

Bright North Star Conversationalists

Union of Saints

Clearly Define:

- What are logical fallacies?
- What are cognitive biases?
- How do I have an academic discussion?
- How do I stay focused on the topic?
- What non-biased research and sources am I able to provide to support my theory or claim?

Common Conversational Fallacies

Logical Fallacies, Reasoning Errors, and Discussion Tactics

When evaluating a serious, professional, or academic discussion, it is useful to distinguish between formal logical fallacies, cognitive biases, unsupported reasoning, and discussion tactics. The following are common problems that can cause an argument to become distracted, unsupported, confusing, or disconnected from the central issue.

1. Red Herring

A **red herring** occurs when someone introduces an unrelated issue, theory, or subject that distracts from the question actually being discussed.

Example:

A discussion concerns whether a particular claim is supported by evidence, and the person changes the subject to an unrelated political theory or historical event.

2. Non Sequitur

A **non sequitur** occurs when a conclusion or claim does not logically follow from the information that preceded it.

Example:

“Several people disagree with this position, therefore the position must be morally wrong.”

The conclusion does not logically follow from the premise.

3. Gish Gallop

A **Gish gallop** occurs when someone presents a large number of claims, theories, objections, or arguments in rapid succession, making it difficult to address each one individually.

The problem is especially significant when the claims are numerous, weakly supported, or unrelated to one another.

4. Topic Shifting

Topic shifting occurs when a person repeatedly moves the conversation from the original subject to different subjects rather than resolving the original question.

Topic shifting can become a red herring when the purpose or effect is to distract from the central issue.

5. Unsupported Assertion

An **unsupported assertion** is a claim presented without sufficient evidence or reasoning to establish it.

Example:

“This is what happened,” without providing evidence demonstrating that it happened.

6. Bare Assertion Fallacy

The **bare assertion fallacy** occurs when someone treats a claim as established simply because they assert it.

Example:

“That person is dishonest because they are dishonest.”

The conclusion is merely repeated rather than demonstrated.

7. Appeal to Possibility

An **appeal to possibility** occurs when someone treats something as credible or established merely because it is possible.

Example:

“There could have been a coordinated effort, therefore there probably was one.”

The possibility itself does not establish probability or fact.

8. Speculation Presented as Fact

This occurs when a theory, hypothesis, possibility, or consideration is presented as though it were an established fact.

Example:

“There are several explanations for this event” becomes “This is what actually happened,” without evidence establishing the conclusion.

9. Argument From Ignorance

An **argument from ignorance** occurs when someone claims that something is true because it has not been proven false, or false because it has not been proven true.

Example:

“No one has proven that this theory is false, so it must be true.”

10. Unsupported Accusation

An **unsupported accusation** occurs when someone makes a serious allegation about another person without sufficient evidence.

Example:

Calling someone a “pervert,” criminal, dishonest person, or other derogatory characterization without evidence supporting the allegation.

The seriousness of the accusation does not substitute for evidence.

11. Ad Hominem

An **ad hominem** argument attacks a person's character, identity, motives, or personal circumstances instead of addressing the substance of their argument.

Example:

“You cannot be right about this because you are a bad person.”

12. Poisoning the Well

Poisoning the well occurs when someone attempts to discredit a person in advance so that what the person subsequently says will be viewed negatively regardless of its actual merits.

Example:

“That person is a pervert, so you should not listen to anything they say.”

The accusation is being used to undermine the person's credibility rather than addressing their actual argument.

13. Appeal to Ridicule

An **appeal to ridicule** occurs when someone mocks an argument or position instead of demonstrating why it is factually or logically wrong.

Humor can be legitimate in conversation, but ridicule becomes problematic when it substitutes for substantive reasoning.

14. Appeal to Anecdote

An **appeal to anecdote** occurs when a personal story or individual experience is treated as sufficient evidence for a broader claim.

Example:

“This happened to someone I know, therefore this must generally be what happens.”

An anecdote can be relevant evidence, but it generally cannot establish a broad statistical conclusion by itself.

15. Hasty Generalization

A **hasty generalization** occurs when someone draws a broad conclusion from an insufficient or unrepresentative number of examples.

Example:

“Three people behaved this way, therefore people in this entire group behave this way.”

16. Cherry Picking

Cherry picking occurs when someone selectively chooses evidence, examples, or cases that support their conclusion while ignoring relevant evidence that could contradict or complicate it.

This can produce a misleading picture of the larger issue.

17. Availability Heuristic

The **availability heuristic** is a cognitive bias in which people give disproportionate weight to information that is particularly memorable, recent, emotional, dramatic, or widely publicized.

For example, heavily covered cases may seem more common or representative simply because they are easier to recall.

18. Base Rate Neglect

Base rate neglect occurs when someone focuses on a striking individual case while ignoring the broader statistical prevalence of the phenomenon.

A highly publicized case may be real while still being statistically unusual.

19. Selection Bias

Selection bias occurs when the cases or information being considered are systematically unrepresentative of the larger population or question.

This is particularly relevant when someone uses selected media stories to make conclusions about an entire population.

20. Framing Effect

The **framing effect** occurs when the way information is presented influences how people interpret it, even when the underlying facts remain the same.

The presentation, wording, imagery, or emphasis surrounding an event can influence the perceived significance of the event.

21. Appeal to Popularity

An **appeal to popularity**, or *argumentum ad populum*, occurs when someone treats a belief as true or correct because many people believe it.

Example:

“Everyone knows this is true, so it must be true.”

Popularity does not independently establish factual accuracy.

22. Bandwagon Reasoning

Bandwagon reasoning is closely related to appeal to popularity. It treats widespread acceptance as evidence that a position is correct.

