



Let's TALK



THINK CLEARLY, SPEAK CLEARLY:
AVOIDING LOGICAL FALLACIES
IN “LET’S TALK” DISCUSSIONS

Think Clearly, Speak Clearly: Avoiding Logical Fallacies in “Let’s Talk” Discussions

You’ve got your student group together for a fair and free discussion, and you want to make sure the conversation focuses on content rather than conceit.¹ Logical fallacies often produce confusing, circular, and ceaselessly frustrating conversations. Below are some common logical fallacies that you may encounter in a Let’s Talk discussion. Let’s review a few.

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE:

A claim that argues that “if A ... happens, then eventually through a series of small steps, ... X, Y, Z will happen, too, basically equating A and Z. So, if we don’t want Z to occur, A must not be allowed to occur either.”²

Example: If we resolve to legalize marijuana, then the government will want to legalize more and more drugs, eventually including heroin and fentanyl, and in the end countless lives will be ruined.

Fallacy: Equating legalizing marijuana with legalizing all substances is a fallacy, because one does not necessarily follow the other.

HASTY GENERALIZATION:*

A claim which assumes a conclusion using “insufficient or biased evidence. In other words, you are rushing to a conclusion before you have all the relevant facts.”³

Example: Everyone in this group is a thoughtless ideologue and won’t listen to what I have to say.

Fallacy: This claim makes assumptions and predictive claims about the present or future based on existing

biases or rushed judgments. Productive discussions could be inhibited or stopped before they’ve started if such assumptions are made.

*Ask yourself: Which cognitive distortion does this resemble? If you guessed “overgeneralization,” you would be right. Check out our guide, [“Using Cognitive Behavioral Insights in Group Discussions”](#) to learn more about the overlap between logical fallacies and cognitive distortions.

POST HOC ERGO PROPTER HOC:

This is a claim which assumes causation from chronology.

Example: Ever since the President came into office a month ago, the economy has soared, most likely due to their leadership.

Fallacy: This claim assumes that the newly-inaugurated President is directly responsible for every positive or negative change in the national economy, without taking into account the policies of the previous administration, speculative investing, or any other economic or political factor. The claim rests on a false assumption that because one incident followed the other, they must have a causal relationship.

1 Conceit: “a fanciful idea; an elaborate or strained metaphor”, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conceit>.

2 Logical Fallacies,” Purdue Online Writing Lab, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/logic_in_argumentative_writing/fallacies.html.

3 “Logical Fallacies,” Purdue Online Writing Lab, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/logic_in_argumentative_writing/fallacies.html.

GENETIC FALLACY:

A claim that uses “the origins of a person, idea, institute, or theory” to “determine its character, nature, or worth.”⁴

Example: You shouldn’t cite Martin Heidegger or Ezra Pound in your arguments or read any of their work at all, because they both supported fascism during the twentieth century.

Fallacy: This claim assumes that all of Heidegger’s philosophy is worthless or evil because of his erstwhile professional association with Nazism, and that all of Ezra Pound’s poetry and essays are likewise intolerable because he supported Benito Mussolini’s regime. A person’s temporary or lifetime political associations are not inherently related or determinant of the nature or value of all their work.

BEGGING THE CLAIM (OR BEGGING THE QUESTION):

“The conclusion that the writer should prove is validated within the claim.”⁵

Example: Misleading and deceitful arguments like that shouldn’t be allowed in this discussion at all.

Fallacy: The claim does not explain why the “arguments” to which it refers are “misleading” or “deceitful,” and thus cannot justify why they ought to be banned from discussion. It might be logical to explain why those “arguments” are “misleading,” and use that evidence to argue that they should be banned. Beginning the sentence with “misleading and deceitful arguments” assumes the conclusion (that such arguments should be banned) before properly justifying that conclusion.

CIRCULAR ARGUMENT:

“This restates the argument rather than actually proving it.”⁶

Example: That man is heartless because he doesn’t care about people.

Fallacy: The claim does not give examples or more evidence as to why “that man is heartless,” but simply restates a synonymous claim to “heartless” by claiming that “he doesn’t care about people.”

EITHER/OR:

“This is a conclusion that oversimplifies the argument by reducing it to only two sides or choices.”⁷

Example: You either love dogs or hate dogs.

Fallacy: This argument eliminates the possibility of being indifferent to dogs, liking dogs, mildly disliking dogs—essentially, this extremely binary argument disregards a range of choices between two polar opposites.

4 “Logical Fallacies,” Purdue Online Writing Lab, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/logic_in_argumentative_writing/fallacies.html.

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6 “Logical Fallacies,” Purdue Online Writing Lab, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/logic_in_argumentative_writing/fallacies.html.

