Logical Fallacies & The Simpsons


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1. Appeal to Authority

Form: Authority A believes that P is true.
      Therefore, P is true.

Exposition:
Not all arguments from expert opinion are fallacious, and for this reason some authorities on logic have taken to labeling this fallacy as “appeal to false authority” or “argument from questionable authority”.
We must often rely upon expert opinion when drawing conclusions about technical matters where we lack the time or expertise to form an informed opinion. For instance, those of us who are not physicians usually rely upon those who are when making medical decisions, and we are not wrong to do so….

The Simpsons - a model of bad logic

In Lemon of Troy, Bart writes his name in wet cement. Rather than explain to Bart the problem with his behavior, Marge asks him, “What would Jebediah Springfield say?” Unimpressed with her appeal to authority, Bart replies, “I think he’d be cool with it.”

English 12 papers - avoid these examples of bad logic

“James Frazer studied myth for many years, and his book, ‘The Golden Bough,’ was a groundbreaking work on mythology. A pioneer and expert in his field, his theory that myth was a primitive form of science makes a lot of sense.”

2. Two Wrongs Make a Right

Exposition:
This fallacy involves the attempt to justify a wrong action by pointing to another wrong action. Often, the other wrong action is of the same type or committed by the accuser, in which case it is the subfallacy Tu Quoque.
Two Wrongs Make a Right needs to be distinguished from retaliation or punishment, as it would not do to condemn these on logical grounds, though they may be morally objectionable. So, when children defend themselves by hitting or kicking another child on the grounds of “he started it!”, they may be morally to blame, but not logically.
Rather, this fallacy is committed when the wrong being defended is not directed at the accuser, and so is not retaliatory. Attempting to justify committing a wrong on the grounds that someone else is guilty of another wrong is clearly a Red Herring, because if this form of argument were cogent, one could justify anything.

The Simpsons - a model of bad logic

In Lemon of Troy, Marge asks Homer to assist her in an argument against Bart’s vandalism, to “help me make a big deal of this.” Homer thinks that two wrongs make a right: Actor Humphry Bogart also vandalized a sidewalk, while placing his hands in the walk of fame in Hollywood, and no one cared.

English 12 papers - avoid these examples of bad logic

“There is no reason to respect the theory on myth put forward by Frazer, because he didn’t show respect to the myths written by our ancestors.”
3. Appeal to Force

Exposition:
Appeal to Force is a technique of distraction which occurs when force, or the threat of force, is used to “win” a debate. More frequently, it is used to cover up the fact that the threatener is losing. The name “argumentum ad baculum” (“argument by the stick”) alludes to the use of a stick, or club, to beat someone.

This fallacy is committed whenever force or the threat of it is introduced into a rational discussion in order to derail it. For example, extremists will disrupt debates by starting riots when their side appears to be losing. Even audience members “shouting down” a debater whom they disagree with in order to prevent a case from being heard are resorting to “ad baculum”.

The Simpsons - a model of bad logic

In Lemon of Troy, Bart argues with a Shelbyville kid about whose town “sucks.” Told to stop talking bad about Springfield, the Shelbyvillian appeals to force, asking Bart, “Why don’t you make me?”

English 12 class discussion - avoid these examples of bad logic

Shouting. Talking over other students. Slamming hands on table. Aggressive posturing. Telling people to shut up…

4. Argumentum ad Hominem

Translation: “Argument against the man” (Latin)

Exposition:
A debater commits the Ad Hominem Fallacy when he introduces irrelevant personal premises about his opponent. Such red herrings may successfully distract the opponent or the audience from the topic of the debate.

The Simpsons - a model of bad logic

In Lemon of Troy, Bart argues with a Shelbyville kid about whose town “sucks.” Bart calls his opponent “trash.” The Shellbyvillian calls Bart a “garbage man.” None of these ad hominems bear on the argument at hand, the virtues and failings of the each town.

