Examples of Informal Fallacies

The following examples were used during lectures. Note that this document contains only those examples that appeared in a powerpoint presentation. It does not contain examples that were written on the board. Consequently, this document does not list every fallacy we discussed in class. For a complete list, consult the distinct document available on the website.

1. Begging the Question
   a. (1) The bible says that God exists.
      (2) The bible was inspired by God.
      (3) Anything inspired by God is true.
      (4) Therefore, God exists.
   b. If such actions were not illegal, then they would not be prohibited by the law.
   c. I am not lying. Since I'm not lying, I must be telling the truth.

2. Complex Question
   a. How long have you been a jerk?
   b. Lawyer: The figures seem to indicate that your sales increased as a result of these misleading statements. Is that correct?

3. Incomplete Enumeration (False Dichotomy)
   a. Book Title: Napoleon III: Enlightened Statesman or Proto-Fascist?
   b. Either we invade Iran, or we don’t do anything. Clearly, not doing anything won’t work. So we must invade Iran.

4. Abusive Ad Hominem
   a. You may argue that socialism is the best form of government, but you are just being gullible.
   b. I can’t believe anyone listens to what the NRA has to say – they’re a bunch of ignorant yokels.
   c. The Dali Lama argues that China has no right to occupy Tibet, and that the West should do something about it. But the Dalí Lama just wants the Chinese to leave so he can return as a leader of his own country.
5. Circumstantial Ad Hominem
   a. We should doubt the conclusions of research on the effect of smoking on health because it was funded by tobacco companies.
   b. John Ashcroft and the Justice Department announced they are going to investigate the White House’s role in disclosing the name of a CIA agent. But certainly we can’t trust Ashcroft’s investigation – he was appointed by Bush!

6. Tu Quoque
   a. Creationism is sometimes accused of being unscientific – of being merely a matter of faith, but the theory of evolution is also just based on faith.
   b. Diplomacy may not succeed, but there is not guarantee that military force will either.

7. Red Herring
   a. Regarding the role of CFCs in producing stratospheric chlorine, D. L. Ray wrote: “Sea water evaporation provides the atmosphere with 600 million tons of chloride per year.”
   b. Bette Hileman argues that the increase in greenhouse gasses is caused by manmade sources. S. Milloy responds, writing, “Bette presumes to write about the climate change issue; she should know some basics – like the fact that about 98 percent of greenhouse gases are natural and not manmade”

8. Straw Man
   a. Creationists say that scientists suppose that living things simply fell together by chance. But this characterization of what scientists believe ignores the central Darwinian insight that Nature ratchets up by saving what works and discarding what doesn’t.
   b. If guns were microbes, we would launch a national war to eradicate them. (from an article entitled ‘Time to declare war – on guns’, by Art Caplan, on MSNBC website).

9. Appeal to the People (Ad Populum)
   a. “Yet I am not a man so iron-hearted to be unaffected by the grief of my most dear and loving brother, present here, nor by the tears of all these friends you see around me. Nor can I prevent my thoughts being often recalled to my own home by my despondent wife, my terrified daughter (whom I think the state is cherishing as a sort of pledge for my loyalty as consul), or by my son-in-law who stands within my view awaiting anxiously the result of this day” (Cicero, fourth oration against Cataline)
b. Surely air strikes against suspected terrorist strongholds are justified, regardless of civilian casualties. Beheading people who are crying for mercy – and videotaping it! – is horrible and despicable and deplorable!

10. Appeal to Common Practice (Steamrolling)

a. I should get an IPod – everyone else has one!

b. Ted Kennedy has accused the Bush Administration of “fraud” regarding its apparently inflating the importance of intelligence regarding Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. But so-and-so, a scholar at such-and-such university, notes that the type of language used by the Bush Administration is simply to be expected given the circumstances.

11. Appeal to Force (Ad Baculum)

a. Anyone who does not accept the New Testament as truth will burn forever in hell.

b. Either grant me custody of the children, or I’ll sue your ass off.

12. Appeal to Pity (Ad Misericordiam)


Quote: "After a debate touching on their own four-legged friends, senators [of the California senate] voted to forbid condominiums and mobile home parks from completely banning pets.

Supporters said the bill would help many Californians, including older residents, whose lives could be brightened by animals.

