



# Reading Comprehension

## Fallacies in Reading

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### Recognizing the Strengths/Weaknesses of Arguments

An argument consists of:

1. a list of premises (hypotheses)
2. a conclusion that is supposed to be drawn from the premises.

The premises can be facts or opinions. If a premise is a false fact, then the conclusion may not be true regardless of the strength of the logic used to reach it. Similarly, if a premise is not an acceptable opinion, then the quality of the logic cannot make the conclusion acceptable. Consequently, the first step in determining the strength or weakness of an argument is to decide upon the quality of its separate premises.

The conclusion of a strong argument must follow logically from its premises. The list of premises may have no flaws, but the argument is weak if those premises do not lead logically to the conclusion.

Some classic and common weak arguments are described below. The reader who is familiar with this list is well-prepared to spot most of the weak arguments that will be found in reading passages.

- **Faulty cause and effect:** The premise used as the cause is not sufficient to guarantee the conclusion (effect).

For Example: "She passed the test because she wore her lucky charm" has "she wore her lucky charm" as a premise and "she passed the test" as an unwarranted conclusion.

- **Non sequitur:** The conclusion is an illogical result of the facts stated.

For Example: "People who get cancer drank milk as children" illogically makes a connection between "people who get cancer" and "people who drank milk as children."

- **Begging the question:** The writer makes an assertion of fact that has not been established.

For Example: George Washington was a communist.

- **Circular logic:** A premise is rephrased as the conclusion which means the argument has gone nowhere.

For Example: The bookstore ran out of texts for the course because there are too many students in the class.

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[http://www.hhpublishing.com/\\_onlinecourses/ppstdemo/ppst/readingskills/A13.html](http://www.hhpublishing.com/_onlinecourses/ppstdemo/ppst/readingskills/A13.html)  
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- **Hasty generalization:** The reasoning or argument is extended beyond the specific evidence cited.

For Example: All federal politicians are corrupt.

- **Either/Or:** The reader is expected to choose one of two extreme choices while offered no other possibilities.

For Example: Thinking people will choose either democracy or communism.

- **Faulty analogy:** Insufficient or inappropriate comparisons are made in an attempt to prove a point.

For Example: That politician is a flea hopping around on the issues.

- **Argument to the person (argumentum ad hominem):** The passage attacks a person rather than the person's opinions or issues.

For Example: This instructor can't be trusted because he was a hippie at one time.

- **Argument to the people (argumentum ad populum):** Appeals are made to the feelings or emotions of the reader rather than the other side of the argument.

For Example: When you see the American flag passing by, you won't think that it may pass out of existence if you vote for me.

- **Bandwagon appeal:** The passage claims that everyone believes or does whatever his/her argument is.

For Example: Everyone agrees that Cadillacs are great this year and now is the time to buy one.

- **Red herring:** Irrelevant is used in an attempt to divert attention from a weak argument.

For Example: The voters will want to vote against Joe Brown because they remember what happened in the '60s.

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## Other Examples of Fallacies

<u>Fallacy Type/Fallacy</u>	<u>Definition</u>	<u>Example</u>
Distracting the audience		
--With people		
1. Ad populeum	Appeal to popular opinion	The college should lower tuition because 90% of college students say it's too high.
2. Ad hominem	Attacking the person rather than the argument	This biological theory must be false because it was introduced by a person of known Communist sympathies.
--From weak data		
3. Begging the question	The claim is restated rather than supported	He is not guilty because he is innocent.
4. Non sequitur (also known as Red Herring)	Claim is unrelated to or unsupported by data	There have been some comments that the current Administration is anti-Israeli. This is totally inaccurate. Israel is a great country.
--From the opponent's argument		
5. Straw person	Attacks a weaker or worse form of opponents' argument (caricature)	You should not vote for abortion restrictions because anti-abortion activists believe that all women who have abortions should rot in prison.
--From alternatives		
6. False dilemma	Inaccurately limiting options to two	America, love it or leave it.
--With language		
7. Emotive language	Uses emotional language instead of support and reasoning	How can we allow such terrors to plague our children? We must act immediately to save the hope of our next generation.
8. Ambiguous language	Word choice is misleading or indecipherable; includes word ambiguities (equivocation) and grammar ambiguities (amphiboly)	1. Try our fabulous slimming formula totally free for one month. (What is "free"?) 2. Women make good workers which can help with the success of the business. (Which helps the business—women or good workers?)
False cause fallacies		
9. Post hoc	Mistakes two events where one follows each other as one causing the other	Guns cause gangs; after all, in Japan, where guns are illegal, there are fewer gangs than there are in the U.S.
10. Single cause	Mistakes single for multiple causes	
11. Slippery slope	Mistakes one result for a sequence of results following each other	If we make abortions illegal, the next thing you know we'll be living in a fascist state, where you'll be arrested for not going to church every Sunday.
Other		
12. Appeal to authority	The authority cited lacks actual expertise	According to Michael Jackson, the Republicans are taking over California.
13. False analogy	Compares two things that are not sufficiently alike	Guns aren't violent tools any more than cars are; after all, cars kill more people each year than guns do.
Generalization fallacies		
14. Division	What is true of the whole is true of part	This class is getting a higher than average grade on their speeches, therefore Joe Smith is getting a higher than average grade on his speech.
15. Composition	What is true of the part is true of the whole	U.W. student Joe Smith is a real party animal who sleeps in class and never does his homework. U.W. students are really not the academic successes that they are cracked up to be.

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