English 12 papers - avoid these examples of bad logic

“Freud’s theory on myth is truly sick. He’s obviously a depraved individual, and an idiot. Also, he was a well-known drug user, so how good could his theories be?”

5. Tu Quoque

Latin: “You’re another”, AKA: “You, also” or “So’s You.”

Type: Argumentum ad Hominem / Two Wrongs Make a Right

Exposition:
A very common fallacy in which one attempts to defend oneself or another from criticism by turning the critique back against the accuser. This is a classic Red Herring since whether the accuser is guilty of the same, or a similar, wrong is irrelevant to the truth of the original charge.

The Simpsons - a model of bad logic

In Lemon of Troy, Bart argues with a Shelbyville kid about whose town “sucks.” In an exchange of ad hominems, the Shelbyvillian calls Bart a “garbage man.” Bart replies, “it takes one to know one.” This

English 12 papers - avoid these examples of bad logic

“Freud’s theory on myth must be the result of his own desires for his mother, and hatred for his father.”
quick quiz - lemon of troy, clip c

A) The Shelbyvillian throws a rock into Springfield.

1. Appeal to Authority 4. Argumentum ad Hominem
2. Two Wrongs Make a Right 5. Tu Quoque
3. Appeal to Force

B) The Shelbyvillian tells Bart, “You’re stupid, you stupid, weak baby.”

1. Appeal to Authority 4. Argumentum ad Hominem
2. Two Wrongs Make a Right 5. Tu Quoque
3. Appeal to Force

C) Millhouse responds to the theft of the precious lemons by throwing – lemons.

1. Appeal to Authority 4. Argumentum ad Hominem
2. Two Wrongs Make a Right 5. Tu Quoque
3. Appeal to Force

6. Genetic Fallacy

Exposition:
The Genetic Fallacy is the most general fallacy of irrelevancy involving the origins or history of an idea. It is fallacious to either endorse or condemn an idea based on its past, rather than on its present, merits or demerits, unless its past in some way affects its present value. For instance, the origin of evidence can be quite relevant to its evaluation, especially in historical investigations. The origin of testimony—whether first hand, hearsay, or rumor—carries weight in evaluating it.

In contrast, the value of many scientific ideas can be objectively evaluated by established techniques, so that the origin or history of the idea is irrelevant to its value.

The Simpsons - a model of bad logic

In Lemon of Troy, clip D, Mr. VanHouten says that he “hates those Shelbyville jerks.” Mrs. VanHouten reminds him that she’s from Shelbyville. Mr. VanHouten retorts: “And it tears me up inside.” This genetic fallacy focuses on people’s origins, rather than their relevant qualities.

English 12 papers - avoid these examples of bad logic

“The theories we read on myth were from people who wrote more than 50 years ago. Since then, people’s thinking has progressed a great deal, and has gone beyond the ideas from those times.”

7. Red Herring  AKA: Irrelevant Thesis

Exposition:
This is the most general fallacy of irrelevance. The name comes from the reputed practice of escaped convicts using pickled herrings to throw bloodhounds off the scent. Thus, a “red herring” argument is one which distracts the audience from the issue in question through the introduction of some irrelevancy.

The Simpsons - a model of bad logic

In Lemon of Troy, clip D, Marge blames herself for filling Bart with town pride with her speech against vandalism. Homer throws a red herring into the discussion – that Marge let Bart wear a bathing suit instead of underwear, which turned him bad. Afterward, he “reminds” Marge about her little speech. These red herrings throw any scent of blame for Bart’s behavior off of Homer himself.

English 12 papers - avoid these examples of bad logic
“Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank wrote about the incest themes found in many myths. I think that incest is wrong. How could you sleep with your mother, or father? It might have been happening back in the day, but nowadays, it's illegal, and disgusting.”

8. Straw Man

Exposition:
Judging from my experience, Straw Man is one of the commonest of fallacies. It is endemic in public debates on politics, ethics, and religion. “Straw man” is one of the best-named fallacies, because it is both memorable and vividly illustrates the nature of the fallacy. Imagine a fight in which one of the combatants sets up a man of straw, attacks it, then proclaims victory. All the while, the real opponent stands by untouched. In a dialectical contest, this is what the Straw Man amounts to.

