examples of fallacies

Chapter 16 Persuasive Speaking

By Sarah Stone Watt and Joshua Trey Barnett

http://www.publicspeakingproject.org/persuasive.html

fallacies of faulty assumption

Fallacies of faulty assumption include the causal fallacy, which occurs when the speaker inaccurately identifies a causal relationship. Conservative religious leader Pat Robertson has been ridiculed by journalists and shunned by colleagues for using this fallacy to claim that the U.S. abortion rate caused Hurricane Katrina, or that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's stroke was "divine punishment for 'dividing God's land' and giving Gaza away to the Palestinians" (Goodstein, 2006, para. 2). Other fallacies of faulty assumption include the bandwagon fallacy, or the argument that "everyone is doing it so you should too," and begging the question in which the speaker assumes that questions about their proposition have already been answered in their favor. For example, arguing that a woman will never be elected president of the United States because all previous presidents have been men.

fallacies directed to the person

When arguing against an opponent, speakers sometimes focus too heavily on the person rather than the argument. A common fallacy in this category is an *ad hominem* attack. Here the speaker attacks their opponent as an individual. In a debate about economic recovery strategies one politician may say to another, "your plan will fail because you are not smart enough to understand economics." Here the speaker has questioned their opponent's intelligence, but has not outlined any flaws in their opponent's plan. Another way of focusing on the person is called poisoning the well. In this case, the speaker does not interact with an opponent directly, but discredits them to the audience before they have the chance to speak. A third fallacy directed to the person focuses not on criticizing an opponent, but on flattering the audience. An appeal to flattery focuses on making audiences feel good about themselves as a result of accepting the argument, rather than weighing the merits of the argument itself.

fallacies of case presentation

Speakers must also be careful about the way that they construct their case in support of a proposition. Fallacies of case presentation can be distracting to audience members when they recognize them, and manipulative when they do not. One example of this type of fallacy is a *non sequitur*, which is Latin for "it does not follow" (Beebe & Beebe, 2003, p. 392). A non sequitur occurs when the speaker uses an unconnected idea to support their proposition, such as, "students should have more homework because it is snowing outside." There is no logical connection between the need for homework and snow, or at least the speaker has not offered one, but the audience is invited to make their own assumption regarding the connection. Another fallacy of case presentation is the red herring in which the speaker focuses on an unrelated issue to distract from the one they are supposed to be addressing. For example, an athlete accused of taking performance enhancing drugs may, at a press conference, focus on the good work her charity is doing to fight childhood obesity rather than address the lingering accusations. A third fallacy in this category is the appeal to misplaced authority. In these appeals, recognized authorities from one

area of life are used to endorse a persuasive proposition in another area of life. This happens often with celebrity endorsements such as 50 Cent's advertisements for Vitamin Water. 50 Cent may know a lot about hip-hop, but his understanding of the body's vitamin needs remains untested.

fallacies of suggestion

These fallacies include strategies such as paralepsis, in which the speaker claims they will not bring up an issue in order to suggest that the audience ought to be concerned about that issue (Herrick, 2011). In 2012 Democrats have used this strategy to indict Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney for his personal financial wealth. Democratic commentator Paul Begala (2012) writes, "Romney's wealth is unspeakably vast and his personal consumption grotesquely conspicuous, but that's his business" (para. 6). Although Begala does not directly outline any of Romney's problematic spending practices, he invites the audience to imagine those practices and extrapolate a connection between Romney's personal spending habits and the way he would spend money if elected. Another form of suggestion is the either-or fallacy in which the speaker creates a false choice between only two options, "either we buy a big-screen plasma television or go without TV altogether," rather than exploring other possible options. In these strategies the speaker makes an overt suggestion, but some suggestions are more implicit as in the arrangement fallacy where ideas are associated because of how they are grouped together. For example, workplaces are installing healthy vending machines to help employees make better choices. If a soda machine is replaced with a machine offering water, green tea, tomato juice, and sports drinks, the implication is that sports drinks are a healthy option. In reality many sports drinks have extremely high levels of sugar, which make them an unhealthy choice for most office workers.

appeals to emotion

Just as important as sound logical appeals in a persuasive speech, are sound emotional appeals. A speaker who attempts to manipulate their audience through extreme and unethical emotional appeals is called a **demagogue** (Beebe & Beebe, 2003). These speakers focus heavily on appealing to an audience's emotions, especially their fears and prejudices, at the expense of reasoned argument. Prominent demagogues include figures like Adolf Hitler and Joseph McCarthy. In recent years television figure Glen Beck has been called "the first true demagogue of the information age" (Milbank, 2010, para. 3). Throughout his speeches Beck offers a range of emotion from red faced anger to sobbing tears causing people to speculate that Beck is so good at what he does because he does not truly believe what he is saying, but is instead playing a role that resonates with his audience (Avlon, 2010; Lilla, 2010; Milbank, 2010).

See Chapter 16 for a complete list of source citations.