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AD HOMINEM:

“This is an attack on the character of a person rather than his or her opinions or arguments.”⁸

Example: I wouldn’t trust any of his policies. He cheated on his wife, after all.

Fallacy: The logical fallacy consists of the speaker’s refusal to evaluate any of the “policies” in question, as well as their attack on the policy-maker’s actions rather than any of the specific faults with his (likely unrelated) policy suggestions.

AD POPULUM/ BANDWAGON APPEAL:

“This is an appeal that presents what most people, or what a group of people, think in order to persuade someone to think the same way. Getting on the bandwagon is one such instance of an ad populum appeal.”⁹

Example: A true patriot would support eating turkey on Thanksgiving.

Fallacy: This claim asserts that patriotism and dining choices are inherently related, though the claim offers no evidence to support the relationship between the two concepts.

RED HERRING:

“This is a diversionary tactic that avoids the key issues, often by avoiding opposing arguments rather than addressing them.”¹⁰

Example: AI might pose an existential risk, but we have to stay ahead of China’s latest technology.

Fallacy: This secondary claim about potential technological competition from China distracts from the question of whether artificial intelligence poses a risk to mankind more broadly. The two issues may be related, but one does not discount the importance of the other.

STRAW MAN:

“This move oversimplifies an opponent's viewpoint and then attacks that hollow argument.”¹¹

Example: People who don’t believe in increasing taxes on the very wealthy hate the poor.

Fallacy: This claim attributes the very worst motive for the opposing view’s position. People who support the opposing view probably have more complex arguments for it than this claim would suggest. This claim avoids responding to these more intricate arguments by writing off the whole position because they believe it to be badly motivated. This does not treat the opposing view with respect and is not conducive to complex and constructive discussion.

8 “Logical Fallacies,” Purdue Online Writing Lab, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/logic_in_argumentative_writing/fallacies.html.

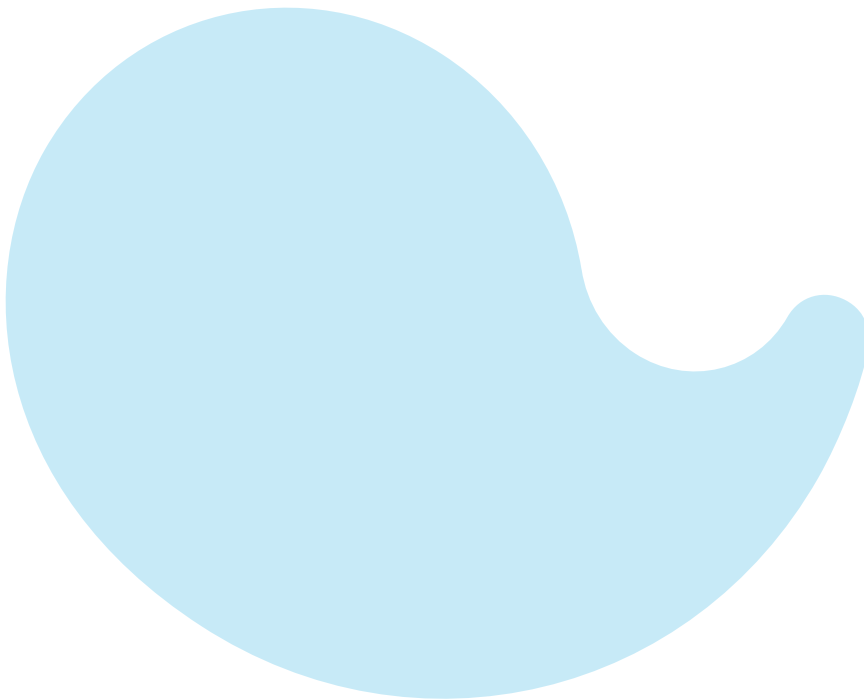
9 “Logical Fallacies,” Purdue Online Writing Lab, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/logic_in_argumentative_writing/fallacies.html.

10 “Logical Fallacies,” Purdue Online Writing Lab, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/logic_in_argumentative_writing/fallacies.html.

11 “Logical Fallacies,” Purdue Online Writing Lab, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/logic_in_argumentative_writing/fallacies.html.

Resource

“Logical Fallacies.” Purdue Online Writing Lab. https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/logic_in_argumentative_writing/fallacies.html.





How FIRE can help

We are counting on you to help cultivate a culture of free speech on your campus! FIRE is here to provide guidance and resources. We have a team of experts at your disposal who can help decode and demystify your school's policies, help you talk to administrators, and offer advice on tricky free speech questions. Additionally, we can send guides, literature, speakers, and FIRE materials. Please do not hesitate to contact us with questions.

We are here to help!