The Straw Man is a type of Red Herring because the arguer is attempting to refute his opponent’s position, and in the dialectical context is required to do so, but instead attacks a position—the “straw man”—not held by his opponent. In a Straw Man argument, the arguer argues to a conclusion that denies the “straw man” he has set up, but misses the dialectical target. There may be nothing wrong with the argument presented by the arguer when it is taken out of this dialectical context, that is, it may be a perfectly good argument against the straw man. It is only because the onus probandi is on the arguer to argue against the dialectical target that a Straw Man fallacy is committed. So, the fallacy is not simply the argument, but the entire situation of the argument occurring in such a dialectical context.

The Simpsons - a model of bad logic

In Lisa the Vegetarian, clip A, Lisa has requested vegetarian school lunches, so Principal Skinner shows her class an educational film about the virtues of being a carnivore, titled, “Meat and You: Partners in Freedom.” The title alone sets-up a straw man, by implying that anyone against eating meat is somehow against freedom.

English 12 papers - avoid these examples of bad logic

“Freud said that the cherished mother figure we see so often in myth, and in life, is just a product of our unconscious minds. Well, Freud might think that the image of the mother figure is nothing but a figment from our imaginations, but I think mothers deserve respect and reverence as the ones who raised us, and who sacrificed so much for us. I owe my life to my mother, and I will respect her no matter what Freud’s theory says.”

quick quiz - Lisa the Vegetarian, clip A

A) Jimmy to Troy McClure: “Mr. McClure, I have a crazy friend who says it’s wrong to eat meat. Is he crazy?”


B) Troy McClure paraphrases a scientician: “He’ll tell you that in nature, one creature invariably eats another to survive.”

C) Troy McClure warns the boy in the film: “Don’t kid yourself, Jimmy. If a cow ever got the chance, he’d eat you, and everyone you care about.”

D) At the end of the film, Jimmy declares, “Wow, Mr. McClure! I was a grade A moron to ever question eating meat.”

quick quiz - Lisa the Vegetarian, clip B

E) Rejecting Lisa’s attempt to serve a vegetarian dish at her father’s barbeque, Barney shouts, “Go back to Russia!”

9. Quoting Out of Context

Exposition:
The quote out of context is to remove a passage from its surrounding matter in such a way as to distort its meaning. The context in which a passage occurs always contributes to its meaning, and the shorter the passage the larger the contribution. For this reason, the quoter must always be careful to quote enough of the context not to misrepresent the meaning of the quote.

The Simpsons - a model of bad logic

In Lisa the Vegetarian, clip C, the children take Lisa’s quote of context, and taunt her for admitting that she will marry a carrot, even though her “admission” was made with exasperated sarcasm.

English 12 papers - avoid these examples of bad logic

"When Weigle says, ‘On the whole, goddesses play second fiddle to gods in cosmogonic and origin myths dealing with the early stages of creation,’ she is grossly inaccurate, since no musical instruments are found in most creation myths, and no fiddles can be found in any myths at all, as this instrument came long after the age of myth.”

10. Bandwagon Fallacy         AKA: Appeal to Popularity

Form: Idea i is popular. Therefore, i is correct.

Exposition:
The Bandwagon Fallacy is committed whenever one argues for an idea based upon an irrelevant appeal to its popularity. The name comes from the phrase “jumping on the bandwagon”, referring to joining a cause because of its popularity.

The Simpsons - a model of bad logic
In *Lisa the Iconoclast*, clip A, Lisa visits the Jebadiah Springfield museum and discovers the ugly truth about her town's hero. After she reveals the truth to her family, Marge replies, “Lisa, honey, when my family first came to this state, they had a choice between living in Springfield, or Stenchburg. You know why they chose Springfield? Because everyone knows that Jebadiah Springfield was a true American hero. End of story.” Marge appeals to the popularity of an idea as proof of that idea, committing the **bandwagon fallacy**.