Arguing for the bill, Senate leader John Burton, D-San Francisco, recalled that his own mother was greatly comforted by her little dog after Burton’s father passed away.

"That poodle was a companion of my mother, who naturally, after the death of my father, was living at home alone," Burton said.

b. A substantial federal subsidy for the province's wine industry is definitely needed. Grape growers have suffered from a late spring, a killing frost, and a serious shortage of field help. The resulting losses have severely depressed the entire industry.

13. Appeal to Ignorance

a. We should continue to allow abortion, because no one can tell when a fetus becomes a person.
b. Science cannot prove that God does not exist, therefore God exists.

c. Joseph McCarthy, speaking of one of the names on his list of alleged Communists in the State Department: “I do not have much information on this except the general statement of the agency that there is nothing in the files to disprove his Communist connections.” (Quoted in Rovere, R. H., Senator Joe McCarthy, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959; p. 132).

d. Our failure to discover Iraqi weapons of mass destruction is a testament to Saddam’s ingenuity in concealing them.

14. Appeal to Authority

a. The prominent ethicist Peter Singer tells us that “Most New Testament scholars believe that whoever wrote the Gospel According to Matthew himself composed the Sermon on the Mount, basing it on various saying of Jesus that had been written down earlier.” (The President of Good and Evil, p. 98) So we should doubt that Jesus ever preached the infamous Sermon at all.

b. John Madden (the football personality) argues that artificial intelligence will fail. Therefore, we should doubt the possibility of intelligent machines.

c. Stephen Hawking believes that black holes emit radiation. [Note – this is a non-fallacious appeal to authority.]

15. Misapplication

a. Terrence has been caught stealing candy from O’Leary’s general store three times. The laws of the state of California state that, after three strikes, you’re out. So I have no choice but to sentence Terrence to 7 years of incarceration.

b. “…are we to say that justice or right is simply to speak the truth and to pay back any debt one may have contracted? Or are these same actions sometimes right and sometimes wrong? I mean this sort of thing, for example: everyone would surely agree that if a friend has deposited weapons with you when he was sane, and he asks them when he is out of his mind, you should not return them. The man who returns them is not doing right, nor is one who is willing to tell the whole truth to a man in such a state.” (Plato’s Republic).

16. Hasty Generalization

a. Sam is riding her bike in her home town in Maine, minding her own business. A station wagon comes up behind her and the driver starts beeping his horn and then tries to force her off the road. As he goes by, the driver yells "get on the sidewalk where you belong!" Sam sees that the car has Massachusetts plates and concludes that all Massachusetts drivers are jerks.

17. False Cause
a. The skin taking on a yellow tinge is correlated with a general lack of energy. Therefore, yellow skin causes lack of energy.

b. The current levels of poverty and health in children are worse now than prior to implementing the sanctions. Therefore, the sanctions caused the decline in health and increase in poverty.

c. Twenty years ago, the economy was in shambles. Unemployment was at 7.1 percent, inflation at 13.5 percent, and interest rates at 15.3 percent. The Democratic Party accepted that malaise as the price the nation had to pay for Big Government, and in so doing lost the confidence of the American people. Inspired by Presidents Reagan and Bush, Republicans hammered into place the framework for today’s prosperity and surpluses. We cut tax rates, simplified the tax code, deregulated industries, and opened world markets to American enterprise. The result was the tremendous growth in the 1980s that created the venture capital to launch the technology revolution of the 1990s. (G.W. Bush, Republican National Convention, 2000)

18. Equivocation

a. “I spent one day with the Masai…They had a lovely time during the Mau Mau rising. They were enlisted and told to bring in all the Kikuyu’s arms. Back they proudly came with baskets of severed limbs.” (Mark Amory, ed., Letters of Evelyn Waugh, 1980, p. 517).

b. Evolution is just a theory. Therefore, it should not be taught in public schools as fact.

   i. Definition #1: "a coherent group of general propositions used as principles of explanation for a class of phenomena: Newton's theory of gravitation.

   ii. Definition #2: "a proposed explanation whose status is still conjectural, in contrast to well-established propositions that are regarded as reporting matters of actual fact." (The Random House College Dictionary, Revised Edition, 1975)

19. Amphiboly

a. "One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I'll never know." (Groucho Marx)

b. 'Workers Accused Of Selling Stamps To Be Burned'

c. ‘Left turn only on green’