENT

The **straw man argument** consists of an oversimplification of an opponent's argument to make it easier to attack.

(By the way, the new, more politically correct fallacy is called the straw person argument.) Here's an example of how this works.

Example: Students who want to eliminate the school uniform are exhibitionists who want to show off bare midriffs.

In fact, students who are arguing against having to wear a school uniform may be interested only in expressing their individuality; it's even possible that they would be happy in conservative clothing. However, if the author of this sentence attributes a simplistic argument to the students, who had, in reality, a more substantive motivation (individuality), it is easier to attack their position.

SENTIMENTAL APPEALS

This commonly used tactic attempts to appeal to the *hearts* of readers (or, of course, listeners) so that they forget to use their *minds*.

Example: "The assignment that I gave you last night was much too long, but just think how pleased your parents and I will be when you score a 5 on the AP exam. Think about the pride you'll feel when tears of joy stream down our faces!"

Here, the teacher knew that arguing that the assignment was an important intellectual exercise wouldn't convince his students, even though that may have been a more valid argument. So in this case, he decided to use a sentimental appeal. Sentimental appeals are generally not valid arguments, but they work sometimes!

RED HERRING

A **red herring** attempts to shift attention away from an important issue by introducing an issue that has no logical connection to the discussion at hand.

Example: "My opponent talks about the poor quality of military intelligence, but this is a time for decisiveness, not for weakness. We must stick together and present a common front as the other nations look on. If we do not, we could jeopardize our position as a global leader."

As you can see, this is very similar to a sentimental appeal, although the political speaker is (apparently) still appealing to minds, rather than sentiments. In this case, the speaker shifts the discussion from the topic under debate (military intelligence) to a different issue (our role as a super power).

SCARE TACTICS

The aptly named **scare tactic** is used to frighten readers or listeners into agreeing with the speaker; often, when scare tactics are used, the speaker has no logical argument on which to fall back.

Example: “My opponent talks about the need to explore stem cell research, but this would bring about an end to ethical uses of technology, and, before long, scientists will be creating superraces—the Nazi dream of an Aryan Nation will ensue!”

Here the speaker mentions Nazis to frighten the listeners; there is no logical (or at least, logically presented) link between exploring stem cell research and the creation of an Aryan Nation. The example may seem to you like a combination of scare tactics and slippery slope; this combination is sometimes seen when a slippery slope argument is used to scare readers or listeners.

BANDWAGON APPEALS

Bandwagon appeals have a different name in school settings; there, they are known as “peer pressure.” A bandwagon appeal encourages the listener to agree with a position because everyone else does. The logic goes something like this: If everybody else is doing it, it must be all right.

Example: It’s time for our county to repeal the ban on strip mining—every other county in the state has already done so!

Notice that the speaker (or writer) avoids having to explain the merits of the issue and explain why the ban is inappropriate.

DOGMATISM

Dogmatism does not allow for discussion because the speaker presumes that his or her beliefs are beyond question; essentially, the “logic” runs thusly: I’m correct because I’m correct.

Example: We are members of the Wombat Party and, as such, know that we are right when we assert that Wombats are the best!

There is no way to rebut the claim.

EQUIVOCATION

Equivocation is telling part of the truth, while deliberately hiding the entire truth; typically, this is similar to lying by omission.

Example: There is a Pink Panther movie in which Inspector Clouseau enters a quaint European hotel and, upon spying a cute little dog, asks the owner, “Does your dog bite?” The manager responds, “No,” and Clouseau attempts to pet the dog, which growls and bites him. “You told me that your dog does not bite!” exclaims Clouseau. “That’s not my dog,” responds the owner.

Setting the comedy aside for a moment, the owner of the chalet gave an equivocal answer. Presumably, he was telling the truth when he responded that his dog does not bite, but that truth hid the more relevant truth—the dog he was with at the time does, in fact, bite. It is possible that you have indulged in equivocation. Let’s say that you’re about to leave the house, but your mom stops you and says, “You’re not going to Marina’s party tonight, are you? I heard that her parents are out of town and there’s not going to be any supervision.” “No, Mom, I’m not going there.” Your mom smiles in relief and lets you go. You’re relieved too because you are going to Dave’s party, where there will be no supervision because his parents are out of town. You did not exactly lie because you truly are not going to Marina’s party; however, you did lie because you are going to the same kind of party somewhere else, and it is the *kind* of party that your mom objects to, not its specific location.

FAULTY ANALOGY

A **faulty analogy** is an illogical, misleading comparison between two things.

Example: Why should we invade that country? Let me explain it to you like this. What if you looked out the window and saw a 20-dollar bill in the street? Wouldn't you go outside and take it?

This analogy is *really* faulty! A better analogy would be: What if you saw a person in the street with a 20-dollar bill? Wouldn't you go outside and try to steal it from the person? Analogy is always a weak form of argumentation; a faulty analogy exploits this weakness to mislead listeners (or readers), when true logic may not convince them.

As we mentioned earlier, make sure you have memorized all of these rhetorical fallacies before test day. After you've studied them carefully (make flashcards if you need to, using the examples we gave you), try the following questions.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

In each question, choose the most fitting rhetorical fallacy.

1. If such actions were not illegal, then they would not be prohibited by law.
 - (A) faulty causality
 - (B) begging the question
 - (C) appeal to ignorance
 - (D) argument from authority
 - (E) *ad hominem*
2. We all knew he would think abortion is wrong! He's a priest!
 - (A) faulty causality
 - (B) hasty generalization
 - (C) *ad hominem*
 - (D) false dichotomy
 - (E) dogmatism
3. "Recently, I've been thinking that there is some merit in the Republicans' tax-cut plan. I suggest that we come up with something like it because if we Democrats are going to survive as a party, we have got to show the people that we are as tough-minded as the Republicans, because that is what the public wants."
 - (A) red herring
 - (B) straw man argument
 - (C) slippery slope
 - (D) equivocation
 - (E) *non sequitur*