

**The most common classification of fallacies groups fallacies of relevance, of ambiguity, and of presumption.**

Arguments that commit fallacies of relevance rely on premises that aren't relevant to the truth of the conclusion. The various irrelevant appeals are all fallacies of relevance, as are ad hominems.

Arguments that commit fallacies of ambiguity, such as equivocation or the straw man fallacy, manipulate language in misleading ways.

Arguments that commit fallacies of presumption contain false premises, and so fail to establish their conclusion. For example, arguments based on a false dilemma or circular arguments both commit fallacies of presumption.

Some fallacies are difficult to place in any category; others belong in two or three. The 'No True Scotsman' fallacy, for example, could be classified either as a fallacy of ambiguity (an attempt to switch definitions of "Scotsman") or as a fallacy of presumption (it begs the question, reinterpreting the evidence to fit its conclusion rather than forming its conclusion on the basis of the evidence).

**Fallacies of Relevance**

Fallacies of relevance are attempts to prove a conclusion by offering considerations that simply don't bear on its truth. In order to prove that a conclusion is true, one must offer evidence that supports it. Arguments that commit fallacies of relevance don't do this; the considerations that they offer in support of their conclusion are irrelevant to determining whether that conclusion is true. The considerations offered by such are usually psychologically powerful, however, even if they don't have any evidential value.

**Examples**

Many of the familiar informal fallacies are fallacies of relevance, for example:

Personal attacks (arguments ad hominem) attempt to discredit a point of view by discrediting the person that holds it. The character of the person that holds a view, though, entails nothing about the truth of that view. Such arguments therefore commit a fallacy of relevance.

Appeals to consequences attempt to persuade someone to accept a position based either on the good consequences of their accepting it or on the bad consequences of their not accepting it. There is no guarantee, though, that the position that has the best consequences is true. Again, then, such arguments commit a fallacy of relevance.

**Irrelevant Appeals**

Irrelevant appeals attempt to sway the listener with information that, though persuasive, is irrelevant to the matter at hand. There are many different types of irrelevant appeal, many different ways of influencing what people think without using evidence. Each is a different type of fallacy of relevance.

**Examples**

For example, an appeal to authority seeks to persuade by citing what a perceived authority thinks on the subject, as if that resolves the question. The degree of support that such an appeal lends to a claim varies depending on the particular authority cited, the relevance of their expertise to the claim, and other factors, but in all cases is limited.

An appeal to consequences seeks to persuade by getting the listener to consider either the attractiveness of a belief, or the unattractiveness of the alternatives. We should form beliefs, however, not on the basis of what we would like to be true, but on the basis of what the evidence supports.

An appeal to pity, which can be very effective, persuades using emotion—specifically, sympathy—rather than reason.

**Fallacies of Ambiguity**

Fallacies of ambiguity appear to support their conclusions only due to their imprecise use of language. Once terms are clarified, fallacies of ambiguity are exposed. It is to avoid fallacies of this type that philosophers often carefully define their terms before launching into an argument.

**Examples**

The accent fallacy, and the fallacy of equivocation, are classic examples of fallacies of ambiguity. Equivocation is particularly important to look out for in evaluating philosophical arguments.

**Equivocation Fallacy**

This fallacy is committed when a term is used in two or more different senses within a single argument.

For an argument to work, words must have the same meaning each time they appear in its premises or conclusion.

Arguments that switch between different meanings of words equivocate, and so don't work. This is because the change in meaning introduces a change in subject. If the words in the premises and the conclusion mean different things, then the premises and the conclusion are about different things, and so the former cannot support the latter.

**Example (Equivocation, contd.)**

- (1) The church would like to encourage theism.
- (2) Theism is a medical condition resulting from the excessive consumption of tea.

Therefore:

- (3) The church ought to distribute tea more freely.

This argument is obviously fallacious because it equivocates on the word theism. The first premise of the argument is only true if theism is understood as belief in a particular kind of god; the second premise of the argument is only true if theism is understood in a medical sense.

**Fallacies of Presumption**

These are not errors of reasoning in the sense of logical errors, but are nevertheless commonly classed as fallacies. Fallacies of presumption begin with a false (or at least unwarranted) assumption, and so fail to establish their conclusion.

**Examples**

Arguments involving [false dilemmas](#), [complex questions](#), or [circularity](#) all commit fallacies of presumption: false dilemmas assume that there are no other options to consider; complex questions assume that a state of affairs holds when it may not; circular arguments assume precisely the thing that they seek to prove. In each case, the assumption is problematic, and prevents the argument from establishing its conclusion.

**False Dilemma / Bifurcation Fallacy**

The bifurcation fallacy is committed when a false dilemma is presented, i.e. when someone is asked to choose between two options when there is at least one other option available. Of course, arguments that restrict the options to more than two but less than there really are similarly fallacious.

**Examples**

- (1) Either a Creator brought the universe into existence, or the universe came into existence out of nothing.
- (2) The universe didn't come into existence out of nothing (because nothing comes from nothing).

Therefore:

- (3) A Creator brought the universe into existence.

The first premise of this argument presents a false dilemma; it might be thought that the universe neither was brought into existence by a Creator nor came into existence out of nothing, because it existed from eternity.

Another example emerged when George W Bush launched the war on terror, insisting that other nations were either for or against America in her campaign, excluding the quite real possibility of neutrality.

**Complex questions** are subtle forms of false dilemma. Questions such as “Are you going to admit that you're wrong?” implicitly restrict the options to either being wrong and admitting it or being wrong or not admitting it, thus excluding the option of not being wrong.

**Begging the Question / Circular Reasoning**

An argument is circular if its conclusion is among its premises, if it assumes (either explicitly or not) what it is trying to prove. Such arguments are said to beg the question. A circular argument fails as a proof because it will only be judged to be sound by those who already accept its conclusion.

Anyone who rejects the argument's conclusion should also reject at least one of its premises (the one that is the same as its conclusion), and so should reject the argument as a whole. Anyone who accepts all of the argument's premises already accepts the argument's conclusion, so can't be said to have been persuaded by the argument. In neither case, then, will the argument be successful.

**Example**

- (1) The Bible affirms that it is inerrant.
- (2) Whatever the Bible says is true.

Therefore:

- (3) The Bible is inerrant.

This argument is circular because its conclusion—The Bible is inerrant—is the same as its second premise—Whatever the Bible says is true. Anyone who would reject the argument's conclusion should also reject its second premise, and, along with it, the argument as a whole.