This can become particularly relevant when someone assumes that the prevailing opinion within a political, social, academic, religious, or cultural community must be correct.

23. Appeal to Authority

An **appeal to authority** occurs when someone treats a claim as established merely because an influential person or organization supports it.

An expert's opinion can be valuable evidence, but the authority's position does not automatically make every claim true.

24. Groupthink

Groupthink is a psychological and social phenomenon rather than a formal logical fallacy.

It occurs when conformity within a group discourages independent examination, dissent, questioning, or consideration of alternative explanations.

A person may accept a commonly held position within their political or cultural community without independently examining the evidence.

25. Confirmation Bias

Confirmation bias is the tendency to seek, interpret, remember, or give greater weight to information that supports an existing belief while discounting information that challenges it.

This can affect people across every political, cultural, religious, and ideological viewpoint.

26. Ideological Conformity

Ideological conformity occurs when a person accepts the premises or conclusions associated with a particular ideological framework without independently establishing whether those premises are supported.

The problem is not the ideology itself. The issue is treating ideological assumptions as established facts without examining them.

27. Dogmatic Reasoning

Dogmatic reasoning occurs when a person treats a proposition as unquestionably true and gives insufficient consideration to evidence, uncertainty, or reasonable alternatives.

This can prevent meaningful examination of competing explanations.

28. Begging the Question

Begging the question, or circular reasoning, occurs when an argument assumes the conclusion it is supposed to establish.

Example:

“This policy is discriminatory because it is a discriminatory policy.”

The conclusion is contained within the premise rather than independently demonstrated.

29. Slippery Slope

A **slippery slope** occurs when someone argues that one action or development will inevitably lead to increasingly extreme consequences without adequately establishing the causal steps between them.

Example:

“If this policy is accepted, eventually society will inevitably reach an extreme outcome.”

The intermediate steps must be demonstrated rather than assumed.

30. Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization occurs when someone takes a limited observation and extends it far beyond what the evidence supports.

It frequently overlaps with hasty generalization and can cause a specific event to become a sweeping claim about an entire population or phenomenon.

31. Conceptual Drift

Conceptual drift occurs when the meaning or scope of the original subject gradually changes during a discussion.

The conversation may begin with a specific question but eventually address a much broader or substantially different question without explicitly acknowledging the change.

32. Speculative Escalation

Speculative escalation describes a pattern in which one possibility is used as the foundation for another possibility, which then becomes the foundation for another increasingly speculative conclusion.

Eventually, the argument can become substantially removed from the original evidence.

33. Argumentative Escalation

Argumentative escalation occurs when the claims in an argument progressively become more extreme, expansive, or consequential without a corresponding increase in evidence.

The argument can move from a reasonable consideration to increasingly broad conclusions that have not been independently established.

34. Derailment

Derailment occurs when a discussion moves away from its central question and becomes focused on unrelated subjects.

Derailment can involve political arguments, personal stories, jokes, accusations, speculative theories, or other subjects that prevent the original issue from being examined.

35. Personalization

Personalization occurs when an objective or substantive discussion is shifted toward the personal characteristics, experiences, motives, or private circumstances of the people involved.

It becomes particularly problematic when the personal material is irrelevant to the factual question.

36. Appeal to Emotion

An **appeal to emotion** occurs when emotional reactions are used in place of relevant evidence or reasoning.

Fear, anger, disgust, embarrassment, sympathy, or outrage can all be used in this manner.

Emotions can be relevant to a discussion, but emotional impact does not by itself establish factual accuracy.

37. Argument by Insinuation

Argument by insinuation occurs when someone introduces suggestive information or implications without directly establishing the accusation or conclusion.

Instead of demonstrating the claim, the person encourages the listener to reach the desired conclusion themselves.

38. Boundary Violation in Discussion

A **boundary violation** is not technically a logical fallacy. It describes conduct in which someone introduces personal, intrusive, sexual, provocative, or otherwise inappropriate subjects into a setting where those subjects are unrelated to the legitimate purpose of the discussion.

In a professional or academic environment, this can interfere with substantive discussion even when the material has no logical relationship to the subject.

39. Anecdotal Distraction

Anecdotal distraction describes the use of personal stories to move attention away from the central evidence or analytical question.

The story may be genuine while still being irrelevant to the issue being evaluated.

40. Media Amplification Bias

Media amplification bias describes the tendency to give disproportionate attention to events because they receive extensive media coverage.

The fact that an event receives substantial coverage does not necessarily mean that it is statistically representative of the larger phenomenon.

Overall Pattern

When several of these problems occur together, it may be more accurate to describe the discussion as a **pattern of poor reasoning** rather than attempting to identify one single fallacy.

For example:

The discussion relies on unsupported assertions and speculation, introduces unrelated theories and personal anecdotes, shifts away from the central issue, relies on highly publicized individual cases rather than representative evidence, makes unsupported personal accusations, appeals to ideological or group assumptions, and progressively moves into increasingly speculative and disconnected territory.

A professional or academic discussion is generally strongest when it:

1. Defines the central question clearly.

2. Separates facts from theories and possibilities.
3. Provides evidence for substantive claims.
4. Distinguishes individual anecdotes from representative data.
5. Considers relevant evidence rather than selectively chosen examples.
6. Avoids unsupported personal accusations.
7. Keeps personal matters separate when they are irrelevant.
8. Distinguishes expert evidence from appeals to authority.
9. Allows competing explanations to be examined.
10. Maintains a clear connection between evidence, premises, and conclusions.

The central issue is ultimately **whether the conclusion is supported by relevant evidence and valid reasoning**. A discussion can contain unusual theories, controversial political positions, personal experiences, or minority viewpoints and still be logically sound if the claims are clearly identified as such and supported appropriately.