English 12 papers - avoid these examples of bad logic

“Marx called religion the ‘opiate of the masses.’ But there aren’t many communists left, and billions of believers in God. This proves Marx wrong, and religion right.”

**quick quiz** - “Lisa the Iconoclast,” clip B

A) When denying the truth of Lisa’s research on Jebediah, her teacher says, “This is nothing but dead white male bashing from a PC thug. It's women like you who keep the rest of us from landing a husband.”

1. Appeal to Authority 6. Genetic Fallacy
2. Two Wrongs Make a Right 7. Red Herring
3. Appeal to Force 8. Straw Man
5. Tu Quoque 10. Bandwagon Fallacy

11. One-Sidedness

Scholars are expected to examine *all* of the evidence and come to a conclusion. Thus, a one-sided lack of objectivity is a cardinal scholarly sin. This is why scholars should listen to others in their field even when --in fact, *especially* when-- they disagree. It is only when scholars have heard and weighed all of the evidence, and considered all of the arguments, that they can come to an objective conclusion.

The Simpsons - a model of bad logic

In *Lisa the Iconoclast*, clip C, Lisa tries to convince the Jebadiah historian of the hero’s dark history. He refuses to consider her evidence or arguments, while a good scholar, and any good thinker, must avoid **one-sidedness**.

English 12 papers - avoid these examples of bad logic

“Freud and Rank were wrong in all of their ideas. They are so off the mark that they’re not even worth going in to.”

**quick quiz** - “Lisa the Iconoclast,” clip D

A) Lisa declares the truth about Jebadiah to Moe’s bar. Moe responds, “Your hero-phobia sickens me.”

1. Appeal to Authority 6. Genetic Fallacy
2. Two Wrongs Make a Right 7. Red Herring
3. Appeal to Force 8. Straw Man
5. Tu Quoque 10. Bandwagon Fallacy
11. One-sided

**quick quiz** - “Lisa the Iconoclast,” clip E

B) To counter Lisa’s argument about Jebadiah, Mayor Quimby says, “You are tampering with forces you can’t understand. We have major corporations sponsoring this event.”
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quick quiz - “Lisa the Iconoclast,” clip F

C) When Lisa accuses the Jebadiah historian of concealing evidence, he counters, “That’s a lie! I’m an antiquarian, damn it! It’s my job to seek out the truth.”

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quick quiz - “Lisa the Iconoclast,” clip G

D) At the Jebadiah parade, Lisa says, “Regardless of who said it, ‘A noble spirit enbiggens the smallest man.’” She is arguing against which of the following fallacies?

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quick quiz - “curfew,” clip A

E) At Moe’s bar, Homer changes his opinion on the local baseball team after discovering that they’re in the playoffs.

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12. Appeal to Ignorance

**Form:**

There is no evidence against \( p \).

Therefore, \( p \).

**Or:**

There is no evidence for \( p \).

Therefore, not \( p \).

**Exposition:**

An appeal to ignorance is an argument for or against a proposition on the basis of a lack of evidence against or for it. If there is positive evidence for the conclusion, then of course we have other reasons for accepting it, but a lack of evidence by itself is no evidence.

The Simpsons - a model of bad logic

In Curfew, clip B, Chief Wiggum admits that they have no suspects for the vandalism at Springfield Elementary. In an appeal to ignorance, he says, “That’s why we’re jumping to the conclusion that this was the work of no good punk kids.”
“Frazer said that primitive man was trying to manipulate nature by practicing magic, and these attempts at manipulation are found in early myth and ritual. However, none of the myths say anything about humans trying to control nature. No evidence of direct efforts at manipulation are present in the myths we read. His theory has no proof.”

13. Slippery Slope

Exposition: There are two related types of fallacy referred to as “slippery slopes”:

1. **Semantic Version:**
   A differs from Z by a continuum of insignificant changes, and there is no non-arbitrary place at which a sharp line between the two can be drawn.
   Therefore, there is really no difference between A and Z.

