



Course Learning Outcomes for Unit VII

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

3. Formulate questions that result in critical thinking.
4. Apply analytical reasoning to a variety of disciplines.
7. Detect bias and fallacies in messages from mass media and other sources.

Reading Assignment

Chapter 12:

How to Detect Media Bias and Propaganda in National and World News

Chapter XIX

Sumner, W. G. (1906). *Folkways: A study of the sociological importance of usages, manners, customs, mores, and morals*. Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/24253>

Unit Lesson

Appeal to Popularity (*Argumentum Ad Populum*)

The appeal to popularity occurs when someone claims that "X" is the case because a group of people believe that "X" is the case. Appeal to popularity is systematic in commercials and marketing campaigns. Just because many people believe something to be true or worthwhile does not make that thing true or worthwhile. Here are some examples.

A movie trailer tells us, "Make the same decision five million people have made so far, and come see *I am Going to Chop You Up Into Little Pieces Part VII*."

Just because five million people have chosen to watch a movie does not give us any logical reason to go out and see that movie.

Friend to Friend: How can you say Celine Dion's music is not great? She has sold over 20 million albums.

Again, the fact that Celine Dion has sold that many records does not mean that her music is great...or even good.

The appeal to popularity can take other forms as well. One of the offshoots of the appeal to popularity is the argument from common practice. In this fallacious form, one claims that a practice is justified because most people in a society or place engage in a practice regularly. Let's look at some examples.

Son to Father: "Is it not against the law to cheat on your taxes, Dad?"

Father to Son: "Son, let me tell you something, all people cheat on their taxes."

Here is another example:

Critical Thinking Student #1: "Hey! Let me copy your homework."

Critical Thinking Student #2: "I do not know, the punishment for cheating is expulsion from the course."

Critical Thinking Student #1: "Come on!!! Everybody does it."

Just because all people cheat on their taxes or their homework does not give you a logical reason for accepting the claim that it is acceptable to cheat on your homework. If all the people around you are speeding, and you get pulled over, just because they were all speeding as well does not detract from the fact that you were breaking the law and deserved to be pulled over. When people justify their beliefs using the fact that most other people practice the same thing, they are committing one form of the appeal to popularity.

Another form of the appeal to popularity is the appeal to tradition. You have probably run into this one at work. Perhaps you think of a more efficient way to accomplish a task or get something done. You approach your boss with the new method. Your boss then informs you that you should keep doing it the old way. When you ask why, your boss says, "well, that is just the way we have always done it." Just because a certain method or belief is representative of the way things "have always been done" does not mean that this is the best way to do something. At the same time, practices that have worked for centuries often live for that long because they reflect a very effective (if not the most effective) way to do things. If you are learning martial arts from a master, and she tells you to wax her car and paint the fence, give it a little while before you go complaining that you are not learning anything. The appeal to tradition is very strong and effective. It is also an extremely useful tactic in maintaining social injustice. Appeals to tradition prevented women from engaging in higher education, they prevented African Americans from having the same privileges to use public services as whites did, and they have prevented equality in the assignation of equal rights to same-sex couples in our country.

When thinking about if the appeal to popularity is at play, just remember the words of Mother: "If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you jump too?"

Subjectivist Fallacy

In the subjectivist fallacy, you claim that something is true merely because you believe it to be true. The argument goes like this:

I believe that X is true. Therefore, X is true.

or

I do not believe that X is true. Therefore, X is not true.

Just because someone believes that something is true does not have anything to do with the actual truth value of the statement. Perhaps you have an outdoor 4th of July picnic planned and have invited all of your close friends and relatives to the festivities. You have meticulously planned the event for months. The morning of the event you cannot wait to get to the park to start setting things up and get the grill going. When you wake up there are dark clouds on the horizon. When you went to bed there was not anything on the weather service radar. However, it looks like there is a storm coming into town. The weather service has issued a thunderstorm warning, there is 99% humidity and your guests start calling to see where you are going to move the party. It is moments like these that people get "hard-headed" and do not want to believe the inevitable. You might keep telling the guests, "I do not think it is going to rain" or "the party is still on in the park, you cannot really trust these weather people." Everything in you wishes that the clouds would magically disappear and that this event could go on as planned. Your desire has led you into the subjectivist fallacy. Just because you do not want it to rain or you do not believe that it is going to rain, does not mean that it will not rain.

When people are discussing things with others with whom they disagree, there often comes a point where one says to the other, "well you believe what you want to believe and I will believe what I believe." This is acceptable as long as you are discussing the best type of pizza or your favorite music. However, if you are discussing governmental reform, educational reform, military spending, welfare, or social ideas, then there is more than likely a best position on the issue. There is a best position on welfare. We might not know what that best position is in our lifetime, but at some point we will see that someone's decisions and ideas were better than others. Claiming that people can believe what they want to believe says nothing about the actual truth value of what we believe. The effective critical thinker is the one who submits to the better argument and holds

the strongest positions on all issues, even when those positions go against what he or she might want to be true.

