Logical Fallacies

**Appealing to Irrational Fears**: All humans have fears, it is often easy to exploit those fears.

**Appealing to Pity**: Although appeals to pity and other emotions can be justified at times, this kind of appeal can mask an otherwise weak case.

**Appealing to Prejudice**: Also known as *ad populum*, this fallacy occurs when the writer appeals to a preexisting prejudice. A common example is the practice or putting an image of the American flag on a bumper sticker that advocates a particular product or stance, with an appeal to patriotism thus substituting for an argument for the product or stance.

**Appealing to Tradition**: The most common form of this appeal is the statement, “We’ve always done it this way in the past.”

**Arguing from a Lack of Knowledge or Evidence**: We can illustrate both forms of this flaw with the following example: You have looked for a needle in a haystack, and your search has been unsuccessful. From this lack of evidence, one person might argue that there must be a needle in that haystack if you would only search more carefully. From the same lack of evidence, a second person might argue that there is no needle in the haystack. In reality of course, neither conclusion can be supported.

**Attacking the Opponent’s Character**: Often called an *ad hominem* attack, this fallacy is sometimes used in an attempt to direct attention away from the logical of a case—usually a strong case—by evoking a negative emotional response to the person making the case. The opposite fallacy (pro hominem) which also is common, involves direction attention away from a case—usually a weak case—by evoking a positive emotional response to the person making. A legislator might appeal to the public to support an unworthy bill by praising the record of the colleague who introduced it.

**Attributing False Causes**: Usually called *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (“after this, therefore because of this”), this fallacy occurs when someone assumes that event A caused event B because event A occurred before event B.

**Bandwagon Appeal**: Here the arguer is essentially saying, “Many people are doing it, especially people whom you admire, so it must be a good thing to do.” You should do it too. Common in advertising.

**Begging the Question/Circular Reasoning**: This fallacy treats a questionable assertion as if it has already been answered or fully explained, as in the following example: “My friend would never cheat because he’s an honest person.” To assert that someone is honest is not to provide evidence that he did not or would not cheat; this assertion merely restates the ideal that the person would not cheat but has nothing to do with whether he actually did cheat.

**Complex Question**: In this ploy, an arguer as a question that actually has two parts and demands a one-part response. For instance, the question, “When did you stop beating your dog?” has embedded in it the assumption that you used to beat your dog.

**Either-or Reasoning**: Also known as “false dichotomy,” this fallacy occurs when writers give readers two opposing choices (either A or B) when other possibilities also exist. For instance, a person might state, “You can major in business administration, or you can plan on getting a crummy job.”

**Faulty Analogy**: In this fallacy, the writer makes a comparison that is in some way misleading or incomplete or that does not even relate to the topic being discussed. For instance, “Leading a country is like running a business. In both cases the bottom line is the most important consideration.” In both cases, the bottom line is the most important consideration” is using a faulty analogy because governments and businesses are different in significant ways.
Guilt by Association—This fallacy occurs when a writer seeks to discredit an opponent by associating the opponent with some unpopular person, group or idea, as when politicians attempt to brand their opponents with labels such as “free-spending liberals” or “hard-right conservative.” Such labels imply that all liberals are “free spending” or that all conservatives are “hard-right” and both labels have negative connotations.

Overgeneralization—This fallacy occurs when someone reaches a conclusion based on insufficient evidence, especially atypical examples. For instance, your friend engages in overgeneralization when, after an automobile accident in which she was not wearing a seat belt by sustained only minor injuries, she says, “See. Seat belts aren’t necessary.”

Oversimplification—People sometimes search for simple answers to complex problems. For instance, some might say that the solution to gang violence in high schools would be simply to require students to wear uniforms in school.

Red Herring—This fallacy occurs when the writers introduces an irrelevant point to divert attention from the issue being considers. A student who says to his teachers, “I know that I was late for class today, but I’ve been on time every other day” is using a red herring to throw the teacher off the scent of the real issue: The student is late.

Slippery Slope—This fallacy claims that once something starts, it must continue, just like a person sliding down a slippery slope. An example is the student who says, “We’ve got to fight that proposed fee for using the computer center. If that fee is enacted, pretty soon they’ll be charging fees for using the restrooms on campus.”

Stacking the Deck—here the writer presents evidence for only one side of the case. A student who says, “I should get an A because I handed in all my homework,” while neglecting to mention that she got a C on the mid term and final exams, is stacking the deck.

Straw Person—This fallacy occurs when an arguer distorts the opponent’s argument and then attacks that distorted argument. For instance, a few decade ago, when equal rights for women was hotly contested issue, some people made statements such as, “Equal rights for women means that women will have the right to use men’s restrooms. What is this country coming to?”

Universal Statements—Such statements often include words such as always, never, all, everyone, everybody, none, or no one. Of course some statements that include those words are true—for instance, “All humans are mammals.” However, when the writers use those words to describe human behavior or beliefs, those statements are usually problematic. For example, the statement “Men never share their feelings, but women always do” could be easily contradicted with just one or two cases.