   This type plays upon the vagueness of the distinction between two terms that lie on a continuum. For instance, the concepts of “bald” and “hairy” lie at opposite ends of a spectrum of hairiness. This continuum is the “slope”, and it is the lack of a non-arbitrary line between hairiness and baldness that makes it “slippery”. We could, of course, decide to count, say, 10,000 hairs or less as the definition of “bald”, but this would be arbitrary. Why not 10,001 or 9,999? Obviously, no answer can be given other than the fact that we prefer round numbers, but round numbers are an artifact of our base 10 numbering system. However, it does not follow from the fact that there is no sharp, non-arbitrary line between “bald” and “hairy” that there really is no difference between the two. A difference in degree is still a difference.

2. **Causal Version:**
   If A is permitted, then by a gradual series of small steps through B, C, ..., X, Y, eventually Z will be too.
   We should not permit Z.
   Therefore, we should not permit A.

   This type is based upon the claim that allowing a controversial type of action will lead inevitably to allowing some admittedly bad type of action. It is the slide from A to Z via the intermediate steps B through Y that is the “slope”, and the smallness of each step that makes it “slippery”.

   This type of argument is by no means invariably fallacious, but the strength of the argument is inversely proportional to the number of steps between A and Z, and directly proportional to the causal strength of the connections between adjacent steps. If there are many intervening steps, and the causal connections between them are weak, or even unknown, then the resulting argument will be very weak, if not downright fallacious.

The Simpsons – a model of bad logic

In The Cartridge Family, clip A, Homer says, “If I didn’t have this gun, the King of England could just walk in here any time he wants, and start shoved you around.” This casual version of the slippery slope starts with premise A, “If I didn’t have this gun,” and leaps to premise Z, the king shoving Lisa around. The problem with this slope is that the causal chain of events from A to Z are not at all clear, though A to Z is presented as following from necessity.

14. Hasty Generalization

Exposition:
This is the fallacy of generalizing about a population based upon a sample which is too small to be representative. If the population is heterogeneous, then the sample needs to be large enough to represent the population’s variability. With a completely homogeneous population, a sample of one is sufficiently large, so it is impossible to put an absolute lower limit on sample size. Rather, sample size depends directly upon the variability of the population: the more heterogeneous a
population, the larger the sample required. For instance, people tend to be quite variable in their political opinions, so that public opinion polls need fairly large samples to be accurate.

The Simpsons - a model of bad logic

In *Apu is an Illegal Immigrant*, clip A, Homer declares, “I’m sick of these constant bear attacks. It’s like a freakin’ country bear-jamboo around here.” Ned replies, “Well, now, realistically, Homer, I’ve lived some 30-odd years. This is the first and only bear I’ve ever seen.” Homer makes a hasty generalization, but Ned Flanders refutes it.

English 12 papers - avoid these examples of bad logic

“Freud and Rank present the idea of the Oedipus complex as a general phenomenon in human psychology. Well, I don’t have an Oedipus complex. I have no desire to kill my father, nor to sleep with my mother. How could they be right?”

quick quiz - “Apu is an illegal immigrant,” clip a

A) After Ned Flanders refutes Homer’s hasty generalization about bears, Homer responds, “Hey, if you want wild bears eating your children, and scaring away your salmon, that’s your business. But I’m not gunna take it!”

1. Appeal to Authority  8. Straw Man
2. Two Wrongs Make a Right  9. Quoting Out of Context
3. Appeal to Force  10. Bandwagon Fallacy
4. Argumentum ad Hominem  11. One-sided
5. Tu Quoque  12. Appeal to Ignorance
6. Genetic Fallacy  13. Slippery Slope

quick quiz - “Apu is an illegal immigrant,” clip b

B) Homer says, “Ah, not a bear in sight. The bear patrol must be working like a charm.”