Relativist Fallacy

It is extremely easy to fall into this dangerous fallacy. Paul and Elder mention relativism early in the textbook and its danger to the beginning thinker. The relativist fallacy occurs when people say that certain ethical practices are acceptable in some cultures but not in others. For example, you might say that it should be illegal to have the death penalty in our own country, but it is acceptable for other cultures to practice the death penalty. This cannot be the case. If you are going to argue against something with the premise that this thing is wrong, then the act must be wrong in all cultures where it is practiced. One can think of numerous examples. It is inconsistent to say that certain drugs should be illegal in the United States, but then go on to say that it is acceptable for shamans in the Peruvian Amazon to take the same drugs in their own religious ceremonies. You cannot have it both ways. If you think it is morally acceptable for humans in the jungle to take drugs, then you must say that humans in our own society should be able to take drugs. If it is wrong to subjugate women in our own society, then you must stand up for the rights of women all over the world in social contexts where they are subjugated. If you believe that people of all ethnicities should be treated equally, then you must claim unequal treatment is wrong in all places in the world where people are treated unequally due to ethnicity.

It is important to mention that not all differences between cultures fall into the relativist fallacy. Those aspects of cultural existence that do not have an ethical component (matters of taste) can be as diverse as the grains of sand on the beach. There is no better side of the street to drive on. Some groups of humans think that avocados and limes are the most delicious of fruits, while others think that pineapples and mangos are the tastiest. However, always remember that in the realm of ethics, to say that opposite ideas are both correct is to fall into the relativist fallacy. We can look back on our own society and say that the ways that women and minorities were treated for hundreds of years were wrong and that we have made progress in the realm of equality. The true relativist could not claim that the old ways were ethically inadequate. He or she would just have to say that things were different and correct at that time, and now our differing ideas are correct. Not all ethical positions are equal. It is the goal of the critical thinker to take on the best ethical positions and consistently work to bring about the outcome of those positions in the world.

Red Herring

The red herring fallacy occurs when someone strays off topic in the middle of an argument to try to draw others off the trail of the argument. It is called the red herring because of a tactic that was used to train scent dogs wherein those training the dogs would drag a herring across the path of the scent that the dogs were supposed to follow. The best dogs would remain on the trail of the original scent. However, most of the dogs were thrown off course by the scent of the fish. The red herring fallacy is rampant in political debates.

Candidate #1: "We need to ensure that we maintain tight borders and prevent illegal immigrants from getting into the country in the first place."

Candidate #2: "What measures do you propose to secure our borders?"

Candidate #1: "The longer we wait, the more American jobs that will be lost to cheap labor, and the more the economy will suffer."

Notice in this example that the topic in question is the measures that the government could use to secure U.S. borders. However, the candidate has slyly dragged that fish across the trail and switched topics to loss of jobs due to cheap labor. Let's look at another example.

Timothy: "I saw that you have been sending strange texts to some guy named Tysean for the past ten nights in a row."

Iris: "What? Where did you hear that?"

Timothy: "I did not hear it anywhere. I checked your phone and saw the texts. Is that the same Tysean that you know from work?"

Iris: "You checked my phone. That shows a total lack of respect and trust for me. Why do you not trust me? Trust is an important part of a relationship, and I am not sure I want to be with someone who does not trust me."

Notice in this example that the issue is the strange texts that Iris has been sending Tysean. However, Iris turns the topic of discussion to trust and a questioning of Timothy's trust for her. Whenever someone tries to pull us off the track of discussion, it is good to pause a moment, and hit the reset button. When the topic is changed, remind the person what the issue is, and then tell the person that their issue can be discussed after the initial issue is taken care of.

Argument Ad Hominem

The *ad hominem* argument occurs when someone attacks the person making the argument rather than the argument that the person is making. In this informal fallacy, the attention is turned from the argument to the one making the argument. There are four forms of *ad hominem* that we will examine here.

1. Inconsistency *ad hominem tu quoque* (you too). In this form of *ad hominem*, the person points out that the one making the argument engages in the same behaviors that he or she is arguing for or against. For example, imagine that you were outside smoking with a colleague, and the colleague said, "Smoking is really bad for you. It causes poor circulation, decreases respiratory volume, and harms the immune system. You should quit smoking." The immediate response would be, "You smoke too!!!" However, this has nothing to do with the argument of the other colleague. Just because that person smokes too does not mean that his or her argument is unsound. Pointing out that someone else does it too shows that they might be inconsistent. However, it does nothing to combat the validity or soundness of a claim.
2. *Ad hominem* abusive. In this form of *ad hominem*, the response is vitriolic toward the one making the argument. This form of *ad hominem* often occurs in high school hallways, but can also readily occur in the workplace. Let's look at an example.

