**11AP**

**Logical Fallacies**

Before we turn to specific types of evidence, let’s consider logical fallacies: potential vulnerabilities, weaknesses, or mistakes in an argument. Practically speaking, the logical breakdown in most weak arguments occurs in the use of evidence, since evidence is what we use to prove arguments. So a more practical definition of a fallacy might be a failure to make a logical connection between the claim and the evidence used to support that claim. Fallacies may be accidental, but they can also be used deliberately to manipulate or deceive. Regardless of whether they are intentional or unintentional, logical fallacies work against the clear, civil discourse that should be at the heart of an argument. By checking for logical fallacies in a published argument that you’re analyzing, you can identify weak points; by checking for fallacies in your own writing, you can revise to strengthen your argument. It’s more important that you be able to describe what you see than it is to be able to label them by their technical name. The concepts are more important than the terms.

*There are several types of logical fallacies, but the following are the most frequently referenced when dealing with AP prompts, questions, and essay writing:*

**Fallacies of Relevance**

Fallacies that result from using evidence that’s irrelevant to the claim fall under the general heading of red herrings (a term derived from the dried fish that trainers used to distract dogs when teaching them to hunt foxes).

* Red herring: This occurs when a speaker skips to a new and irrelevant topic in order to avoid the topic of discussion. (example: Politician X says, “We can debate these regulations until the cows come home, but what the American people want to know is, when are we going to end this partisan bickering?” She has effectively avoided providing evidence on the benefits or detriments of the regulations by trying to change the subject to that of partisanship.
* *Ad hominem*: This literally means to “argue against the man.” This diversionary tactic is used to attack the person rather than dealing with the issue under discussion. Remember that it is valid to call a person’s character into question if it is *relevant* to the topic at hand. (example: We all know that Sam has several speeding tickets on his record, so how can we trust him to vote for us on the issue of a trade agreement with Europe? OR Arguing that a park in your community should not be renovated because the person supporting it was arrested during a domestic dispute.
* Faulty analogy: Analogy is the most vulnerable type of evidence because it’s always susceptible to the charge that two things are not comparable. The most vulnerable are those that focus on irrelevant or inconsequential similarities between two things. (example: Advertisements sometimes draw faulty analogies to appeal to pathos. An ad for a very expensive watch might picture a well-known athlete or a ballet dancer and draw an analogy between the precision and artistry of (1) the person and (2) the mechanism. OR Arguing that we put animals who are in irreversible pain out of their misery, so we should do the same for people.)

**Fallacies of Accuracy**

Using evidence that is either intentionally or unintentionally accurate will result in a fallacy.

* Straw man: The speaker/writer attributes false or exaggerated characteristics or behaviors to the opponent and attacks him on those falsehoods or exaggerations. It often occurs when a speaker chooses a deliberately poor or oversimplified example in order to ridicule and refute an opponent’s viewpoint. (example: Politician X proposes that we put astronauts on Mars in the next four years. Politician Y ridicules this proposal by saying that his opponent is looking for “little green men in space.” Politician Y is committing a straw man fallacy by inaccurately representing Politician X’s proposal, which is about space exploration and scientific experimentation, not “little green men.”)
* Either/or: This is also called a false dilemma. Here, the speaker presents two extreme options as the only possible choices. (example: Either we agree to higher taxes, or our grandchildren will be mired in debt. OR Tomorrow is April 15th; therefore, I must mail in my tax return, or I’ll be arrested.)
* Non Sequitur: This Latin phrase means “does not follow.” This is an argument which has a conclusion which does not follow from the premise. (example: Diane graduated from Vassar. She’ll make a great lawyer.)

**Fallacies of Insufficiency**

Perhaps the most common of fallacies occurs when evidence is insufficient.

* Overgeneralization: In most cases, this is what we call stereotyping. Here, the writer/speaker draws a conclusion about a large group of people, ideas, things, etc. based on very limited evidence. (example: All members of group A are not to be trusted.) Words like *all, never, always,* and *every* are usually indicative of this fallacy. Look for qualifiers like *some, seem, appear, often, perhaps, frequently,* etc. which indicate that the writer has an awareness of the complexities of the topic or group under discussion.
* Hasty generalization: This means that there is not enough evidence to support a particular conclusion. A person who makes a hasty generalization draws a conclusion about an entire group based on evidence which is too scant or insufficient. (example: Smoking isn’t bad for you; my aunt smoked a pack a day and lived until she was 90. OR The veterinarian discovered a viral infection in five beagles. All beagles must be infected with it.)
* Circular reasoning: This involves repeating the claim as a way to provide evidence, resulting in no evidence at all. The mistake in logic restates the premise rather than giving a reason for holding that premise. (example: You can’t give me a C; I’m an A student. OR I like to eat out because I enjoy different foods and restaurants.)
* Begging the question: Here, a claim is based on evidence or support that is in doubt. It “begs” a question whether the support itself is sound. It’s a mistake in which the writer assumes in his assertion/premise/thesis something that really needs to be proved. (example: Giving students easy access to a wealth of facts and resources online allows them to develop critical thinking skills. OR Taking Geometry is a waste of time. High school students should not be required to take this course.
* *Ad populum*/bandwagon appeal: This occurs when evidence boils down to “everybody’s doing it, so it must be a good thing to do.” (example: You should vote to elect Politician X – she has a strong lead in the polls.)
* *Post Hoc* (*ergo propter hoc*): This is Latin for “after which therefore because of which.” This fallacy cites an unrelated event which occurred earlier as the cause of a current situation. (example: I saw a black cat run across the street in front of my car five minutes before I was hot by a foul ball at the park. Therefore, the black cat is the cause of my bruised arm. OR We elected President Johnson and look where it got us: hurricanes, floods, and stock market crashes.)