1. Appeal to Authority  8. Straw Man
2. Two Wrongs Make a Right  9. Quoting Out of Context
3. Appeal to Force  10. Bandwagon Fallacy
4. Argumentum ad Hominem  11. One-sided
5. Tu Quoque  12. Appeal to Ignorance
6. Genetic Fallacy  13. Slippery Slope

quick quiz - “Apu is an illegal immigrant,” clip c

C) During the protest against high taxes, Mrs. Lovejoy pleads to Mayor Quimby, “Won’t you think of the children?”

1. Appeal to Authority  8. Straw Man
2. Two Wrongs Make a Right  9. Quoting Out of Context
3. Appeal to Force  10. Bandwagon Fallacy
4. Argumentum ad Hominem  11. One-sided
5. Tu Quoque  12. Appeal to Ignorance
6. Genetic Fallacy  13. Slippery Slope

quick quiz - “Apu is an illegal immigrant,” clip c

D) Addressing the tax protesters, Mayor Quimby says, “People, your taxes are high because of illegal immigrants!”
1. Appeal to Authority
2. Two Wrongs Make a Right
3. Appeal to Force
4. Argumentum ad Hominem
5. Tu Quoque
6. Genetic Fallacy
7. Red Herring
8. Straw Man
9. Quoting Out of Context
10. Bandwagon Fallacy
11. One-sided
12. Appeal to Ignorance
13. Slippery Slope
14. Hasty Generalization

quick quiz – “Apu is an illegal immigrant,” clip d

E) Defending his support of Proposition 24, Homer says, “Open your eyes, Lisa. Our schools are so jam-packed with immigrants, kids like Bart have lost the will to learn.”

15. Appeal to Consequences

Exposition:
Arguing that a proposition is true because belief in it has good consequences, or that it is false because belief in it has bad consequences is often an irrelevancy. For instance, a child’s belief in Santa Claus may have good consequences in making the child happy and well-behaved, but these facts have nothing to do with whether there really is a Santa Claus. Beliefs have many consequences, both good and bad. For instance, belief that smoking cigarettes causes lung cancer may have such bad consequences as frightening cigarette smokers or making them depressed, but it may also have such good consequences as motivating people to stop smoking, thus lowering their risk of cancer. However, the most important consequences of the belief, or lack thereof, that smoking causes lung cancer are affected by the fact that it does so. In other words, we cannot determine the truth-value of a belief from its consequences alone, since many of those consequences are dependent upon its truth-value.

English 12 papers – avoid these examples of bad logic

“If Durkheim were right about myth being a vehicle for the expression of a society’s values, then my religious beliefs would be meaningless, and the God to which I pray would be nothing but a symbol for society. However, God means everything, and Durkheim’s ideas are nothing.”

16. False Dilemma

Exposition:
Also referred to as the “black and white” fallacy and “false dichotomy”, bifurcation occurs if someone presents a situation as having only two alternatives, where in fact other alternatives exist or can exist. (from www.infidels.org)

English 12 papers – avoid these examples of bad logic

“Either the events in Genesis happened and it’s true, or they didn’t happen, and God’s a lie.”

17. Intentional Fallacy

Exposition:
The dubious critical practice of seeking to decipher a text’s meaning by determining the author’s intentions. [Aidan Arrowsmith]
When the ancient Greeks wrote their creation stories, they were describing their religious beliefs, and never intended their readers to see anything like sexual desire for their mothers. Freud violates the intent of the original authors when he interprets the stories outside their original meaning.

18. Affective Fallacy

Exposition: The fallacy of confusing a work of literature with its effects on the reader. To a New Critic, meaning exists in the words of the text, and can therefore be observed objectively. Its emotional effect on actual readers is irrelevant.

(from Lynch, english.montclair.edu/isaacs/605LitResearch/litemFA02.htm)

The Yoruba stories are full of moving symbolism and imagery, of gripping detail and heart-breaking romance. They moved me more than any other stories, and mean more to me than the boring myths and dry theories.