Employee #1: "I hear from Jeff that they are going to downsize the shipping department because sales are decreasing and they do not need as many workers to fill the sales."

Employee #2: "Jeff is such a sleazy guy. You really cannot believe anything that comes out of his mouth. He makes me sick."

Just because someone is mean, temperamental, arrogant, inappropriate, or snide does not automatically disqualify all that the person says. Pointing out someone's bad features does nothing to disprove the arguments that he or she makes and is merely a form of abusive *ad hominem*.

3. *Ad hominem* circumstantial. Here, one attacks another person based on his or her circumstances. Whenever you say that someone holds a specific position because he or she is part of a specific group (the rich, the poor, the Democrats, the Republicans, the Christians, the Muslims, the students, the teachers), you commit the circumstantial *ad hominem* fallacy. Let's look at an example.

Friend #1: "I think taxes should be lower on people who make less money because they need every penny they can get for essential items."

Friend #2: "You just think that because you are a Democrat."

Here is another example:

Friend #1: "My cousin Vinny says it is a good time to invest in Berkshire. They have a new drug coming out and it was just passed by the FDA. They are expecting profits in excess of 12 billion next year."

Friend #2: "The only reason your cousin wants us to invest is because he is an investor, and he will make a pretty penny off our investment."

The fact that cousin Vinny looks to make money off the investments of others is a good reason to suspend judgment about whether or not someone should invest. However, the fact that Vinny is an investor does not automatically disqualify the claims that he made about investing in Berkshire. Pointing out a group that someone making an argument belongs to as a refutation of the argument that the person is making is yet another form that the ugly *ad hominem* takes.

1. The *ad hominem* does not always take a negative form. There is such a thing as a positive *ad hominem*. In the positive *ad hominem*, people point out good attributes of someone or some group in order to defend the person or group. This often happens in cases where people in high religious, social, or political positions are found to have done something immoral. For example, if a story breaks that a religious leader has systematically abused children over the course of his or her career, then people who follow that religion will tend to defend the leader even in the face of overwhelming evidence.

Member #1: "I do not know, but now there are ten kids who have come forward and said that leader Jones has inappropriate contact with them. I heard that five adults have come forward as well. It seems that this has been going on for a long time. It is horrible."

Member #2: "Well I will tell you something. I just do not believe it. How can someone who has done such good for the community and all of us have done something so terrible? It is impossible."

As we all learn over and over throughout the course of human history, just because someone does something good for people does not mean that he or she does not have a dark side. To focus on the good that someone does in response to negative charges or allegations that have evidence is to commit the positive *ad hominem* fallacy.

Straw Man Fallacy

Straw men are much lighter and are more easily pushed over than real men. The straw man fallacy occurs when someone makes a straw argument out of a real argument and then attacks the straw argument. When people attack a weakened form of another person's argument, they are committing the straw man fallacy. Let's look at two straw men arguments based on the opposing sides in the abortion debate.

Anti-abortionist: "Pro-choicers are murderers. Abortion is the murder of an unborn baby. Those who approve of abortion really approve of killing innocent, unborn babies. I guess it is just my opinion, but I think it is wrong to kill innocent babies."

Pro-abortionist: "Those idiot pro-lifers do not give a hoot about women's rights. I guess they just want women to go back to their place in the home, have kids, and stop going to school. They just want women to regress into the Stone Age and lose all the rights they have gained in the past 100 years."

It is pretty easy to see that these are straw men arguments. No person who believes that abortion is acceptable would hold that abortion is murder of an innocent baby. When the issue is defined this way, the anti-abortionist is creating a straw man argument. Almost all people would agree that killing babies is wrong, and people who believe that women should be able to get abortions would never argue that they are for the killing of innocent babies.

At the same time, the argument that contradicts those who are against abortion also sets up the argument in straw man form. Just because people who are against abortion do not think that women should be able to choose this option does not mean that they would want women to lose the rights that they have gained over the course of the past 100 years.

As can be seen from these examples, it is much easier to attack an overstated opposite position and torch a straw man, than to respond to another sides strongest argument. However, the goal of the critical thinker is to always respond to his or her opponent's strongest argument and concede valid points on the opposite side.

Suggested Reading

Carr, N. (2008, July). Is Google Making Us Stupid? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>

Learning Activities (Non-Graded)

To gain further knowledge of the material, including key terms, please view this HTML presentation. This will summarize and reinforce the information from these chapters in your textbook.

Click [here](#) to access the lesson presentation for Unit VII.

Non-Graded Learning Activities are provided to aid students in their course of study. You do not have to submit them. If you have questions contact your instructor for further guidance and information.